

How to Spy on Your Kids

Contributed by Jay Payleitner
Wednesday, 28 April 2010

Don't let your kids read this article. **DON'T LET YOUR KIDS READ THIS ARTICLE.** They don't need to know all your secrets. Now, because my five kids will eventually read the following paragraphs, I may have to deliver this concept in dad-to-dad code, but I have a good sense you're smart enough to read between the lines.

One of your primary jobs is to know everything possible about your kid. Where they are. Who they're with. Their favorite subject. Their toughest challenge. Their best friend. Their best friend who has never been to your home. Their nemesis. Their mentors. Their fears, ambitions, dreams, and core values. You need to know if you can trust them. And if they trust you. You need to have a complete mental database on who they are and what makes them tick.

Put another way, you need to know stuff about them that they don't know that you know. Why? Because you never know when this information will come in handy.

Wise Use of Your Reconnaissance Data

Some examples may help:

Let's say your son gets cut from the sophomore baseball team. It's important to know that peanut butter parfait is his favorite flavor of ice cream.

If your daughter has her heart broken by a boneheaded young man who wasn't worthy of her anyway, it's important to know that yellow roses are her favorite flower.

If one of your children gets in trouble at school or their grades begin to slip, one of the first questions to ask yourself is what recent changes have they been going through. A dad who spies on his kid may have that answer.

The reasons to know your children well extend beyond enduring negative situations. Any extra knowledge you acquire about what makes them tick can help give you hero status in their eyes.

If you overhear your son idolizing a friend's new video game controller, you have the inside track on the perfect birthday present.

If you know that your teenager is meeting up with friends at the Friday football game, you can proactively make your home a postgame destination by stoking your backyard fire pit and picking up some graham crackers, marshmallows and Hershey bars.

If a family trip takes you through Ohio, information gathered while spying on your kids will help you decide whether you should schedule a stop in Canton to see the Football Hall of Fame or Cleveland to tour the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. On the surface, you may think your son is a huge football fan. After all, he seems to enjoy his time at Cornhusker or Packer games with you. The truth may be that his first love is Coldplay or U2 or The Fray. Knowing this fact is the difference between being a typical dad and being an indisputable hero. At the very least, don't be the dad who drags his kids to the Trapshooting Hall of Fame in Vandalia or the Accounting Hall of Fame in Columbus. (Unless that's who they are and that's what fascinates them.)

Knowing your children's secret world can help you appreciate them as individuals, guide them in their area of strength, create opportunities, and keep them out of trouble. The goal is for your kids to pause occasionally and think, My dad gets it. He understands who I am. They'll never say that kind of thing out loud of course, but once you establish yourself as a trustworthy insider, you may find that your father-child connections are deeper and conversations are more meaningful. Especially as they plow deeper into those teenage years.

So, how do you spy on your kids without invading their privacy? Diaries and dresser drawers are off limits. Searching book bags and computer histories is not acceptable. Using Jack Bauer techniques to interrogate their friends is probably a bad idea. But there are things you can do.

Entering Your Child's World

Offer to drive car pools. It's surprising what you can hear and overhear when you're driving a car full of kids from house to school to practice to lessons to church to the mall and back. You don't have to initiate conversation. It's actually better if they forget you're there. Don't turn on talk radio unless it's a decoy. Once in a while, you can ask whoever is riding

shotgun to find a good station. But for the most part, just sit back, sneak an occasional peek in the rearview mirror, and get a glimpse of a little slice of their life.

Network with other parents. We have a saying in our house. "Our spies are everywhere." It sounds like a joke, but it's not. We know hundreds of parents and they know our kids. Sure, sometimes it seems like our kids are overscheduled and involved in way too many group activities, but all those kids in all those events have parents. Those parents are an extra set of eyes and ears. I'm not saying that "it takes a village to raise a child." Raising our children is a job for which my wife, Rita, and I take full responsibility, but it's still a blessing to have other parents in the neighborhood, on the sidelines, in the auditorium and just living life in our hometown who care about my kids. Having my kids on the radar screen of other parents is not intimidating. Just the opposite. It's a comfort for Rita and me – and our kids.

Be tech savvy. Whether it's MySpace, Facebook or the latest variation of social interactive websites, you need to set yourself up with primary or second-generation access. You don't have to have multiple accounts yourself, but stay connected with parents and other individuals who are in the know and in the loop. Expect that sometime, someplace your teenager is going to be at a gathering where something dangerous or illegal is going down. The good news (and the bad news) is that there's a tattletale in every crowd and the dirt will show up on Facebook. Don't overreact. Don't accuse. Your child may be totally innocent, but because it's public knowledge, you have the right and responsibility to get the facts.

Stand in the middle of their bedroom. When the house is empty, walk in to their room and just observe. Don't rifle through their things. Maybe don't even touch anything at all. But do make note of the environment they have created intentionally or quite by accident. Do a 180° turn. Imagine what their life is like. Remember your fears and fantasies when you were their age. Get in their heads. Yes, you can pull a book off a shelf or pick up a CD. It's permissible to read any poster, catalog or paper that's in plain sight, but not much more than that. Spend two minutes once a month in their world, and then leave without a trace.

Absorb what they absorb. Read some of the stuff they read. Watch some of the stuff they watch. Listen to some of the stuff they listen to. Play some of the games they play. You may fall asleep at the formulaic animated features. You may roll your eyes at the simplistic teen-angst comedies. You may be disturbed at suggestive music lyrics or the graphic nature of some popular movies or television shows. You may get angry at some of the worldview opinions expressed in the stuff they read. As you immerse yourself in their culture, you'll know more about your kids. A word of caution here: don't automatically assume your kids endorse or mimic everything they watch, read or hear. As they sample culture, like you, they're going to consider, judge, accept and/or reject what's offered.

Trusting Dad

To any young people reading this – including my own kids – please understand this spying business is a good thing. Every dad I know wants to do his very best to protect and provide for his children. This is part of that. If and when we go too far, please let us know. Truly, we only want what's best for you.

Finally, if your spying turns up evidence that your son or daughter is endangering their life, then all ironclad rules of privacy and normal parental protocol are off. Your child's survival is more important than their "trust." As a matter of fact, if they're hitting bottom and making life-threatening decisions, they "trust" you to intervene. Also, because you're part of the parenting network, other families are counting on you to do the same for them.

Jay K. Payleitner is author of the book *52 Things Kids Need from their Dad* (Harvest House Publishers, 2010), from which this article was adapted. He also writes the National Center's featured blog, *Fathers 52*. Jay is also a marketing consultant, speaker, and fathering advocate, and helps produce Carey Casey's *Today's Father* radio program. Jay and his wife Rita have five children and live in Illinois.

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