

Web-connected devices a new source of worry for parents

January 19 2011, By Abby Sewell

Every day, Teresa DiFalco's children clamor for her iPhone.

The kids, ages 9 and 11, use the smart phone and DiFalco's iPod Touch to play such games as "Angry Birds" and "Zombie Farm." Around the nation, other kids are doing the same, either on their own or on their parents' mobile devices, such as smart phones, iPads and other tablets.

But to the alarm of some parents, these mobile devices can do far more than enable their children to send text messages and play games. The gadgets are powerful little computers that can access the Internet in all its tastelessness. A few companies now are promoting products to block unwanted online content.

"It's not your grandfather's Internet anymore," said Stephen Balkam, chief executive of nonprofit advocacy organization Family Online Safety Institute.

"We're getting to a stage now where just about anything with a screen is connected to the Net, but we still have a generation of parents who were born in the analog age," he said.

Since the rise of the personal computer, Internet users have been concerned about their children finding graphic images of sex and violence and increasingly about their kids' sending inappropriate content or bullying messages to one another online, Balkam said.

But it took time for some parents to realize that mobile devices carry the same capabilities and risks.

Apple Inc.'s mobile devices offer the option to disable the Safari [Web browser](#), but some parents don't want to cut off Internet access completely.

[Wireless carriers](#) offer their own sets of parental controls for smart phones, including [Internet filtering](#), but those controls work only when the devices are accessing the Internet via the carrier's network rather than through a local wireless signal.

So a growing number of applications - including Safe Eyes Mobile from InternetSafety.com, owned by McAfee Inc., and Safe Browser from Mobicip - are offering "kid-safe" filtered Internet browsers that can be set as an alternative to Safari on Apple devices.

Mobicip, based in Thousand Oaks, Calif., initially developed its application for use by schools to allow them to comply with the federal Children's Internet Protection Act, company founder Suren Ramasubbu said.

It found a market among parents as well, although Ramasubbu said tens of thousands of consumers have bought the app, compared with the millions who have bought Apple's [mobile devices](#).

DiFalco, 42, a freelance writer in Vancouver, Wash., installed the Mobicip browser on her phone after testing it for the Parents' Choice Foundation, a nonprofit that rates children's products.

Before that, she said, she hadn't really thought about the need to filter access to the Internet on her phone.

"Smart phones and devices and kids are new territory for most parents I know," DiFalco said. "So where we all knew to protect computer Internet with filters, having Internet available on phones kind of snuck in."

Not all [parents](#) feel a need to restrict their children's access to the Web.

Sheila Spencer, 50, a business consultant and mother of two from Santa Monica, Calif., bought an iPod Touch for her 10-year-old daughter, Lindsey, for Christmas in 2009 and one for 13-year-old son Ryan for his birthday last month.

The kids use the devices to play music and games. Lindsey uses hers to e-mail her friends, and Ryan has apps for Wikipedia, the Internet Movie Database and Facebook.

Spencer said she has talked to her children about appropriate Internet use and trusts them to make good decisions.

"If kids are going to look up something inappropriate on the Internet, they're probably going to find a way to do it," she said. "So it probably has more to do with talking to them about making good choices and bad choices, and values, and what's appropriate or inappropriate."

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