

EVERYDAY DIGITAL ETHICS · SEMINAR 01

CASE PHILOSOPHY SEMINAR

Should Your Parents Be Allowed to Track You?

Safety, privacy, trust, and the ethics of growing up

PUBLIC-FACING QUESTION

If tracking keeps you safe, can it still make you less free?

Parents can now know where a teenager is almost every minute. Safety may improve - but growing up may also require spaces in which a young person is not continuously watched.

In one sentence A case-driven seminar on parental responsibility, adolescent autonomy, privacy, consent, and paternalism. Participants do not need prior philosophy or knowledge of any country's law.		
Preparation	Live session	Entry level
30-40 minutes	About 55 minutes	No prior philosophy

Format

Read the case, then four guided materials. Public-domain and licensed sources use body passages that do substantive argumentative or interpretive work; restricted sources are summarized.

- Cross-cultural
- Teen-relevant
- Four guided readings
- No sensitive politics required

01 Core case and three questions

Case: Maya's location is always visible

Maya is 16. Her parents require her to keep live location sharing on whenever she leaves home. They say it is for emergencies and promise not to check unless something seems wrong.

One evening Maya says she is studying at a friend's house. Her parents open the app and notice that she spent twenty minutes at another address first. When they ask about it, Maya says a friend needed to talk privately and that nothing unsafe happened. She is angry that a safety tool has become a way to question ordinary movements.

Her parents reply that they did not forbid her from going anywhere: they only looked. They also say that until she is an adult, they are responsible if something goes badly wrong. Maya answers that learning to be responsible requires being trusted before she turns 18, not suddenly afterward.

Questions everyone answers

01	Does a 16-year-old have a right to privacy from their parents? What facts make that right stronger or weaker?
02	Can constant tracking be justified by safety while still undermining the autonomy and responsibility parents want a teenager to develop?
03	Does consent solve the problem if the teenager can technically say no, but the parents can impose consequences for refusing?

privacy and status -> protection and paternalism -> consent, trust, and developing autonomy

Opening poll: Always acceptable · Acceptable only with the teenager's agreement · Acceptable only under heightened risk · Generally not acceptable

PRIMARY
MATERIAL

1/4

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

Chapter I, with a short connection to Chapter III · classic text on liberty and interference

Mill gives us both sides of Maya's problem. He offers one of the strongest defenses of individual self-direction, but he also explicitly limits that defense to people whose capacities are mature. Adolescence therefore sits exactly where his simple rule becomes difficult.

The argument to understand

Mill's mature-agent rule is strongly anti-paternalist: a person's own good is not enough to justify coercion. But he immediately withholds the full rule from children and young people who still require care. Chapter III then introduces the counter-pressure: individuality, judgment, and character are developed through actual exercises of choice and through 'experiments of living.' Mill does not literally say that children must be allowed to make mistakes; the relevant claim is that capacities of self-government are strengthened by being used. For parental tracking, the tension is therefore developmental: protection may be justified now, yet overprotection may also reduce the practice through which later autonomy becomes possible.

VERBATIM SELECTED READING · CHAPTERS I & III

Five complete selected passages from the public-domain Project Gutenberg edition. Page-break markers are omitted; wording is otherwise reproduced as text.

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself.

Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth, as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character.

Thirdly, though the customs be both good as customs, and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom, merely as custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person's own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but is likely to be weakened by his adopting it: and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others, are not concerned), it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being? It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.

Read for the tension, not a verdict. Passage 1 limits Mill's liberty doctrine by maturity; Passages 2-5 explain why self-direction matters to development. Ask whether constant tracking protects the conditions for future autonomy or crowds them out.

Seminar hinge: How much real room for choice must a teenager have in order to become the kind of mature agent to whom Mill thinks the liberty principle fully applies?

Rights / use: *On Liberty* (1859) is listed by Project Gutenberg as public domain in the United States. Source edition: Project Gutenberg eBook #34901. These passages are reproduced verbatim for non-commercial educational discussion. Public-domain status is territorial; check local law outside the U.S. Project Gutenberg branding and edition files remain subject to its terms of use.

Project Gutenberg #34901 · [HTML full text](#)

PRIMARY
MATERIAL

2/4

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Paternalism”

Gerald Dworkin · conceptual reference · summary only

The SEP entry is useful because it turns a vague accusation - “that is paternalistic” - into several distinct questions. Not every protective intervention has the same structure or needs the same justification.

The argument to understand

The entry characterizes paternalism as interference with another person, against that person's will, defended or motivated by a claim that the person will be better off or protected from harm. It then distinguishes several forms. **Soft paternalism** permits interference when it is needed to determine whether a person's choice is genuinely voluntary and informed; **hard paternalism** can permit intervention even against a voluntary, informed choice. **Weak paternalism** questions the means a person chooses to reach their own ends when those means may defeat those ends; **strong paternalism** can challenge the ends themselves.

These distinctions matter for Maya because 'safety' is not yet a complete argument. Is tracking only a temporary way to check whether she is acting with adequate information? Is it a standing power to override a competent choice because her parents think the choice is bad for her? Or is it not paternalism at all because parental responsibility creates a different relationship from ordinary adult-to-adult interference? The SEP also notes that paternalism becomes especially difficult when we ask how to treat people who are less than fully rational - exactly the developmental issue raised by adolescence.

NO VERBATIM EXCERPT REPRODUCED

This page is a BoMinds summary. The SEP entry is copyrighted, so participants should use the link below for the original wording.

Reading tip: focus on Sections 1-2.3: the basic definition, hard vs. soft paternalism, and weak vs. strong paternalism. Do not try to memorize the taxonomy; use it to classify the parents' reason for tracking.

Three classifications to test

- Emergency-only tracking
- Routine tracking despite informed refusal
- Tracking imposed because parents distrust Maya's goals, not just her means

Question to carry forward

If a short-term restriction is meant to protect a person's future autonomy, when does that explanation become self-defeating?

Rights / use: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entries are copyrighted. No SEP passage is reproduced; this page is an original summary for discussion preparation.

SEP: Paternalism

PRIMARY
MATERIAL

3/4

Jessica Nihlén Fahlquist, “Responsibility and Privacy - Ethical Aspects of Using GPS to Track Children”

Children & Society 29(1), 38-47 (2015) · DOI 10.1111/chso.12016 · summary only

This paper places the tracking dilemma directly inside parenting. Its key contribution is to show that “responsible parenting” cannot be reduced to maximizing information about where a child is.

The argument to understand

Fahlquist starts from the attraction of GPS: a parent can know where a child is around the clock, potentially increasing safety and reassurance. She then organizes the ethical problem around three questions. First, what does parental responsibility require in a world where constant monitoring is technically possible? Second, what might continuous surveillance do to a child's own development of responsibility? Third, do children have a meaningful claim to privacy even while adults remain responsible for their welfare?

The paper's conclusion is cautious rather than absolutist. It argues, against the background of psychological research discussed in the article, that constant monitoring is not conducive to a child's sense of responsibility. It also treats children's privacy as a genuine ethical consideration rather than something that disappears because the person is a minor. Because the long-term effects of ubiquitous monitoring are uncertain, Fahlquist recommends caution in using GPS tracking. For Maya's case, this moves the question from *Does tracking reduce risk today?* to *What kind of person and relationship does a monitoring practice help create over time?*

NO VERBATIM EXCERPT REPRODUCED

The publisher page does not display an open reproduction license for the article, so this guide summarizes the argument instead of copying the paper.

Read the abstract first. Then, if you have institutional access, look especially for the sections on parental responsibility, development of responsibility, and children's privacy. Those three strands map directly onto Maya's parents, Maya's growth, and Maya's claim to private space.

What the paper adds

- Safety is one value among several, not the whole of parental responsibility.
- Monitoring can change developmental conditions, not just reveal information.
- Privacy can matter before full adulthood.

Hardest challenge

Even if constant monitoring carries developmental costs, how much present danger would be enough to outweigh those costs?

Rights / use: No open reproduction license was verified on the publisher version used for this guide. Summary only; no article passage is reproduced.

DOI 10.1111/chso.12016 · Wiley abstract

PRIMARY
MATERIAL

4/4 A

Boele, Bülow & Keijzers: What tracking looks like in practice

Journal of Adolescence (2026) · Discussion §§4-4.1 · DOI 10.1002/jad.70229 · CC BY 4.0

The selected reading comes from the paper's **Discussion**, where the authors interpret the results and connect them to autonomy, acceptance, and parental motives. The abstract is useful orientation, but it is not the assigned primary-source reading.

VERBATIM ARGUMENT-BEARING SELECTION · DISCUSSION

Two complete discussion paragraphs. Publisher line-breaks and soft hyphens have been normalized; wording is otherwise unchanged.

Findings show that, in 2024, nearly all parents (99.6%) engaged in digital tracking, though frequency varied across parents and domains. Most adolescents accepted digital tracking, particularly school performance and financial activities, while location tracking was viewed more critically. Parental (not adolescent) characteristics were associated with tracking frequency, including overprotection, intolerance of uncertainty, and perceiving the world as dangerous. These findings suggest that frequent digital tracking may reflect parents' own anxiety and concerns, rather than issues in adolescent maladjustment.

To understand the potential risks of digital tracking, it is essential to consider how adolescents perceive its use (Darling et al. 2008; Smetana 2024). In our sample of 525 adolescents aged 11 to 18 years, the majority found it an acceptable parenting practice. Location tracking was the least accepted, however, suggesting that parents may more frequently track domains that adolescents find more acceptable. Additionally, many adolescents seemed aware that they were being tracked, and many even thought their parents engaged in tracking more frequently than their parents indicated. Hence, the present findings suggest that many adolescents are aware of and seem to accept this modern form of passive parental monitoring.

Why these paragraphs matter. They complicate both easy positions. Widespread adolescent acceptance makes "tracking is obviously experienced as an invasion" too quick; but prevalence and acceptance do not turn the practice into a moral permission. The ethical question remains what kinds of privacy and developmental space teenagers should have even when surveillance feels normal.

Do not infer

"99.6% tracked something" does not mean 99.6% used live GPS, nor that any particular form of tracking is justified.

Ask Maya

If Maya accepts location-sharing because all her friends do it, does normalization strengthen consent, weaken it, or neither?

Rights / use: © 2026 The Author(s). The article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, permitting reproduction with attribution. Selected from the Discussion, not the abstract.

DOI 10.1002/jad.70229 · PubMed record

PRIMARY
MATERIAL

4/4 B

Boele, Bülow & Keijsers: Overprotection, reassurance, and null effects

Discussion §§4.3-4.4 · interpretation and limits · CC BY 4.0

These two paragraphs do the most useful interpretive work for the seminar. They ask what tracking may reveal about parents, then directly resist a different overclaim: this cross-sectional study did **not** robustly associate more tracking with worse adolescent well-being.

VERBATIM ARGUMENT-BEARING SELECTION · DISCUSSION

Two complete discussion paragraphs. Citation formatting and line-break artifacts are normalized; wording is otherwise unchanged.

Parents' worries and anxiety about their child's safety and functioning might be a key driver of their digital tracking use (Davis et al. 2024; Wood et al. 2003). The present study found, however, no evidence that parents with higher levels of general anxiety or neuroticism engage in more frequent tracking. However, parents characterized by higher intolerance of uncertainty, a strong need for control and predictability (Gibb et al. 2023), and those holding more dangerous worldviews (Zimmermann et al. 2024), reported more frequent digital tracking across domains, though these associations were small in magnitude. In addition, separation anxiety was related to school performance and location tracking, suggesting that some parents may use tracking to reassure themselves about their child's whereabouts and functioning. School-related tracking was specifically linked to parenting perfectionism. Parents might monitor their child's school performance as part of their own striving to be the "perfect parent" - staying informed about grades, schedules, and homework enables them to provide the most optimal level of support. Relatedly, parents who track more frequently were perceived by both themselves and their adolescents as more overprotective. Digital tracking might therefore be viewed as a modern extension of parents' overprotection, used to minimize perceived risks, in line with the review of Davis et al. (2024), who identified parental worry and safety concerns as primary motives for location tracking. Our results suggest that similar anxiety-driven mechanisms may extend beyond location tracking to school and financial tracking as well.

The present study tapped into the concerns that the shift from interaction-based to data-driven parental monitoring may undermine adolescents' privacy, autonomy, and well-being (Davis et al. 2024; Gabriels 2016). However, the frequency of digital tracking was not robustly associated with adolescents' autonomy frustration, depressive, and general anxiety symptoms, or perceived school pressure. These null findings are consistent with Burnell et al. (2023), who found no associations between location tracking frequency and adolescent internalizing or externalizing problems. One possible explanation might be that parental tracking behavior may be more parent-driven than child-driven. Additionally, today's adolescents grow up in a world where continuous connectivity is omnipresent (Dereymaeker et al. 2025; Janssen et al. 2025; Marciano 2022), and many might even track their parents in return. With digital tracking potentially being an increasingly normalized and accepted parenting practice, digital tracking might not be experienced as a privacy violation or a threat to autonomy. Future longitudinal, within-family research is needed to study whether, for whom, when, and under what conditions digital tracking is harmful or beneficial (Keijsers et al. 2026).

Philosophical use: Mill and Fahlquist raise developmental and privacy reasons that need not show up as short-run anxiety or depression. Conversely, the ethics discussion should not pretend that current evidence has already demonstrated psychological harm. Separate *wronging someone*, *impeding development*, and *causing measured distress*.

Best stress test: Suppose future longitudinal research finds no average mental-health harm from tracking. Would Maya's privacy or autonomy objection disappear? If not, identify exactly which value remains.

Rights / use: © 2026 The Author(s), CC BY 4.0. The source paragraphs are from the Discussion (§§4.3-4.4), where the authors interpret associations and null findings; they are not copied from the abstract.

Full citation / DOI · CC BY 4.0

03 Stress tests and live-session plan

Change one fact at a time

Change one fact	What it tests
Maya is 12, not 16.	Does age matter because of competence, vulnerability, or parental responsibility?
There was a recent serious safety incident.	How much risk is enough to justify surveillance?
The app reveals location only after an emergency trigger.	Is the objection about collection, continuous access, or actual checking?
Parents share their own live location with Maya too.	Does symmetry reduce control, or merely make surveillance mutual?
Maya explicitly agrees to tracking.	What makes consent genuine inside a parent-child power relationship?
Tracking is perfectly accurate and stores no history.	If privacy costs fall, does the developmental-autonomy objection remain?

55-minute flow

Time	Stage	What happens
0:00-0:07	Case + first poll	Read the case; choose a provisional rule.
0:07-0:17	Small-group principle	State one rule, one reason, and the strongest objection.
0:17-0:28	Mill + maturity	Ask how adult liberty should change for a developing agent.
0:28-0:39	Paternalism	Classify the parents' reason: soft/hard, means/ends, or something else.
0:39-0:49	Tracking evidence	Use Fahlquist and Boele to separate ethical claims from empirical claims.
0:49-0:55	Final poll	Revise the rule and name the fact that changed your view.

Prepare before joining

- Read the case and all four materials; Material 4 now uses selected Discussion paragraphs rather than the structured abstract.
- Bring one sentence beginning: "Parents may track a teenager when..."
- Bring one counterexample that makes your own rule uncomfortable.

Selection rule. For public-domain or openly licensed sources, the packet uses passages from the body of the work that advance an argument, interpret evidence, state a substantive distinction, or answer an objection. Abstracts and introductions are orientation only.

Full references and access. Mill, J. S. *On Liberty* (1859), Project Gutenberg #34901. Dworkin, G., "Paternalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, rev. 2020. Fahlquist, J. N. (2015), *Children & Society* 29(1), 38-47, DOI 10.1111/chso.12016. Boele, S., Bülow, A., & Keijsers, L. (2026), *Journal of Adolescence*, DOI 10.1002/jad.70229.