

Meet the Snoopers

Parenting, Privacy, Common Sense, and Communication

By Stephen Wallace, M.S.Ed.



In what *The Associated Press* (AP) called, “a victory for rebellious teenagers,” the Washington State Supreme Court recently ruled as illegal a mother’s listening in on her “out of control” daughter’s phone conversation with an older boy suspected by police of involvement in an assault and robbery. Predictably, the case has rallied both privacy and parental rights advocates to their respective causes. For the rest of us, it begs the question, “How far *should* we go to protect our children?”

That is more easily asked than answered.

While federal law applies a broader interpretation of rightful parental intervention, Washington and ten other states require the consent of all parties before a phone conversation can be intercepted or recorded, according to the AP. No less contentious on the privacy scale are such detection devices as Breathalyzers, drug tests, and property searches, at school or at home.

As is often the case when such divides exist, a common-sense middle ground can be found in the voices of those with a dog in the fight. This time it’s parents and teens.

Few parents dispute the importance, if not the right, of privacy for teens ... up to a point. And few teens quibble with parental inquisitiveness in the face of reasonable suspicion ... unless they have something to hide. Indeed, parents tend to feel that building and maintaining trust with their teen means accepting, even fostering, a degree of independence and privacy. And most teens seem to agree that parents who believe their child is involved in, or headed toward, illegal or dangerous behavior have a duty to act – even if doing so entails investigative techniques that, under different circumstances, would be deemed intrusive and unacceptable.

For Mom or Dad, finding the proper balance between trust and truth can be a vexing task. And teens don’t always help. According to a *Teens Today* study from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group, 80 percent of teens report that it is important to have their parents’ trust, but only 28 percent are honest and forthcoming when it comes to issues such as drinking and other drug use.

Enter the Snoopers. In a teenage world filled with dangerous decisions and destructive behaviors, parents must make difficult choices in parsing privacy issues, balancing adolescent independence with common sense supervision. After all, according to *Teens Today*, 70 percent of high school students say they drink alcohol and 41 percent say they have used marijuana.

To make matters worse, many of these teens mix that substance use with driving. In the same *Teens Today* study, only 30 percent of teens cited driving as a reason not to drink and only 18 percent as a reason not to use drugs. The results? Impaired driving remains one of the leading causes of death among young people.

While there is no debate that teens have easy access to alcohol and drugs, not to mention frequent exposure to forces that glamorize and promote them, there *is* animated discussion about how best to keep them safe. Surprisingly, teens themselves offer insights into the parenting strategies that are most effective in steering them away from alcohol and drugs: set and enforce curfews; stay up until they return home; require that they call to “check in” from time to time; talk with friends’ parents to ensure supervision; and restrict overnights away from home.

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In short, stay involved. Young people who avoid alcohol and drugs are more likely than those who don't to report that they have a close relationship with their parents. They are also more likely to say that their parents exercise a lot of "control" over various aspects of their lives, including where they go, what they do, and whom they are with. Seem obvious? Painfully so. Still, only about one quarter of parents do so. And that's a shame because the truth is that the majority of young people say they want parental guidance in making decisions about personal behavior.

SADD's *Contract for Life and Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, along with the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Family Communication Tips*, offer free, constructive, and easy to use advice for parents looking to get the ball rolling in talking to their teen about the important issues of alcohol and drug use. So, too, does the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which advises parents to take the following steps.

Make a plan. Organize your thoughts. Decide what you want to say to your teen.

Listen. Ask your teens for their response to the information you've presented.

Discuss. Discuss the shared information. Don't get lulled into "looking the other way" because it's easier.

Set rules. Make it very clear that you will not tolerate drug or alcohol use.

Establish clear consequences and reward good behavior. Let your teens know that you will be holding them accountable for their actions and that there will be consequences for not following the rules.

We are likely a long way from reaching consensus on telephone taps, urine tests, and drug dogs, but the evidence makes clear that parents who stay in the loop may not have reason to snoop. And that's a better solution all the way around.

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