

The monitored generation: Navigating autonomy and independence in the digital age



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**Grown
up?**

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VoiceBox

In the quiet hours of the night, parents around the world receive chimes from their smartphones that alert them to their children's arrival at a friend's house. A few clicks later, they can see the exact location, confirming their safe arrival. This seemingly benign act, a common occurrence of modern parenting, reveals a fundamental shift in the journey from adolescence to adulthood. For today's generation of young people, this journey has been complicated by the pervasive influence of digital life. Technology has become an active participant in the parent-child relationship, fundamentally reshaping concepts of trust, respect and autonomy, in no small part due to the rise of new ways of surveillance. Surveillance takes many forms and can come from many sources, but broadly speaking represents the passive monitoring of an individual's digital and physical location, online activities, and communications, with or without their full and explicit consent. While we often associate this with government or law enforcement, it is increasingly common to experience a form of surveillance from family, friends and loved ones. This constant state of surveillance creates a unique set of challenges to developing the resilience and self-sufficiency required for adulthood. A critical distinction in this negotiation lies in the concept of digital consent, which separates helpful, collaborative oversight from invasive, controlling surveillance, and it is this distinction that most significantly impacts a young person's journey to independence.

The normalisation of surveillance technology, from location-sharing apps to monitoring software, has created a paradox for young people. While they are expected to grow into independent, resilient adults, they are simultaneously subject to a level of parental oversight that previous generations could not have imagined. A 2023 study on digital location tracking found that around half of both parents and adolescents reported the use of tracking, highlighting its widespread nature¹.

While the intentions are often benign, for many young people, this monitoring feels like a breach of trust. As young people who work with others around the world every day, we hear frustrations about this often.

"Using a parental control app might make parents feel safer, but it can really mess with trust. If they're spying on you, you're not gonna want to talk to them about anything serious."

– VoiceBox Community Member, Parental Supervision: How Far is Too Far?²

“I don’t do anything that would make them upset – but it would be weird to show them because my online world is my own business and I like having some privacy”

– VoiceBox Community Member, Digital Wellbeing: A Balancing Act³

“It discourages open communication between the child and the parent”

– VoiceBox Community Member, Parental Supervision: How Far is Too Far?⁴

These sentiments highlight a core tension: the desire for safety, which drives parental monitoring, often conflicts with the need for privacy and the space young people need to make their own decisions, and even mistakes, without constant scrutiny. While technology may provide a sense of security for parents, for young people it can stunt their emotional development and prevent them from building the critical problem-solving skills necessary to navigate life's challenges on their own.

This tension is not always simple, as there are plenty of situations where parental monitoring can be a necessary safeguard. For example, for children with severe medical conditions, or in contexts of high-risk behaviours like substance abuse, a parent's ability to locate their child can be a crucial tool for intervention and care. This complexity only expands over time as the needs of, say, a 13-year-old will be vastly different to those of a 17-year-old, and so will their online and offline behaviours.

However, these cases of necessary oversight are often blurred with a more general desire for control in a world that many view as increasingly dangerous to grow up in. An over-reliance on technology can counterproductively stunt a young person's development of genuine independence. By outsourcing safety to a mobile app, young people may never develop the situational awareness, problem-solving skills and confidence needed to navigate the world on their own. The constant parental oversight, initially intended to keep them safe, may ultimately leave them vulnerable, having never had the opportunity to learn from their mistakes or to navigate challenges without real-time guidance. The above-mentioned 2023 study noted that digital tracking is often associated with greater “externalising problems” – defined in the study as engaging in aggressive (physical and relational) and deviant behaviour – and alcohol use, particularly for older adolescents who may view the tracking as controlling and intrusive⁵. This over-dependency creates a fragile form of security that will likely shatter when confronted with the realities of true independence.

This anecdote, offered by a VoiceBox Community Member from the USA, exemplifies this challenge:

“My best friend in university had one of those tracking apps still installed on his phone by his parents. They originally installed it when he was in high school, but insisted he kept it on after he moved out for ‘safety reasons’, but his mom started abusing this system. She would constantly call him to check where he was going whenever she got an alert that he had gone outside the set location radius. And at one point, she even called the campus police to do a wellness check on him because she could see he wasn’t at his dorm. He was completely fine; he had just spent the night at a friend’s place and wasn’t answering his phone at 8 am. It was such an excessive amount of monitoring for a 19-year-old who had moved away to school, and it really impacted him.”

– VoiceBox Community Member, Parental Supervision: How Far is Too Far?⁶

The challenge is further compounded by the fact that young people, unlike their parents, have grown up with technology as an integral part of their lives, shaping how they learn, socialise and form their identities. This experience of growing up surrounded by tech gives them a unique perspective on the utility and risks of technology, particularly concerning consent and mutual understanding. They understand that the line between helpful connection and invasive surveillance is a conversation about consent. Many young people themselves use tracking apps as a collaborative tool for safety among friends. For instance, sharing an Uber ride’s progress with a friend or having a location check-in with a group when going out is a common, mutually agreed-upon practice. This stands in stark opposition to a parent or controlling partner who demands location access at all times as a condition of trust, effectively removing the autonomy from the individual. This lack of consent can feel like a complete violation of trust. A study by the University of Wisconsin showed that teens who felt they had a voice in setting digital rules with their parents typically reported higher levels of trust in their relationship and more positive outcomes for things like body image and depression, a sharp contrast to those who felt their digital lives were simply being monitored without their consent⁷.

Furthermore, the issue of surveillance extends beyond the parent–child dynamic to a wider societal apathy about privacy. Young people are acutely aware that they are being monitored from all sides: by tech companies using their data for targeted advertising, by schools and prospective employers scrutinising their online social media presence, and even by their own peers. This pervasive monitoring environment contributes to a growing feeling of resignation. As one young person from our community stated, “Honestly, I’ve just given up being stressed about privacy. Everything you do is tracked anyway, so what’s the point? It feels impossible to stop it, so I just don’t even bother anymore.”

This resignation can be a form of learned helplessness, where the constant feeling of being watched erodes the motivation to take control of one’s digital identity. It also complicates the formation of a cohesive self, as young people feel a fragmentation between their ‘real’ selves and the versions of themselves they present online, knowing they are constantly being watched.

However, the narrative need not be one of complete helplessness. For many young people, digital skills are not a weakness but a strength. Those who have grown up with tech are often better equipped to navigate the complexities of online life and to actively manage their digital footprints. Some young people, for instance, actively use digital tools for self-improvement and mental health management, using apps to track mood, sleep patterns or exercise – a form of ‘self-surveillance’ rooted in a desire for wellness (though these often raise other issues we’ve previously investigated)⁸. In other cases, they may voluntarily share their location with family members in a two-way agreement that provides security without sacrificing trust. This suggests that the issue is not the technology itself, but the nature of its application, whether it is imposed as a tool of control or adopted as a tool of collaboration. This ability to discern and adapt shows a form of digital maturity that previous generations, often less familiar with these tools, may not fully appreciate.

Cultural and socio-economic factors also play a significant role in how surveillance is perceived and practised. In some cultures, family collectivism and a strong sense of community might normalise a level of constant contact and knowledge of a child’s whereabouts that would be seen as a violation in a more individualistic society. Similarly, for families in lower socio-economic brackets, technology might be a crucial, and sometimes the only, means of ensuring a child’s safety in a dangerous neighbourhood or public transport system. In these contexts, surveillance is less about control and more about a basic safety net, blurring the lines further and highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding that goes beyond a simple binary of good versus bad, and a recognition that this will be unique to every family.

Ultimately, the journey to independence for this generation’s young people involves developing new forms of resilience and self-sufficiency. They must learn to navigate a world where they have often been tracked or had their decisions influenced by technology or parental intervention. This is an already complex journey made all the more difficult by the unpredictable nature of modern life, where the future of employment and financial stability is increasingly uncertain⁹. While some parental surveillance is intended to equip children for this uncertain future, it often does the opposite, creating an over-reliance on external guidance rather than an internal compass. The path forward lies in open and honest discussions about the use of technology, where young people are given the opportunity to give and withdraw consent. By shifting the focus from surveillance and control to collaboration and mutual understanding, parents can help their children cultivate the true independence and resilience they need to thrive in the digital age.

Parent Zone

Parenting is messy in all its complex, contextual forms. Digital tools promise to simplify all aspects of our lives – including doing family¹⁰. Thanks to digital transformation, families in the UK are awash with information, but how this helps adolescents navigate the journey to adulthood is less clear. How do parents and caregivers harness the benefits of technology without eroding young people's independence and resilience? How do they avoid being nudged into surveillance and ceding all influence to companies? Digital technologies are a key part of young people's lives, and mastering the tools is a requirement for thriving today. But, as VoiceBox highlights, adolescents' development is also blocked by an over-reliance on technology – by them, or their parents.

The parents of a friend of mine once received an unexpected telegram from their daughter, who was backpacking around the world. "Snake bite. Giselle OK. Snake Dead". Now the whole thing would be live-streamed and the snake's death a meme before breakfast. Social media, mobiles and messaging apps have made family communication easier, faster and multimedia. Shared calendars, chats and locations have become part of the infrastructure for most families in the UK.

But convenience comes bundled with challenge, and tools are never neutral. Tools are taken up to make life easier, but soon our lives are remade by those tools. A process that Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green refer to as "the platformization of the family"¹¹.

Digital technologies have created new methods of connection and sharing that must be navigated and negotiated^{12,13}. In our work, we see the availability of data and digital tools nudging parents into less helpful modes of parenting.

"Platforms trouble this already blurred boundary in new and more extensive ways, through intensive processes of datafication and commodification"

– The Home as a Site of Platformization¹⁴

Parental mediation is a key part of parenting young children; over time, generally, this is balanced with fostering independence in adolescence. However, the ability to get constant updates and have control over their adolescent child's environment has changed that balance. Taking an interest in your teen's life can be easily nudged by technological functionality and persuasive business models into over-scrutiny, too much information and control – shifting power from collaborative to hierarchical. Authoritative to authoritarian¹⁵.

And yet, despite the evidence of the impacts an authoritarian approach has on children's outcomes^{16,17}, and counter to previous generations of societal expectations, constant monitoring of children and young people has become normalised¹⁸. 'Intimate surveillance'¹⁹ is increasingly positioned as an essential part of 'good parenting'. Monitoring every aspect of your teen's life and location has shifted from being perceived as controlling to a demonstration of care. And as surveillance becomes normalised as a signal of care, if you don't utilise the

tools and data available to you, then you may be quietly perceived to be neglectful. Avoiding surveillance becomes '*bad parenting*'.

Guilt is an ever-present and powerful force in parenting, and so parents are drawn into the position of control as care. In the process, young people's views and experiences are sidelined. And parents gain more concern than comfort. As young people note, "Using a parental-control app might make parents feel safer, but it can really mess with trust".

Digital technologies present opportunities and potential equity for many young people, but they also introduce actual and perceived risks that cause genuine concern for parents²⁰. Fear of harm to their child makes parents very susceptible to exploitation. Technology fuels fear and then offers the safety net. As a parent, if you know your teen can text you when they get on the bus – if they don't, you immediately start to panic. Tech companies know how hard it is for parents to give up power and control. They have built tools that can delay the moment indefinitely – and by doing so, they drive further reliance by both parents and young people on the technology as the go-between.

In a bid to maintain boundaries and retain influence in their teens' lives at a point where teens should be pulling away, it is perhaps unsurprising that parents reach for simple solutions they hope will give them more control and give their child greater protection on their journey to adulthood. But reliance on a digital mediator undermines the arms-length, trusting relationship parents need to learn to have with their teens. Just as adolescents learn independence, so parents have to learn how to hand over control and allow for autonomy. Digital tools and their associated corporate agendas interfere in this.

Driven by perceived and actual risks, social expectations, and commercial exploitation of our desire to know, the push from concern to control often extends into adulthood. As the Nuffield Foundation's work shows, milestones to adulthood are fundamentally changing²¹. However, in our digitally saturated world, young people are not just staying in the physical home longer; they are also staying under the digital family roof for much longer. Hand-down devices, shared subscriptions and supervision tools mean that the boundary of the 'family home' can constantly be redrawn and expanded. For adolescents, staying under the digital family roof may mean quietly consenting to surveillance and parental choice. Perhaps as a consequence, the notion of positive complete surveillance has been internalised by many young people, with many adopting similar norms without question in friendship groups and relationships. Will this also extend to their own parenting if they become parents?

Certainly, parental monitoring is important, and it is often wanted and welcomed by young people. But when implemented as a single, top-down solution, it erodes trust. Research shows that, while intended to aid parenting, the use of parental supervision tools can cause greater confusion²² for parents, impact on children's relationships with parents and stimulate more conflict in families²³.

How then might parents express their concerns and find comfort in uncertainty without unintentionally limiting young people's autonomy as well as driving division? And how might we conceive of digital tools not as levers of authority but as instruments of collaboration?

Developing consent literacy within families may be one part. This requires understanding the differential power that the digital tools have within families and what consent means in practice for everyone. As VoiceBox notes, given that young people often have greater familiarity with new and emerging technologies and perhaps a more visceral engagement with digital services and culture, understanding their experiences and codesigning solutions may help produce more effective strategies and tools. Supporting parents and young people to discuss what is shared, when and how long it is shared, why it is valued, and how to manage disagreement may also help. For example, strategies like time-bound agreements may help create a rhythm of renegotiation that stays up to date with changes in technology and respects evolving autonomy. It is important, though, that any guidance recognises what is reasonable and realistic to ask of different families in their everyday digital lives. As VoiceBox highlights, this is particularly important for young people and families that experience additional vulnerabilities and barriers, where risk and safety have different contexts and implications.

Digital technologies have introduced a corporate partner as a mediator between parent and child. Unlike previous technologies that were passive, digital is active – responding, recommending, creating. Now, as AI drives a new paradigm, the medium is not only the message, but it is also making the message, shaping the conversation and defining the boundaries. Digital tools are gaining ever greater agency and influence – and parents and adolescents risk losing theirs.

Driven by valid concerns about the impacts of technology on children's well-being, many parents are seeking change. Early enthusiasm for the potential equalising opportunities of the web has evolved for some into deep scepticism and anger. Curfews, age restrictions and bans are being adopted around the world. However, in pursuit of protection, young people may lose the privacy and agency that are also vital to their development. Building more tools and policies that push the policing of children's online lives onto parents also provides a convenient, low-cost solution for platforms and policymakers – and a scapegoat for when things go wrong.

Successive governments have gutted support for parents, and policymakers have a long-standing aversion to parenting as a valid area of focus. This, combined with rapid technological change, is pushing the experience of everyday parenting to breaking point. And it will be young people who feel the consequences most keenly.

Parents are being nudged by fear, platform design and social expectations without proper consideration for what this means for effective parenting. There is a well-established body of evidence on effective parenting, but whether this holds up for supporting young people in their journey to adulthood in today's digitally entangled, AI-powered realities is something to reflect on. Do we fully understand how much harder digital technologies are making it to apply the style of parenting that research tells us is best for young people and nurturing their independence? To answer this, we need to sustain and expand research on how foundational parenting evidence applies in today's and tomorrow's world.

Rare is the straight line in parenting, despite what digital services may push and promise. Technology should support, not impede, the relational core of parenting. By foregrounding consent, co-creation and proportionality as part of evidence-based systemic support systems, we can help parents harness the potential convenience and power of digital tools while preserving the trust and autonomy essential for their teens' transition into adulthood.

Recommendations

We set out our joint recommendations for next steps below; they reflect the perspectives of both young people and their parents and the need to better support this generation navigate autonomy and independence in the digital age.

Increased transparency and accountability

- The use of monitoring, location tracking and similar surveillance tools should be clearly disclosed to the affected user(s) at all times across all devices. Automatic removal of consent after fixed periods – and more frequent moments for parents and young people to review and change what is currently agreed to – would also help improve awareness, avoid unintentional continuous monitoring and facilitate dialogue.
- While services may include some or all of these elements already, greater consideration of how tools and notifications are presented, used and understood by young people and parents is needed to ensure there is meaningful transparency for all. This will become particularly important as wearable technology continues to advance and adoption increases.

Consultation and co-creation with young people and parents

- Ongoing and inclusive consultation, co-creation and testing of features, policies and guidance is essential to ensure approaches meet the everyday needs of real young people and their parents.

Opportunities for young people

- More opportunities and resources are needed for young people to build their understanding and confidence in negotiating/rejecting digital consent, privacy and surveillance – within families, intimate relationships and friendships. However, education and support need to be combined with a meaningful voice in the design of digital tools and in making policy.

Strategic support for parents

- Sustained investment and a national strategy for delivering evidence-based universal parenting support for parents – particularly of adolescents where provision is already much less – should be put in place. This should also include specific consideration of child and adolescent development, digital opportunities and challenges, and how digital tools and policies can nudge parents towards less helpful parenting approaches.

Digital parenting research

- A re-evaluation is required of existing parenting evidence and guidance in relation to digital environments and experiences, particularly considering the data and relational aspects of generative AI and other rapid changes driven by wearables and extended reality.

Acknowledgement of digital influence

- Any work to support young people and families must be underpinned by an acknowledgment that a young person's journey to adulthood is significantly shaped by their digital environment, whether it is the one they choose or the one they are required or obligated to inhabit. This must be coupled with recognition that parents are navigating similar, parallel influences on their parenting journey. To aid them on these journeys, both require better evidence-based policies and tools and more opportunities to be heard.

About VoiceBox

VoiceBox is an international youth content platform and social enterprise dedicated to empowering creators aged 13–25 worldwide. Based in the UK, VoiceBox works closely with young people and youth organisations across the country as well as in over 50 countries globally. Through its content platform and Ambassador programme, VoiceBox acts as an Early Warning System, bringing attention to emerging trends and topics that matter to young people.



voicebox.site

About Parent Zone

Parent Zone sits at the heart of modern family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they embrace the online world. We conduct research to inform policy and practice, and we deliver education and support programmes that reach millions of families every year.



parentzone.org.uk

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