Parental supervision: the views and experiences of young people and their parents

The Government has shown an increasing interest in how parents monitor and supervise their children. The introduction of Parenting Orders is evidence of a drive to get parents to know where their children are, what they are doing and whom they are with. It is also an issue that has received much media attention. However, little is known about how ‘ordinary’ families (i.e. those with no links to statutory services) negotiate monitoring and supervision. This study, by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA), explored the context for such policy initiatives and debates, by looking at how monitoring and supervision was experienced by 50 families with children aged 11 to 16, from a range of backgrounds. The research found that:

- Parents described knowing where your children are, what they are doing and who they are with as a key part of parental care, love and protection.
- Parents used various strategies and techniques to monitor and supervise their children, such as asking for information, checking and tracking, setting boundaries, and encouraging open communication.
- Parents considered the local neighbourhood (including their perceptions of how risk), the young person’s age and gender, and his or her personality in deciding how they went about monitoring and supervising their child.
- Most parents not only monitored their child’s physical whereabouts, but also checked their child’s emotional well-being and adjustment. This emotional monitoring was particularly evident during key life events or changes.
- Young people who felt able to talk openly with their parents disclosed information about their activities without being asked.
- Mothers were more involved than fathers in day-to-day monitoring and supervision. Mothers often described this responsibility as time-consuming and stressful.
- Other significant people (such as family members, family friends and neighbours) and organisations (such as schools) were also involved in the monitoring process.
- Technology was seen as useful, but also a potential threat. Young people commonly owned a mobile phone, and parents and young people relied on these to contact each other when necessary. However, parents were particularly concerned to monitor their child’s use of the Internet as this was considered an area of particular risk.
How do parents and young people view monitoring and supervision?

Parents and young people understood monitoring and supervision to involve parents knowing their child’s whereabouts and activities. They described it as a key part of parental care, love, guidance and protection. The purpose of monitoring and supervision was seen as keeping young people safe, out of trouble, and preparing them for independent lives as adults. As this mother explained it:

“... you start with this little baby that you’ve got to care for and gradually you’ve got to be able to release it into the world safely, but you hope that the influences that you have had on that child have prepared it to be sensible in the outside world.” (Mother of 14-year-old girl)

Young people were in general very aware of how their parents monitored and supervised them and, even where they disagreed with this, they understood that their parents were mainly trying to keep them safe.

Parents and young people saw monitoring and supervision as including not only the physical whereabouts of young people, but also their emotional well-being. This involved parents and significant others being alert to changes in the young person’s mood or behaviour. This was heightened during difficult times such as parental divorce or separation or the young person being bullied at school. For example:

“Her granddad died ... I encouraged her to go and see [the counsellor]... I was sort of aware of her behaviour for a few weeks after that.” (Mother of 14-year-old girl)

Parents also sometimes asked their child for information about their activities and whereabouts, and young people sometimes provided information voluntarily. For example:

“It’s a bit of both really because sometimes he will say ‘is it alright if I go to the park?’ and I say ‘well, which park are you going to? Who are you going with?’... it depends.” (Mother of 12-year-old boy)

The quality of parent-child communication was closely related to parental knowledge of their child’s whereabouts and activities. For example, where young people said they felt able to talk to their parents, they were more likely to tell them about their whereabouts and activities voluntarily, and less likely to withhold information from them or lie. As this parent explained it:

“I have noticed that a lot of people monitor their children but don’t actually communicate with them ... a child can be monitored and learn nothing from it. You have to impart some kind of knowledge onto your children otherwise they don’t learn right from wrong ... you can’t monitor your child properly unless you actually have a conversation and teach your child how important it is, how they should behave and shouldn’t behave and to be a good example to them yourself.” (Mother of 13-year-old girl)

Many young people said that if they felt trusted and respected by their parents, they wouldn’t betray that trust. This was because they would feel guilty, or know that their parents would be disappointed in them:

“... they’ll just give you that look, that says we’re really disappointed in you and then that makes you feel guilty...” (12-year-old girl)

Young people, therefore, were aware of the impact their relationships with their parents had on their behaviour, and knew what their parents would consider as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour.

The role of technology

New technology was also found to have a significant impact on the way parents monitored and supervised young people. First, it was very common for the young people to have a mobile phone, to enable parent-child contact at any time. Parents used mobile phones to check young people were safe; young people used them to inform their parents of any changes in plans, or if they were in difficulty. For example:

“... like if someone was bullying me, I can phone them and explain to them that I’m in trouble and so they can come and get me or something.” (13-year-old boy)
Second, parents were particularly concerned about the risks to young people of using the Internet, particularly in relation to the use of chat rooms. This was an area that most parents tried to regulate very closely, with some trying to prevent their child from accessing the Internet at all:

“No I won’t allow her to have the Internet … It’s not that I don’t trust [her], I don’t trust other people who use it … you read more and more about it. I’m just not taking that risk.” (Mother of 12-year-old girl)

Family responsibilities and the wider support network

Mothers in this study bore most of the responsibility for monitoring and supervision, regardless of whether the family had one or two parents. This was mostly due to mothers being in the home more, and fathers working longer hours. Many mothers found this responsibility very time-consuming and stressful. Many young people also felt that they could talk with their mothers better than with their fathers about their day-to-day lives, and would therefore tell their mothers their whereabouts and activities more than their fathers.

Few families, however, said that they monitored and supervised their child alone without any help from support networks. Other significant people, such as family members and parents’ friends, were all involved to varying degrees, and the parents tended to see themselves as part of a ‘network’ of parents that monitored and protected young people:

“I think [child’s friend’s] mum does monitor and supervise when they’re around in that area and when their children are round here we do the same … I think parents do if they know each other … we just know that we, sort of, monitor each other’s children, it just goes without saying really, it’s just a natural thing.” (Father of 12-year-old boy)

Schools were also involved in the monitoring process. This particularly applied to attendance at school, and parents relied on immediate contact by the school if their child was not at school. In addition, community and activity group leaders were seen as responsible for monitoring young people whilst in their care.

Factors influencing monitoring and supervision

Parents described the local neighbourhood, age, gender and personality of the young person as particularly influential on their arrangements for monitoring and supervision.

Neighbourhood

Parents and young people were very aware of their local environment, and how this affected the process of negotiating monitoring and supervision. It was common for parents to feel that young people today were at much greater risk than they were, when they were growing up. For example:

“I think when I was a child I had a lot more freedom, and I don’t think we needed to be monitored as much as they need to be now … I don’t think my mum had to monitor me, or was aware of the process, as you have to be now.” (Mother of 11-year-old boy)

Parental concerns about their local neighbourhood were considered to increase the level of parental monitoring and decrease the young person’s freedom to go out of the family home without their parents.

Age

The young person’s age was seen by most parents as being a key factor in the monitoring and supervision process:

“Age makes an incredible difference, certainly to what you have to monitor … at eleven it’s about roads and traffic and things like that … it’s changed from that to being lured away by men … then it moves into all these other things … the sex, you get the drugs, you get the alcohol, and you get the relationships … and then of course, you know, like this year the school work would be high, very high.” (Mother of 15-year-old girl)

Parents and young people described a number of changes in monitoring and supervision as young people grew older. These included: going further away from the family home unsupervised; staying out later at night and going to bed later; having more trust, responsibility, privacy and freedom; and being more involved in joint decision-making and negotiations.

Gender

Most parents in the study said that they did monitor sons and daughters differently. As this parent said:

“I do think you worry about girls more when they go out, that’s why I try and talk to her about things. You worry about them more.” (Mother of 14-year-old girl)

Young people also recognised this, with many young women believing that their parents monitored them more closely than young men, as they were more likely to be attacked or abducted. Some young people questioned this, however:
“Girls are always portrayed as being the weak people that have to be kept an eye on more ... we are going to be the ones that get abused in the streets ... from complete random strangers, that we are more at risk. But boys get into fights and things.” (15-year-old girl)

**Personality of the child**
Parents reported ‘tailoring’ monitoring and supervision arrangements to suit each child’s personality and maturity. Some parents considered their child to be ‘mature’ for their age, others ‘immature’ for their age, and parents took this into consideration. Also, some young people were seen as more open and more honest, others as more vulnerable to getting involved in risk-taking. As these parents said:

“... you can put two 13-year-olds together and they’re totally different.” (Mother of 13-year-old girl)

“I don’t think it’s age, I think it’s mentality, I think you judge by the child, not by the age.” (Mother of 13-year-old girl)

Parents therefore described how important it was to understand each child’s personality, and tailor monitoring arrangements to this.

**Conclusions**
This research has shown that parents generally take monitoring and supervision seriously and consider it to be an important part of their care and protection for their children. It is a complex process that involves parents, young people and the wider support network, and is dependent on the quality of the parent-child relationship. Parents have to think about what is appropriate for their child, and have adapted to incorporate changes in society (such as an increasing use of technology and their perceptions of increased risk), into their day-to-day monitoring and supervision practices. They also undertake emotional monitoring, which acts as an ‘early warning system’ in relation to children’s well-being. Also, mothers were more actively involved in monitoring and supervision, and often found this time-consuming and stressful, even where others, such as family and friends, were involved. This finding may also, of course, apply to fathers or other carers who are more actively engaged in day-to-day monitoring. This suggests that it is an area of parenting where further support, advice or assistance may be warranted.

The researchers conclude that these findings have clear implications for various government initiatives, such as Parenting Orders in the youth justice and education fields. The research could be widely used by practitioners to support group-based parenting courses, and in individual work.

**About the project**
The research was undertaken by Dr Stephanie Stace and Dr Debi Roker of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. The study was based on interviews conducted with 50 young people aged 11 to 16 and with one or both of their parents. The participants also completed a seven-day diary. The families were recruited from schools, youth and parenting organisations in the South East of England and the West Midlands, and were diverse in terms of socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity and family structure. The authors are currently developing materials from this research, to provide information and support to practitioners and parents.

**For further information**
The full report, Monitoring and supervision in ‘ordinary’ families: The views and experiences of young people aged 11 to 16 and their parents by Stephanie Stace and Debi Roker, is published for the Foundation by the National Children’s Bureau as part of the Parenting in Practice series (ISBN 1 904787 42 8, price £13.95 or £11.25 for NCB members, plus £3 p&p for orders under £28).