

Big Brother Meets Big Mother

By Ellen Goodman | November 2, 2007

PRETTY SOON, we're going to have to amend the favorite mom and dad moniker of the moment. Those much-vaunted helicopter parents are turning into black-helicopter parents. The image of parents hovering over their kids is morphing into the darker image of parents spying on their kids.

Here is the latest bit of high-tech surveillance equipment being marketed to parents. A company inauspiciously named Bladerunner has begun selling a jacket with a GPS device sewn into the lining. For a mere \$500 plus \$20 a month, a parent can track a child, or at least his jacket, all day long.

This is just a small addition to the family-friendly arsenal. We already have a full range of cellphones equipped with GPS. Indeed, the most common cellphone greeting is not "How are you?" but "Where are you?" Parents are being sold the idea that they can trust but Wherify - the name of one of the many manufacturers offering services that beam their children's whereabouts to their cellphone.

Want to monitor what your kids eat at school? MyNutrikids gives you the scoop from the lunchroom. Want an automatic alert if he got a B on the pop quiz? Go to GradeSpeed. Want to monitor her instant messages? There's IMSafer. And want to know whether your 17-year-old is speeding? Alltrack not only tells you but lets you remotely flash the lights and honk the horn till she slows down.

There is also a "safety checks" service courtesy of Sprint to let you know if your children showed up for soccer practice. And a "geofencing" service from Verizon that alerts parents if a child leaves the area circumscribed by her parents.

Next thing you know, there will be a chip implanted under your child's skin. No wait! Somebody's already invented that.

Once upon a time - that ever-popular era - a parent had two weapons for keeping children out of danger: They kept their mouths open and their fingers crossed. Once upon that time, the second set of ears and eyes on children were those of neighbors.

Now we have a disharmonic convergence of anxieties, the dual fear that kids are endangered and/or dangerous, out of (our) control. There's the sense that we are raising children in a more treacherous culture. We teach preschoolers about stranger-danger, and only let them take candy from our friends if it's sealed. But even if kids aren't wandering in the neighborhood, they are wandering in the Internet with all of its unknown cul-de-sacs. What teenagers claim as MySpace, parents often see as an unmonitored public zone that leads predators to their doorstep.

At the same time, parents are expected to know and control everything their children watch, eat, do - where they are, who they are texting, what channels and websites they are viewing. So we have entered a technological arms race where even MySpace - whose space? - offers parents a way to track the changes posted by children.

"The culture of fear," according to Danah Boyd, a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, "says that if you are not monitoring, you are a bad parent. Apparently, we're supposed to be stalking our kids." Having privatized child raising, we seem to be turning parents into private eyes.

I am by no means blasé about danger. The implicit deal that comes with the cellphone is that children get to roam and parents get to stay in touch. It's a mutual comfort society. But the downside to what MIT's Sherry Turkle calls "tethered adolescents" is real: "There's always a parent on speed dial." Teens are never really on their own. We may be protecting them right out of the ability to make their own decisions. Including their own mistakes.

It's not clear that a surveillance society actually provides more security. Consider the ubiquitous surveillance cameras at schools. What did they do for that Cleveland high school last month except to leave behind chilling, post-mortem pictures of the 14-year-old shooter? And how easy is it to drop the GPS jacket by the roadside?

Meanwhile, we may be raising a generation with low expectations of public privacy, trained by Big Mother to accept Big Brother. Did anyone notice how Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton made monitoring anklets into this year's fashion accessory?

As someone who has done my fair share of speed dialing, I am a believer in the text messaging and cellphoning that keeps parents and kids in contact. But there's a moment when the two-way tools of communication turn into the one-way tools of surveillance. Then the tether becomes a leash and parenting becomes stalking. We don't talk; we track. That's when it's time to say, Black Helicopter down.