

# 'I have a right to privacy'

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## **Parental Monitoring of Adolescents use of Social Network Sites**

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## **Abstract**

*The objective of this paper was to examine how parents monitored adolescent's use of social networking sites and to ascertain whether different monitoring techniques resulted in different levels of conflict or understanding. The research was conducted using a qualitative research design and the researcher carried out six semi-structured interviews. The findings were then coded into nivo and examined through the use of thematic analysis. The paper found that many parents are unsure of how to monitor their adolescent's use of social network sites due to a lack of technology awareness. Of the six participants interviewed two participants used direct monitoring, one relied on indirect methods and one on restrictive practice. The final two reported to less involved in the monitoring of social network sites however one used restrictive practices in other areas of risk. Indirect and restrictive methods resulted in a higher level of conflict, a perception of secrecy and distrust on both parts, whereas direct monitoring resulted in lower levels of conflict and more trusting relationship between parent and adolescent. This result tallied with previous studies regarding parental monitoring in other areas of risk. Furthermore the findings show that parents are more aware of certain risks, such as cyber bullying than other possible risks. This shows a need for more discussion on the possible risks and for parents to be given more information of the benefits of direct monitoring and its methods.*

## **Introduction**

Since the advent of the internet there have been huge advancements in technology. Smart phones such as the iPhone allow users to access the internet from any location. Adolescents spending more time away from the family, in what has been coined a 'bedroom culture' has raised concerns among sociologists about the quality of interaction between family members (Chambers, 2012). Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts found that American's aged 8–18 use a computer for about one-and-half hours per day, 59% of this time was devoted to instant messaging, emailing, social networking, and video sharing (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). These types of interactions are defined by theorist John Thompson as 'mediated quasi-interactions' (Thompson, 1995). Chambers states that 'parents are frequently poorly informed about their children's activities and often fail to monitor them correctly' (2012, P. 88). After examining the body of research in the area of parental monitoring this study was able to define four methods of monitoring, direct, indirect, restrictive and uninvolved. This research project will examine what type of parental monitoring takes place in relation to adolescent's use of Social Networking Sites in Ireland and the level of parent-adolescent conflict.

## **Adolescent-Parent Relationship**

Adolescence is often discussed as a time of stress, crisis and storm as adolescents strive to assert their individuality. Hall was one of the first sociologists to study this time period and Smetana discusses how he goes as far as comparing the behaviours and feelings of adolescents to that of the mentally insane (Smetana, 2011). 'Early adolescents has been reported to be the most strained period in adolescent-parent relationships' (Lawlor, de Roiste & Devlin, 2000, P. 22). Psychoanalytic theorists such as Anna Freud found that parent-child conflict was necessary during this period to ensure 'healthy development and separation from parents' (Smetana, 2011, P. 17). Smetana suggests, however, that too much parent-adolescent conflict can have detrimental effects on the development of the adolescent and that high levels of conflict have been connected to teen depression or suicide attempts. Smetana discusses how other studies into the 'norm' in relation to parent-adolescent relationships have found that the period was not always characterised as one of conflict as earlier studies had suggested and that many described their relationship with their parents as a loving one with minor disagreements around day to day issues such a clothing, music or curfews (Smetana, 2011). Smetana concludes, from examining the research, that intense conflict is 'a reflection of troubled adolescence and disturbed family relationships' (Smetana, 2011, P. 30). Therefore it is important to society that parents are able to maintain a balance between their role in providing their adolescent with a strong moral compass and maintaining good relationships. Research, which we will look at further along, has shown that different monitoring systems result in different levels of conflict which in turn result in positively or negatively impacting on family relationships and adolescent development.

### **The Influence of Media on Socialization**

Functionalist theory believes that one of the most important tasks for the survival of society is successful socialization of children. Talcott Parsons views the role of socialisation of children as one of the primary functions for the family (Giddens, 2009). Parents are seen as 'the local guardians of the moral' and charged with ensuring children accept certain values and rules of society (Smetana, 2011, P. 32). Piaget refers to the period between 11-15 as the formal operational stage. He explains how the child goes from primary socialization, and where the family are the main agent of socialization, to secondary socialization where external factors, such as media, influence how the child's personality will develop. Giddens states that 'the media plays a large role in shaping our understanding of the world and therefore in socialization'(Giddens, 2009, P. 3). He goes on to say that 'the internet threatens to erase the distinctions between the traditional forms of media and to become the primary conduit for the delivery of information, entertainment, advertising and commerce to media audiences' (Giddens, 2009, P.724). From this perspective it is therefore important that parents are aware of the effects of social media on adolescents and how this may affect their development. We should then consider how much influence social media has on socialization and whether it has negative or positive impacts.

### **The Rise of Social Media and the Sociological Debate.**

A study carried out by Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig & Olafsson in 2011 found that in Europe 73% of 13–14 year olds and 82% of 15–16 year olds now have a profile on a Social network site (Livingstone, Haddon & Görzig, 2012). Research carried out by RTE's Prime Time investigates found that in Ireland 90% of 15-16 year olds have a profile on social network sites ('Prime Time Investigates', 2014). There has been much sociological debate as to whether media such as this has a positive or negative effect on society.

Functionalist theory is largely positive in regard to the media. Rather than seeing media as being a function of change in society it regards it as being a tool to maintain it. McQuail, in *Mass Communications Theory*, outlines 5 functions of media; information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilization (McQuail, 2010, P. 98-99). A recent study carried out by Thomas Allmer to ascertain the positives and negatives of Facebook found that 42.3% of people felt that Facebook aided them in maintaining contact with friends and family, 33.8% of people identified it as a way to stay in contact with people over long distances, 23.4% saw it as a way to stay up to date with latest news and information, and only 2.1% identified Facebook as a source of entertainment or amusement (Allmer, 2014, P. 49).

Conflict theorists have a more negative view of the internet and argue that interactions on the internet take away from face to face contact, hinder other forms of entertainment such as reading and that, rather than increasing a person's interactions, social media is causing people to become socially isolated and suffer low self-esteem (Giddens, 2009). Due to the ability of the user to remain anonymous it has also led to a rise in the issue of cyber bullying and opened up concerns regarding predators, who may pose as a youth in order to gain access to children. In Almers study, when questioned about the perceived disadvantages of social

media, 57% of participants were most concerned with data abuse, data forwarding and lack of data protection, and 33.8% were concerned by a lack of privacy (Allmer 2014, P. 50). The prime time investigation into the use of Facebook showed how images of Irish teenagers on Facebook have been taken and used on pornographic websites without the knowledge of the teenagers ('Prime Time Investigates', 2014).

Some postmodernists see mass media as creating a 'hyper reality'. As people become more involved in the use of technology the conscious mind can no longer distinguish the difference between physical world interactions and those that take place in simulated environments such as internet chat rooms (Giddens, 2009). For the majority of teenagers in western countries their social worlds also include SNS. Harris comments on the use of the term "Living Internet" in the Online Safety and Technology Working Group's report "Youth Safety on a Living Internet" as an 'apt reflection of how Internet use differs from the passive nature of media experiences like television' (Harris, 2010, P. 4).

Symbolic interactionists believe that conflict theorists do not give enough thought to media involvement in constructing our society. John Thompson describes people as active agents rather than passive recipients of media messages. He developed the term 'mediated quasi-interactions' to describe the more constricted, one way type of interaction people have with media. Mediated quasi-interactions are a type of communication that is delivered to not just one but multiple unknown recipients, which aptly describes the interaction on social networking sites. Thompson argues against conflict theorists and views that social media helps social interactions as people take what they have heard or read and use it as a platform for discussion or debate with their peers (Thompson, 1995). Issues arise for parents as to how safely their adolescents are whilst interacting with others on SNS and what type of risky behaviours they might be engaging in whilst online.

### **Online risk factors**

Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke, in their research paper, *Educating Teens about the Risks on Social Network Sites*, define three categories of online risks: content, commercial and contact risk (Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke, 2014).

Content risk refers to material adolescents might come across whilst accessing SNS including hate messaging or age inappropriate images.

Commercial risks include the ability of commercial users to gain access to personal data in order to target users with advertisements for goods or services. One of the most important of the conflict theories, the Political Economy approach, sees the 'media as an industry' and opines that it is the rich and powerful that have control over what information people are presented (Giddens, 2009, P. 745). The information that is provided by media is therefore carefully selected so as to benefit the business world and not society as a whole.

The final category, contact risk, 'the fact that Social network sites can be used to communicate and have contact with others' (Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke, 2014, P. 2), has had the most researcher focus. A survey conducted on participants ranging from 9-16 years in Europe, showed that only 43% of children keep their social network profiles private (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011). During the Prime Time investigation the researchers created a fake adolescent public profile on Facebook. The page was targeted by a number of fraudulent characters who went on to send numerous messages of a sexual nature. This research shows how many teenagers may unknowingly make themselves vulnerable to grooming behaviours on Social Network Sites ('Prime Time Investigates', 2014). Livingstone,

Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson found that 46% of the children questioned had accepted people as friends that they had met on the Internet and did not know face-to-face. McAfee found that 52% of the adolescents surveyed had disclosed personal information to someone they had not met and 25% had shared personal photos/physical descriptions of themselves (McAfee, 2009). The report, *Privacy, Self Disclosure and Self Image of Spanish Teenagers on Social Networking Sites* concluded that this use of self-disclosure by adolescents was a way of gaining popularity. The researcher states that 'the ability to share content that reinforces sociability and makes relationships with friends stronger becomes very important' (Crescenzi, Arauna & Tortajada, 2013, P.4).

### **The Importance of Parental Monitoring**

A lot of research is focused on the role of schools programmes in ensuring adolescents do not participate or engage in risky online behaviours. Research conducted by Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke on a programme of courses delivered to adolescents in schools on online risks found that although the courses were successful in enhancing knowledge of the risks they did little to alter the participants attitudes and behaviours (Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke, 2014). 'The lack of consistent impact on attitudes and behaviour is an observation regularly found in general media education' (Duran, Yousman, Walsh & Longshore, 2008). Livingstone & Helsper note that this creates a 'need for increased parental oversight' and it 'enhanced the importance of understanding the nature and forms of parental mediation' (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

In a study *'But I Trust My Teen: Parents' Attitudes and Response to a Parental Monitoring Intervention*, the researcher examines the importance of parental monitoring in altering risky behaviours. The author found that parental monitoring differed between family

types. It found that there was a lower level of monitoring in single-parent families, lower income groups and families of multiple children. It found that monitoring differed dependant on the age and gender of the adolescent with parents monitoring younger adolescents and female adolescents more than older or male adolescents. The study also found that most parents were concerned about allowing their teenagers some trust and privacy in order to build a successful relationship. Families who prioritised their relationship were then more likely to have a decline in the use of monitoring systems. Also parent's attitudes towards the monitoring systems affected the degree to which they monitored adolescents. Those who felt that teenagers were going to engage in risky behaviours no matter what they did were less likely to continue to monitor their adolescents as did those who put high importance into building trust (Metzger, Ice & Cottrell, 2012).

From the research examined there appears to be four major monitoring systems. These are: direct monitoring, which involves open communication between the parent and adolescent; indirect monitoring, such as speaking with the adolescent's peers or checking emails; restrictive practices, such as limiting time spent on social network sites and having strict rules around what the adolescent can and cannot access online; the final monitoring system is non-involvement.

### **Direct monitoring**

The study *But I Trust My Teen: Parents' Attitudes and Response to a Parental Monitoring Intervention* the researcher found that parental monitoring systems are more likely to be successful when information came directly from the adolescent (Metzger, Ice & Cottrell, 2012). Shin, Huh, Faber agreed with this report referring to parents open communication as active mediation and further going on to say that this type of monitoring leads to better socialization as it is more likely to teach the adolescent critical thinking skills

than other monitoring systems (Shin, Huh & Faber, 2012). 'According to self-determination theory, parental practices supporting children's autonomy are likely to facilitate children's perception that their behaviour is self-determined rather than externally forced, and this perception is likely to foster children's moral internalization, leading to pro social behaviours even without clear rewards presented' (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). Petronio (1994) suggests that although there will still be conflict in the relationship were parents use direct monitoring systems the lines of communication will be more open and this conflict will only lead to a better understanding of each parties expectations with regards to privacy.

### **Indirect monitoring or an invasion of privacy?**

Indirect monitoring is when a parent who, usually because of lack of trust in the adolescent, tries to gain knowledge by asking the adolescents peers or through 'snooping' techniques. A study examining the effect of a perceived parental invasion of adolescents privacy by the adolescent found that the more the adolescent perceived their privacy had been invaded the less likely they were to communicate openly with the parent and that this in turn led to secrecy (Hawk et al., 2013). Shin, Huh, and Faber agrees with this finding and go on to further say that adolescents who feel that their privacy has been invaded are more likely to have higher levels of conflict with their parents. Therefore indirect monitoring can end up being counterproductive.

The communication privacy theory, as developed by Petronio, defines privacy as 'one's expectation and experience of control over others' access to information, spaces, or property that is viewed as one's own' (Petronio, 2002). Hawk, Kijers, Hale & Meeus discuss how parents often assume that their children do not have ownership rights over information, space and property and therefore they do not have a right to privacy and parents as such are

then entitled to access this information (Hawk, Keijsers, Hale & Meeus, 2009). Petronio (1994) describes how a feeling that one's privacy has been invaded involves a loss of desired control and that secrecy then follows as a result, as the person attempts to regain this control. This secrecy has been linked to difficult family relationships and adolescent's psychosocial difficulties. Petronio states that adolescents are often fully aware of the indirect monitoring and that unless there are serious concerns for the welfare of the adolescent parents should, at all costs, avoid the use of such monitoring.

### **Restrictive practices**

Restrictive practices, although not as effective and more likely to lead to conflict, are still shown to be better than no involvement at all in limiting the risks to adolescent's online safety. The study carried out by Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts examining tweens personal disclosure on social networks sites and the effects active or restrictive parental mediation found that tweens who perceived restrictive practices differently to that of their parents were more likely to disclose personal information (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). Harris discusses how privacy is often perceived differently depending on who is defining it (Harris, 2010). Parents are concerned for the safety and welfare of their adolescents whereas the adolescents see it as a way of gaining control and independence from their parents or other authority figures who seek to limit their personal choices. The ability to have some control is crucial to the development of the adolescent's autonomy and identity (Foltz, 2011).

### **Uninvolved**

Parents who feel that the adolescents may involve themselves in risky behaviours no matter what they do may decide any type of monitoring would be useless. They may also decide that having a harmonious relationship with their teen is more important. To the contrary, many studies have shown if a parent has no input it can lead the adolescent to feel uncared for, insecure and can build distrust for authority figures (Smetana, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

As discussed, social networking sites have many positive features such as the ability to make or maintain friendships regardless of boundaries. The literature and research has identified many risks involved in its usage showing that parental concern is warranted. Research has shown that parental monitoring can have a positive impact on whether an adolescent engages in risky behaviours whereas research conducted into current education programmes has shown that it is only beneficial in providing adolescents with more knowledge but has done little to alter behaviour and attitudes. This gives weight to the Miyazaki, Stanaland & Lwin argument that the 'inability to regulate all forms of online disclosures, along with the increasing online communication activities and information sharing among children, places greater responsibility on parents to supervise their children's online activities' (Miyazaki, Stanaland & Lwin, 2009).

In previous studies relating to the issue of privacy and adolescents, findings indicate that open communication of expectations, whether through positive negotiations or conflict,

lead to better parent-adolescent relationships. In contrast, indirect methods of gathering information, excessive questioning or instigating rigorous controls have been shown to lead teenagers to rebel and become more secretive. How parents interact with adolescents over privacy issues can also affect how they develop and affect the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. It is important that parents not only have knowledge of what their adolescents are accessing but that they monitor this in a way that promotes some level of independence so that the adolescent can develop the ability to make appropriate choices for themselves.

There has been a rich body of research into the use of monitoring systems as illustrated above; however, there has been no research as to what are the most common types of parental monitoring of adolescents in relation to social networking sites. This research aims to fill this gap and to ascertain what level of conflict it produces.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of the research was to examine how parents monitored adolescent's use of social networking sites and how much conflict occurred as a result of parental monitoring. The research was inductive in that it set out to examine participant's interpretation of their monitoring systems and their subjective experience of conflict within the relationship therefore the researcher choose to use a Qualitative research design. To get a full picture of the issue this research required a method that would allow for discussion to ensure room for exploration of participants answers therefore the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The researcher used open ended questions to allow the participant to decide the course of the interview and in order to avoid participant bias. The researcher conducted six interviews which were then coded in nivio. Thematic analysis of the data was then carried out in order to examine the findings and develop key recurring themes.

### **Participants**

The researcher required participants to have at least one adolescent in their primary care and for that adolescent to be known to a use social networking site. Six participants were chosen through stratified purposive sampling. The researcher attempted to ensure participants selected came from different family circumstances, such as size of family

number of parents in family and gender of adolescent in order to ensure diversity so that the findings could not be said to be exclusive to just one family grouping.

The researcher conducted interviews on six participants. Participants included; two fathers, one of which had an adolescent son and the other an adolescent daughter, and four females with varying gendered adolescents. Interviewee one was a single parent of multiple children ranging in age from nine to twenty all other participants were from two parent households. The interviewees ranged in age from 31 to 50. Interviewee 1 and 2 did not work outside of the house; interviewee's 3 and 5 were employed in the care sector, although interviewee 5 was currently on unpaid maternity leave, Interviewee 5 worked as a painter and interviewee 6 as a risk assessor.

### **Materials**

The researcher used a voice recorder to record the interviews before transcribing them. This information was then input to Nvivo in order to code the data and develop themes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher ensured that the study was of scientific quality, respected the welfare, rights and dignity of the participant by ensuring the research conformed to ethical standards as set out in the Ethical Guidelines document from the Sociological Association of Ireland.

As the researcher was not qualified to conduct research on any vulnerable groups all interviewees were over the age of 18 and questions were not designed to investigate any issues that might be considered sensitive for the participant. Participants were assured of their

right to withdraw from the study at any time and guaranteed that all identifying information would not be stored within the research so that they could be confident of maintaining confidentiality. Participants were given verbal explanation of the purpose of the study along with a written letter outlining this to provide for informed consent prior to the interviews. A copy of written consent is included in the appendices. The researcher organised a quiet and comfortable space to conduct the interviews and ensured that each participant was well at the end of the interview. The researcher did not treat any of the participant's disclosures with judgement in order to ensure the interviewee was treated with respect and to foster trust. The researcher informed each participant that they had the right to request a copy of the research.

### **Procedure**

After selecting the participant's by stratified purposeful sampling the researcher compiled a questionnaire that was based on information analysed from the literature in the area of monitoring. The researcher selected a quiet area to conduct the interviews, explained the purpose of the research, informed participants of their rights and assured them regarding confidentiality. The researcher then requested the participant completed the consent form prior to starting the interview. The researcher conveyed to the participant how instrumental their experiences were to the research regardless if they had a lot to say on an issue or nothing at all.

The interview started with a set of questions designed to get an overview of the family before moving on to the open ended questions. The researcher allowed the participants answers to inform the direction of the interview and ordered the questions on the basis of what was being said by the participant. The researcher used active listening techniques to demonstrate empathy and understanding.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed at the end of each interview. Once all interviews were complete the transcribed interviews were imported into Nvivo for analytical coding. Once each interview was coded these codes were reviewed and five themes were formulated. These themes were selected based on the data and the relevance of the information to the study. The themes were then illustrated in the studies finding section.

## **Research Findings**

### **Adult/Adolescent Communication**

There were a number of factors which affected the level of communication reported such as the age and the gender of the adolescent. The majority of participants spoke about having a more open relationship with their adolescents up to the age of 14 to 15. They then went through a period of time where they felt their adolescents broke away. The participants felt this distancing began when the adolescent commenced secondary education. Secondary school was also the stage when most participants were first allowed access to social networking sites. Participants still felt that they were too young at this stage to manage their own issues.

*'They are very private once they get to a certain age... I can get up to 14/15 I can't get anything after that...From half way through First Year they start to move away from you, you hear them saying 'aw you're stupid' ...They are too young to be individual' (1).*

*'The 12 year old isn't on it yet ... but come secondary school that will all change. With the others from about 4 months of starting secondary school it all changed' (1)*

Interviewee 4 agreed with this and felt that he had a closer relationship with his younger daughter compared to his adolescent daughter. He felt that the adolescent would be closer to her mother and that he would get involved more when it came to discipline.

*'She wouldn't really discuss much with me she would discuss more with her mother ... I would be the one to say listen you can't do this you can't do that' (4).*

Interviewee 5 and 6 had the opposite experience to the others and felt that their relationship with their son had grown stronger as he had gotten older. These interviewees used direct monitoring techniques and proactively communicated with their adolescent,

*'We have probably got a lot closer as he has got older... We get to have our chats and I get to find as much information that I can. (6).*

*'Every so often I would go into his room and ask everything alright in school, you're not being bullied, no one is bullying you, anything you want to tell me, anything going on. We have always had open little chats and he would be always so open and honest about everything from small' (5).*

Participants, with both female and male children, felt that their daughters were more likely than their sons to discuss issues with them.

*'She would be better at coming to me and discussing things to me she would say it more openly' (2).*

The participants identified different methods of extracting information from girls in comparison to boys. One participant spoke about how she would try to work the question she wanted to ask into the conversation by warming up with general discussion and then subtly leading to the question she wanted to ask.

*'Yes girls sit down and we chat in general and I would just throw it in ...they seem to be more open to talk about it if I bring it into conversation. Whereas if I said come here to me I have just heard... they would close up completely... Whereas the boys will just stop they don't*

*want to talk about it unless something is going on with one of their friends but they do not want you involved' (1).*

This statement also draws on what the adolescent is willing to discuss. The participant's experiences were similar to others who felt their adolescents would be more likely to communicate about issues relating to school, boyfriends and girlfriends or third party issues rather than personal issues such as bullying.

*'She would be more open about school work than her friends she would keep her friends stuff to herself thinking she could deal with her herself' (3).*

When it came to communicating fears or concerns regarding social networking sites most felt this conversation came about due to something they had seen in the media or as a consequence to an incident and to a lesser extent a school awareness talk.

*'Yes more to do with things that happened on television more to do with bullying, when it came up about cyber bully and kids committing suicide because of what others were saying about them online. That kind of instigated us talking about. They had a thing on anti-bullying in school and they were on about cyber bullying.' (2).*

### Conflicts and Consequences

Good communication between Parent and Adolescent was identified as being important in avoiding conflict. When directly questioned about conflicts arising from social networking sites most participants struggled to identify a particular incident, however, during the course of the interview many issues arose. One participant spoke about how her daughter had opened up an account without her knowledge and consent. Other reasons for conflict were over the amount of time spent accessing social network sites, accessing them late at night and putting up inappropriate or hurtful comments.

*'I would often say to her you are sitting there the last two hours what are you at?' (4).*

Participants felt that ensuring they have a good awareness of their adolescent's activities was very important to them. However, some participants spoke about how conflicts arose as a result of their information seeking. The adolescents who perceived their parents questioning as invasion of their privacy reacted negatively to this. One participant, as if internalising her adolescent's view of her, went on to describe herself on a number of occasions throughout the interview as being nose-y.

*'I ask for more information, I want to see what's going on, then the conflict starts they don't want me to see what's going on... They don't want to discuss anything, it's just I'm nose-y (1).*

Another participant talked about how she wouldn't want to come across to her adolescent as being too over demanding for information in case this then led to secrecy.

*'I would be afraid to be too into being a bully myself about trying to get the information out*

*of them in case they wouldn't tell me things that really matter' (2).*

The participants all stated that if or when an incident did arise they would manage this by discussing the issue. The two participants who used direct methods of monitoring spoke of how important they felt it was that once the conflict was resolved that there was no other action taken. Both these participants also felt that their adolescent did not react negatively to them looking for information due to an understanding of the reasons on both parts.

*'I told him it's not acceptable. He said no I wouldn't do that dad and I said that's fine. That's the end of that' (6).*

*'I would often check his text messages and it wouldn't bother him he'd let me. He knows that I check them for his own good that I am not being nosey' (5)*

When questioned about the outcome of these discussions the other respondent who used indirect or restrictive practices were unsure as to whether they had managed to reach an understanding with their adolescent due to the responses of the adolescent to their advice.

*'I know nothing because they are wiser as far as they are concerned' (1).*

*'If you say anything you are told that it is just the way everybody is but it's strange to me' (4).*

The participants who were unsure of whether their adolescents had taken heed of what the parents had said felt that there needed to be a consequence to negative behaviours. This consequence always included the removal of a device used to access the internet. This form of punishment was also used as a consequence to other incidents of negative behaviours. One participant spoke of how the removal of access to social media was today's version of grounding as this was the way they accessed their friends.

*'When I take her phone off her I am taking away her access to friends, it's like 10 years ago when we were grounded we weren't able to go out to see our friends. Taking the phone of her is like when we were grounded 10 years ago. It's stopping the connection to her friends' (3).*

### **Parental concerns**

Social Networking was most identified by participants as a tool for adolescents to interact with friends. The majority of participants interviewed were concerned how this then affected their adolescent's ability to communicate face to face with their peers and felt that if the social networking sites were not available that their adolescents would interact face to face with their friends more.

*'When they were going on the school tours there not able to talk to each other anymore' (2).*

*'You have 3 teenagers in the back of the car and you would often say nothing like you would just leave them see what happens and you drive say 20 minutes and they would not have spoken one word to each other.. They would be on their devices and you might just hear them say look at what so and so said. If you say anything you are told that is just the way everybody is but it's strange to me' (4).*

The most commonly identified concern on social network sites for parents was bullying. Suicide as a result of bullying was mentioned during two of the interviews. One parent mentioned how she had found out that her son had been involved in an incident of bullying on a social networking site and spoke about how she did not think he would have verbalised what he had wrote on the social networking site and that she felt it had only occurred because the internet allowed him to remain anonymous. She acknowledged the school in enhancing her awareness of the issue of cyber bullying.

*'We never heard him use language like that to me or openly in the house so to write something like that... I suppose their anonymous they are saying it into a machine and it kind of doesn't mean as much to them or they don't kind of think it's as bad as what it is... There was a talk in the school and they said the biggest dealings they have are online bullying rather than the physical or emotional that it used to be...'* (2).

Only one parent mentioned access to pornographic material on the internet as being a concern and she did not link this issue to social networking sites. In general sexual material appeared to be less of a concern when it came to social networking sites with only one parent identifying at all and he believed his son to be mature enough to handle any images that might come up.

*'I think he is mature enough that whatever is coming up they have all seen whether it be sexual they have all seen and would be knowledgeable enough'* (6).

Some participants were concerned by the amount of time spent on social networking sites. One participant mentioned how he felt the amount of time his daughter spent on social networking sites impacted on her academic studies.

*'She spends too much time on Social Network Sites. She is 17 she is doing her leaving next year and when she is supposed to be studying she is upstairs and you go up and she is on the phone so she is not studying'*(4).

### Monitoring Methods

Several parents mentioned their own lack of awareness of social networking sites, what their adolescents could be accessing and a general lack of technology awareness as a concern as this effected how capable they were in managing their adolescent activities.

*'I think I am not knowledgeable enough about it to control it but maybe it would make me try to do a course' (2).*

One parent mentioned the use technology to restrict access to certain sites but she was unsure of how to do this.

*'We do use the anti-viral stuff that is supposed to block porn to a certain extent but we don't know how to use parental controls and all that' (2).*

Another stated that she would restrict the type of social network site to only those of which she had knowledge.

*'I wouldn't like her having much more than Facebook. Probably because I know what Facebook is and the other ones I wouldn't be aware of' (3).*

For participants, this lack of awareness, also lead to a feeling of not being able to control the online activities. Loss of control was also put down to the adolescent growing older and a lack of time.

*'At 17 she could turn around and say it's not your concern. You are trying to advise her. I would have very little control' (4).*

*'I sometimes feel I can't control what they are doing because there are so many different angles so you can't be watching them the whole time' (1).*

One of the questions that were asked was whether the parent had knowledge of the adolescent's passwords to access devices and social network sites which one parent stated that she did and that she had in the past used this to check her son's social network activities. She stated that her son was aware of this and understood why she did it. Another participant stated that she was able to access passwords up until her children turned 15, for her, access to passwords was a condition in using the site up until this age.

*'I have asked for the passwords but they won't give them to me from 15 upwards.... With the younger ones I have told them if I can't see what you're doing you're not allowed use the networking sites' (1).*

Some participants stated that they would directly ask their adolescents what they are looking at whilst they are using the devices and ask retrospective questions to ascertain if there was any issues.

*'I have often asked him did he, did anyone, ever write anything about him or to him or say anything nasty about him and he said no' (2).*

*'We get to have our chats and I get to find as much information that I can' (6).*

Other participants stated that they would restrict access by turning off the internet which meant their adolescents could no longer access the sites through their phone, which was usually done at night or if they felt the adolescent was on it too long.

*'I would turn the Wi-Fi off going to bed so she doesn't have internet access then' (3)*

All participants stated they had their own account on Facebook, with the exception of

one who stated his wife had one, and would monitor their adolescents homepage by ‘befriending’ their adolescent.

*‘I am friends with him on it and he needed try to defriend me’ (5).*

One interviewee said she befriended her adolescent’s friends as well. She also spoke of how she used her older children to gain information and how she felt her children were unaware of this method of monitoring.

*‘I would do it through the older ones if the boys at home close up and don’t want to talk about it I ring the older two boys ... it will come back to me in such a way they won’t ever find out I know about it’. (1).*

### **Trust and Privacy**

As the adolescent grows older participants felt that they were less likely to monitor their online activities. Parents who used direct monitoring techniques positively identified that this was due to a build-up of trust.

*‘I think when they first go on it you monitor it plenty to make sure they are using it safely and wisely then you kind of ease off a bit because you know you can trust them. I know I can trust him, I learned I can trust him’ (5).*

All participants agreed that it was important to them that their adolescent trusted them. This trust was conditional though and needed to be earned. Participants felt that it was more important that they kept their children safe than give in to demands in order to maintain a good relationship.

*'I would like them to trust me ...but at the same time they have to earn my trust so if they are going to be sneaky ... I won't trust them therefore they can't trust me but I don't mind the fact that they don't trust me because I am the parent and they are the child no matter what' (1).*

*'You can't be best buddies with your daughter and look out for her best interests at the same time' (4)*

Participants spoke of how trust was important in order to ensure you were able to maintain open communication.

*'Oh very important because if he doesn't trust me he might not tell me anything' (5).*

When asked about the level of privacy participants answered similarly in that they would grant privacy when they felt the adolescent had earned it and shown that they were capable of acting responsibly.

*'She will get privacy when she deserves the privacy when I think she is not doing anything wrong when she is not putting herself in any danger she'll get privacy' (3).*

Age was also a factor, one parent highlighted that she felt that at 15 her children did not require a great deal of privacy and that unless she had all the information it would lead to more difficulties.

*'If you don't get an idea of what they are at you are going to be in big trouble because you really need to know what they are doing most of the time. I do feel that they need their own privacy but only to a small extent especially at that age' (1).*

Parent's perception of adolescent's awareness of the dangers affected whether they felt they should be granted privacy. There was a 50/50 split between the parents whether they

perceived their adolescent to have a risk awareness when it came to the use of social networking sites.

*'Yeh I spoke to her why were you messaging these people you don't even know them but they are in his kind of a bubble and it's a game nearly' (3).*

*'I think there are more dangers out there than they realise. I try to tell them that but I know nothing because they are wiser as far as they are concerned' (1).*

Participants had a sense of the ways in which their adolescents were trying to gain more privacy and independence. All of the adolescents were able to access the social networking sites through use of their phones and in their bedrooms. Parents felt that they were protective of their information being seen. With the exception of one parent the participants felt that any perceived invasion of privacy would lead to conflict.

*'I do notice he kind of tries to close it down alright if I am coming in' (2).*

*'They tell me that they are entitled to their privacy then that opens a new can of worms. You say yeh your entitled to your privacy but I need to trust you and I can't trust you and then computers get taken off them phones get taken off them and then that causes more trouble again' (1).*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The research set out to examine how parents monitored adolescent's use of social network sites and the level of conflict that resulted. After examining previous research the researcher was able to identify four types of monitoring systems: direct, indirect, restrictive and uninvolved. Previous research had shown that indirect or restrictive monitoring created higher levels of conflict. The paper found that many parents are unsure of how to monitor their adolescent's use of social network sites due to a lack of technology awareness. Of the six participants interviewed two participants used direct monitoring, one relied on indirect methods and one on restrictive practice. The final two reported to less involved in the monitoring of social network sites however one used restrictive practices in other areas of risk. Indirect and restrictive methods resulted in a higher level of conflict, a perception of secrecy and distrust on both parts, whereas direct monitoring resulted in lower levels of conflict and more trusting relationship between parent and adolescent. This result tallied with previous studies regarding parental monitoring in other areas of risk. Furthermore the findings show that parents are more aware of certain risks, such as cyber bullying than other possible risks. This shows a need for more discussion on the possible risks and for parents to be given more information of the benefits of direct monitoring and its methods.

Most participants did not stick to just one type of monitoring, however, the two interviewees that utilised mainly direct monitoring techniques were the ones that reported that they had no incidents of conflict relating to social networking sites and that in general they had very little conflict. They were also the ones who reported having a very open relationship

with their adolescent and a high degree of trust. The participants that used restrictive or indirect methods of monitoring reported more incidents of conflict, had a lower level of trust, and felt that their adolescent was secretive. It is also worth noting that one of the participants, that felt she was not as involved in her adolescent's use of social networking sites because of lack of knowledge, reported being restrictive in other areas of her son's life and that this resulted in conflict.

The findings showed that up until age fifteen most of the participants felt they could communicate well with their adolescents. Fifteen appeared to be the age where the adolescents started to look for more privacy and independence from their parents. Some parents felt that their adolescents were still too young to be given the amount of independence they sought and this then resulted in conflict. Hawk, Kijers, Hale & Meeus (2009) study *Mind your own Business* draws on this when it discusses parents assumption that they have ownership rights over adolescents information and therefore adolescents are not entitled to privacy. The participants who reported higher levels of open communication were participants who used direct monitoring methods. They engaged in open communication proactivity rather than reactively. Petronio (1994) suggests that conflict from use of direct monitoring leads to a better understanding of expectations regarding privacy. This was seen in the response from interviewee 5 who stated that her son understood why she had to monitor him and allowed her to do so when she felt the need. She, along with interviewee 6, stressed that due to their ability to openly communicate with their adolescent, conflict did not often lead to punishment. They would discuss the issue and that their adolescent would then know that 'would be the end of it'. This highlights that if this type of monitoring was applied to all families it could lead to the period being a happier one for both parent and adolescent. Those who used direct monitoring also reported learning to be able to trust their adolescent

by the time this stage came along and therefore were able to allow him some degree of trust and privacy.

The interviewee that used indirect methods of monitoring such as obtaining information through others reported a higher level of distrust and perceived there to be more secrecy. She also stated that she felt her adolescents were unaware of her methods to obtain information. According to Petronio (1994), however, adolescents are frequently more aware of this than parents assume and that this counterproductively leads to more secrecy in the relationship. The findings of this study therefore agree with Petronio.

Participants who used restrictive practices reported how their adolescents had on occasion defied the parent's instructions and carried out the restricted activity despite the parental warning. One participant who used restrictive practices informed the interviewer that her adolescent had opened up an account without her knowledge and was contacted by older men, one of which was a man in his forties who had regularly messaged her daughter. Having reviewed the messages and given her daughter's responses were innocent the interviewee felt that this had not had an effect on her daughter and she was not concerned that this may have become dangerous as she felt her daughter would have known better than to have physically met up with anyone she did not know. The profile her daughter had setup was public, making it easy for her to be contacted by strangers. The interviewee closed down her daughter's account and reported this person to Facebook. The Rideout, Foehr and Roberts study on tween disclosures on social network sites found that tweens were more likely to disclose personal information as a result of misconstruing parent's restrictive practices (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). The reaction of the interviewee's daughter was to disclose information without her mother's knowledge, which shows that the tween finding continues into older adolescents. The conflict resulting from this resulted in the adolescent having additional restrictions placed on them as the parent then removed their phone which was their

method of access to social networking sites. This was a punishment utilised at times by all of the participants who used restrictive and indirect methods of monitoring as a result of incidents of conflict.

Two of the participants reported little involvement in their adolescent's online activities, however, this stemmed from a lack of knowledge on the first participant's behalf and the other related this to the age of his adolescent, 17. Contrary to the previous research discussed, neither felt that this was because the teenager would be likely to engage in risky behaviours no matter what they did. Both were involved in monitoring other aspects of their adolescent's lives.

In Metzger, Ice and Cottrell's 2012 study *But I Trust my Teen* they found that single-parents, lower income groups and parents of multiple children had lower levels of monitoring (Metzger, Ice & Cottrell, 2012). This was not found to be the case in this study, in fact the parent who seemed to have the most open communication and direct method of monitoring, which as stated has been found to be the most effective, also had a low level of income and three children. The single parent interviewed used rigorous indirect methods of monitoring. She did state that, due to the fact she had twelve children, for her time management was an issue.

Metzger, Ice and Cottrell's study also found that the age and gender of the children was factored into the level of monitoring (Metzger, Ice & Cottrell, 2012). The parents in this study who had a mix of the two genders felt the girls were more likely to be open with them. Age was proven to be a factor for the participants of this study. Most participants felt that from 15 onwards they were less able to restrict their adolescent's activities and that their adolescents were more likely to hide information from them.

The majority of the participants felt that they were not knowledgeable enough of the social network sites, the internet and new technology. This lack of awareness could be linked to their feelings of uncertainty around how to correctly monitor online activities which would give weight to Chambers argument that ‘parents are frequently poorly informed about their children’s activities and often fail to monitor them correctly’ (Chambers, 2012, P. 88).

All participants stated that their adolescent would access the internet from mobile devices which they would use in their bedrooms. Interviewees felt that this ‘bedroom culture’ could contribute to a lack of knowledge of what their adolescents were doing.

During the introduction the paper discussed how post modernists saw mass media as creating a hyper-reality and how the internet has become a form of mass media. One of the participants described her daughter as acting as if she was in a ‘bubble’ or playing a ‘game’ when communicating online. Another participant went on to describe how her son’s behaviour changed from the norm when he was online, that being online made him feel like he was able to do or say things he would not normally do or say. She linked this to the anonymity the internet provided. For them the internet was not real-life.

The participants were more negative than positive in their comments about social networking sites. In keeping with the Allmers study regarding positive aspects of social networking sites participants acknowledged that the social networking sites had a function in how it allowed their adolescents to keep in contact with their friends (Allmer, 2014). They felt there was a pressure on adolescents to get involved in social networking sites once they started secondary school in order to be able to communicate with their friends and ‘keep up with the crowd’. Research by Crescenzi, Arauna and Tortajada (2013) discusses how the ability to access social networking sites is important to adolescents in order to share content as a way of gaining popularity - the participants responses agree with this. Only one

participant had restricted their adolescent access to Facebook until the age of 14, which is the minimum age that Facebook stipulates for all its members. All other adolescents were allowed to access Facebook at 12, once they started secondary school, meaning they would have had to give a false date of birth when opening their original accounts.

The majority of participants felt that social networking sites took away from face to face communication and observing their adolescents interactions with their peers. They had noted that, even when adolescents were with their friends, they did not communicate as much as they would have expected or thought would be normal. In fact, they said that they had seen their adolescents continue to use mediated quasi interactions, as termed by John Thompson (1995), through social networking even when they were with their friends.

As mentioned in the introduction Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke (2014) identified three areas of online risks, content, commercial and contact. The area of risk which was brought up by participants the most was bullying which falls into contact risk. There was less mention of content risk and when this came up it was in relation to the internet in general and less about social networking sites. There was no mention of any parental concerns in relation to commercial risk. This is probably why the majority of research focuses on the area of contact risk.

Parents were very aware that by allowing their adolescent access to social networking sites they were making them vulnerable to others and that these others may not behave in a way that was acceptable and this was not under their control. The Prime Time investigates report highlighted the dangers of adolescents coming in contact with individuals unknown to them and how this may open up adolescents to grooming behaviours; however, the risk of adolescents coming in contact with individuals who may try to manipulate their adolescents for sexual purposes or use their pictures for pornographic use was not brought up as a

concern during the majority of interviews. The participants main concern was cyber bullying, an issue which they said they become aware of through the media and to a lesser extent school programmes.

The school talks informed the parents of the issue but did not provide them knowledge of how to monitor the adolescent's activities. Research by Vanderhoven, Schellens and Valcke (2014) on educating teens about the risk of social networking sites showed that school programmes delivered to adolescents only provided knowledge but did not show them how to alter behaviours. The findings of this paper show the same can be said for school programmes aimed at parents. The issue of grooming behaviours on social networking sites has only been recently highlighted by Irish media. This research shows that more media coverage of this is needed in order to adequately inform parents of all the risks. This study, and previous research, highlights that parents need more information as to how to go about monitoring their adolescent's activities in a way that will promote proactive open communication as open communication rather than indirect methods of monitoring has been shown to be the best method to protect the adolescent and the parent-adolescent relationship. Future studies could look into how to deliver this information to parents in a way they could put it into practice.

Due to time constraints the researcher could only conduct a certain number of interviews if there had of been more time the study could have included a more diverse number of interviewees. It would also have been of interest to get the adolescents perspective, the interviewer could not do this at the time due to ethical concerns.

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## Appendices

### Letter of Consent

***Name of Study: 'I have a right to privacy' Parental Monitoring of Adolescents use of Social Network Sites***

My name is Michelle O'Reilly and I am conducting research that explores parental monitoring of adolescent's use of social networking sites any resulting conflict.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

**It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.**

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact

Paul Halligan at [paul.halligan@dbs.ie](mailto:paul.halligan@dbs.ie)

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questionnaire

### **Section 1: Overview of family**

Number of adults in household

Number of children in household

Age of Adolescent(s)

Gender of Adolescent(s)

Parent Gender

Parent(s) occupation

Age of Parents

### **Section 2: Parental Monitoring in Relation to Social Networking Sites**

1. What social networking sites does your son/daughter use and how do they gain access to these?
  - a. Mobile devices?
2. Can you tell me about your awareness of your son/daughters online activities?
  - a. How important is it to you that you are aware?
  - b. What are your concerns?
3. Have you ever discussed your son/daughters activities on social networking sites with them, can you tell me of a particular occasion and how this went?
  - a. To what extent do you feel that your son/daughter was honest with you in relation to their online activities?
4. Have you ever viewed the content on your son/daughters social networking sites without their knowledge?
  - a. What sort of material would you monitor for?
  - b. Do you know your son/daughters passwords?
5. Have you ever spoken to one of your son/daughters friends/others about their online activities, how did that go?

- a. Were you left more concerned or relieved?
6. Can you tell me about any restrictions, if any, that you have placed on your son/daughters online activities?
  - a. How useful do you find them?
  - b. Were these as a result of an issue or an initial conditions of use?
  - c. How do you maintain these?
7. Can you describe how much trust factors into your method of monitoring?
  - a. How important is it that your son/daughter trusts you to give them privacy?
8. What do you consider are the benefits are of monitoring?
  - a. Do you feel it reduces risky behaviours ?
9. Can you tell me if you have different concerns/tactics when monitoring your son compared to your daughter?
  - a. Is this the result of any incidents and if so can you tell me about them?

### **Section 3: Parent Reported Conflict**

10. What aspects of online activities, if any, would you feel you could allow your son/daughter to have complete control over?
11. Can you tell me about a time your teens online actives resulted in conflict?
  - a. Was this to do with type of monitoring
  - b. How often does this conflict occur
12. Can you tell me about the consequences of this conflict?
  - a. Do you feel there was an understanding reached?
13. What sorts of issues, if any, do you feel your son or daughter could discuss with you?
14. If you became aware that your teen had posted a picture of themselves you were unhappy with, how would you deal with this issue?