



Should I Stalk My Kid?

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One of the most common questions I get from parents at my workshops is, "What software do you use to track your teenagers' phones?"

I think I disappoint many of these parents when I tell them, "I don't."

Let's look at this big picture for a moment. We have two types of parents. The 'over-permissive' parents who buy their kids a smartphone at age 8 and never set a single boundary. On the other extreme we have the 'over-protective' parents who don't let their kid go anywhere or own any technology, hoping that they'll be safe from the evil clutches of the world.

Here's the problem. Neither extreme works. And following your teenager's every move is tiptoeing towards the overprotective extreme.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting you let your kids do whatever they want. In fact, I'm a huge advocate for helpful boundaries, especially when your kids are younger. But as they grow older, we need to teach them discernment, and they'll never learn to discern if every decision is made for them. That means parents need to slowly release their grip as their kids get older. That means... no stalking!

Accountability is a good thing. Stalking is a bad thing.

One of the ways your can hold your kids accountable is by requiring them to provide you with all their passwords. No tracking software, no spying on them, just passwords. That means Mom or Dad can look at their teenager's phone whenever they want. My daughters didn't like this. They were rather vocal about it. But whenever we discussed it, I always stumped them with this question: "When is the last time I looked at your phone?"

The fact was, my girls were trustworthy and I didn't need to check their phones. But I had the ability to at any time. They learned that the more they demonstrated trust, the more freedom they enjoyed. Parents also need to be careful of smothering their kids in the social media world. We all know parents who seem to live on social media and comment on literally every post, especially their kids' posts. It's parents like this who provoked kids to leave Facebook and seek out new social media platforms where Mom and Dad aren't watching.

The scary thing about this is that some of the more "private" social media platforms are dangerous. Young people are fleeing accountability and landing in "anonymous" social media playgrounds where they feel like they can post anything with no consequences. Many of the students are learning hard lessons, like the reality that nothing we post is ever truly anonymous, and many of said posts come back and haunt them.

Guardrails can help keep your kids stay on course.

If Mom and Dad chilled in the first place and stopped smothering their kids online, then kids wouldn't feel as compelled to flee.

One of my blog readers who is a youth pastor told me stories about some of the parents of kids in his youth group. One Mom constantly posted embarrassing photos of her kids. She thought it was fun; but her daughter was in tears over some of the pics. Another mom posted something about her son snuggling in bed with her that morning—a harmless incident, until posted publically and led to him being ridiculed at school that day. In a culture where almost half of teens have been harassed online,* parents need to use wisdom and think twice about their posts. And if they want their kids to experience the freedom to earn trust, then Mom and Dad might want to back off on the stalking as well.

What does it look like to walk this line?

- Be involved in your kids' lives enough so you get to know their world through conversations, not spying.
- Require passwords from your kids when they're young. Start strict, then give them an increasing amount of freedom as they mature. Passwords provide accountability, without so much "big brother is watching."
- Feel free to engage in social media with them—get an Instagram account and occasionally LIKE their photos. Resist the urge to comment on every photo. Give them enough slack so they forget you're one of their followers.
- Engage in frequent conversations about social media values—dialogue, not monologue. Ask questions and then do more listening than talking.
- Stay current by reading about youth culture and technology (My blog and the Youth Culture Window articles on TheSource4Parents.com are both great resources to keep you informed).

Guardrails can help keep your kids stay on course. Shackles, however, only bind your kids from ever learning to make decisions on their own.

For more ideas like this about connecting with your kids who can't seem to pry their eyes away from their mobile devices, look for my brand new book, *52 Ways to Connect With Your Smartphone-Obsessed Kid*.

JONATHAN McKEE is the author of over a dozen books including *Get Your Teenager Talking* and *More Than Just the Talk*. He speaks to parents and leaders worldwide, all while providing free help for parents on TheSource4Parents.com

- <http://www.thesource4parents.com/YouthCultureWindow/article.aspx?ID=290>