

# Young children unconcerned about digital tracking by strangers

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Children may be more vulnerable than previously thought to those who might exploit their digital footprint to track their location or obtain private information.

A new University of Michigan study suggests that when it comes to digital privacy, [children](#) often do not see the [negative consequences](#) of someone tracking items belonging to someone else.

"These findings raise serious concerns for children's digital safety and security," said lead author Susan Gelman, professor of psychology and linguistics. "They indicate that children up to 10 years of age display robust positive moral judgments about digital tracking and [digital privacy](#), at an age when many children play with, use or own a variety of types of mobile devices with a built-in GPS."

Cell phone ownership has been on the rise for the last decade, including among children 8-10 years of age. About a third of this group owns a cell phone.

Digital privacy is of growing concern, given the increasing use of technological devices that track object locations, revealing personal information regarding an individual's movements and activities, Gelman said.

Although many children use this technology—such as cell phones that track their location throughout the day or sharing photos that are tagged with time and location stamps—little had been known regarding how children of different ages evaluate digital tracking, and whether they are sensitive to violations of privacy.

The study examined how more than 300 children, ages 4-10, and adults evaluated a hypothetical situation of someone using a mobile GPS device to track items (a backpack, a favorite object, a pet) that they either do or do not own.

The results indicate striking age differences. Adults were consistently negative about someone tracking items that the tracker did not own.

They identified possible negative consequences of someone tracking others' possessions (such as stealing or stalking), moral principles ("It's an invasion of privacy," "Without permission, it's wrong") and a vague sense of unease ("It's weird," "He has no business to know where [my] dog is").

In contrast, the children did not express such negativity, overall. The youngest children (4-7 years) were positive about someone tracking others' possessions. In fact, children were more negative about someone merely placing a mobile GPS device on an object and not tracking it than about someone placing the device in order to track the object, Gelman said.

Although evaluations differed markedly when comparing children to adults, more subtle measures indicate an earlier emerging sense that tracking someone else's possessions is less acceptable than tracking one's own possessions, as early as 4-5 years old.

By 6-7 years old, some children were able to provide reasons to explain this belief ("Because sometimes it's kind of private," "If Sam uses his computer to see where my backpack is, it's cheating," "He could steal it").

"At the same time, children were much more accepting of this behavior than adults, perhaps focusing on the benefits of object-tracking (for example, to find lost objects) more than its costs," Gelman said.

The findings raise an urgent question: what is the best way to protect children? Gelman said it starts by educating children about potential dangers, and providing clear guidelines and limits for how and when their phones and accounts should be shared.

**More information:** Susan A. Gelman et al. Developing Digital

Privacy: Children's Moral Judgments Concerning Mobile GPS Devices,  
*Child Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12826](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12826)

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