

Telecom Giant Offers Girl Scouts New Patch in Exchange for Promoting ‘Wonders of 5G’

By ProPublica

Courtesy of Swedish telecom giant Ericsson, Girl Scouts across America this year were offered a new way to earn a special uniform patch: learning about the wonders of 5G cellphone technology and, in some cases, promoting it.

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Beyond developing their camping skills, participating in a food drive to aid the hungry and donating pajamas for seniors, Girl Scouts across America this year were offered a new way to earn a special uniform patch: learning about the wonders of 5G cellphone technology and, in some cases, promoting it.

The opportunity came courtesy of Ericsson, the Swedish telecommunications giant, which sponsored the “Ericsson Limited Edition 5G & IoT” (Internet of Things) patch program.

The program, still available on at least one Girl Scout website, targets all age levels, from Daisies (kindergarten-age Scouts) to Ambassadors (those in high school), with an array of activities intended to “introduce Girl Scouts to 5G and the Internet of Things.”

These include watching “[Explaining 5G to Kids](#),” a five-minute video featuring Mats, a bearded Ericsson employee, as he chats with Siofra, Freya and two other squirming but charming children, who speak English with what sounds like hints of Swedish accents.

Mats explains that 5G is a “new technology for the mobile phone. So everything will be much better.” He explains that the [technology](#) could allow the kids’ toys to connect. “Wouldn’t that be cool?” he asks. “This is what Ericsson is doing,” Mats explains. “This is what 5G can do.”

Other recommended activities sound more like do-it-yourself advertising. High school-age members on [one Girl Scout site](#) are encouraged to:

“Find a cell tower and make a video explaining how 5G would change the world for you. Share the video you made with a friend or fellow Girl Scout. Or, with an adult’s permission, post your video on social media and tag @gsheartofnj, @ericsson, #girlscoutstalk5G.”

And Scouts of all ages are invited to “discuss with your troop or an adult how mmWave spectrum is safe and does not cause harm to our health.”

Some health experts, who are concerned that [wireless radiation](#) poses a [health risk to children](#), criticize the Ericsson program as an improper and inaccurate form of

industry marketing.

“Anytime corporations advertise directly to children, I’m very suspicious,” Dr. Jerome Paulson, a pediatrician and emeritus professor in George Washington University’s department of environmental and occupational health, told ProPublica. “It would be like Exxon Mobil sponsoring a patch on climate change.”

Paulson previously chaired the Council on Environmental Health at the American Academy of Pediatrics, which has criticized the Federal Communications Commission’s wireless-radiation standards for failing to protect children.

The [Environmental Health Trust](#), an activist nonprofit that first spotted the Ericsson program, recently sent a [letter of protest](#) to the Girl Scouts’ national office, saying the patch materials “misleadingly state that [5G networks](#) and cellphones are safe,” and urging their removal from all Girl Scout websites.

The 10 signers included “former Girl Scouts and parents of Scouts,” the chair of the obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences department at Yale’s medical school, the former president of Microsoft Canada and a Swedish scientist who has conducted influential epidemiological studies on [cellphone radiation](#).

In an emailed statement, Vidya Krishnan, global chief learning officer for Ericsson, who sits on the Girl Scouts National Board, defended the program:

“The [Ericsson Girl Scouts 5G patch](#) has the sole purpose of educating our next generation about the latest [wireless technologies](#) that are shaping their lives and their future. Educational awareness is the only intention and impact.”

(In October, the Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas honored Krishnan as a “Woman of Distinction” at its annual fundraising luncheon, where a “presenting sponsorship” went for \$100,000 and individual tickets sold for \$300.)

The Girl Scouts, of course, are hardly strangers to the world of commerce.

They have long been renowned for their annual cookie sales — the Scouts call it “the largest girl-led entrepreneurial program in the world” — which raise about \$800 million annually for local activities. Girls are eligible for special “Cookie Business” badges by honing their sales pitches and tapping into market research.

And the Girl Scouts have offered other patches sponsored by corporations. Among them: Fidelity Investments, which sponsors a “girls’ guide to managing money.” One Texas chapter offered a patch for “Fluor Engineering Month.”

The Ericsson 5G patch was first made available in March 2021 through the website of the Northeast Texas council of the Girl Scouts.

Ericsson’s U.S. headquarters is in Plano, Texas, and the company, which boasts of being “[the leading provider of 5G network equipment in the U.S.](#),” has been involved with the area’s Girl Scouts program for several years. Ericsson has focused on promoting interest in science, technology, engineering and math careers, known as STEM, where girls are historically underrepresented.

(The company’s Facebook page includes photos of [hardhat-wearing Girl Scouts](#) on a 2018 field trip to an Ericsson training center with mock cell towers and

transmitters.)

A second Ericsson executive serves on the local Girl Scouts board, and, according to public disclosures, Ericsson has donated more than \$100,000 annually to the northeast Texas council for the past three years.

Ashley Crowe, chief program officer for the Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas, said 697 Girl Scouts have obtained the Ericsson 5G patch.

Crowe praised Ericsson's support for the Girl Scouts, saying, "I for one would never feel exploited by Ericsson," but she added that she was unaware of health concerns about children's exposure to cellphone radiation. "I had never even heard about that," she said. "This has not been brought to our attention at all."

After ProPublica's inquiries about the matter, the patch program was removed from the Texas council's website.

(A spokesperson for the council asserted that "the patch program was removed from our site at the beginning of October," explaining that "the Ericsson 5G IoT patch program was funded by Ericsson as a one-year optional program for local Girl Scouts and concluded September 30, 2022." However, a ProPublica reporter saw the patch on the Texas site as late as Nov. 21.)

It remains available on the website of [a New Jersey Girls Scouts council](#).

A spokesperson for Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey submitted a statement on behalf of its CEO, Natasha Hemmings, asserting that "the safety and well-being of our Girl Scouts is and always has been our top priority." The statement continued:

"In line with our mission, we partner with numerous organizations and corporations, including Ericsson, to expand access to education and to empower girls to become leaders of tomorrow."

The national office for Girl Scouts of the USA did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Scientific concern about whether cellphone radiation poses a human health hazard, including increased risk of cancer, fertility issues or other problems, has been rising in recent years. ([ProPublica recently explored this issue in detail](#).)

The research includes a massive U.S. government study that in 2018 found "clear evidence" that cellphone radiation caused cancer in lab animals. Some researchers have also warned of special risk to children, citing studies showing that their developing brains absorb more radiation because of their thinner, smaller skulls.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has echoed this concern, urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to revise its exposure standards, saying they don't adequately protect children.

More than 20 foreign governments have adopted protective measures or recommended precautions regarding wireless radiation, with many of them focused on limiting exposure to children.

The [European Environment Agency](#) offers similar guidance, noting:

“There is sufficient evidence of risk to advise people, especially children, not to place the handset against their heads.”

The wireless industry and U.S. regulators, including the FCC and U.S. Food and Drug Administration, deny that there is any proven health risk for anyone. They dispute that the technology poses any special hazard to children and don’t advocate any precautions.

The FCC’s “[Wireless Devices and Health Concerns](#)” page, for example, notes that “some parties” recommend safety measures, “even though no scientific evidence currently establishes a definitive link between wireless device use and cancer or other illnesses.”

It then states, in bold:

“The FCC does not endorse the need for these practices.”

Originally published by [ProPublica](#).

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