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# ON TRACK FOR DISASTER

Experts tell **Marnie McKimmie** parents should trust old-fashioned parenting skills over technology

**A** big drop in the price of high-tech tracking and monitoring devices puts this generation of children at risk of being more closely watched than any other.

But experts warn the technology, designed to be hooked up from day one of a child's life, may be fuelling the paranoia of so-called helicopter parents and needlessly increasing anxiety to the point it interferes with the relationship with the child.

And if parents do resort to using now-available GPS systems to track the whereabouts of headache-causing teenagers, or software to record their computer key strokes — the modern-day equivalent of reading a diary — they must come clean up front and warn of the extra surveillance, the experts say.

And parents must not allow the devices to act as an electronic babysitter or replace family discussions on acceptable behaviour.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive and psychologist Joe Tucci has deep concerns about new forms of monitoring.

He warns the use of surveillance equipment may backfire and eat away at levels of trust, which in turn could cause teenagers to rebel or trigger them to live out their parents' deepest fears.

WA developmental paediatrician Trevor Parry describes baby monitors that supply video and track temperature and heart rate as being unnecessary and unhelpful, and urges

parents not to get hooked into such consumerism, marketed under the guise of "best for baby".

Unless there is a specific medical indication, he says babies do not need such close monitoring and it risks increasing parental anxiety, which may then unsettle the child. It is far better, he says, to protect the baby with evidence-backed strategies such as using the correct sleeping position to reduce the risk of SIDS, breastfeeding, vaccination and keeping pets away from the cot.

Adolescent psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg says that in the case of raising teenagers, it is never a case of "one size fits all" and he can see a role for the technology with sensation-seeking teens who fail to respond to warnings and have fallen in with the wrong crowd.

For example, he advocates the use of key-logging software for teens who "despite everything" continue to visit inappropriate websites or "hack into the Australian defence system". There is even an argument, he says, for mandatory car chips that monitor the speed and driving practices of teenage drivers.

But Dr Carr-Gregg says he opposes the technology being used to feed the paranoia of parents and to track and

monitor teenagers who have a clean track record of keeping safe and not sensation-seeking.

"Parents are world experts on their own kids and they know deep down what category they fall into," he says.

WA cyber bullying expert Julian Dooley warns parents choosing to install internet-use tracking software behind the back of their teenagers that they may be sending a message of total distrust. And their teen — personally more worried about online viruses than predators — is unlikely to "react well" if they have not been pre-warned of this addition to their computer.

"From the kid's perspective, there seems to be a lot of 'you don't trust me' and 'you do not trust what I am doing online' and 'you are going behind my back'," he says.

"I think there is a place

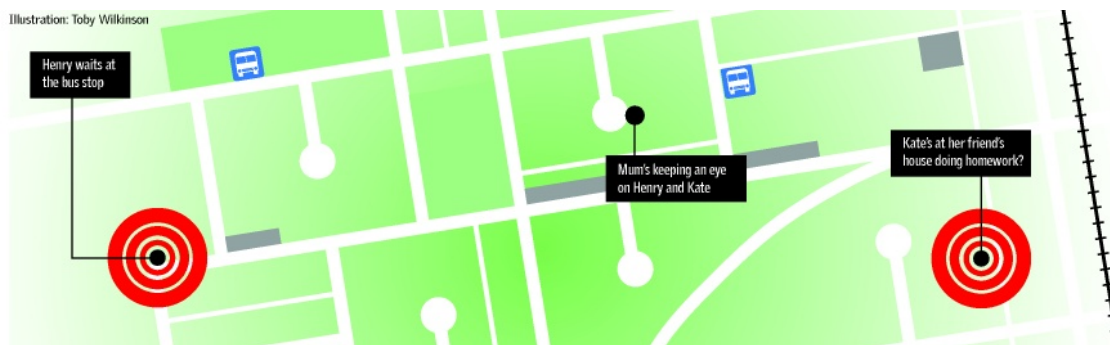
for some internet-monitoring software and it seems to work best for younger kids. Older kids can get around it if they want to.

"But it is more about creating an open dialogue between parents and children about uses of technology — what is appropriate, what is not appropriate — rather than what is essentially a kind of passive approach to monitoring.

"There is a very good argument and some reasonable evidence that in families, this creates a sense that the problem is solved.

"So, in some ways, parents seem to be less likely to engage with their kids about their computer use because there seems to be this idea there is a babysitter there."

Illustration: Toby Wilkinson





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## WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Camera monitoring equipment that links up to mobile phones and family computers is now being installed in the hospital cots of Perth newborns, to give them more chance to rest undisturbed, while relatives from all around the world meet them and catch up on their progress.

Dubbed the Virtual Baby Visit, Mercy Hospital, in Mt Lawley, has become the first hospital in WA to provide new parents with the live and secure video streaming service direct from the maternity ward, following an 18-month pilot program by its developers, Look@MyBaby.



Online: One-day-old Taj Smales.

Among the first to use it were the England-based and Canberra-based relatives of baby Taj Smales, of Forrestfield, although it was his proud Perth-based aunt who clocked up the most time online admiring him. To register for the service, parents pay a one-off fee of \$100, which provides them and their family and friends with unlimited viewing during their hospital stay.

## TRACKING A GENERATION

### BABIES

- wireless baby monitor that provides video and audio transmission via a camera to a device the size of the palm of your hand. Can also allow temperature, heart rate and movement monitoring. (\$80-300)

### CHILDREN

- live-view web camera installed in a teddy bear (used also for nanny monitoring) (\$200-450).

### TEENAGERS

- internet-control software that blocks sites, records history of visits and key strokes (about \$60 a year).

- car chip — installed in the car of new teen drivers — records vehicle speeds driven, hard accelerations, hard decelerations/braking, time and date for each trip and distance travelled (\$160).

- real-time GPS personal tracker with audio — the size of a pack of cards, it tracks exactly where people go and is promoted to be used for the protection of children. (\$599).

- iPhone apps enable you to share your GPS location with a click of a button. Location viewed on a Google map Source: eBay, Dick Smith, [www.nannycam.com](http://www.nannycam.com), Ozspy, Norton online, iTunes, [www.alltrackusa.com](http://www.alltrackusa.com).