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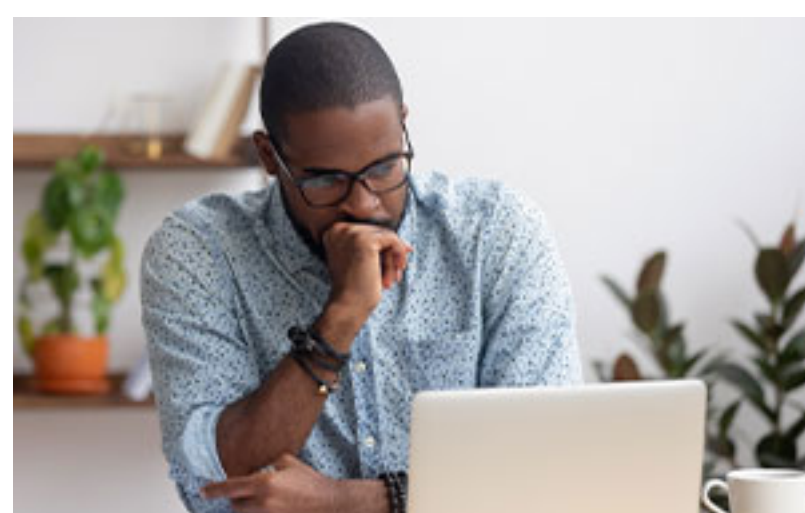
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To Spy or Not to Spy?

By Nadja Streiter, LMSW

AT A GLANCE

Pandering to parental fears of what their children are doing and seeing online, parental monitoring is a growing phenomenon • Under what, if any, circumstances is spying on your child appropriate? • And are there other less intrusive ways to ensure your child's online safety?



There are several reasons parents use to justify monitoring their child's online activity, most of which come from the well-intentioned desire to protect their child from online abuse or misuse (cyberbullying, sexual predation, inappropriate content). That coupled with a growing market for parental surveillance products has made it easy for well-meaning parents to monitor their child's device use, whereabouts, conversations, aspirations, interests, etc. But just because you can monitor your child's every move online, should you?

PARENTAL CONTROLS V. MONITORING

To understand the issue, it's important to clarify the difference between parental controls and parental monitoring: Parental controls refer to apps or features on a device that allow you to have a say in *what type of digital information your child accesses* and for *how long*.

Monitoring apps might also include those features, but their primary purpose is to enable parents to remotely monitor their child's online behavior and their devices. This includes seeing text messages, web browsing history, and social media use. They can also tell parents their child's current location and location history of their phone, *all without the child knowing*. In other words, monitoring apps allow parents to spy.

While no one disputes the value of parental controls for setting age-appropriate limits on both the content and quantity of a child's tech use, even for the most well-intentioned parents spying is problematic. Following is food for thought before you go down that path.

SPYWARE CREATES A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

Tracking companies pander to parents' fears by promoting the idea that knowing your child's every digital move will protect her from all risks. Understandably you want to know if your child is being cyberbullied—but monitoring her doesn't actually prevent cyberbullying, nor does it provide your child with the skills to deal with it. While spyware can show you if your child is interacting with online friends, it doesn't prevent her from making an online friend or discern if that new friend is a stranger from across the country. The same goes for sexting.

Just as you wouldn't wait for your child to actually get into a stranger's car before teaching her not to, you shouldn't wait to teach her about these online dangers.

It's advisable to discuss these situations *before* they happen, rather than after the fact. At that point you're left to manage a potentially difficult problem rather than prevent one.

ROLE MODEL OPEN COMMUNICATION

Having those difficult conversations is a fundamental responsibility of parenting. Spyware may allow you to avoid those tough topics (unless you discover something that forces the issue) by suggesting that if your child's not engaged in those behaviors you don't have to address them. But the better option is to initiate those conversations *before* the fact, rather than in the heat of the moment.

Being intentional in those discussions has the added benefits of teaching your child how to confront uncomfortable topics in a calm and non-confrontational manner, while also communicating your family's values around certain issues. How will your child understand your family's values if you don't have those conversations?

BREACHING TRUST

Spying teaches stealthiness, and it can undermine self-confidence. Children interpret a parent's need to snoop as a lack of faith in their ability to make good decisions or to be trusted. It is appropriate for tweens and teens to begin to separate from their parents and want greater privacy. If a parent does not tell their child they are being monitored and the child discovers it, it will inevitably be viewed as a violation of trust—it's the modern-day equivalent of your mom reading your diary.

Not only is spying an invasion of your child's privacy, it also might jeopardize your family's privacy. If you're reading your child's texts you can assume that theirs are being read by another parent. Any and every complaint your child has made to her best friend is now public information.



What Can Parents Do?

Following are common-sense guidelines to help you navigate this issue for your family:

- 1. Define your goal.** Before monitoring, ask yourself why you feel the need, and if surveillance will accomplish your objective. If, for example, your child is not talking with you, installing spyware won't change that. Instead, a little research on communicating with kids might result in what you're after. If, on the other hand, your child has an after-school job delivering pizza, being able to track her location seems reasonable.
- 2. Be aware of boundaries.** If you feel you must monitor, don't spy and don't overdo it. Children need to experience age-appropriate independence on their journey to adulthood. Tracking your teen's location while she's making pizza deliveries is different from micromanaging her every move during her leisure time and constantly questioning, "Why did you stop here? Why did you go there?"
- 3. Be open and upfront.** Most important, explain that while you trust your child she can't be expected to know all the dangers and read the signs especially at a time when even adults are struggling to decipher what is real and what is not. Most kids understand and are willing to tolerate a certain amount of digital surveillance, but you'll get much further if you make it collaborative by agreeing on what you will and won't monitor. Amount of time spent on Instagram or gaming? Fair. Type of content she's viewing? Fair. Conversations with her school friends? Off limits. Interactions with new online friends? Decide together when and how much.

Nadja Streiter is a clinical social worker and therapist who specializes in Technology and Video Game Addiction.

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