

MOBILE PHONES – Ownership and use by children and young people in out of home care information sheet

- Mobile phones and texting have become an integral part of the cultural lives of many children and young people. Many children and young people enter care in the possession of a mobile phone. Carers and child protection workers should support children and young people to use mobile phones appropriately and safely.
- As mobile phones are capable of storing photographs, text messages and videos, they may form a type of life record or photo album for the child or young person. This use of the phone must be supported by carers and workers.
- Carers should discuss with children and young people in their care their responsibilities regarding the use of the mobile phone, including any rules on when, where and in what ways the phone may be used. All rules must be consistent with the child or young person's age and maturity.
- Carers need to maintain an awareness of with the abilities of mobile phones and the consequent benefits and risks.

Issues associated with mobile phone use

- As with most communication tools, mobile phones can be used to view both appropriate and inappropriate content. While it should be remembered that most children use their mobile phones appropriately, carers, like parents, should be conscious of what children in their care are being exposed to, and should talk to children about their use of mobile phones. However, this should not involve inappropriate invasion of the child's privacy.
- Carers should contact their child's case manager if they have any concerns or questions.

Privacy

- Children should be advised that they need to seek permission before taking photos or recordings of others or before forwarding messages that involve sharing information without the permission of the sender.
- The *Charter of Rights for Tasmanian Children and Young People in Out of Home Care* states that children and young people have the right to have their privacy respected, including having their own things. This right includes access to mobile phones.
- The contents of the phone are the child or young person's private property. Material should not be deleted from the phone without the child or young person's permission. The contents of a mobile phone should only be viewed with the child or young person being present and only if there is a reasonable belief that there is material on the phone which is offensive, illegal, breaches another person's privacy, is used for the purposes of bullying or harassment or otherwise poses a risk to the child or young person or others. If such material is found the child or young person will be instructed to delete the material and appropriate consequences given.

Cost

- If a mobile phone being used by a child or young person is subject to a contract when they enter care, the case manager should be advised as soon as possible and the case manager must advise the guarantor that any debt incurred will not be covered by the Department or the carer.
- Children and young people who own a pre-paid phone should be encouraged to save money from their pocket money towards the purchase of phone credit.
- Mobile phone credit is not covered by the standard reimbursement to carers.
- Issues associated with the purchase or management of a child or young person's mobile phone use should be discussed with the case manager and the child or young person and may be reviewed during the case and care planning process.

Hours of use

- Appropriate limits may need to be set on the use of the phone in collaboration with the child or young person. Such limits will vary with age and developmental status of the child. Limiting use of the phone during certain times such as mealtimes, homework, after bedtime is legitimate.

Use of Mobiles at School

- Many schools have policies on the possession and use of mobile phones during school hours. The carer should ensure the child or young person knows what these policies are and that they are responsible for complying with them.

Bullying

- Children should be advised that they need to tell the carer if they feel they are being bullied by others via their mobile phone. They need to be advised about the fact that it is not appropriate to take part in any form of bullying another person through the use of the phone either by themselves or with others.

Behavioural issues

- Any behavioural issues that might become apparent through a child or young person's use of a phone should be discussed with the child or young person's case manager who will address these matters from a professional perspective.

Safety

- Where there are concerns that the mobile phone may facilitate unauthorised contact between a child or young person and their family or persons who may pose a risk these should be addressed in consultation with the case manager. Solutions which do not require the removal of the phone should be thoroughly explored.

Removal

- Removal of a mobile phone should only be considered as a last resort. Alternative options such as restricted access to the phone (eg the phone is handed in at bedtime) should be explored first. Where removal of the phone is necessary, assurances need to be made that this is only temporary and alternative forms of communication need to be put in place if necessary. Restriction/withdrawal of a mobile should not be used as sanction for non-phone related breaches of discipline.

General information about mobile phones

- Mobile phones enable a range of functions beyond making and receiving calls. The scale of these functions can be deceptive given the increasingly small size of the devices. Functions can include the ability to send and receive text messages and video calls; to take, send and receive still and video images; to access media content such as music; and to access Internet content. Some of these functions are directly built into the phone handset, while others, such as making calls or accessing the Internet, need the handset to be able to access a mobile telephone network with a designated phone number on a particular service provider (e.g. Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, etc).
- Carers should not undertake to be a guarantor for any mobile phone contract without fully understanding the potential consequences. The Department will not be responsible for costs incurred by a carer who chooses to be a guarantor for a child or young person's mobile phone.