



## To Spy, Or Not To Spy...That Is The Question

Prof Andy Phippen poses an interesting question: 'While there are many positives of young people using tech, we are flooded with concerns too- too much screen time, inappropriate content, cyberbullying, sexting, pornography, grooming and meeting up with strangers. Wouldn't it be good if we could put something on their phone or tablet that would make sure none of this could happen!?'

It appears there's an app for that and busy parents often resort to technology to address these concerns. This has inspired many parents to manage online and smartphone safety by utilising parental controls and monitoring techniques.

These can range from manual approaches such as friending or following their teen on social media in order to keep an eye on what they post, through to utilising additional technologies that can monitor device usage or prohibit certain Internet activities.

Spying takes monitoring their child's device to another level. Using spyware enables parents to spy on their child's device activity and personal content without their knowledge. Spyware is also capable of blocking incoming calls, monitoring SMS and

voice messages, tracking GPS locations, remotely locking devices, and blacklisting certain apps and device functions.



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This approach has also proven to present problems, as it can motivate children to go to dangerous lengths to be secretive about their online activities, as well as having serious implications for parent-child trust.

As with most other parental controls, spying on a child's device becomes contentious during adolescence. This is because adolescence represents a stage in a child's life where they're developing and exploring their own independence and identity.

This can often cause parents to grow anxious about losing influence, authority, and control – an issue which is only made worse by the use of secretive and surreptitious software.

Yet, in doing so, parents risk preventing them from developing their own moral compass. There are some lessons in life that are best learned through personal experiences and mistakes, rather than through being disciplined by a parent.

Another approach advocated by Devorah Heitner, founder of Raising Digital Natives is for parents to focus on mentoring, rather than monitoring-talking with, listening to, observing and engaging with their children is far more effective in keeping children safe than covert spying. She observes: ' I think that parents may be hoping for insight about their kids' inner lives, but they're not going to get that from reading their texts or seeing what websites they're visiting.'

Consider the following two scenarios. In Scenario One, a parent agrees to let their teen have a smartphone on the condition that they will be using parental control software that is able to monitor activities and patterns of behaviour (without necessarily making that content viewable to parents) in order to detect potential threats. Parental alerts are triggered only when verified threats are detected (i.e the child visits a website which is recognised to be dangerous) so that parents can respond immediately.



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In Scenario Two, a parent agrees to let their teen have a smartphone on the condition that they will be installing spyware, which will give them direct oversight of all activity and data on the device, enabling them to – amongst other things – read all messages sent and received by their child; regardless of whether or not they’re engaging in dangerous or inappropriate behaviour.

Both scenarios entail a parent attempting to keep their child safe, but the second scenario does so at the expense of the child’s right to basic privacy.

It is clear to see that in order to raise responsible, healthy, and independent young adults who have strong moral compasses and value privacy, we need to make sure that they are entitled to it themselves. By all means, parents should get involved and stay involved in their children’s online lives, but spying is never an appropriate substitute for ongoing communication, support, or education.

# Family Discussion Opportunities

- Do you think parents have different ideas about privacy from their children?
- Does this become a source of conflict? Why or why not?
- What can you do to protect your privacy by using settings and other features on devices?
- How important is trust between parents and their children when it comes to social media and other online activities?
- How do you earn trust?

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