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Secret smartphone spy device taps teen privacy debate

EXCLUSIVE

**RICK WALLACE
FINBAR O'MALLON**

The launch of a controversial US-based service that allows parents to spy on their children's smartphone usage in Australia is set to spark a big debate around privacy versus safety.

Teensafe, which has one million registered users mostly in the US, is taking subscriptions from Australian parents wanting access to their children's text messages, Facebook posts and other data.

The rapidly expanding company says that what it is doing is perfectly legal, and for many parents the ends justify the means in terms of avoiding problems with bullying, sexual activity and other problems.

Parents can install the device discreetly on their children's phones provided they are the genuine guardian of the child and they pay the phone bill.

Teensafe chief executive Rawdon Messenger, who is travelling to Australia next week to promote the service, said there was no obligation for parents to tell children it was on their mobile phone, but they recommend they do.

Mr Messenger said Australia was chosen as a key expansion market for Teensafe because of the high smartphone penetration, cultural similarities to the US and a firm legal footing.

"We do an extensive legal feasibility study in each territory and Australia came back as a resounding yes — it's absolutely fine," he said.

Mr Messenger said parents could view the child's text messages, iMessages, browser history, Facebook and Instagram activity, call logs, deleted messages and the location of the phone in real time.

But the service does not store or pass on any images attached to messages and doesn't monitor or record voice conversations.

Teensafe was founded three years ago by three sets of parents

from California.

Mr Messenger said more than one million parents had signed with Teensafe and he expected the take-up rate for the \$14.95-a-month service in Australia to be similar to the US.

Teensafe also operates in Mexico, Canada and New Zealand.

The company acknowledges the service is likely to attract critics, but Mr Messenger said the overall reception in the US had been positive.

"It's a debate," he said. "We say treat their digital life as you would their normal life. Eighty per cent of teenagers have smartphones and these devices are on 24/7.

"We feel that you can't really protect your child, and (the right to) privacy is trumped by protection. This is the right thing to do if you want to be a good parent.

Mr Messenger said the service was best used to check if a child was depressed, bullied or being a bully or involved in sexual activity. "Sexting is a very common trend among young teenagers."

Data is kept secure and not seen by employees, and Mr Messenger said there were safeguards to prevent malicious usage.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said the service had the potential to undermine trust.

"This sort of thing always concerns me," he said. "If you are trying to have a relationship with the children, doing things that undermine the trust your kids have in you is not positive or helpful.

"What you need is an open relationship — you need to talk to kids and support them. I think Australian parents would know better than to take up this service."

Mr Tucci said that as children approached 18 they were progressively granted more freedom, and monitoring their communications went against the grain.

Australian parents who were asked about the service yesterday were cautiously enthusiastic, and

their teenage children were surprisingly sanguine about it.

"I might get it," Melbourne mother of two Bernadette Box said. "I wouldn't want to invade their privacy, but at the same time if there's something going on that gives you reason to be nervous then you'd have that back-up."

Her teenage daughter, Darcy Prince, said: "I don't say bad things or anything so I wouldn't really care."

Her friend Emily Raukola said: "Mum's got all my passwords to my social media, that was one of the conditions of getting Facebook."

Melbourne man Mark Murphy, whose sons Connor and Fintan are 15 and 12, said it "sounds like a great idea, but obviously the kids need their privacy as well".

His wife, Teresa, said: "I think there has to be an element of trust as well."

The couple said their biggest concerns were Connor and Fintan seeing inappropriate material, and bullying.

The boys said they wouldn't mind if the parents eavesdropped on their communications.

"I don't really have anything to hide," Fintan said "I don't really use my phone often."



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DAVID GERAGHTY

Mark and Teresa Murphy like the idea of Teensafe, but say the trust and privacy of their sons Connor, 15, and Fintan, 12, would have to be respected