

More children to go mobile 160,000 have own phone

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MORE than 160,000 Australian children under 10 now own a mobile phone. And while health authorities are concerned radiation and heat from mobiles could be harming thousands of young brains, a further 40,000 under 10s are expected to get mobiles by the end of the year. Some medical experts fear mobiles could cause brain damage that may not become obvious for years -- and that the effect could be worse in young children. But the threat is not conclusive, with a recent Danish study finding mobile use did not appear to increase the risk of developing brain tumours. One in 16 under-10s now has a mobile phone.

Some phone companies have pledged not to single out young consumers, but Telstra will intensify efforts to sell mobiles to youngsters. "We're opening a new division -- pioneer market -- which will ensure we're able to attract early adopters of the technology," Telstra spokesman Pat O'Beirne said. Bio-physics expert Andrew Wood said handsets generated a thousand times more radiation than mobile base stations because of the proximity to the user. "The worst-case scenario in terms of harm would be tumours of the brain and the nerves of the cheek," the Swinburne University associate professor said. He said evidence was still inconclusive but as a precaution "responsible Agencies" should caution parents against letting their children use their phones excessively. "It can be a lifesaving device in emergency situations but indiscriminate use can be a danger," Prof Wood said.

A British government inquiry into mobile phone safety concluded widespread mobile use by children should be discouraged. The inquiry found children could be more vulnerable because of their developing nervous system, the greater absorption of energy in the tissues of the head and a longer lifetime of exposure.

Cody McQualter, like thousands of primary school aged Victorians, is rarely without his phone. Cody got his first mobile phone -- a hand-me-down from his sister -- on his ninth birthday. Now 10, he uses it mostly to listen to the radio or call his parents. Cody's mum Maree said she was aware of the risks of mobile phone use by the young but said being able to contact her children meant she could look after their security. "You hear of risks and it does worry me but I just pray it won't happen," Maree said. "It's like everything in life -- it's a balance. It's basically a contact thing."

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