

Parents: Beware the iPod's Wi-Fi powers

Posted by Eric Benderoff at 2:45 p.m.

As parents, we've learned to monitor what our kids watch on TV, but we're just starting to grapple with how to best manage their online interaction. Now there is an emerging concern many parents are not aware of, and that's the Internet-enabled hand-held devices hitting the market.

Take the iPod Touch, the revised Sony Mylo or even Sony's portable game player, the PSP. (Many more are on the way.) Have you put limits on your kid's access to the Internet with those Wi-Fi devices, like maybe you have with the home computer?

As Wi-Fi hot spots proliferate in libraries, fast-food restaurants, coffee shops and even truck stops, kids can access the Internet from practically anywhere. I recently walked up and down Michigan Avenue, jumping from one free Wi-Fi hot spot to another.

These gadgets are a lot more powerful than a device that plays music and movies. (For a review of the iPod Touch's new powers, click [here](#).) Why should a parent be concerned?

With the Touch, I can e-mail a photo of someone in an embarrassing situation to MySpace, Facebook or other sites where peers could write mocking commentary. That's a form of cyber bullying, a growing concern among educators.

So while many parents worry about such behavior with mobile-phone toting kids, they may not be thinking about the capabilities of that new music player.

"Parents need to figure out what a device can do before they buy it," said Parry Aftab, who runs an Internet safety group called WiredSafety.org. She was also featured in the compelling Frontline episode, "[Growing Up Online](#)," that aired Tuesday night on PBS.

"Parents are pretty good about figuring out what things costs, like ringtone downloads for a mobile phone, because they are listed on mobile phone bills," she told me. "But they are bad at the other stuff," such as how kids use their gadgets.

"Kids store all sorts of information on hand-held devices, like pictures and phone numbers and addresses," she said before pointing out another concern: "If a predator steals one from a single 12-year-old girl, now he has access to 50 12-year-old girls."

So even as MySpace [toughens](#) rules for minors and the access to their profiles, parents need to be thinking about the Wi-Fi tools kids have in the palm of their hands. It's not their older brother's music player anymore.

Here's one idea for gadget makers: if a parent can put a volume lock on a music player like the iPod so a kid can't crank up the sound, perhaps it's time to put a Wi-Fi lock on devices, too, so parents can limit their reach.