

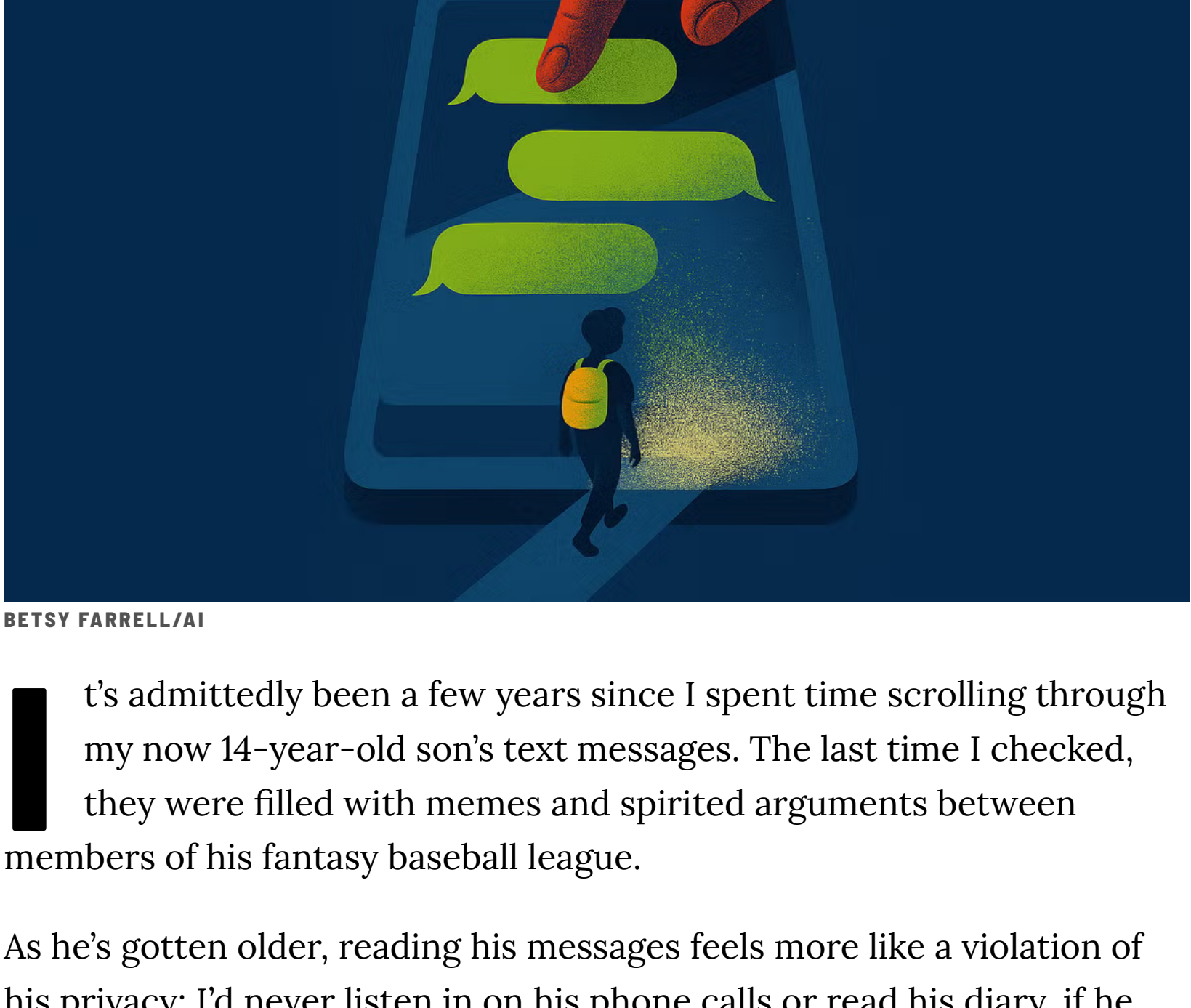
Life > Parenting Advice

7 Rules for Reading Your Kids' Text Messages

We all want to do it, but should kids have total privacy, total transparency, or something in the middle?

BY **BETH BRAVERMAN** PUBLISHED: SEP 6, 2025

SAVE ARTICLE



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It's admittedly been a few years since I spent time scrolling through my now 14-year-old son's text messages. The last time I checked, they were filled with memes and spirited arguments between members of his fantasy baseball league.

As he's gotten older, reading his messages feels more like a violation of his privacy; I'd never listen in on his phone calls or read his diary, if he kept one. But I'm still regularly reading the messages his that younger sister, 11, receives on her iPad. (She doesn't have a phone yet.)

Look, when it comes to snooping, we all *want* to do it. Aside from pure nosiness, the torrent of news about teen sexting scandals and the dangers of bullying can make it feel like a parenting imperative. But, we also want to respect our kids' privacy.

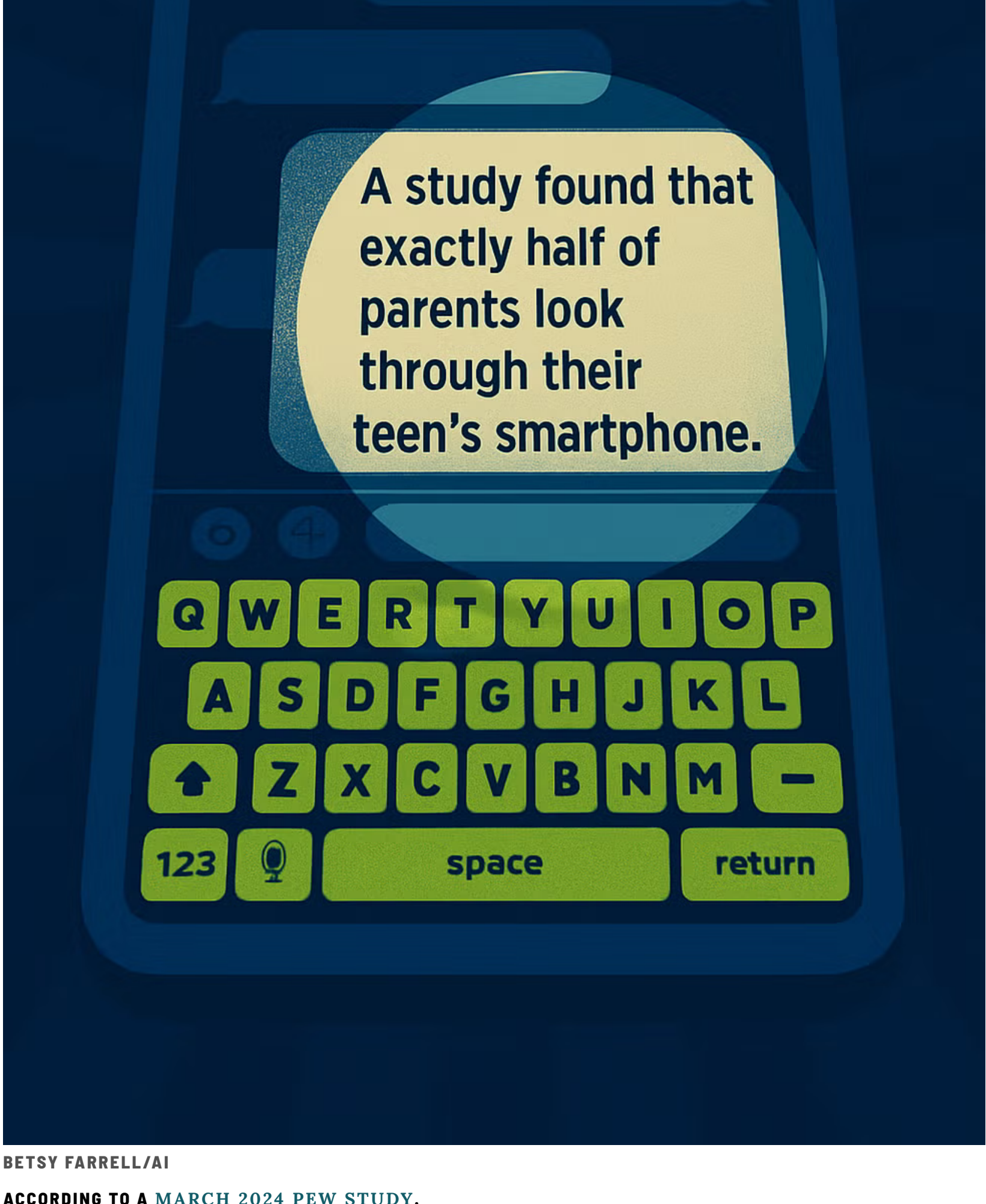
Among my mom friends, no one seems to know the best approach: some of them never touch their children's devices and others that have their kids' texts forwarded to them. A [March 2024 Pew study](#) found that exactly half of parents look through their teen's smartphone.

I know what side I'm on, but what do experts think are best practices for monitoring your kids' digital communications? I got in touch with several to find out.

Start early.

Today's kids typically receive their first smartphone between the ages of [10 and 12](#), although more than half of kids age [8 or younger](#) have a device capable of texting or messaging via app. At that age, parents should keep an eye on all their kids' digital communications, experts say.

"A 6-year-old should not have free rein to be messaging people," says Donnell Probst, interim executive director at the National Association for Media Literacy Education and a faculty associate teaching digital medal literacy at Arizona State University. In addition to limiting excessive screen time, parents should make sure their messages don't contain cyberbullying, sexting or inappropriate content, communication with strangers or signs of mental health issues.



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ACCORDING TO A [MARCH 2024 PEW STUDY](#).

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Don't sneak around.

No matter how old your kids are, if you're reading their DMs or text messages, you need to tell them that you're doing so. "Parental monitoring of messages shouldn't ever be a secret," says Janet Sasson Edgette, a psychologist specializing in kids and teens and their families. "It's so destructive when a kid finds out retroactively, because it's not just their privacy being violated but also the privacy of their friends."

It's also important to let them know why: Explain your concerns, in an age-appropriate way, about how some people lie online or how even a supposedly private message can go viral.

While you can discuss the rules with your child, you're not negotiating. "For younger children, parents set the rules," Catherine Pearlman, a parenting expert and author of *First Phone: A Child's Guide to Digital Responsibility, Safety, and Etiquette*. "They don't need buy-in. If the children aren't comfortable with that at age 11, they shouldn't get a phone."

Remember they're more digitally savvy than you are.

While it's tempting to rely on parental controls or monitoring apps like Bark or SaferKid to make sure your kids are shielded from digital dangers, such tools are not infallible. Savvy kids often find their way around such controls, leaving parents with a false sense of security.

"Parents who are too strict and restrictive, especially compared to their child's friends, will often have children who sneak their usage on apps and social media," Pearlman says. "A more understanding approach is preferred to keep lines of communication open."

Have the hard conversations.

If you find something objectionable in your kids' messages, that's an opportunity for a direct and honest discussion about the material—even if it makes you both uncomfortable.

"Sometimes that's exactly what they want you to do," says Kathy van Benthuyssen, president of [Converlation](#), a program that helps schools and parents raise digitally responsible children. "They want you to find it so that you can save them. They just don't know how to come and ask or talk to you about it."

If the message is particularly upsetting, give yourself some time to calm down before confronting your child. Then work together to find a solution that prevents similar situations in the future.

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Give kids more independence as they mature.

As your children get older, you can gradually start giving them more independence in their digital lives. If they feel you're violating their privacy at this age, it can potentially damage your relationship and lead to less open communication.

"[Parental monitoring] can be very unsettling for kids who are really working to separate from their parents and develop their own identity," Pearlman says. "It's not good for anybody for parents to see everything that kids say and do."

The right age for full digital independence varies by child, and you'll need to evaluate the social skills, judgement and emotional readiness to determine the best age for them. That said, experts say that most well-adjusted kids should have digital independence by the time they reach 14 or so.

Let them know you can help in sticky situations.

Even if you're not regularly monitoring their online activity, your children should know that they can come to you any time they encounter something that makes them feel uncomfortable or confused. Let your teen know that they won't get in trouble for these conversations and do your best to remain calm and listen carefully when they do come to you with an issue.

Revisit the subject often.

The more often you talk about digital safety with your children, the more you can increase their awareness of the online risks and the steps they need to take to protect themselves.

"If you're continuing these conversations over time, even if they don't seem like they're listening, over time they will have heard what you've said," Probst says.

Creating a safe space for open dialogue—and modeling the digital behavior you want to see from your children—can increase the trust on both ends and help empower your kids to respond navigately the digital world, with the knowledge that they have parental support if they need it.

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