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Checking in, or on?

Software lets parents do more monitoring, but is it too much?

By Maggie Jackson | February 11, 2007

Lori Galewski doesn't have to wait until her three kids come home from school to quiz them on what they had for lunch. In fact, she doesn't have to ask at all. She knows if her 16-year-old twin sons or 11-year-old daughter had cookies for a main course by checking a website linked to their Whitman-Hanson school system.

"Before, I'd have to trust that they made the healthy choices," says Galewski, administrative assistant for technology for the district, which uses an electronic tag system that allows parents to pre pay school lunches and track kids' choices. From work, Galewski uses MealpayPlus by Horizon Software International to check her children's choices, mostly to make sure they are well-fueled for afternoon sports.

"When they come home, I can say, 'You only had a cookie and chocolate milk. That isn't going to last you,'" says Galewski.

Keeping track of the kids isn't just a matter of poking your head out the back door anymore. In an era of highly scheduled and relentlessly mobile families, working parents now have virtual eyes and ears.

There are breathalyzers and drug tests marketed for family use, software to block websites and record keystrokes, GPS in cell phones, and alarm systems that monitor sitters and family members as much as would-be burglars. In an insecure world where most bomb scares aren't comic, parents naturally want to do everything they can to safeguard their children.

And yet parents and specialists wonder: In keeping them safe are we keeping them caged? How much "monitoring" is too much, especially when we're trying to rear creative, independent thinkers? Steven Mintz, a historian of childhood, says we're putting children on tighter leashes than past generations, when the young had loads of freedom, punctuated by times of strict supervision in institutions such as school.

"Today, becoming an adult is becoming a much more difficult, prolonged, and disjunctive process," says Mintz, a professor at the University of Houston and author of "Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood." "What we've done is put kids under what I would call house arrest."

George Abrahamson, a corporate database administrator, grew up in Scituate with almost complete freedom to roam the town, a fondly remembered aspect of childhood that he realizes his two teen daughters, ages 15 and 17, now lack.

"I feel bad for the kids in that respect," says Abrahamson, who lives in Attleboro. "But I like having the ability of knowing what they're doing. It makes me feel better and the kids don't seem to mind. They don't know any different."

Several years ago, when the girls began spending some after-school hours alone, Abrahamson installed a wireless security system by Alarm.com at home. When the girls let themselves in and out of the house before and after school, they effectively punch in and out using an electronic code or key fob, which alerts their dad via e-mail or voicemail. A separate sensor guards the liquor cabinet to deter teen experimenting.

Since its debut in late 2003, tens of thousands of such systems have been sold, mostly to families interested in monitoring kids and sitters, along with deterring intruders, says Mary Knebel, vice president of business development at Tysons Corner, Va.,-based Alarm.com. Parents set up sensors on gun, liquor, and medicine cabinets, pool gates, and doors and windows to “understand what’s going on at home,” says Knebel.

Deciding what’s a safeguard and what’s a choking leash isn’t easy, but it’s a crucial question as we raise not only tomorrow’s workers, but future lovers, citizens, and friends.

With good intentions, we risk making our kids less independent and less trusting with our web of safeguards. If children grow up amid a climate of distrust, how will they learn to take the risk of trusting another as adults? And, since some kids will always try to circumvent the watching, another unintended effect may be to drive them further underground if they do want to make mischief.

Galewski likes the ease and efficiency of MealpayPlus, although she worries that the system does away with an important nightly conversation-starter. “You have to be able to gain trust by talking to them, and not trust technologies to make decisions for you,” says Galewski.

She makes a good point. We can’t always be there to watch our children in person, so virtual eyes and ears are a boon. Yet depending too heavily on monitoring technologies is like getting to know someone via snapshots and printouts. It’s a risky business, even for the pros.

Recently, I tagged along with New York City private detective Jim Mulvaney one morning as he installed keystroke-logging software on the laptop of a 13-year-old Long Island teen who was at school. Her nervous parents said they had no immediate suspicions, yet wanted to make sure that in a year or two, their daughter wasn’t hanging with the wrong online or hometown crowd.

“You can’t say at 16, after you’ve lost control, that now I’m going to be involved,” said the teen’s father, Bob, who did not want his last name used.

Mulvaney, a father of two, says parents need to be vigilant, especially about their child’s doings online, but should also realize that monitoring can be a Pandora’s box. His own teenage son had a “couple of police rides” a year ago, but Mulvaney turned to a non professional tactic: spending more time together.

“Am I reading his e-mail? No, I’m not,” says Mulvaney, who has a small but growing clientele of parents seeking to check up on their children. “You can keylog a kid’s computer and think you’re up on everything, but you’re better off spending time with them. Understanding human relations is an art, not a science. Tech tools provide a safety net for the parent, but they don’t provide what the kid needs.”