

Family Spies

In recent years, location tracking services and apps have become popular among smartphone users. Friends can use Snapchat maps or Find My Friends to do precisely that—find their friends. A number of apps market themselves specifically as family locator apps: Life360, Swarm, Glympse, and others. These apps are used most often by parents to keep track of their children.

Sasha's family of four is set up on one of these family tracking apps. Her mom, who pays the family's phone bill, is its most dedicated user. She loves to stay updated on where her two daughters are and frequently checks the app to see what they're up to. She claims she's not using it to supervise her daughters' every move, but instead to simply assure herself that they are safe and well.

Sasha has never really had a problem with her family using the app. She rarely goes on it and doesn't care much whether her mom knows where she is. In other words, she doesn't think she has anything to hide. Sometimes Sasha's mom will text her if Sasha goes somewhere unexpected, but that just feels like sweet motherly concern.

On the other hand, Sasha's little sister Jules *hates* the app and feels like it is overbearing and invasive. Perhaps because she is the younger sister, she gets more attention from their mother on the app. But from her perspective, she is beginning to feel like she has no privacy. If she stays late over at her friend's dorm—something she feels is a normal thing to do in college—her mom will text her about it and ask what she's doing. Jules feels that she comes under scrutiny for no good reason—she's doing well in her classes, and most of the time when her mom checks in on her she is studying or watching TV with her friends.

Sasha has always listened to Jules' complaints and has recently been fielding concern from their mother, too. Their mother will text Sasha asking whether she should be concerned about where Jules is and whether she should bring up her concern about how late she is out at her friend's dorm, for example. Sasha feels increasingly unsure about the app and is starting to question whether it is a good idea for their family.

On one hand, the app isn't really harming anyone. Sasha knows that Jules isn't doing anything irresponsible, so she doesn't understand why it should be a big deal if their mother knows what she is up to. From Sasha's perspective, Jules is being too sensitive and defensive, which makes it look like she has something to hide. At the same time, Sasha understands that it would be tiresome to put up with the constant monitoring and questioning, however well intentioned. She also understands why, to Jules, it can sometimes feel like their mother doesn't trust her or doesn't see her as a responsible adult. Yet still, Sasha also empathizes with their mother, who derives a lot of comfort from being able to check in and see that her children are in a safe place. Moreover, given that their mother is the one paying for the phone bill, having this app seems like a reasonable concession for her to request.

Given all of this, Sasha is torn between sticking up for her mom or for Jules. She is also convinced that there are probably a lot of other families going through very similar arguments—in the end, these apps might just cause more problems than they solve.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is personal privacy important? To what extent, if any, is privacy still important even when someone doesn't think that they have anything to hide?
2. What, if anything, is good or valuable about family (or friend) locator apps?
3. To what extent, if any, do family (or friend) locator apps conflict with their users' privacy? If it depends, what does it depend on?

