



Tethered By The Electronic Umbilicus

Recent advances in cell phone technology and marketing are helping parents maintain an electronic umbilical cord. New cell phones are equipped with a host of services that enable children as young as six or eight to carry the device with programmed communication capability for reaching just their parents or any other recipient as programmed by the parent. Further, with other cell phones equipped with GPS (Global Positioning System), parents are now able to track the location of their teenaged son or daughter, in real time within a few meters of accuracy. However, as parents use technology to keep their kids closer, fact is, the kids may be slipping further away.

Cell phone technology may provide a false sense of security. While a young child may be able to communicate more easily, no amount of technology can compensate for judgment. Kids may still place themselves at risk and communication devices provide a means for assistance only after the child may have fallen prey to harm. As such, parents are still well advised to have meaningful discussions with their children with regard to where they are going, when they will return and who will provide for their supervision. It is the pre-planning that can mitigate the risk of harm in the first place. Further, no number of electronic devices can ever replace feeling connected to your child as through the relationship itself and relationships can only be developed on the basis of actual time spent in each other's company.

As for teenagers, this is notably the time when children are seeking to differentiate themselves from their parents and forge their own identity. An electronic umbilical cord simply is not "kewl" and smacks of trust and control issues. The collective moan in the background is the sound of all youths cringing at the thought of their parents so keeping tabs on them. Give a kid a cell phone with built-in GPS and you may increase the likelihood of the device floating in the river or being mysteriously lost time and time again. Youths are well adept at outsmarting their parents when it comes time to increasing their independence. It may well be that

your youth will strike a deal with a friend to keep the device at their home whilst actually out for a night on the town. Can't seem to raise your kid when you call. Umm sorry, I guess the music was too loud.

If you are determined to deploy a cell phone with GPS technology, best to approach it from the point of view of mutual safety and concern. And as always, what's good for the goose is good for the gander. As important as it is to know where your kids are, it may prove even more important for them to know how to raise you. Hence this sword cuts both ways. Want your kid to carry the GPS, then you might as well too. As a role model you are demonstrating that the issue really is one of safety and concern, versus trust and control.

As media news highlights child abductions, young driver car crashes, youthful misadventure leading to injury and death, parents are more frightened for their kids well-being. Further, as more families rely on dual incomes and more single parents are required to work, children are left unattended in greater numbers. We used to talk of "latch key kids" in these circumstances. Now it's being *tethered by the electronic umbilicus*. Either way, there is precious little that can ever compensate for time spent directly with the kids. Through time spent directly with the kids, we transfer our own value base, improve their sense of worth and know firsthand of their safety.

Relationship first, devices second.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.