

Privacy, monitoring and trust in 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 your child's need for privacy and your need to know what's going on.

Teen privacy and parent trust

Privacy

As your child gets older, she needs more privacy and more personal and psychological space.

This is because your child is dealing with big teenage challenges, such as working out what kind of person he is. He's also gaining new physical and thinking capacities, 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 child has 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If a child spends many hours in her room, doesn't ever want to talk or seems very withdrawn – even when you're trying to keep the lines of communication open – it could be a warning sign of [depression](#), [anxiety](#), smoking, [alcohol or other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 the child is spending too much time alone on the computer or internet.

Monitoring

Teenagers aren't 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 your child still needs your advice and support. **He needs you to stay in touch with him** and what he's up to – this is called monitoring.

But because teenagers also need privacy and independence, you need to monitor your child differently from when she was younger. You might need to use more sensitivity and discretion.

Respecting your child's privacy

Asking yourself what you really need to know might help you work out where the boundary is when it comes to your child's privacy.

There are some things you need to know, such as where your child is going to be on Saturday night and how he's getting there and back. Other things can be left private between your child and his friends – for example, what they talked about at a party, or who they danced with.

Practical ways you could respect your child's privacy include:

- knocking before going into her room
- asking before looking in or getting things out of her school bag
- checking if your child wants you to be there when she sees the doctor.

It can also help to discuss privacy with your child, set some [ground rules](#) and work out some boundaries. These can be changed as your child gets older.



did you know ?

In a recent survey, about 75% of Australian teenagers said they had good relationships with their parents. But only about half shared their personal thoughts and feelings with parents.

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 child.

To send the message that you respect your child's privacy, you could **avoid things like**:

- listening in to his telephone conversations
- looking at things in his room or in his drawers
- reading his diary or checking his email account
- 'friending' him or communicating with him on social networking sites
- calling his mobile to check on him all the time.

Monitoring your child successfully

The best monitoring is low key, and is based on trust and [staying connected](#) with your child. When you have good everyday connections and communication, your child is more likely to share what she's up to.

Family rules and routines

- If you or your partner can't be there when your child comes home from school, ask him to call to let you know he's home. This is a reasonable request.
- If you set some ground rules about what your child can do in free time, you won't have to look over her shoulder all the time. Examples of ground rules might be limits on screen time, or the time you negotiate with her, or expect her, to be home on Saturday nights.
- Be aware of what your child is reading, watching on TV and doing on the computer or internet. Keeping TVs and networked computers in shared areas of your home helps. It's also a good idea to be aware of how much screen time your child has each day.
- If you set up some expectations about what you need to know in the early years of adolescence, your child will carry these expectations through as he gets older. For example, he'll be more likely to accept that you need to know where he's going and when he'll be home if he gets into the habit of sharing this information when he's younger.

Keeping in touch with your child

- When your child starts a conversation, stop what you're doing and [actively listen to your child](#). This sends the message that you're interested in what's going on in her life.
- Sitting down to a family dinner as often as possible can be a good chance for everyone to chat about the day and what's coming up.
- If you're aware of what your child is doing and how he's behaving, you might find it easier to spot any changes in his behaviour that might signal a problem.
- With school, you can keep a general eye on school progress, homework and deadlines without micromanaging your child. This is easier to do when you have a [good relationship with your child's school](#) and teachers.
- Getting to know your child's friends and giving them a space in your home helps you keep in touch with [your child's friendships](#) and relationships without always having to ask. Communicating with the parents of your child's friends can help create a safe environment for your child and her friends, and help you keep track of their activities.

Try to avoid breaking your child's trust or invading his privacy. But keep in mind that 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 child. When you monitor your child in a trusting environment, you're giving her what she needs if she's going to learn how to make good decisions and behave responsibly.

Handling breaches of trust

Your child might break your trust or misuse his privacy.

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

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

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

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

Benefits of monitoring

Monitoring your child 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.



Keeping the lines of communication open is important for your relationship with your adolescent child. Our [Talking to Teens interactive guide](#) shows you how different approaches to communicating with teenagers can get different results.



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