

## **Private-Eye Parents?**

Your teenager wants privacy; you want answers. Should you butt in or back off?

By Mimi Greenwood Knight

Think about this: You're checking your family e-mail, and you notice one intended for your 13-year-old son. It's from someone you've never heard of, so you open it. It says, "Hey, Alan, you're not gonna wimp out on Friday, are you? We're all still planning to skip school and go skateboarding. We did it a few weeks ago, and nobody got caught!"

Or this: You're putting freshly folded clothes away in your 15-year-old daughter's dresser when you notice her journal by her bedside. Curious, you take a look at the most recent entry. You read, "I can't believe they're treating me this way. Sometimes they just make me feel like a nobody. Sometimes I get angry, but usually I just cry. Life is so hard, sometimes I wonder if it's all really worth it ..."

**Both scenarios raise a number of questions, starting with these two: Did I just invade my child's privacy? What am I supposed to do with this information?**

The message from secular society seems to be that parents need to lighten up and give teenagers more freedom and fewer constraints. Case in point: Did you know that many U.S. states have enacted Minor Consent Laws which allow under-aged citizens (a.k.a. children) to obtain medical and mental health services without their parents' knowledge?

In some states, minors may receive pregnancy testing, prenatal care, labor and delivery services, abortion counseling, contraceptive devices, alcohol and drug abuse counseling, treatment and detox—all without their parents being notified. In some cases, children may also even get an abortion without a parent's permission if they obtain a court order.

For some parents, these situations are no big deal. According to a Harris Interactive survey, many parents buy into this what-we-don't-know-won't-hurt-us philosophy. The survey found that of children who go online at home, over 50 percent are not supervised by an adult and only 29 percent of parents use filtering software to limit or restrict their children's access to certain content.

I don't believe these are parents who simply don't care about their children, but rather that they have bought into the cultural message that if they are too nosy or hover too much, they will alienate their children. So the question becomes not whether parents should be involved in their teenagers' business, but to what extent.

**"Jesus told his disciples to be 'as wise as serpents and gentle as doves.' That's good advice for parents too,"** says Melissa Trevathan, founder and Executive Director of Daystar Ministries in Nashville. Trevathan works with adolescents and their parents, and is the author of *The Back Door to Your Teen's Heart* (Harvest House). She says, "I've had kids in counseling sessions tell me, 'My parents don't have a clue what I'm into or who I hang around.' And others say, 'The only reason I don't drink (do drugs, have sex) is that I know my mom would find out.'"

"Parents worry too much that their kids will think they don't trust them. I'm not telling you to snoop so much as care enough to be aware, stay involved, stay connected. Snooping should be a last resort. Remaining a part of your child's life should be your first priority. Ask questions. Show interest. I've never seen a child resent a parent being sincerely interested in them."

To figure out what this interest look like in everyday situations, I asked a few experts for some practical guidelines for finding the balance between privacy and protection.

### **Should I preview my teenager's books, movies, and CDs?**

"All of the above," says Karen Dockrey, author of *Bold Teens, Positive Parents* (WaterBrook). "This is not a control issue so much as teaching our children to make wise media choices. You are her parents and are responsible for knowing what she's putting into her eyes, ears, and heart as you guide her to eventually discern for herself what is best. In the Old Testament, God gave us rules. In the New Testament, he tells us why we need those rules. When your child is younger, you're making her media selections for her. As she gets older, explain why you choose what you choose and supervise her as she starts making her own selections."

### **What about the computer?**

Beth Carlton of Daytona Beach, Florida, has raised three sons, now 22, 25, and 27. Her advice, "Computers should be kept in the kitchen or family room where everyone can see what everyone else is viewing. Let your child know you'll check his browser history from time to time to see what sites he's visited and invite him to do the same for you." It's not that you don't trust him to make the right decision. It's about being a continuing source of guidance for your child.

### **Should I insist on meeting my teen's friends?**

Yes, and their parents too. Let your child know that any time he's invited to a party where you don't know the parents, you'll call to find out what adults will be present. Furthermore, if you're not satisfied with the answers, he won't attend that party.

Encourage your teen to host her friends at your house. It's a great way to know her friends and maintain the connection to your child.

Aubrey Mannion, 18, of Lecanto, Florida, appreciates her parents opening their home to her friends—no matter how many or how noisy. "My parents make our house a place where my friends want to be. My parents know what music we listen to and what movies we watch because they come alongside and enjoy them with us."

### **Should family time be mandatory?**

When my daughter Haley was tiny, the first thing she did when she woke up every morning was look for me. But then things changed; one day I opened her bedroom door to find her wide awake, reading a book in bed. For whatever reason, she no longer needed to connect with me before starting her day—even if I still wanted her to.

But that was only a preview of things to come; one day last year she rounded the corner at school, saw me, instinctively reached out to hug me, then drew back her arms as her classmates caught up with her. Ouch!

"Our kids still need hugs even when those hugs are met with shrugs," says Dr. Donald W. Welch of the Christian Education and Family Studies department at MidAmerican Nazarene University in Olathe, Kansas. If your teenager is pulling away from the family, Welch suggests reestablishing the bond by watching old home movies together. "Watching those past times reminds you of the emotional investment you've made in each other. It's like a bank account you've been depositing into all his life. When he begins to pull away, you still have a balance in his emotional bank account to draw upon."

### **Another way to reconnect is through family tradition and ritual.**

Even if your teen initially balks at decorating the Christmas tree or attending the annual Fourth of July camping trip, doing things you've always done together will help him feel that bond you've spent years developing.

### **In the end, spending time together as a family is nonnegotiable.**

If your teen is resistant, encourage him to help plan a family outing or trip that would be more interesting for him. When he has some ownership in the family plans, he's more likely to willingly take part.

### **Is it ever okay to "snoop"?**

When asked if it's ever acceptable to read a teen's journal or search a teen's room, Dockrey says, "Absolutely! But only if you have a clear hunch she's into something that could harm her physically or spiritually. Don't betray her trust just because you're curious.

You don't want to snoop on your teen, but if you strongly suspect she's experimenting with drugs, sex, or anything else that could have serious consequences, you need to know so you can help her before the damage is done. Pray for wisdom to know what you need to find out and whether it's time to snoop or not."

Babs Meador, a mother of four teens from Greentown, Ohio, puts it like this: "We do our best to teach our children right from wrong. But peer pressure is a strong pull, and even good kids will do dumb things to try to fit in. I know privacy is important to my kids, but their welfare is more important."

### **Should I tell her I snooped?**

"Parenting is not a popularity contest. Accept that there will be times when you're not your child's favorite person," says June Hunt, President of Hope for the Heart and author of *Bonding With Your Teen Through Boundaries* (Broadman & Holman). "Proverbs 22:3 calls parents to be prudent and foresee evil. If that means listening in on a phone call or searching her car to find out what she's into, don't lie about how you heard about the party or found the beer cans. Children die from drug overdoses or anorexia and their parents never knew they had a problem."

Of course, once your teen knows you've snooped, expect her to throw it in your face: "You had no right to search through my private stuff!" Avoid letting your search become the issue. The fact is you did have the right. As long as she's living under your roof and you earnestly suspect she's into something that can harm her, you have a moral and legal obligation to do what's best for her.

Tell her, "If I didn't think there was anything wrong, I wouldn't have felt the need to check up on you. But the fact is there is something wrong, so instead of focusing on how I found out, let's look toward what we can do to get you help. I love you and will walk with you as far as we need to go."

Assure her that as long as she behaves in a trustworthy manner, you'll have no more need to check up on her. But if you suspect she's making harmful choices again, you'll do what's needed to find out for sure.

On the other hand, if your "snooping" yields no confirmation of your suspicions—in other words, if you realize you've made a mistake—apologize to your son or daughter for the misunderstanding. Don't apologize for your right to check up on things, but for jumping to the wrong conclusion. Then praise them for continuing to make wise choices.

### **What are some red flags?**

Look for things like excessive secrecy or drastic changes in sleep, diet, dress, friends, or school performance; any or all may signal that your teen is delving into activities he shouldn't. Look for an inability to concentrate or make decisions, anything that might indicate self-injury, or a sudden withdrawal from family and church. Any school absences should be hopped on immediately.

"When a child becomes exclusive, parents should become intrusive," says Dr. Welch. "Also look for dramatic hair changes (spikes, a drastic color change), tattoos or unusual piercings, marked weight gain or loss, or a drastic attitude change, particularly where authority is concerned." These signs can all point to a serious problem.

Dockrey adds, "A major red flag is when your teen stops talking to you. Make certain you connect with your teenager every day. That way you can nip potential problems before they grow into something more serious. My policy is to insist my kids share three things about their day. It might seem silly at first, but if your kids know it's expected, they'll get used to it and it will start to come naturally to them."

### **Should I keep tabs everywhere?**

To keep track of your child, you need help. Know your child's teachers and youth leaders, and make sure they know they can call you anytime they notice anything suspicious.

"Teachers will seldom call a parent unless the parent makes the first contact," says Trevathan. "Don't be gossipy about your child but say, 'I'm seeing some red flags. Will you keep your eyes open and tell me if you think there's anything to worry about?'" Teachers are in a position to witness things you might not. A Christian teacher or youth leader can also serve as a mentor, someone your teen can go to when she's not comfortable coming to you.

Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death." The teen who tries drugs for the first time thinks, "I won't get hooked. I'm just going to do a little bit." Without a parent—or teacher or other adult—who cares, that's "a way" that could indeed "lead to death."

"If any of you lacks wisdom," reads James 1:5, "he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Parenting an adolescent is a tough job. Pray for godly wisdom and insight, be deliberate about staying connected long before there is a problem, and let your child know you are there for him, no matter what. Because your teenager's business is also your business.

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