

[<<Back](#)



Your teen's privacy: Is crossing the line ever OK?



By Diane Griffith, Staff Writer, myOptumHealth

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With kids spending so much time on social sites like MySpace and Facebook, parents may have good reason to worry. © iStockphoto.com/Tomaz Levstek

Is it ever OK to read your child's e-mail? Go into her backpack? Search his bedroom? When does keeping an eye on your child cross the line from monitoring to snooping?

Most parents agree on keeping a close eye on their kids. They keep the computer in a common area and watch what sites they visit. They get to know their children's friends and their parents. They ask where they are going and tell them when to be home.

But are there times when simply trusting your child may not be enough? For some parents, "monitoring" may cross the line to "spying." This can lead to a loss of trust and destroy the relationship.

To snoop or not to snoop

Many experts feel that snooping on your child does more harm than good. Spying can destroy your child's trust and make it less likely for him to confide in you when he's in trouble. It's best to discuss your concerns with him, keep the lines of communication open and let him know he can talk to you about anything.

However, if there are signs that your child is involved in risky behavior, some of those same experts say you should do whatever you can - including snooping - to protect her. But they add that spying on your child should be a last resort. If taking away his computer or cell phone can resolve the problem, try that first. If you have concerns about your child's safety, talk to your doctor or a counselor before you resort to snooping.

The Internet

Before you buy a computer, set some ground rules. Let the kids know that you will be checking the history and the browser from time to time. That way, they will know what is expected from them up front and won't feel as though you are violating their trust.

With kids spending so much time on social sites like MySpace and Facebook, parents may have good reason to worry. Although there are age limitations for joining these sites, they're easy for kids to bypass. If kids reveal too much about themselves on their pages, they can easily become the targets of Internet predators.

If you suspect your child is planning to meet up with strangers, taking drugs or getting involved with the wrong crowd, this information is likely to be on his MySpace or Facebook page. But he may use privacy settings to block you from viewing it. Tell him that you want to view his site with him regularly to make sure that all the information is appropriate.

Also let your child know that any information posted has the potential to be seen by anyone. That includes grandparents, college admissions staff and future employers.

If you feel that the only way to find out what's going on with a troubled child is to snoop, make sure you can defend your decision. Also realize that you are taking a huge risk with your child's trust.

Damaging the lines of trust

Parents can buy cell phones that track their kids' whereabouts. There are monitoring devices for cars that tell parents not only where their children are, but also whether they're speeding or driving recklessly. Some parents check their kids' cell phones to see who their contacts are and to read their texts. Others use spyware that records every keystroke and makes it easy to find out their children's passwords, sites they visit and messages they send and receive. And then there's good-old-fashioned rummaging through their kids' rooms.

Experts say these methods can damage the parent-child relationship and that open communication with your child is far more effective. If you suspect your teen is involved in life-threatening behaviors (such as drugs, violence, meeting up with strangers she's met online, etc.), seek professional help right away.

The last resort

What if all else fails and you feel there is no alternative but to snoop on your child? If your gut is telling you that he is involved in something dangerous, you may have to choose your duty to protect him over his right to privacy. He might be angry, but that's better than having harm come to him that can't be undone.

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