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# Negative reactions to monitoring: Do they undermine the ability of monitoring to protect adolescents?

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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on adolescents' negative reactions to parental monitoring to determine whether parents should avoid excessive monitoring because adolescents find monitoring behaviors to be over-controlling and privacy invasive. Adolescents ( $n = 242$ ,  $M$  age = 15.4 years; 51% female) reported monitoring, negative reactions, warmth, antisocial behavior, depressive symptoms, and disclosure. Adolescents additionally reported antisocial behavior, depressive symptoms, and disclosure one to two years later. In cross-sectional analyses, less monitoring but more negative reactions were linked with less disclosure, suggesting that negative reactions can undermine parents' ability to obtain information. Although monitoring behaviors were not related to depressive symptoms, more negative reactions were linked with more depressive symptoms, suggesting that negative reactions also may increase depressive symptoms as a side effect of monitoring behavior. Negative reactions were not linked to antisocial behavior. There were no longitudinal links between negative reactions and changes in disclosure, antisocial behavior, or depressive symptoms.

## 1. Introduction

When parents are aware of adolescent's activities, whereabouts, and companions, adolescents are less likely to engage in misbehavior (e.g., Fletcher, Darling, & Steinberg, 1995; Lahey, Van Hulle, D'Onofrio, Rodgers, & Waldman, 2008; Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003). For some time, the assumption was that parents gained awareness through active monitoring of adolescents' behavior. However, Stattin and Kerr (2000) demonstrated that adolescents' sharing of information, rather than parents' monitoring activity, was the proximal source of parents' knowledge. Subsequent studies that have directly assessed parents' monitoring behavior provide inconsistent evidence linking parents' monitoring behaviors with adolescents' misbehavior (see Racz & McMahon, 2011 for a review), questioning whether parental monitoring is an effective means of preventing and curtailing misbehavior. Meanwhile, other studies have shown that parents' efforts to monitor their adolescents may evoke negative emotional reactions in adolescents (i.e., feelings of being over-controlled or having one's privacy invaded; Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008; Kakiyama, Tilton-Weaver, Kerr, & Stattin, 2010). The purpose of this study is to determine whether negative reactions eliminate or undermine the potential effects of parental monitoring on preventing or curtailing behavior problems. We consider whether parents should reduce efforts to monitor adolescents' behavior and activities because some adolescents find monitoring behaviors to be overcontrolling and privacy invasive, or whether parents should be encouraged to monitor despite the negative reactions experienced by some adolescents. We will focus

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on associations linking monitoring and negative reactions with adolescents' disclosure, antisocial behavior, and depressive symptoms.

### 1.1. Parental monitoring

To date, there have been three waves of research on parental monitoring. The first wave drew on [Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber's \(1984\)](#) broad conceptualization of monitoring and typically used multi-method, multi-informant approaches to combine measures of parental knowledge (i.e., how much parents know about their adolescents' leisure time activities), parental supervision (i.e., how much parents supervise leisure time activities), and child disclosure (i.e., how much adolescents tell their parents about their leisure time activities). This first wave of research demonstrated that more monitoring (i.e., knowledge, supervision, and disclosure) was linked to less delinquent behavior (e.g., [Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984](#)), substance use (e.g., [Dishion & Loeber, 1985](#)), antisocial behavior (e.g., [Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991](#)), and higher school achievement ([Crouter, MacDermid, McHale, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990](#)). The second wave of parental monitoring research operationalized parental monitoring more narrowly than the first wave, focusing almost exclusively on perceived parental knowledge of adolescents' activities. Studies in the second wave reported that more parental monitoring (i.e., knowledge) was associated with lower levels of substance use (e.g., [Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993](#)), less delinquency (e.g., [Laird et al., 2003](#)), and higher school achievement ([Brown et al., 1993](#)). Researchers in the second wave often concluded that increased parental active tracking was the best approach to reducing problem behavior (e.g., [Fletcher et al., 1995](#); [Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001](#)), despite not measuring parents' behavior directly. [Stattin and Kerr \(2000\)](#); [Kerr & Stattin, 2000](#) emphasized that this recommendation rested on the untested assumption that parents' behaviors were the source of parental knowledge.

[Stattin and Kerr \(2000\)](#) split [Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber's \(1984\)](#) original conceptualization of monitoring into at least three different constructs arguing that parents monitor through solicitation and the imposition of rules, children provide information by disclosing, and that parental knowledge or awareness is not necessarily the product of parental monitoring. [Stattin and Kerr's \(2000\)](#) data showed that knowledge was associated with monitoring through questions and rules, but that child disclosure was the most proximal source of parents' knowledge ([Kerr & Stattin, 2000](#)). [Stattin and Kerr's \(2000\)](#) critique led to a third wave of parental monitoring research.

The third wave of parental monitoring research emphasized the disaggregation of parent and child contributions to monitoring, and measured parent and child components as separate elements of a monitoring process. Several studies adopted [Stattin and Kerr's \(2000\)](#) measure of monitoring through questions and rules, but a few studies used other measures that clearly differentiated parent and child behaviors. Separate assessments of child behaviors (i.e., disclosure and secrecy) and parental behaviors (i.e., monitoring through questions, monitoring through rules) helped determine which parent and child behaviors predict lower levels of adolescent problem behavior. Bivariate correlations from the third wave of monitoring research show that in most (e.g., [Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004](#); [Kakihara et al., 2010](#); [Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009](#); [Kerr & Stattin, 2000](#); [Willoughby & Hamza, 2011](#)), but not all studies ([Kiesner, Dishion, Poulin, & Pastore, 2009](#); [Laird, Marrero, & Sentse, 2010](#)), more parental monitoring through rules and questions are linked to less problem behavior and substance use. Results from multivariate analyses show that more parental monitoring behaviors are predictive of less adolescent problem behavior, though not as predictive as child disclosure ([Keijsers et al., 2009](#); [Kerr & Stattin, 2000](#); [Stattin & Kerr, 2000](#)).

Studies assessing longitudinal links between monitoring and later problem behavior also report inconsistent patterns. In some studies, greater monitoring predicts lower levels of problem behavior, at least in some circumstances ([Crocetti et al., 2016](#); [Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009](#); [Kakihara et al., 2010](#); [Laird et al., 2010](#)), while others find that greater monitoring predicts higher levels of problem behavior (e.g., [Kiesner et al., 2009](#)), or that the longitudinal links between monitoring and problem behavior are not statistically significant (e.g., [Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010](#); [Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Demetriou, 2010](#)). Altogether, the three waves of monitoring research provide strong, consistent evidence that adolescents are less likely to engage in problem behavior when their parents are consistently aware of the adolescents' whereabouts and activities. However, evidence linking low levels of problem behavior with greater parental monitoring through questioning or rules is much less consistent.

### 1.2. Negative reactions

In demonstrating that adolescent disclosure is a more proximal source of parental knowledge and awareness than is parents' monitoring behavior, [Stattin and Kerr \(2000\)](#) drew attention to the dyadic nature of the monitoring process. The current study focuses on parental monitoring while recognizing that it is likely that children must answer parents' questions, or comply with parents' restrictions, for monitoring to effectively limit or curtail misbehavior. Therefore, it is important to consider how adolescents interpret and react to parents' monitoring behaviors. It is likely that adolescents experience an emotional reaction of some type when they ask permission (or announce their intention) to attend a social event with friends and parents respond by asking, "Where is the event?" or "Will the event be supervised by adults?" These monitoring questions may evoke negative emotional reactions when adolescents feel that parents are blocking them from attaining their goal, over-stepping their authority, controlling the adolescents' behavior, or invading the adolescents' privacy. However, the same questions from parents may evoke positive emotional reactions when adolescents perceive parents' monitoring actions as attempts to help them reach their goals, or as signs of care and concern. Adolescents have reported that parental monitoring behaviors can simultaneously make them feel loved and cared for as well as controlled and invaded ([Bakken & Brown, 2010](#); [Kakihara et al., 2010](#)) suggesting that adolescents can experience monitoring as both a sign of caring and as a potential barrier limiting their freedom and privacy. Our previous work ([LaFleur, Zhao, Zeringue, & Laird, 2016](#)) shows that parental warmth both suppresses and moderates the link between monitoring behavior and negative emotional

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