



[FIELD GUIDE TO THE SNOOP]

Peek Hours

What makes a neighbor nosy? **By Sushma Subramanian**

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HEN DANINE MANETTE'S teenage son left the house, she noticed he'd left his Myspace account open. She saw that he had told a friend that he was going to be at a party that weekend. Manette hadn't heard about a party. She waited for the weekend to roll around to see if her son would speak up about his plans. Luckily for him, he did.

Manette, a 42-year-old criminal investigator from Oakland, warns her two teenage sons that she might slowly creep downstairs to see what they're looking at online, and they might be subject to random Internet history checks. But sometimes, she also snoops

behind their backs.

"I never give them my sources," Manette says. "As long as someone doesn't know how you find something out, they're more inclined to walk a straight line so they don't get caught." Once, while her son was at the gym, his friend sent him an email message asking about the girls he was talking to there. Manette deleted the message, and when he got home, she told him he shouldn't spend hours on end talking to girls when he should be doing homework. He had no clue how she knew. He still thinks she has spies at the gym.

"Some call it snooping," Manette says. "I call it monitoring and old-fashioned parenting."

Social networking sites, email, and cell phones have made it easier for all of us to spy, and most of us Google friends or maybe even Facebook-stalk. Many employers scour office emails looking for hot-button subject lines and record keystrokes and downloads. Utility company employees and government officials have been busted for looking up confidential information about friends and celebrities.

But psychologists are just now tapping into why we do it. Snoops can be separated into two main types: There are people like Manette, who search for information to protect themselves from perceived threats (a son possibly up to no good), and there are people who seek information just because they're curious.

University of Southern Florida psychologist Jordan Litman says snoops like Manette feel much more worried and distressed than the average person when they are missing information that will affect their lives, like whether they'll be laid off or whether their spouse is cheating. Because of their higher anxiety levels, people who seek out bad or threatening information are often trying to uncover problems so they can deal with them or fix them quickly. Having more information can make it seem like they have more control.

Litman says past experiences dealing with danger also contribute to how people respond to potentially threatening

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situations. Manette used to work with juveniles on probation, making her an extra-vigilant parent, she says. She has seen too many kids get in trouble for robbing liquor stores and buying narcotics, catching their parents off-guard.

And two years into Manette’s marriage, she noticed her husband had started working longer hours and sometimes said he was hanging out with friends whose names she hadn’t heard before. She knew something was up and after two months of digging, she found the evidence—a stack of love notes and cards from a mistress, and even a photo of them posing together. “I never wanted to be the fool in the corner again,” she says.

She wrote about the experience in her book, *Ultimate Betrayal: Recognizing, Uncovering, and Dealing With Infidelity*, in which she urges suspecting wives to gather evidence before confronting a husband about cheating, rather than reacting to the first thing they notice. “Then, he doesn’t have time to get his story straight.” Manette eventually reconciled with her husband, but first he had to agree to make his life an open book. Now, years later, she trusts him enough not to snoop on him.

The other category of snoop consists of people who can be characterized as nosy, people who seek out information about others that has no consequence for them. While we’re all curious about our friends and colleagues, these snoops have a higher degree of curiosity. Under ordinary conditions, most people are outgoing enough to ask questions to satisfy their curiosity, but people who are less social often revert to covert ways of gathering information, according to Britta Renner, a University of Konstanz psychologist.

The most researched form of curiosity is called interest-type curiosity, the

motivation to learn about something because it’s entertaining or novel. But snooping is driven more by what’s called deprivation curiosity, that nagging feeling that there are gaps in your knowledge. “It’s the whole reason the human brain freaks out when a picture is out of focus,” Litman says. “The brain likes coherent patterns.”

That tension is worse in some than in others. For a snoop, simply knowing how a friend or family member acts around them isn’t enough. Eavesdropping on a personal conversation or rifling through a gym bag can help create a more complete picture.

The need to snoop is often an indication that there is poor trust or other insecurities affecting the relationship, says Kay Abrams, a Kensington, Maryland-based family therapist. In a case of infidelity, like Manette’s husband’s, it makes sense to offer a partner less privacy at first. But once trust is rebuilt and the threat fades, so should the snooping.

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STOP THE snoop

THESE DAYS, IT’S especially important to establish realms of privacy with family members, therapist Kay Abrams says. And she suggests talking instead of snooping. “If your partner’s email is open, you can ask what a certain message is about and they might tell you instead of you having to snoop.”

In the case of teenagers, there’s a fine line to walk between respecting their privacy and keeping a third eye in the back of your head. “It is most important to keep a relationship and maintain ways to have a dialogue with your teen,” Abrams says.