**CHILD-TRACKING APPS ARE GROWING**

Elaine was anxious to hear whether her son had safely gotten back to his dorm in Texas, after a recent visit home. But rather than waiting for him to call or text, the Baltimore, US-based mum was carrying on with her day, and awaiting a reassuring ding from her phone.

That’s because, like 32 million people around the world, Elaine and her whole family have the app ‘Life’ installed on their phones. The app keeps constant tabs on the whereabouts of her three children, letting her know when they’re on the move, when they’re safely home, and a whole host of other data. [...]

Family-tracking apps have exploded in popularity over the past decade or so. A parent’s natural instinct to protect their children is a component of growth, of course – but these apps keep booming as many parents feel the world – both off and online – is inherently and increasingly dangerous. Yet experts say parents wanting to use them should think very hard about how they’’ll do so. Apps are becoming ever more sophisticated in the data they're gathering, raising questions about personal security. [...]

Ms Bombusa, who advises parents on internet safety, says the choice of tracking options “depends on your type of parenting”. At the basic end, they include features such as geofencing, so an alert is sent when a phone leaves or enters a certain area. For parents with teen drivers, there’s also speed monitoring and crash detection. [...] On the more extreme end of the market, some apps allow a parent to remotely activate the microphone on their child’s phone and even record audio which means the child will “never find out that their parents are tracking them”. [...]

And these apps are big business. ‘Life’ alone has been valued at over $1bn, and operates in more than 140 countries. [...]

But Sonia Livingstone, a professor at the London School of Economics, believes there is in fact “zero evidence that any of these apps keep children safer”. As an expert in children’s digital rights and safety, Livingstone feels the extensive adoption of tracking apps is an understandable response to constant headlines about the “terrible dangers to our children”. [...]

App makers and advertisers may be keen to make parents believe getting an app is an act of parental love, she says, but "the most important thing for development is that the child learns to trust the parent and the parents the child”. Relying on an app to find out where a child is or what they are looking at online, particularly without their knowledge, can seriously undermine that trust. As well as the right to be safe, children do also have a right to privacy, particularly as they get older, says Livingstone. [...]

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