

Where to Draw the Digital Line: Monitoring, Spying, and Privacy

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How much privacy do we give our children when it comes to their online use? Are we telling them we don't trust them when we install monitoring software or insist the computer must be in a public place? Is it okay to spy on my child without them knowing it?

These are all great questions... let me break this down into a couple of segments. First, I would NEVER insist there is only ONE parenting style that must be adhered to in order to be safe, every family dynamic is different so you have to find what works best for you.

That being said, let's look at how we parent in the physical world. Let's say you are taking 3 children to the park, a 4-year old, a 10-year old and a 13-year old. You may let the 10-year old go to the big kid park while you stay with the 4-year old (not leaving her side for a moment). You can see the 10-year old from across the park but you are not there to hold her hand as she climbs the slide. The 10-year old knows enough not to talk to adult strangers and she is always within earshot of you. Now the 13-year old may get to wander to the soccer field on the other side of the park where you cannot see him. But you know he is there and you know who he is playing with. He needs to be back in an hour and he better not leave the soccer field to go to grab a soda with his friends without checking with you first. See where I'm going with this...

Let's translate this to their online use. Direct supervision is imperative for the youngest user. They are just one-click away from seeing something they didn't mean to or connecting with a stranger. The rule in my house is you don't talk to strangers unless you are with a trusted adult. Therefore, that same rule applies online. Although 4 may be a little young to even be online, I've seen plenty of tech savvy toddlers that I need to say this. There are programs such as PureSight for the PC and built in filtering on the Mac that allow you to lock down an account so the child can ONLY access the sites you allow. It's a great way to start them off and show them that not everything is meant for them online, so you are helping by directing them to the places that are for them.

A 10-year old online may not need you sitting on top of them, but filtering and

monitoring are important here to let them know that you have certain expectations about what they can and cannot do. As your kids get older they will have access to unfiltered and monitored computers at a friend's house, the public library, and even mobile devices. Therefore, you have to remember that ALL filtering and monitoring software are meant to set expectations and NOT to keep your kids safe from wandering off to the wrong site.

I believe that when you get to the point with your child that you are constantly over their shoulder putting in a password to allow them access to sites they need to get to, it's time to remove the filters. There are reporting tools such as Web Shadow for PC users and Built in Reporting Logs for Mac user that allows you to view all sites they have visited (even if they clear their history or private browse).

The reporting feature again is a way to set expectations and even get the conversation starting about what they are doing online. It's almost impossible to keep up with the games they play and the applications they use, but when you can take a peek into their digital world, you have a starting point from which to ask questions about where they are going and with whom they are going there.

I've never been a huge proponent of spying but I will say that if you believe your child warrants spying PLEASE DO SO! If they are pulling away, unwilling to communicate about their online whereabouts and friends, if they seem to be constantly connected or even waking up in the middle of the night to check Facebook, text messages, etc. it's time to take drastic measures! There is SPY software that allows you to monitor both in real time and via reporting every action on a specific computer. There are also monitoring software for cell phones (contact your phone company and ask about parental controls). If you are going to go this far then you need to know that you will also need to have your child within your sight at all times too. Talk to the school about hindering computer access and do not allow play-dates or sleepovers outside of your supervision. It's an extreme measure. We used to call it being grounded... No socializing with friends because we broke trust.

The point is, parenting is parenting no matter what realm we are talking about. You just need to tweak these skills a bit to apply the same parameters in the online world that you do in the physical.

Discussion Topics: Here are a few questions you can ask to get the conversation started?

1) What is your favorite website?

2) How much time do you think you spend on a particular site/app/game (i.e.

Facebook, Instagram, or Xbox Live) NOTE: Your kids may not even realize how

much time they spend socializing or gaming. Setting up monitoring software like

Screen Retriever may give them some insight into their own use.

3) Would you mind if I received a report weekly about the things you do? Why or why not? NOTE: You wouldn't let your child walk out the front door and not ask them where they are going, why would you let them wander the vast world of cyberspace and not ask the same questions.