



# When to Snoop? Here's the Scoop

## Spying on Your Teenager

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

### Dear Dr. Kay:

Our daughter is 16 and a junior in high school. She is essentially a good kid and does just well enough in school. We are glad she has a social life, but she spends an awful lot of time on the computer instant messaging her friends. Her mood is decent, but at times she seems agitated or sullen. We haven't a clue what goes on because she does not share much at all.

We aren't certain what is typical for teens and what is a "red flag." My husband feels she is sacrificing effort in school due to her "addiction" to computer games and instant messaging. So, he did some spying on our daughter's computer.

The good news is that, short of a bit of boasting and complaining about her "crappy parents who only care about school," there were no signs of foul play. We want to know what you advise about spying on your teenager? How can parents encourage and respect independence, yet keep an eye on their teenager who is essentially still a child?

### Dear Parent:

First off, I would like to give credit to teenagers today who largely get a "bad rap" in the media. Adolescence is an exciting time of development, and most teens are healthy. They are testing their wings and building confidence. Teens turn to their peers for affirmation and belonging. They deserve our attention, our humor and plenty of parenting. Simply put, the process of how we parent changes as our children grow.

**Adolescents need to dislike us to some degree. Expect to embarrass, and be embarrassed by, your teens. Do not take their “attitude” too literally.**

I often explain at my Parenting Coffeehouse, that we parent “from the outside-in.” Our little ones thrive on structure and do not need so much choice or negotiation. As our children become adolescents, we do more negotiating. We set the bar and expect them to test their judgment and learn from their mistakes. They are practicing for adulthood.

Adolescents need to dislike us to some degree. Expect to embarrass, and be embarrassed by, your teens. Do not take their “attitude” too literally. This does not mean that we allow our teens to mow us over or go off the edge as they test their independence. Keeping a sense of humor and recognizing that they need distance helps us move through this stage of development. If you practice being cool and calm, you can ride the waves.

The waves represent our teen’s internal vacillation from being dependent on us to getting along without us. The best way to believe they can get along without us is to believe we no longer have any idea what we are talking about. Thus, the teenagers’ tendency for rolling their eyes and turning to their peers.

In fact, if we need our teenager to remain dependent, we might interfere with the necessary separation required to become a young adult who functions independent of family. It is important to note that this value of independence is embedded in culture and ideals about family. Presently, in this culture, we value and expect our children to become autonomous.

How can any of us leave the comfort and profound attachment of home? Without a sense of agitation and a need for some space, without a sense of grandiosity that comes in the form of, “My parents are so dumb...old-fashioned and outdated,” how could any young and inexperienced teenager have the courage to jump off that diving board?

As an adolescent develops, she may begin to admire and revere anyone other than her parents. It is time to practice flying away from the nest, so to speak. This includes broadening the circle of social influence. This stretching of the umbilical cord symbolizes the testing ground for the real separation that is inevitable in a few years.

Your question touches upon this careful tightrope act we must do as parents. You want to give your daughter the rope to have her own private life. You might be trying to avoid being intrusive or overly demanding. Your daughter is not verbally expressive or revealing, which makes it especially hard if she is the first teen you are launching.

You might feel in the dark and want to do this “right.” Please trust that you are already doing a lot that is “right.” You are fortunate to have a daughter who is engaged positively both socially and academically. You are really addressing her connection to you. How much connection should you expect in order to feel confident about her choices and in order to resist the temptation to spy on your daughter? Here are some guidelines and tips to shore up your confidence.

- Never stop caring and being present for your teen. Never stop any and all efforts to engage with her.
- Trust that what you say and what you expect still matters. Do not take the attitude that “teens will be teens” as if you no longer have control. Teens like to put on a façade of indifference, as if anything you say is unworthy.
- The typical teen is still attached and wants to meet your expectations. Yet, she also wants to define some of her own expectations, and

this is very important. Include your teenager in decisions involving privileges and responsibilities.

- Always tie any loss or gain of privileges to responsible choices. Be reasonable about the privileges and the responsibilities, but do not

forget the latter!

- Begin to parent by asking questions rather than lecturing and scolding. So, for example, as she struggles with a decision or performs less than her potential, pose the question, “How do you feel about that C you got?” or “I am sure you will figure out what you need to do to improve that grade should you choose to.”

- I call this kind of approach to parenting playing “Columbo”— the detective who stays cool and acts a bit detached. In this manner, your teen’s choices or outcomes are not about your reactivity. When teens can get a rise out of you, they forget their own accountability and conveniently project responsibility onto you by thinking, “My dad’s just a jerk,” or, “My parents are ruining my life.”

- If the only way you “parent” is to ground your teen, you might get very stuck and fail to teach valuable lessons. Teens know you will fold, and they are happy to live out their punishment. Be creative. Try restitution, which means making them do work! They will not make wrong choices and test your agreement often if it means they have to rake the yard.

- By all means, be less predictable because it gives you more authority. When your teen makes mistakes, take your time, be quiet for longer periods of time. Let her stew and wonder what you might do.

- Teens are ingenious about looking for loopholes as a way out from under responsibility. State the obvious and be very specific about your expectations.

- With respect to addictions to computers, all of us need limits to get off our phones and away from our computer screens so we can connect face-to-face. Some high school students are truly able to balance IM-ing their friends, listen-

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## Parents who understand teenagers and who want their children to grow up and become their own people have an easier time with letting go.

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ing to their MP3s, text messaging and getting school work done. If a teen is managing her responsibilities, including time with family, all is well!

- Discuss the problem as you see it, and set the expectations. Your family can insist on no screens after dinner or no screens until evening time. The important thing is to engage with each other more often.

- And the spying?? Yes, we might need to occasionally spy on our teens. That means it is normal and important to keep an eye out. If your child is showing signs of withdrawal, anger or depression, you are especially obliged to spy. Looking for signs of danger means we care and know that teens can be vulnerable.

- If your child is simply private and you are snooping, I would not advise spying. It is time to work on your relationship to build a bit more open communication or connection.

- If you glance at a note, a Blog site or a diary that was left open, understand the drama of the adolescent. Talk to your friends who have teenagers. Remember that how kids relate to their friends is entirely different from how they relate to you.

- I would not advise any spying around for the parent who is prone to dramatic reactions. Spying is a way for a parent to check that nothing terribly dangerous is happening. It is a confirmation and oppor-

tunity for parents to discuss what their teen might need.

Parents who understand teenagers and who want their children to grow up and become their own people have an easier time with letting go. However, letting go and encouraging independence do not equate to cessation of parenting and expectations for involvement and commitment to the family!

Continue to have open discussions, but keep it simple. Be a good listener. Let your daughter know that her presence and her ability to share more about her activities results in greater trust in her independence, while being in the dark results in feelings of suspiciousness.

Try to remember your own adolescence and the positive aspects of feeling so alive and capable, of wanting affirmation and belonging. Most important, keep your humor, be present to check in and hug your teenager a lot. Encourage independence but with a very clear mutual understanding of expectations. Spy rarely, and only as necessary, but mostly in order to ease your worst fears.

Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her "Parenting With Confidence" Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at Congregation Beth El. For more information, visit her website [www.kayabrams.com](http://www.kayabrams.com).



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