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The Ambient Parent – Is Remote Care Tech Bringing Us Closer, or Just Watching From Afar?

Our Friends · Monday, July 28th, 2025

It's 10 PM in Alaska, and my mother is 13,000 kilometers away in Toronto. I don't call her. Instead, I opened an app. I see the green dot that confirms her smartwatch is charged. I checked the log from her smart speaker to see she played her favourite Ella Fitzgerald playlist this afternoon. A glance at our shared digital photo frame shows she "liked" the picture I uploaded of my daughter an hour ago. I exhale. She's okay.

This quiet, digital check-in has become a familiar ritual for millions of us in the global diaspora. We are the first generation to parent our own parents from a distance, and we've adopted a **suite of technologies** to help us do it. We are becoming The Ambient Parent—a constant, low-level, watchful presence in our parents' lives, facilitated by a network of sensors and screens.

This technology arrived as a solution, a balm for the anxiety of distance. And in many ways, it delivers. For the "sandwich generation," caught between raising children and caring for aging parents, these tools are a godsend. A fall-detection alert from an Apple Watch can be a literal lifesaver. Devices like Jubilee TV, which cleverly turn the familiar television set into an easy-to-use video calling and photo-sharing hub, can bridge continents, allowing a grandparent to witness a child's first steps without fumbling with a tablet. This digital tether provides an undeniable peace of mind, a way to be "there" when you physically can't be.

The Gilded Cage of Care

But as I close the app each night, a disquieting question lingers. In our pursuit of this data-driven reassurance, what are we losing? When does caring cross the line into controlling? When does a smart home become a gilded cage?

The very language of this technology—monitoring, tracking, alerts—betrays a shift from connection to surveillance. We tell ourselves we're just making sure they're safe, but we are also, inadvertently, eroding the very thing that makes our parents who they are: their autonomy.

An adult who has managed a household, raised a family, and navigated a complex life for over seventy years is now subtly subjected to a system that questions their every move, or lack thereof. Did Dad forget to take his medication, or did he just not log it in the app? Is Mom sleeping in, or is something wrong?

The very design of these new technologies perfectly illustrates this dilemma. Take a feature

common to **Jubilee TV monitoring devices for seniors**: the “glance” or one-way check-in. This allows a child to briefly and silently activate the camera in their parent’s living room to confirm their well-being, without the senior even needing to answer a call. On the surface, it’s a brilliant, non-intrusive solution.

Yet, it perfectly **encapsulates the ethical tightrope** we walk. That loving “glance” for my peace of mind is, for my mother, a moment of unannounced observation. It re-frames her private home as a space subject to my review. It risks infantilizing our elders, reducing the rich complexity of their lives to a series of visual data points. We get the information—*she’s in her armchair*—but we miss the meaning. We know she is alive, but we don’t know *how* she is living.

A real conversation, with its unpredictable tangents and emotional nuance, is replaced by the sterile certainty of an activity log. We get the information, but we miss the meaning. We know they are alive, but we don’t know *how* they are living.

Redefining Family Duty

This technological shift is forcing a cultural redefinition of care and family duty. It creates a new kind of emotional labor for the child—the anxiety of the perpetual watcher, always on alert. It also reshapes the experience of aging itself. To grow old under this digital panopticon is to live with the quiet awareness that you are always being observed. Privacy becomes a luxury, and solitude can be mistaken for an emergency.

The solution isn’t to reject these tools wholesale. The peace of mind they offer is real, and for many, non-negotiable. But we must approach them with a new consciousness. The goal cannot be simply to monitor; it must be to connect.

Perhaps we need to schedule our check-ins, agreeing on digital boundaries with our parents just as we would with a physical roommate. Perhaps we need to prioritize the messy, inconvenient, but deeply human video call over the efficient, passive data check. We need to ask ourselves if we are using this technology to augment our relationship or to replace it.

The question is not whether this technology can bring us closer, but whether we have the wisdom to use it to do so. We can have the data that tells us our parents are safe. But true peace of mind comes from the connection that tells us they are still living a life of dignity, privacy, and purpose. Otherwise, we’re not caregivers; we’re just watchmen, staring at a screen from half a world away.

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