

Spying on your kid's phone with Teensafe will only undermine trust

April 29 2015, by Tonya Rooney



How will they feel if they find their parents are monitoring their every online movement? Credit: Kat N.L.M./Flickr, CC BY-NC

There is a [growing market](#) in software that can be used by parents to track their child's mobile phone and internet activity. The [Teensafe](#) app, recently launched in Australia, is one such app that has prompted renewed debate around issues such as children's privacy and parental rights and responsibilities.

The app works by allowing parents to remotely monitor activity on their

[child](#)'s phone, including text messages, [web browsing history](#) and social media use on Facebook or Instagram. It also tells the parents their child's current location and location history of the phone.

The presence of this app cannot be detected on the phone, so the only way the child will know they are being monitored is if their parent chooses to tell them.

[Police](#) and [cyber safety experts](#) have cautioned parents against using this type of monitoring due to the potential impact on [trust](#) in the parent/child relationship.

The impact on trust

If a parent does not tell the child they are being monitored, and the child finds out, this is likely to be experienced as a breach of trust. Even if a parent lets their child know they are being monitored, children will often take this as a message that they cannot be trusted. In either scenario, several problems can arise.

One of these is that the child may simply use another phone, or a friend's phone, in which case parents are left with a false sense of security and no knowledge of the risks the child may be taking.

Perhaps more significantly is the risk to the relationship between parent and child. One of the widely recognised features of trust is that it takes time to build, but can be easily broken and once broken can be difficult to rebuild. If a child loses trust in a parent, then this may leave the child feeling isolated and ultimately lacking the very support they need to negotiate the genuine risks they may encounter.

There may also be flow-on effects to the child's friendships. This app allows parents to view the messages a child receives from others, as well

as contacts and the child's Facebook activity, including posts and messages. This capacity to monitor the child's wider friendship circle may therefore interfere with the way a child goes about building relationships with others.

The value of trust

Trust lies at the heart of our relationships with others. The things we value, such as family and friends, are grounded in some level of mutual trust. Furthermore, most of daily activities often require us to place trust in people we do not know or may never meet. For example, we trust that others will obey the road rules each time we drive, walk or ride a bike in public spaces.



Some of the features included in the Teensafe app. Credit: Teensafe

Coming to understand what it means to place trust in someone, the reasons we might do this and how to make judgements about when it is reasonable to trust, are all important in navigating everyday interactions.

Trusting others is not always easy. It is a risky business. When we entrust others, we leave ourselves vulnerable and open to the potential for hurt or harm to something we care about. Yet, unless we take these risks, trust has no place to start from.

For children, having another person trust them can also act as an expression of confidence. Giving children gradual opportunities to be trusted helps them find their own way through things, even if at times this means making mistakes.

The limitations of tracking and monitoring apps

Companies such as Teensafe trade on an assumption that it is possible to protect children from all risks and that the way to do this is to watch every move so as to avert or intercept potential harm.

These types of messages feed into the culture of fear about the dangers children face. It also goes against the [growing body of evidence](#) that shows that – unless trusted to take risks – children are losing the very skills they need to navigate the world and deal with the genuine risks they will encounter.

This is not to say we should trust children blindly and neglect our responsibility to protect them from harm. It is also not to say that we shouldn't at times share in children's online encounters and the humour, anxiety or pride this brings.

On the contrary, every child needs to be supported in working out how to safely negotiate their way around social media, online gaming, email and texting.

Concerns such as cyber-bullying, online stalking, [identity theft](#) and access to inappropriate content are some of the risks children need to be aware of. But there are alternatives to addressing these without resorting to blanket covert monitoring of a child's online and messaging activity.

Building digital literacy and involving children in educating adults about [social media](#) are two more productive options.

Some [parents](#) using apps such as Teensafe [describe](#) the sense of security it brings knowing they can watch every move and word of their [children](#)'s online lives.

We need to ask why this level of scrutiny would ever be necessary. Teenagers have always had secret parts of their lives, and a trusting relationship with a parent is a better antidote to the risks they may encounter than a one-size-fits-all monitoring device that carries with it the potential to undermine that trust.

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