

Should You Spy On Your Kids Online?

by Carolyn Jabs

Parents have always wanted to know what their kids do when they aren't around. Now, it's disconcertingly easy to find out - at least when kids are online. New software programs with ominous names like Big Brother and Stealth Eyes allow parents to monitor everything kids do in cyberspace.

Originally, these products were designed for the workplace where employers found workers using computers for everything but work. More recently, the software companies have started urging parents to use their products at home. Unlike monitoring or filtering programs that try to keep kids away from unwholesome websites, the new "snoopware" can report not only where kids have been surfing, but also every e-mail and instant message they exchange.

Is using such software responsible parenting or paranoid spying? The answer isn't obvious. The Internet can be a dangerous place, and turning kids loose without guidance is a little like dropping them off in midtown Manhattan and suggesting they find their way safely back to the hotel. In a perfect world, parents would explain the risks, lay out the limits and trust kids to make good choices. But the world isn't perfect. Parents aren't always home, kids don't always use good judgement, and there are people who use the Internet to exploit children.

In this context, spyware starts to make sense except for one big problem: installing it without telling your kids models the dishonesty you want to discourage in your children. The solution: take the "spy" out of spyware by telling kids what you're doing. This is, obviously, easiest when kids are under the age of 10 and accustomed to parental surveillance. It's more crucial for kids between 11 and 15 who are likely to be addicted to instant messages and often spend time at home alone.

Supervision software can only be effective if you find a program you can actually use. Many of the spyware programs advertised through e-mail are technically complex. The idea of recording every keystroke may seem brilliant at first glance, but it takes time most parents don't have to sift through all the backspaces and backslashes to get at what you need to know. Instead, look for a program like Spector (spectorsoft.com) which has a clear, uncluttered filing system so you can decide what you want to monitor.

When you install the software, be upfront with your kids. It's perfectly alright to admit that this is new territory. You might say, for example, that you've heard about kids getting into trouble online so you're using software to keep track of how the family computer is being used. Assure your child that you don't have time or inclination to check everything that goes on, but you'll be able to do periodic inspections.

For most kids, the simple fact that mom or dad could see what they're doing online brings conscience to computing. Even adults admit that the anonymity of chat and instant messages is what encourages them to do things they wouldn't do in real life. Telling kids you'll be checking the online log now and then is a lot like giving an adolescent couple privacy in the TV room - just knowing you could drop in with popcorn keeps their feet on the floor.

When and whether you actually use the software you've installed depends to a large extent on your child's temperament. For cheerful kids who still confide in you and usually follow family rules in other areas, an occasional question about a new name on a buddy list may be plenty. Risk-taking kids who miss curfews, skip school or show poor judgement in other ways need more supervision in cyberspace, too.

Obviously, parents have to resist the dark side of surveillance. All of us have the urge, on occasion, to micro-manage our kids' lives, partly to protect them and partly (be honest) because it's good to feel powerful. When parents scrutinize every move a child makes on or off line, he can't develop the independence, much less the confidence, necessary to become a self-sufficient adult. In the worst case scenario, over zealous surveillance will undermine the parent-child relationship because he can't trust you to trust him.

Trust, however, is different from ignorance. In the end, supervising software gives parents the same control over the household computer that they've always had over children's bedrooms. Both are semi-private - unless parents have a reason to be concerned about a child's well-being. Used with kids' knowledge and parents' restraint, surveillance software is just another part of the loving structure kids need to make wise decisions in cyberspace.