

Educating parents of techno-savvy kids



By [Dr Pieter Streicher](#)

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Western society has become more and more permissive with the emphasis on the "freedom of expression" of individuals. However, these consenting rights need to be balanced by the protection of children's rights. Gone are the days when parental control meant keeping your kids off the neighbour's farm. Today parents need to be vigilant and protect children from harmful media content.

Parental vigilance of media is becoming increasingly difficult. Adult magazines abound in stores and adult videos, adult movies on TV and adult websites are accessible. Now, even cell phones can download adult content.

The availability of adult mobile content has raised many concerns that children may access explicit adult media content such as logos, video clips or wallpapers via cell phones. These concerns indicate that there is need for suitable regulations and parental control to protect children from adult mobile content.

It is my view that parental control should compliment the efforts made to regulate mobile adult content. Parents are not alone in safe-guarding the mobile habits of children.

The mobile network operators and the wireless application service provider's association (WASPA) are working hard to introduce suitable measures to protect children from adult content on mobile phones.

The measures that have so far been implemented include limiting promotions for adult mobile services to print or electronic media with similar content, that is, adult magazines and late night TV programming only can advertise similar adult mobile content. These measures are commendable yet, in my opinion, children are not adequately protected until further measures have been implemented.

There are several measures that are likely to be adopted in 2006. These include limiting adult services to a specific short code number range and allowing networks and parents to block access to these numbers from specific phones.

An age verification system (AVS) is also to be introduced. This will involve the networks having a record of the ages of all users per cell phone or SIM card. Content providers will then be compelled to verify a user's age before delivery of adult content using the AVS.

Furthermore, there is the possibility that the media content classification (the levels of sex, violence and language) currently used for films and television will be applied to all mobile content. This will mean that mobile content is treated no differently to other forms of media.

In my view, Vodacom's stance of limiting adult content on its network to "page 3" level (something similar to what tabloid newspapers print on page 3) is a further positive step during this interim period where several proposed measures have not yet been implemented.

Once all these measures have been implemented parents cannot sit back and relax. Parents should also be aware of the measures they can take to protect their children from this content.

The proposed cell phone blocking system will only help if parents make the effort to bar adult content to their children's phones. The age verification system will only work effectively if parents ensure that the phones used by their children are registered as belonging to the child. The regulations limiting advertising can only be acted on if the public lodges complaints when infringements are spotted in the print or electronic media.

Some people may argue that all adult content should be banned from cell phones. This measure would not have the desired effect as content usage will simply be driven from Wireless Application Service Providers (over which the networks have control) to mobile internet websites (over which the networks have very little control).

We should all strive to introduce measures that protect children from adult mobile content but still allow us to embrace the positive aspects of new technology. Yet, technology is a neutral platform and parents should be discerning in what content is being downloaded by their children via a cell phone.

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