

Peek season

Worried parents are increasingly turning to surveillance software to monitor their children's online activities, writes Elaine Yau

Sales manager Eric Wong Yiu-wai began to monitor the online activities of his younger son two years ago. The software he installed on his computer tracks the website his son visits, instant messaging between him and his buddies, and the updates he posts on social networks. His phone will get instant alerts if his son uses offensive language in his posts or visits an unsavoury website. Wong says many online parents make electronic surveillance of his 15-year-old son necessary.

"It spends a lot of time online every day. As I am working most of the time, I don't know what he is doing on the computer."

Wong's worries are shared by a rising number of parents who feel helpless in the digital age where online scams, data theft and breaches of personal privacy happen every day.

Internet security companies say they have seen an increase in parents buying filtering software and electronic surveillance tools to ensure better online protection for their children.

The plethora of online risks was exposed in a survey conducted by Microsoft and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service last year. A total of 823 people aged 12 to 23 were polled. It found that an average user spent 20.3 hours online per



week, with 32 per cent of them saying they suffered from invasion of privacy where their private correspondence and pictures were made public. Eleven per cent said they are victims of cyberbullying and 70 per cent said pornography was easily accessible on the web.

Internet security firm Symantec launched Norton Online Family, a free software that allows parents to track the online activities of children, worldwide last year.

"Parental online monitoring should start early as older children are likely to resist control and restraint," she says. "Some parents just give their children a smartphone and take relief in the fact that their kids won't bother them any more. This is dangerous. Our Norton Online Family Report 2011, which interviewed 2,956 parents and 4,553 children aged eight to 17 globally, showed that 24 per cent of children sleep online for music and video games with parents' credit cards without their knowledge. Nearly 20 per cent of 200-Hong Kong children polled say they have experienced a negative situation as their mobiles, including bullying and the receipt of unsavoury SMSs."

Given the situation, Symantec launched Norton Online Family, a free software that allows parents to track the online activities of children, worldwide last year.

A paper trail of all online activities by children can be revealed with the software. Parents can get detailed reports on the time and frequency of children logging on to social networks, full contents of instant message conversations they have with friends, and the words they input into search engines and the sites they lead to.

A mobile application of the software has recently been launched for iPhones and Android mobile phones.

Sam Lee Lik-hang, general China director of F-Secure, says his internet security firm launched an updated software package called Mobile Security 7.5 last month, aimed at parents who want to ensure a safe web experience for their children. The latest version, costing HK\$295, offers filtering, apps control and a location feature that can show the whereabouts of users. Lee says the software is useful for tablets and smartphones that do not have embedded parent-control features like in Apple or Microsoft-powered computers.

"We have seen a fourfold increase in parent clientele since the software was launched," he says. "Young people can get a tablet and smartphone easily now. An abundance of dubious apps like those for gambling and spammy novels are free for downloading by Android users. Those apps greatly alarm parents."

In addition to installing monitoring software, Ho says parents should discuss with children the establishment of house rules as computer use.

"The rules can be about how much time children can spend

Ally Cheng has been friends with her 12-year-old daughter, Albert Lai, on Facebook for two years. She says the site hasn't had any communication with her daughter.

online each day and what sites are off-limits to them. I have a mutual agreement with my seven-year-old twins on what sites they can visit. They understand that I will get alerts on my office computer if they break the rules."

Yu Kwok-kin, the training director of Spiritual Strengthening Centre, which provides communication courses, is a father of three children aged eight to 13. He says he has set a lot of house rules with the agreement of his children.

"We agreed that the computer is placed in the drawing room where parental exposure can minimize inappropriate activities and excessive computer use," he says.

"They can use the computer for entertainment for only 30 minutes a day. A timer is placed next to it. The children will stop using it on their own accord once the time is up. Violent games are forbidden. All three of my children have Facebook accounts. I know their passwords. They don't have any problems with us accessing their accounts. The rules have been observed since they were very young and they have grown accustomed to them."

While parental electronic surveillance can reduce the risks children are exposed to on the web, youth workers and educators promoting parental digital literacy say excessive surveillance can provide hostility from

Yu Kwok-kin has a list of house rules on Internet usage with the agreement of his children Augustine, 13, Clark, 12, and Jiah, eight. Photo: K. T. Cheng

