

# To track or not to track?

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To track or not to track. That is the question. GPS and cell phone technology has made it possible to follow our kids' every move. Just because we can, is it ok to do it?

The most recent data shows that among parents of teens aged 14-17, 25% of parents track their kids' locations, but only 15% of teens actually think their parents do so.

The argument for tracking is knowing where our kids are in this wild world. Proof of our kids' whereabouts in the form of a little dot on a screen provides the peace of mind some parents want. Tracking is also a sure-fire way to know whether kids are exactly where they say they are or supposed to be.

The main argument against tracking is that it can undermine the desire to build trust between parents and kids. Some say it is important to give youth the freedom to make the right choice without following them. If they know we are tracking them, it weakens their obligation to be responsible.

With my teens, I have always preferred to not use tracking but to rely on our communication with each other. They tell me or my husband where they are. We have discussed with them that we want to know where they are if they go out at night, and they text us to let us know (or ask permission) when they want to change plans. Does that mean they have told us every change of location? During the day definitely not—and we do not require that of them. They are living their lives and we know that if we have to reach them, usually they will answer the phone—unless there is a reason not to, like their battery died or they are not in cell range. For my teens, it has worked well to rely on our talking about plans in advance and then to stay in touch about changes.

I realize that for other families this approach might not work, and of course, every family needs to make a decision about how this will be handled. One thing that I feel strongly about is the damage that can be done in a relationship when parents are tracking a kid's location without telling them. That goes for monitoring any type of behavior. Using deceptive ways to monitor can cause serious rifts in relationships that can be very daunting to repair.

There are many reasons that parents decide to use tracking. Commonly they do it because they are concerned about their youth's safety. For example, if they cannot reach their child they want to be able to see where they are. I have never felt that being able to see their location will make them safer. Because I grew up in a high-crime neighborhood, I have raised my children to be very savvy about safety and I trust that they will rely on such skills to stay away from unsafe situations. That said, I realize that some parents just feel a lot better being able to actually see where they are if they have any doubts.

Another reason people like to track is so they can have fewer talks about logistics and instead rely more on tech for sorting out the locations of everyone in the family. This is one way tech can really be helpful.

Of course, there are many more reasons that people choose to track or not to track. This is a great topic to have a conversation about with your kids in a calm, non-charged way:

1. Let's discuss how families managed logistics before cell phones.
2. What are the upsides of tracking? Possible downsides?
3. What do you think of the study results that teens underestimate how often parents track teens' location?