

Who's watching the kids? All of us, thanks to daycare webcams

CHRISTINA VARDANIS

The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Jul. 19 2012, 6:34 PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Jul. 19 2012, 6:34 PM EDT



(Medioimages/Photodisc/Thinkstock)

When our daycare announced it was considering installing webcams, with a password-protected system that allows parents to log in and act as a voyeur, my reaction was swift: No thanks.

I pulled out my soapbox and talked about trust. Railed against helicopter parents. Espoused the virtues of letting your child develop into their own person. I equated cameras with parental interference – why else would you watch, if you didn't intend to stick your nose where it doesn't necessarily belong?

Recent studies seemed to back me up. One, out of the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va., linked “intense parenting” with depression and anxiety in mothers. Another out of Keene State College in New Hampshire found that helicopter parenting can result in overly dependent, and even neurotic, offspring.

But hard as I tried, the appeal of it inched its way into my subconscious. At first, I told myself it was the novelty of it – like the live penguin cams out of Edinburgh Zoo, but with more Play-Doh – yet that didn't really wash. Almost all daycare webcam companies market that feeling of security – but that wasn't it either. I do trust the staff at our centre.

Then I realized I was warming up to the idea because of one simple reason: I miss my kid.

In those first panicky months as a new parent, everyone tells you to trust your instincts, that you know your baby best. And it's absolutely true. Until it isn't.

The reality for most working parents is that the end of parental leave means relinquishing your role as primary care-giver. This came into sharp focus for me the morning I carried my daughter into her daycare, set her down delicately on her two little feet and proudly declared “She can walk!” The impossibly stoic look on her teacher's face was a dead giveaway. She'd been walking for weeks, just not for us.

This wasn't a one-time disconnect between me and the new-found capabilities of my baby – not even close. The developmental milestones she reveals every weekend are a constant reminder that seeing her two hours a day during the work week isn't nearly enough to maintain the intimate relationship that develops when you're with your baby 24 hours a day.

My husband and I often talk about how under the cover of an invisibility cloak we'd love to watch her at the centre for a day, observe her interactions, her interests, how she handles herself in a

surrounding that is so familiar to her, but completely foreign to us. A webcam, as nefarious as it sounds, gives us that window. And, like all aspects of parenting, we have a choice about how far we let things go.

I am not a helicopter parent. I know – well, my brain knows – that part of being a good parent is learning when to back off, and let your child develop his or her own relationship with the world. But my gut is still adjusting to the fact that she is being taught and raised by others, that she has deep relationships with people I don't really know.

If the webcams are installed, it will no doubt be hard to avoid the draw of becoming a back-seat caregiver. But that's on me. I can uphold the morals that are important to me – trust, autonomy, independence – and still have the benefit of being more a part of my 22-month-old's life than having a full-time job allows. If that makes me feel more comfortable, and more confident in my abilities as a parent, how can that be bad?

The true test, I guess, will be when (and if) the switch is flipped. One tiny little mechanical eyeball will either bring out the worst in me, or, through judicious and respectful use, bring me closer to my daughter. I'm aiming for the latter.