

cell phones. **The Jitterbug** is a simplified cell phone that features large buttons, a comfortable ergonomic shape, simple operation (no confusing icons), easy-to-read text, and a cushion that cups around the ear to improve sound quality and a volume control. The phone also offers pre-programmed buttons for one-touch calling. Parents want simplicity (who doesn't?) and this product may be the answer to staying connected with family and friends with the use of a cell phone.

There's also good news for family members who are blind and visually impaired. With the use of talk software and adaptive technology, cell phones that are accessible now can be installed with programs that cause the phone to speak the menu items. Chicago Lighthouse is a wealth of information of such innovative products that keep families in touch.

Cell phones are the basis for a host of ideas for future products, as well as some that are already available in Europe and Japan. For instance, there is a cell phone that detects voice tremors, indicating a risk of Parkinson's disease. There is one that reminds patients to take their medications at programmed intervals—and even comes with a built-in pill dispenser. Another has navigational features to help people with memory problems find their way around town; others help monitor conditions like diabetes. In Europe, cell phones provide around-the-clock heart monitoring. For those of us who live a distance away from aging parents, we will come to rely more and more on cell phone technology as a way to lessen the worries of being far away from loved ones.



Enlist an online video chat service

Face Time

Remember when “home alone” once referred to latchkey children? Now, it's aging parents. In this mobile society, we may be more spread out than we'd like to be, and parents who have chosen to stay in their own homes and “age in place” often experience uncomfortable and long periods of time being alone. There's a consist-

ent message from elderly people everywhere. They cherish their independence and want to be in control of their life, yet stay in touch.

An online video chat service may be a wonderful solution to combat loneliness. Video cams are easy to set up, and allow family members to “see” one another in real time while chatting by phone or on the computer. The computer has a sound card, a microphone, speakers and a video cam. High speed or broadband connect is required. The voice and picture of the sender and receiver are transmitted simultaneously. Seeing and speaking with older relatives gives us a better sense of how they are doing on a day-to-day basis, rather than the process of talking over the phone. Parents, on the other hand, will get immense pleasure interacting with grandchildren and watching them grow before their eyes. Video phones can provide the same service and are equally simple to use. For information on both of these services, type “online video chat service” in the keyword search in your Internet browser.



Feel the Love

Does Grandma need a hug? Perhaps **The Hug** can help. Robots are improving the lives of elderly people every day, and with the use of sensing and wireless phone technology, this soft, huggable pillow provides a physical touch, and social and emotional support for distant family members. The pillow is about the size of a throw pillow and shaped like a person about to give a hug, with two arms reaching up and out from a small torso. The material is velour, making it soft and plush and pleasing to the touch.

Here's how it works: Let's say your daughter wants to send a hug to her grandfather. She squeezes the left paw of her Hug; then speaks her grandfather's name into a microphone hidden in the top of the torso. The Hug automatically calls up Grandpa's Hug (his Hug lights up and plays a sound) who then squeezes the left paw of his Hug to accept your daughter's hug and create a direct link between the two pillows. If grandpa's not home, she can leave a message including one that sends vibration patterns—like a hug.

The bad news is The Hug is still in development stages and not yet ready for the open market. In the meantime, I'll be keeping an eye out for robotic products that help bridge the distance gap between family members and elderly loved ones.

As powerful as it is, technology alone cannot create fulfilling relationships. While technology has enabled us to “communicate” with others more efficiently, there's simply no substitute for the occasional warm hug and the physical interaction that naturally comes with visiting our family members in person. ■

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Jitterbug Cell Phone
www.jitterbug.com

Chicago Lighthouse
 High-tech products for the blind and visually impaired
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