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Parental Peekaboo

Working parents now can ease their guilt and angst by watching their kids at day care, all over the Net. But some educators aren't feeling as secure.

By Evantheia Schibsted

Six-year-old Kenny Rolon hardly notices the small cameras strategically positioned throughout his child-care center. "I don't know what's inside them," he says, as his quizzical brown eyes widen beneath his dark, bowl-cut bangs. Kenny explains he does know his parents can watch him through the devices. "So if my day is messed up they know it."



On this cold winter's day, Kenny, clad in hip suede hiking boots and pumpkin-color sweats, seems more intent on sharing frosted spice cookies than discussing the impact of surveillance at the day care center. Kenny is one of roughly 140 children attending Kiddie Academy in Hillsborough, N.J., a center that had Web cameras (or Webcams), installed about a year and a half ago. The tiny black gadgets allow parents watch their kids by logging on to the Internet.

In a society that increasingly requires both parents to work to make ends meet, children are frequently separated from Mom and Dad all day, raising the angst level at work, at home, and in care centers. Webcam advocates stress that the Web technology can help ease the guilt parents often feel, if not increase the hugs. "There are two reasons parents might want such devices," says Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute, a New York think tank addressing family and workplace issues. "To make sure their children are safe and as a way to connect with them when [the parents] aren't there." Galinsky is author of "Ask the Children: What America's Children Really Think About Working Parents."

ParentWatch staffers, naturally, agree. "Our society has moved to a point where both parents have to work to make ends meet," says Glen Morrison, ParentWatch's COO. "Is what we offer a full substitute for time spent with your child? No. But do you feel better about being separated from your child during the day? Absolutely."

Such a cultural climate has created a need for services offered by companies such as ParentWatch, a Manhattan-based startup that installed the system at Kenny's center. At Kiddie Academy, like most centers using Webcams, each classroom contains a minimum of two Webcams, which are strategically positioned in the classroom, focusing on places where kids usually congregate, such as rugs and tables while avoiding private locations such as diaper-changing areas or bathrooms. The system then delivers live streaming video images to users, who are parents typically logging on at work. Users can tune into the live videos for up to five minutes, and click a "refresh" button to stay longer. Parents can catch a

cyber-glimpse of their kids from any 3.0 or better browser-equipped computer by logging on to a secured area on the ParentWatch site.

Adam Aronson, who is not a parent but hopes to be "on the family track soon," founded ParentWatch in 1998. Prior to starting the venture, the 31-year-old had been a trader at Credit Suisse First Boston and a money manager at AC Capital Management in Greenwich, Conn. Aronson often heard friends moaning about how badly they felt not seeing enough of their children. When several said they'd eagerly pay for some monitoring device, he saw the green light. Thus was conceived ParentWatch. "Parents in our society work hard and are spending many hours away from their children," he says. "This provides them with an opportunity to share a few more minutes with their child each day."

Baby business

Aronson soon discovered ParentWatch was not the first kid on the block with this idea. The first such firm WatchMeGrow.com of Bellevue, Wash., was founded in 1996. It wired its first center in 1997. Around the same time, Atlanta-based KinderCam began hooking up centers to the Net as well. San Diego-based KinderView soon followed suit. Not all companies deliver live video images. Some offer stills instead, claiming that the image quality is better. So far, less than 1 percent of the nation's more than 100,000 licensed child-care centers boast Webcam systems.

Like his rivals, ParentWatch's Aronson saw great business opportunity in the burgeoning child-care industry, which spends roughly \$30 billion in the United States, according to Eduventures.com, a Boston-based research firm for the education market. Aronson is not banking on child-care centers, which are often cash-starved, to supply his payroll. ParentWatch installs and maintains the Webcam systems free, and pays the monthly \$100 to \$300 tab for bandwidth costs related to streaming video. To generate revenue, the company charges parents \$24.95 a month (sometimes less, depending on how many days the child is in the center) for the service, which lets them peek at their kids as well as participate in chats. They will soon be able to send emails to the centers.

Then comes the ecommerce wrapping. Recently, ParentWatch began selling products on its site as an affiliate of eToys, eToys's BabyCenter, and Amazon.com. More partnerships are expected to roll out soon. By April, ParentWatch will begin offering replenishment products (including chalk and Legos) to child-care centers in connection with child-care and school supplies distributors. Another revenue source is ParentWatch's partnership with DoubleClick, which sells space on the startup's site to advertisers.

To date, ParentWatch has hooked up 150 centers, in cities ranging from Miami to Dallas to Seattle. By year's end, that number will reach 1,000, Aronson estimates. Its nearest competitor, WatchMeGrow, boasts 75 centers. Another rival, KinderCam, has signed on 50 centers. It charges centers \$500 to \$1,200 a month, depending on the number of cameras, and the length of the agreement.

Private investors are waking up to the business of online child care and education. "The whole concept of adding technology, especially to link children with parents, is newer.... It's obviously an attractive market because you have a lot of concerned parents who want to be more involved with their children," says Kathleen Bailey, an analyst at Merrill Lynch. ParentWatch has raised \$12 million from Arcadia Partners of Boston, L.E.K Consulting, a spinoff of consulting firm Bain Capital, as well as some individual and corporate investors.

A virtual bridge?

Educators appear generally supportive of the concept of using technology, and the Internet

in particular, to help bridge the gap between parents and their kids as well as educators. Janet Pasteka, director of Kiddie Academy's Hillsborough, N.J., center, says while she initially was "the original self-admitted skeptic," she has found the system to be a useful tool for communicating all aspects of the center's programs to parents. She says her colleagues welcome the opportunity to show parents how their kids are treated (though one employee worried about being on camera when fixing her tights).

Kenny's mom, Jane Madonna Rolon, welcomes such an invitation. A medical education manager at Excerpta Medica in Belle Mead, N.J., this mother of two logs on about once a day for few minutes, just long enough to check in on Kenny and his 4-year-old brother Andrew. On days when her sons are upset at the time she drops them off, she finds the video images particularly comforting. "I can see if they're adapting," she says, adding that it's also reassuring to check on teachers. "When you can't watch, you wonder how they're doing."

Big Brother watching?

But for some, there's a fine line between checking on your toddler and meddling in teachers' affairs. Indeed, not everyone sings the virtues of technology in child rearing. "Some child-care industry CEOs I've spoken with have expressed concerns about liability issues that might be associated with this type of thing," says Peter Stokes, executive vice president of Eduventures.com.

Moreover, parents might misinterpret scenes the video camera catches, possibly resulting in complaints and litigation. "That's the risk," he cautions. "I don't think CEOs are trying to keep parents out of the centers. They're just trying to keep situations in their proper light." (To date, only one such suit was filed against WatchMeGrow, but it was eventually thrown out.)

Some education and privacy advocates argue that Webcams smack of Big Brother. Barbara Willer, spokesperson for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, said the organization, which provides accreditation to child-care centers, has received a few calls from parents and workers concerned about their children being monitored. But as long as a viewing device serves to enhance communication and not substitute for human interaction, "it can be an important tool," she says.

As for Kenny's opinion? He looks oblivious to the devices while munching on cookies. For him, technology comes to life when he plays Mario on his home computer.