

CELL PHONES RING A BELL WITH YOUNG FANS // Games, cartoons and more help companies connect

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Cell-phone companies have focused on a customer base that is literally growing -- kids.

Cell-phone games, cartoons, songs, calling plans and even an entire cell-phone line have been designed with teens and preteens in mind. The marketing is directed at parents, who can spend the money if they decide a child needs a cell phone for safety and convenience.

Or if the kid begs hard enough.

"I've seen an explosion in family plans in the last nine months," said **Delly Tamer**, founder and CEO of LetsTalk, a company that helps clients research and buy calling plans and phones. "Increasingly, parents are saying, 'I'm going to get myself and my spouse cell phones, and also one for junior.'"

Cell-phone ownership tops 16 million among teens and preteens nationwide -- 44 percent of 10- to 18-year-olds in the United States own a wireless phone, according to NOP World Technology, a research company. According to the research firm Yankee Group, about 10 percent of kids under 13 have a cell phone, up from 7 percent in 2004.

"Teen cell-phone ownership has been driven largely by the success of family plans, and will increasingly be driven by prepaid and hybrid plans," said Linda Barrabee, a Yankee Group senior analyst.

While kids like what's cool or fun about cell phones, parents want to be able to control whom kids call, who calls them, and what it costs, according to Robin Abrams, CEO of Firefly Mobile, a Lincolnshire-based company that makes phones exclusively for 8- to 12-year-olds.

The Firefly Mobile went on the market in March through regional carriers, and at Target stores this month. A small phone, about the size of a pocket calculator, it has just five keys -- on, off, mom, dad and phone book. Parents can pre-program up to 22 numbers, to control calling. A parent can also choose to program the phone so any number can call, or so only pre-programmed numbers can call.

The phone has flashing lights, like a firefly, that can be set according to who's calling. Abrams said her daughters use "purple" to indicate mom's on the line.

Firefly has also made the phone school-friendly -- no games, no text messaging and no cameras. "It's entertaining without being distracting," Abrams said.

John Walls, a spokesman for the industry group CTIA-The Wireless Association, called Firefly "a smart product, because a lot of parents want to have the device for young people and they don't want to give them unfettered access."

Major wireless carriers emphasize that while they don't market to kids, they have stepped up kid-friendly applications like games and a variety of ringtones.

Verizon Wireless, for example, allows customers to get an entertainment package with clips from the kid TV shows like "Dora the Explorer," "Blues Clues" and "Sesame Street."

Sprint offers "Scooby-Doo" and other cartoon clips on the phone. John Burris, the director of wireless data services for Sprint, said he'd love to get the rights for live transmissions of Disney Channel or Nickelodeon over the phone. "I think there's no question Sprint sees the family as a core customer," Burris said.

U.S. Cellular has a category of games called "Just for Kids," which includes Disney-brand games like "The Incredibles" or "Finding Nemo," where a player can pretend to be Marlin the fish-dad, cutting a path through nets and jellyfish, according to John Cregier, senior director of product management and development for the Chicago-based company.

Prepaid and pay-as-you-go plans can be useful options for parents, because they control how much is spent, Walls said.

Cingular Wireless, for example, offers a service option with a prepaid card with denominations from \$15 and up. The user gets a message letting her know the minutes are running out, and it's time to reload at an ATM. "If you're a 12-year-old using your baby-sitting money, you can budget with it," explained Meg Frainey, spokeswoman for Cingular.

Melissa Figueroa, 26, of Ukrainian Village, said the games on her U.S. Cellular phone are more attractive to her 8-year-old girl and 3-year-old boy than their video games.

"Every time I'm not on the phone they say, 'We'd like to play,'" Figueroa said.

A single, working mom, Figueroa said she is considering getting her daughter, Tatiana, a cell phone to keep track of her during after-school activities.

"It would be useful if she needs to get picked up early or anything," said Figueroa, whose main worry about the cell phone is that the girl might lose it.

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