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Parental Monitoring Apps, Autonomy, and Skill Development

White Paper

This paper explores the relationship between the use of parental monitoring technology and Gen Z's ideas of independence and their development of key skills.

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Survey Intro

🖥 The Research Question and Preliminary Results

In the Fall 2024, one of our Market Research student groups conducted research on the hypothesis parental monitoring technology impacts Gen Z's ideas of independence. Their goal was to ask questions about how the use of these technologies effected their relationship with their parents, their feelings of trust in the relationship, and their ability to make decisions.

Demographics

They collected 151 survey responses with 83% of respondents being under 25 years old. 79% of their respondents were female, and 72% attended public school for their K-12 education.

Preliminary Results

The survey results showed that respondents feel some level of influence from their parents use of parental monitoring. However, though they recognize that these apps affect relationships with their parents, a majority of them do not feel they affect their ability to make decisions. The research revealed the key themes of technology use, trust and security, and decision making and autonomy.

Parental Monitoring Technology

Parental monitoring applications like Life360 have become increasingly more popular with parents of Gen Z (born 1995-2012) and now Gen Alpha (born 2012-2027) young people. For many parents, parental monitoring and location-services provide a measure of security and a feeling of safety both in physical and online spaces.

Our survey found that just over half of our respondents (51%) said that their parents use parental monitoring technology to keep track of their daily activities. Those who worry about the use of these apps claim that they can stifle decision making and problem solving skills. The American Academy of Pediatrics has also argued that parental control apps might interfere with the developmental process of adolescents because they are geared toward addressing the values of the parent over the child. These concerns raise other themes from our research, especially relating to trust and decision making.

51%	14% of parents	60%
said parents used tech to keep track of daily activities	use the apps without their child's knowledge	have disabled location services on their phone

Trust and Safety

Security and safety are big values when it comes to why parents and children use parental monitoring and location-sharing technology. However, some analysts are concerned that an over-reliance on this technology might impact trust within these relationships. 77% of our survey respondents agreed that tracking apps affect their relationships with their parents. A majority of our respondents (60%) also admitted to turning off location services on their phone. While our survey found that 65% of respondents felt that monitoring technology does not strengthen their relationships with their parents, our survey did not find a significant erosion of trust either.

Have you ever disabled location sharing on your phone?

No
40%

Yes
60%
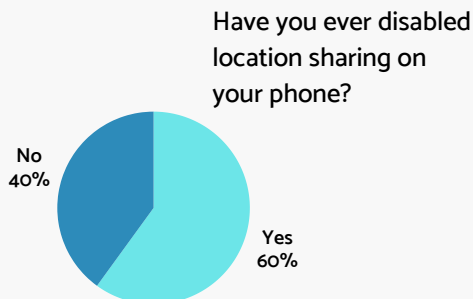
77% feel tracking apps affect their relationships with their parents

66% of Gen Z associate "safe" with location sharing applications

Other research has found that there might be long term ramifications for using these apps. Some parents report that once you have the technology, it can be hard not to use it all the time - limiting your ability to set and maintain boundaries around your children's privacy. These apps might also give parents a false sense of security. Parents tend to associate knowing the location of their child with safety, which isn't necessarily the case.

An over-reliance on these tracking apps could impact the level of trust given to young people by their parents or guardians. We also have to consider ways in which Gen Z can evade tracking. Teens can evade their parents by turning off their phone, letting their battery go dead, or refusing to respond to text messages. However, recent data suggests that Gen Z are willing to trade some of their privacy for the safety of location sharing technology. As Gen Z and their parents both come to rely on smartphones and their services, families need to have deliberate conversations about expectations of privacy versus the importance of safety.

Decision Making and Autonomy

> *Unfortunately, existing parental control apps do not support the developmental process of adolescents because they often fail to balance parental values and desires with their children's own values, needs, and wants.*
>
> American Academy of Pediatrics

Although 80% of our respondents said they seek approval from their parents before making decisions, 78% said that tracking apps do not affect their ability to make decisions.

These findings indicate not that Gen Z doesn't feel independent, but that their understanding of what it means to be independent might differ from previous generations. As a cohort, they are used to a higher level of influence and monitoring from their parents. Therefore, they do not associate monitoring and tracking with a loss of independence or autonomy.

Other research has indicated that parental monitoring and parental control apps can impact the development of independence, decision making skills, and problem solving skills. Parental monitoring and tracking can limit opportunities for young people to navigate the world on their own.

It is important for users of parental monitoring apps to consider how the apps are impacting the development of their children. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that 89% of features of parental online safety apps are targeted toward parental control, while only 11% of features supports some form of teen regulation.

When introducing these technologies to children, parents need to understand how the apps work, who they were designed for, and what kind of impact they might have on adolescent brain and social development.

> *Over-monitoring can also lead to a lack of opportunities for teens to learn from their mistakes ... Parents who prevent their teens from making decisions out of fear of failure eventually hinder their children's ability to develop problem solving skills.*
>
> Daaryl Haley

Findings

What does this mean about our understanding of how parents and children use and adapt to monitoring technology.

Here is what we've learned:

- Over half our respondents (51%) said their parents use parental monitoring apps to keep track of their daily activities.
- Our survey data showed that most Gen Z young people (77%) recognize the impact of parental monitoring applications in their lives, but they do not feel it has impacted their ability to make decisions.
- These technologies help parents and children feel safe and secure. But they may also impact the development of key skills in adolescence.

Applications

What does it all mean?

Every research project tells a story, and here's how this story can help you better understand this rising generation in the workforce:

- Parental monitoring applications are still relatively new. It is vital to understand how they work and how they are designed in order to use them effectively.
- Gen Z workers have been raised with the expectation of location-sharing and parental monitoring - this can impact how they communicate in the workplace.
- As a result of these technologies, and the US education system, Gen Z workers might lack key decision making and problem solving skills.

How can we help?

This White Paper only scratched the surface of our understanding of Gen Z and how they impact multigenerational workplaces.

If we can help you or your organization reach a fuller understanding of generations, please reach out via the contact information below, or scan the QR code to book a call with us or learn more about the trainings we offer!

✉ info@communityresearchinstitute.org

BOOK A CALL

Our Trainings