

Should You Track Your Teen's Location?

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Image



Teenagers are rarely apart from their phones, making it easy for parents to use apps that track their locations. Credit CreditDrew Angerer/Getty Images

By Lisa Damour

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- If you want to start a heated debate, ask a group of parents what they think about using technology to track a teenager's location. Plenty of adults balk at the idea of remotely following an adolescent's movements, while others question why any loving parent wouldn't.

As the school year gets underway, parents who have just dropped their teenagers off on college campuses may be watching on apps like Life 360 as their freshly minted freshmen try to figure out the best route from dorm to dining hall.

Indeed, the ability to locate our children using GPS technology touches on some of the most loaded topics in all of parenting: questions of trust and safety, a young person's

right to privacy and autonomy, and the gut-wrenching truth that to be a parent is “to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

A [survey conducted by the Pew Research Center](#) found that while most adults don't location-track their 13- to 17-year-olds, a full 16 percent of parents do. Given that we *can* use tracking apps to surveil our ambulatory hearts, should we?

Lorrie Faith Cranor, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University who studies children's privacy and safety in the context of technology, has decided against monitoring the location of her two teenagers. “It's tempting to do it because we are all worried about our kids,” notes Dr. Cranor. Yet she resists the urge because she doesn't want her children to “feel like their parents are following them around all the time.” Likewise, Kate Gjaja, a mother raising three teenagers in the Chicago suburbs, doesn't keep digital tabs on her teens' movements because she feels that learning to manage without adult supervision “is an important part of the growing up process.”

Location tracking can, without question, damage the connection between parent and teenager. Research shows that adolescents who believe their parents have invaded their privacy go on to have higher levels of conflict at home. And teenagers who resent being trailed digitally sometimes disable location features, take pains to “spoof” their GPS, or leave their phones at friends' houses to throw parents off their scent.

As a psychologist, I also worry that location tracking can confuse the question of who is mainly responsible for the safety of the roaming adolescent — the parent or the teenager? If parents decide against using location tracking, I encourage them to talk with their teenager about why. They might say, for example, “When you are not with us, you are in charge of yourself. We're here if you need help, but we will not monitor you because we cannot, at a distance, protect you from the choices you make.”

It's easy enough to point to the downsides of location tracking, but can it ever be a good idea to track a young person's movements by phone? Yes, if we keep some key parameters in mind.

Make Safety a Collaborative Effort

It is possible to follow adolescents secretly, but probably a bad idea. Jason Curtis, the technology director at a prekindergarten through grade 12 school in Dallas, says that parents who try to hide the fact that they are location monitoring usually undermine trust because, in his experience, “the majority of the time, the teen figures it out.”

That aside, parents who use location tracking to try to catch misbehaving teenagers ought to weigh the harm they feel they are preventing against the harm such surveillance may do to their relationship with their child. When done collaboratively, however, location tracking can contribute to adolescent safety.

For example, parents might come to an agreement with their young driver that they will check her location if she's running late, rather than texting or calling her if she's likely to be behind the wheel. And Mr. Curtis has told his own children, with whom he does use location tracking apps, that if they ever have an urgent need to be picked up they, "don't have to even call," but can send him a text reading 911 — the agreed-upon family code — and he'll be on his way.

In a similar vein, John Shoemaker, a 16-year-old who lives in Coronado, Calif., suffers from a severe nut allergy. He carries an EpiPen and an inhaler, but has a plan with his parents that they are to find him by his iPhone if he doesn't check in or respond as expected. "I see it as a safety net," he explained. "If something were to happen, it's nice to know that somebody would have the capability to know where I am."

Appreciate the Limitations of Location Tracking

Parents who know where their teenagers are should not make assumptions about what they are doing. I've cared for an adolescent in my practice who got in trouble with her folks for swinging by a banned home to help a friend retrieve a lost item. And I've known teenagers who were doing all the wrong things, in the exact place where they were supposed to be. When it comes to knowing what is going on with a teenager, having their location cannot take the place of having a sturdy, working relationship.

Treat It as Temporary

For many families, an adolescent's wish for increased autonomy outpaces the parents' readiness to grant it. At these times, location tracking can be used to establish trust that leads to greater freedom. Parents might help their tween or teenager move toward independence by saying, "We expect you to tell us where you'll be, to let us know if your plans change and to respond if we reach out. We'll confirm your location by phone for a while, but once we feel that you're on top of things, we'll stop looking over your shoulder."

Tracking can also be used to rebuild trust that has been broken. After their teenage son drank himself into the emergency room, a family in my practice grounded the boy for two months, then tracked his location — with his full agreement — for several weekends until they felt they could, again, count on their son to look after himself.

And though teenagers and young adults routinely location-track their friends, parents should not assume that they enjoy an open-ended tracking arrangement. It's one thing for your roommate to know that you are spending the night at your girlfriend's dorm and quite another for your dad to have that same information.

By age 18 or earlier, parents should ask teenagers if they are still O.K. with being located digitally. Especially when young people head off to college, sometimes in a distant state, being responsible for themselves is supposed to be part of their job description.

Raising teenagers comes with some guaranteed discomforts. We often do not know where our children are, what they are doing and if they'll tell us the truth should we ask. Location tracking allows us to address some of these concerns even as it exacerbates an age-old parenting tension: We want to keep our children safe, maintain a loving connection and, simultaneously, foster their independence.

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