

A guide to Parental Control Apps

In the 'real world', we can be there to physically hold our children's hands and look out for - and protect from - possible danger. On devices and online, most children and particularly young people are in the online world without supervision and without an adult who may spot dangers they can't see or recognise.

A parental control app, or parent app, may seem like the obvious answer – simply download an app, set it up and you're good to go...but is it that easy? Or are there pitfalls to avoid?

It's important to remember that parental control apps or content filters are not 100% effective or foolproof.

The Risks

You may be gaining a sense of security, but you risk losing the trust of your child.

By covertly installing a parent app, there's a risk that, if discovered, any sense of trust in the relationship will be destroyed. The potential consequences of that could far outweigh the benefits any parent app can provide. A parent app is a preventative measure - it can't replace the benefits of having a trusted adult to talk to if something does go wrong and a child or young person is upset. Nor can it give them a supportive hug or signpost to further help.

You may be missing out on an opportunity to teach about digital resilience.

In today's digital world, children and young people need to be armed with the knowledge of digital resilience. Teaching a child that certain apps and platforms are for grown-ups only, monitoring their digital device use and educating them on how to talk to a trusted adult about something that upsets them is giving them some of the tools they'll need if you're introducing them to the online world.

Using Parent Apps with Permission

Not every parent app works 'in secret'. Some software will be conspicuous by design or installed with the child or young person's knowledge and permission.

Young people can be secretive, as they go through the natural teenage stages of growing up, exploring who they are and craving independence. They are also often more 'tech-savvy' than their parents, as many now use tech from a young age. With a quick search online, it's easy to find videos and websites with workarounds for most of the popular parent apps.

All of this means that, should a young person want to find a way around having their parent or carer viewing their online activity, it's important to remember that 'where there's a will, there's a way!'.

Security and Data Breaches

It's easy – and logical - to think that an app that pertains to protect children online can be trusted to do just that, but all companies are fallible and some of the most popular parent control apps have been exposed to data breaches, with users' data ending up online.

The online world is fast moving, and circumstances change, and new factors come into play all the time, like new platforms being launched, children finding workarounds and breaches in security.

What are the Benefits?

Each app is different and will offer different features, but most are likely to offer some or all of the following:

- Monitor search history
- Block websites or apps
- Alert parents to a child's physical location
- Tell parents who children are talking to online
- Schedule designated screen time
- View call logs and what numbers a child may be contacting / contacted by
- View text and / or audio messages
- An SOS feature that lets children contact trusted adults

Top Tips

There's no shortcut to safeguarding! If you do choose to use monitoring software, it should be in conjunction with a range of other safeguarding measures.

Choose wisely. If you want to use a parental control app, make sure you've done your research first. Read reviews, search online for any news about the app and check what's been done with the data collected.

DIY - Do It Yourself! You may be able to do some of the features offered by parent apps yourself, such as adding safe search filters, adjusting parental controls and safety settings.

Talk and trust are two of the best tools. Don't underestimate how much 'parental control' you can gain just by having open, honest, non-judgemental conversations with a child or young person!

