

Monitoring apps: what parents should know

Monitoring apps allow parents to track their children's activity – from where they go after school to what they're texting. At first glance, an app that lets parents constantly keep tabs on their children might seem like a good thing, but is it really?

What do they do?

The apps can be installed on a child's phone to show their parents what they get up to. Some (like Life360) use GPS to track a child's location, while others let parents see their children's texts, who they're calling and what else they're getting up to online. Some combine the two. One app, Ignore No More, will disable a child's phone until they return a call from their parents. Some can (theoretically) be installed and used on a young person's phone without their knowledge.

What are the pros and cons?

It's natural to worry about what your children get up to, on and offline. Some parents argue that the apps actually give their children more freedom – they're allowed to go out with friends more often when their parents can make sure they're actually where they say they are.

But experts have a dim view of the usefulness of monitoring apps. As with a lot of technical solutions, young people often find a way to stay one step ahead. And generally speaking, surveillance may not be the best way to keep your child safe.

Some experts have raised safety concerns about the apps themselves. The former head of MI6 has warned that monitoring apps might be vulnerable to malicious hackers¹ and some abusers have installed the apps on their victims' phones as a way of increasing their control.²

Of course, it's unlikely that your child will be targeted by hackers or abusers. But whenever you start using an app, you should have a look at the privacy policy – and this is especially important if you decide to use a surveillance app. Marketing in the digital age is increasingly data driven: you may be perfectly fine with tracking your child's activity but you might be less comfortable with companies doing it and selling the information commercially.

The biggest problem is that using monitoring apps to log your child's social media use or read their texts might not be the best way to build a trusting relationship. If you're hoping your child will feel comfortable coming to you for guidance, it's important that they feel they can trust you – and vice versa.

Young people today make very little distinction between their lives online and off – so having all their digital messages monitored probably won't feel too different to them to having you eavesdrop on every conversation they have with their friends.

So, while monitoring apps may seem like a convenient solution to digital age parenting dilemmas, they also come with some real drawbacks. The latest research on young people's online lives tells us that rather than trying to keep them away from all risk, we should be supporting them in [building their own resilience](#) and [digital literacy](#). You won't be able to track your child's every move forever, so it might be more effective to focus on helping them know what to do if any problems do arise – and making it clear that you're always there for them.