

“Snooping on your kids? That may cross the line”

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Have you ever spied on your kids? You know, read their diary, listened in on their phone conversations or checked their e-mail?

Technology has made it possible for parents to take spying on their kids to a new level.

We can monitor what they see and do on the Internet. And there's a technology that can let us track where they are using their cell phones. But how far is too far? Do kids have a right to some degree of privacy?

Elizabeth Pearce, executive director of Commonwealth Parenting, says it isn't really about privacy but about setting boundaries. "It's a normal part of a child's development into independence to desire a sense of privacy," she told me. "However, it's the parent's job to protect their child and make sure they're safe. Any indication that their child is in danger, then any sense of privacy goes out the window."

So does this mean it's OK to snoop through your kids' stuff under the guise of protecting them from harm? Pearce believes that unless your child gives you an indication there's a problem, snooping could be crossing the line. Those signs may include a sudden drop in grades, isolating themselves, becoming secretive or exhibiting destructive behavior.

Parents should talk to the children about their suspicions and tell them what they intend to do.

Dawna Kucklick, a Dinwiddie County mom of three, hopes that it never gets to the point where she has to snoop on her kids. Recently, her 8-year-old daughter has started to become possessive about her personal space. "More so with her younger sisters than with me. She tells me everything."

Kucklick is hesitant about snooping through her children's personal space but concedes she might consider it if her child is in danger.

Recently, there's been news about a device that will allow parents to track their children through their cell phones. Does this cross the line?

"While cell phones are a convenience, I believe we must realize that they are not to be used in place of responsible parenting," said Pearce. "Just as kids learn how to evade Internet filters and parental controls, it would be just as easy for children to conveniently leave the phone at home, or simply turn it off, if they wanted to evade their parent's surveillance."

Both Kucklick and Pearce are concerned about kids and what they do on the Internet. "Cell phones and the Internet are not really meant for children," said Pearce. "If parents are going to allow them to use these resources, then they must teach their children how to be responsible. Talk to them about giving out sensitive information that may be used by online predators."

I think I'm an overprotective parent, but I would never intentionally snoop on my kids. I agree with Pearce and Kucklick in giving my children personal space, unless I feel they may be in trouble. I hope no matter what the situation, my kids feel comfortable discussing it with my husband and me.

Parents need to get to know their kids, their friends, and the activities their kids are involved in online and offline. On the Internet, many adults fall prey to scams and shady individuals. Parents can't expect their kids to be able to escape the dark holes of the Web without being actively involved.

Also, I don't believe kids should have cell phones unless they are responsible teens who have jobs to pay for them. If you need to keep track of your 8- to 15-year-old's whereabouts via cell phone, then maybe you need to question whether you're spending enough time with them. A cell phone should not be your child's baby sitter.

Tequitia Andrews is a freelance writer who lives in Petersburg. Her column appears on alternate Sundays in the Flair section.