# **Privacy, monitoring and trust:**

# **the teenage years**

The desire for more privacy is a natural part of adolescence. At the same time, teenagers still need your support to make good decisions. Trust is the key to finding a balance between.

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### **Teen privacy and parent trust**

Privacy

As your children get older, they need more privacy and more personal and psychological space. This is because your children are dealing with big teenage challenges, like working out what kind of person they are. They are also gaining new physical and thinking skills, and developing new social interests. Part of becoming a grown-up is learning to handle these challenges with independence and responsibility.

Secrecy

Wanting more privacy and time alone doesn’t necessarily mean your children have something to hide. Secrecy goes along with the development of independence – it’s a natural part of adolescence. Extreme secrecy can sometimes be a red flag, however. If children spend many hours in their room, don’t ever want to talk or seem very withdrawn – even when you’re trying to keep the lines of communication open – it could be a warning sign of depression, anxiety, smoking, alcohol or other drug use, or other problem activities. It could also be that your children are spending too much time alone on the computer or internet.

Monitoring

Teenagers aren’t always ready to deal with the adult world. For example, the teenage brain is still developing. This means teenagers sometimes make quick decisions and don’t always think through the consequences of behaviour. This might put them at risk. So Teenagers still needs your advice and support. They need you to stay in touch with them and what they are up to – this is called monitoring. But because teenagers also need privacy and independence, you need to monitor your teen differently from when there were younger. You might need to use more sensitivity and discretion. And the way you monitor them will change as they get older.

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### **Respecting your children’s privacy**

Asking yourself what you really need to know might help you work out where the boundary is when it comes to your children’s privacy. There are some things you need to know, like where your children are going to be on Saturday night, how they are getting there and back and whether there’ll be alcohol or adult supervision. Other things can be left private between your children and their friends – for example, what they talked about at a party, or who they danced with.

Practical ways you could respect your children’s privacy include:

* knocking before going into their rooms
* asking before looking in or getting things out of their school bags
* checking whether your children want you to be there when they see the doctor.

It can also help to discuss privacy with your children, set some ground rules and work out some boundaries. These can be changed as your children get older.

You might also want to talk about situations where you’d need to cross the agreed boundaries. For example, this could be when you’re really worried that something isn’t right with your children.

To send the message that you respect your teens privacy, you could avoid things like:

* listening in to their telephone conversations
* looking at things in their rooms or in their drawers
* reading their diary or checking their email account
* ‘friending’ them or communicating with them on social media if they don’t want you to.
* calling their mobile to check on them all the time.

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### **Monitoring your children successfully**

The best monitoring is low key and is based on trust and staying connected with your children. When you have good everyday connections and communication, your children are more likely to share what they are up to.

Family rules and routines

* If you or your partner can’t be there when your children come home from school, ask them to call to let you know they are home. This is a reasonable request.
* Set some ground rules about what your children can do in free time. This means you won’t have to look over your children’s shoulder all the time. Examples of ground rules might be limits on screen time, or the time you negotiate with them, or expect them, to be home on Saturday nights.
* Be aware of what your children are reading, watching on TV and doing on the computer or internet.
* Set up some expectations about what you need to know in the early years of adolescence. Your children will be more likely to carry these expectations through as they get older. For example, they’ll be more likely to accept that you need to know where they are going and when they’ll be home if they get into the habit of sharing this information when they are younger.

Keeping in touch with your children

* When your children start a conversation, stop what you’re doing and [actively listen to your child](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/active_listening_teenagers.html)ren. This sends the message that you’re interested in what’s going on in their lives.
* Sit down to a family dinner as often as possible. This can be a good chance for everyone to chat about the day and what’s coming up.
* Try to be aware of what your children are doing and how they are behaving. This might make it easier to spot any changes in their behaviour that might signal a problem.
* Keep a general eye on school progress, homework and deadlines without micromanaging your children. This is easier to do when you have a [good relationship with your children’s school](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/school_relationship.html) and teachers.
* Get to know your children’s friends and give them a space in your home. This helps you keep in touch with [your children’s friendships](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/friendships_teenagers.html) and relationships without always having to ask. Communicating with the parents of your children’s friends can also help you keep track of your children and their friends.
* Try to avoid breaking your children’s trust or invading their privacy. But there might be times when you need to ask firmly for information – for example, ‘Where were you?’ or ‘Where are you going?’

Too little monitoring can leave teenagers without the support they need to make safe decisions about behaviour and relationships. But too much monitoring can send the message you don’t trust your children. When you monitor your child in a trusting environment, you’re giving them what they need if they are going to learn how to make good decisions and behave responsibly.

**Handling breaches of trust**

Your children might break your trust or misuse their privacy.

For a one-off breach, you could withdraw a privilege – for example, take away some TV or computer time, or not drive your children to an activity. You might also need to monitor your children more closely for a period while you rebuild trust.

For major breaches of trust, or breaches that keep happening, you and your children will need to rebuild trust over time. You might need to use strategies like:

* ‘grounding’ (banning social activities for a period of time)
* withdrawing privileges
* withholding non-essential lifts
* stopping your child’s pocket money.

You can try to negotiate practical ways your children can earn back your trust – for example, by showing you that they can be responsible for certain tasks over a period of time. Letting your children know that you still love them even though you’re disappointed in their behaviour will help them bounce back and learn from their mistakes.

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### **Benefits of monitoring**

Monitoring your children is worth the effort. Teenagers whose parents monitor them well:

* are less likely to get involved in antisocial behaviour – for example, stealing or violence
* engage less often in underage drinking or drug-taking
* start having sex later, and practise safer sex once they’re sexually active
* are less likely to be depressed
* are more likely to have high self-esteem
* have better school outcomes and lower rates of school truancy and suspension
* are more likely to bounce back from hard times.

Source: <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/privacy_teenagers.html/context/2021>