

## GIMME SOME SPACE

Jennifer Mahon, Phd

Thanks for taking some time out of your day to consider one of the most important aspects of our relationship with our kids: privacy.

Real privacy is the kind of delightful solitude that we all need to develop and maintain our mental health. It is not the same as online privacy.

Privacy is essential for mental health. How do we, as parents, react to our kids when they make a move for private space?

Parents are generally not taught about the value to kids of being away from us. Our focus is on DOING PARENTING. We can feel uncertain and rejected when kids go into privacy.

Imagine a scene:

You're home at the weekend after a busy week. Maybe you feel a little guilty that you didn't have much time with the kids during the week. Maybe you're looking forward to some time with your teenager - and you realise they're nowhere to be found. They've slipped off. Maybe they're reading a book, maybe they're on their phone, texting friends or snapchatting. Maybe they've gone into a computer game.

How do you feel?

You might feel deflated, rejected, worried. Maybe you feel shut out. Frustrated? Maybe you wonder what's happened to your sweet child who always used to follow you around.

Whatever you feel, many parents end up thinking they've got to DO something about it, to control their kid's behaviour and bring them back in.

Before you DO anything, I'd like you to stop and think: *What does this mean?* What is this escape or insistence on privacy signaling?

Think about what being in private does for us, what happens when we're in private:

-- We are not watched.

-- We feel free to do things other people might not approve of, like playing games, talking about secrets with friends, looking at our body parts.

*We get to do, think and say things without someone else judging us.*

But you want to be sure your child is doing what they should, so why let them have privacy? What purpose can it serve?

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Here's why it's so important: When we're not being watched or judged, we can enter FLOW. We are deeply involved in what we are interested in, and we lose track of time. There's a lot of research on flow, but for our purpose here, BEING IN FLOW EQUALS BEING HAPPY.

We need privacy, and flow, to feel happy. It balances our brains, and our moods.

Testimony: Pre-teen boys said they 'go to cool off'. Lose their mood in the mood of a book. Send a couple of texts to feel understood by friends. (They noticed that computer games also quickly changed their moods, but they said games were much more intense than books and could knock them off balance in another way.)

'Going into my book in private is like going into my SANCTUARY. It restores my sense of calm.'

But you might think, Ahhah! when they go away from me, they are going TO their friends! they are not alone at all! Often kids will connect with their friends when they go into privacy from us. In its best form, this connection is also essential to happiness. They need to feel close to others their own age, anchored, and socially competent in order to thrive.

Also kids will pursue something they're curious about when they go into private, whether its changes in their own bodies and how to manage it, or changes in their Clan, or the state of their ant farm.

So, going back to the title of this talk - How to feel connected when your child needs privacy. How can you feel connected?

1. Understand better what the move to privacy means: they need to regulate their mood, they need to learn something, they need to restore their energy, their need to feel connected to their friends. It's good for them! And an essential part of good mental health. If they're in flow *they will lose track of time*, 2 hours might seem like 5 minutes. But not because they are trying to trick you.

2. Next try to put your anxiety to one side. They won't want to come out of their room or the computer game if all they get off you is waves of anxiety or anger. If they get pulled into a lecture by you, that feeling of flow and connection is not going to happen when they are in your company. And worse, they're not going to come to you when they need it.

3. It also helps to put it in perspective. They've been making moves for privacy since they could control their heads. Babies who've had enough

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stimulation turn away. Toddlers learn about independence by walking - away from you - and then coming back. Some older kids shut the door to the loo, or hide behind the couch, or ask for privacy when changing their clothes. They've been doing this for ages, it's not just a reaction to you.

4. Also, Know that during every time of transition, behaviour is exaggerated. Now that they are teens, their times away from you are longer, and involve other teens, too. But they still want and NEED to check back in with you. If you can understand that they are BUILDING themselves whilst on their own, they will appreciate your company when they are with you.

And that's a big point to consider. They are building themselves. This is work they must do with their own labour. Understand that being with us can have a regressive pull on them. So they might avoid us just so they don't collapse back into little-kid-hood. This building work will slow down. The sooner they are feel happy and secure in what they have built, they will be able to tolerate our pull.

The next time you realise your child has gone into privacy, think about these points:

1. Privacy is time without being judged, which allows for flow, which allows for happiness and calm to return.
2. Control your own anxiety or anger. Be glad to see them when they are with you.
3. Put it in perspective. Privacy is a mental health essential, not necessarily a comment about you.
4. Kids have to build themselves. Sometimes that means not allowing you to help.
5. When the building work is finished, they'll want to invite you round if they think you'll appreciate the result.