

## IMs: What's a Mother to Do?

By Ruth Marcus

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I've been wrestling recently with the issue of domestic surveillance. Not the NSA-al-Qaeda variety. I mean an even more controversial kind of domestic surveillance: spying on your kids.

Time was, a parent's major privacy dilemma was whether to peek at a child's diary. More than one mom of my acquaintance -- some sheepish, some unrepentant -- has acknowledged engaging in such old-fashioned snooping. But as more and more communication has migrated from ink-on-paper to cyberspace, the always imprecise calibration of children's privacy vs. parental oversight has taken on new layers of moral complexity and technological feasibility. Big Brother, meet Big Mother.

Is monitoring your kids' Internet activity -- say, reviewing the Web sites they've visited -- a violation of their rights or a paradigm of parental responsibility? At what age is this Net nannyism appropriate? When kids are just learning to surf the World Wide Web, certainly, but it's not as if you can stop worrying once the training wheels are off. One mother told me she discreetly checks the porn sites in her teenage son's history folder to make certain they're not too extreme. I cringed, too, but her approach may be realistic; teenage boys will be teenage boys, and they're not just looking at centerfolds these days.

The questions don't get any easier from there. Do gentle parents read their children's e-mail? Install software to intercept their instant messages? Keep track of who's in their chat rooms? Read their blogs? Even for those who insist they wouldn't read an old-fashioned diary or eavesdrop on a telephone call, privacy in cyberspace poses difficult issues.

The first, of course, is keeping kids safe and away from harmful material. But intruding on the grounds of safety is the easy call. The harder one is deciding what expectation of privacy children ought to have in their online lives. In part, this is because, with the Internet, the medium affects the message. The simultaneous immediacy and distance afforded by Internet communication leads people -- children as well as adults -- to write things that they wouldn't say in person, or even over the phone. Mean girls tend to get even meaner in cyberspace.

Think of all the nasty notes you wrote -- or, if you're more like me, that were written about you -- in middle school. Then imagine the ability to cut and paste them and send them to your 10 closest buddies. The Internet facilitates and expands the ability of kids to do the dumbest things.

And there's another factor: Kids today probably aren't any more apt than kids a generation or more ago to do dumb things. But they may be more apt to do them younger. That in itself alters the privacy calculus. And so, merely shielding your kids against talking to strangers online or visiting inappropriate sites might not be going far enough.

My husband and I have been thinking about all this lately because of the IM fever that's infected our daughters, about to be 9 and 11. Instant messaging -- often with the same friends they're simultaneously on the phone with -- has become their new hobby. And while I'm not worried about who they're "talking" to -- I know who's on their buddy list -- I do worry about what's being said, and how.

Yes, 9 sounded awfully young to us, too, and, yes, we thought hard about just saying no, to her and her older sister. But taking away a middle-schooler's IM these days is like denying her access to the telephone. And, or so we told ourselves, even if we were letting them jump the gun, we'd be confronting the same problems in a few years.

Instead, we've had The Talk -- many talks, actually -- about the rules of the Internet road. Still, there's something disturbingly familiar about the eyes-glazed-over look I get whenever this subject comes up. It is, I fear, the same disdainful yeah, yeah, yeah response my parents got when they lectured me 30-some years ago about whatever it was I was probably already doing.

I was talking about this with some parents the other day when the issue of monitoring software came up -- programs that, depending on the degree of intrusiveness, record all Internet use or simply log instant-messaging conversations. Roaming around the Internet afterward, I came across an IM monitoring program that offered a free 10-day trial period. I confess: The download tempted me, and I did click. I snooped on a few of my kids' conversations, which were notable mostly for their inanity and deliberate (I hope) misspellings.

So was I satisfied? Kind of, in that sick and guilty way you feel after you've downed an entire pint of Ben & Jerry's in one stealthy sitting. Would I install the software permanently? Don't know, but probably not without telling my kids it was there.

I do know this: It's all made me nostalgic for the ethically unambiguous days when the only domestic surveillance we felt the need to engage in was switching on the baby monitor and listening for the snufflings of a sleeping infant.

The writer will be taking questions today at noon on <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. Her e-mail address is [ismarcusr@washpost.com](mailto:ismarcusr@washpost.com).