

CONNECT

Who's Filming Our Children

FS 1375 AG

- 1 Imagine that something disturbing is taking place in your child's school. Nobody's asked you if you agree to it or even told you it's happening. When you ask your child if it's true, they say yes – it is true.
- 2 Knowing about it is now keeping you awake. Perhaps you're over-reacting, but you keep coming back to the same thought - THIS IS NOT RIGHT! It's creepy at best - downright worrying at worst. And, to make matters even worse, you found out about it on Facebook. The school didn't even tell you.
- 3 This is exactly what happened recently to parents of students at Newton Abbot College in Devon. Parents found out from the "Spotted Newton Abbot" Facebook page that there are closed-circuit TV [CCTV] cameras at the school – IN THE TOILETS!
- 4 Disbelieving and outraged comments appeared on the Spotted Newton Abbot Facebook post – as you might anticipate. The post was quickly shared on other groups with many people saying, surely, it isn't true? The local media reported the story, by which point the school had sent a message to parents, which confirmed it was true.
But surely, this was an isolated incident?
No - it turns out that surveillance in school toilets and changing rooms is far from unusual.
- 5 Newton Abbot College's former head - who made the decision to install the cameras – and has since been promoted - [said the cameras are not located](#) where they can film students in a state of undress, or while using the toilets.
- Firstly, is this always the case? A [2017 article in the Guardian](#) shows a photograph from another school of a CCTV camera - directly above urinals. There is also a [truly shocking story from 2009](#) about police seizing CCTV footage of children filmed while they changed into sports kits at a school in Salford.
- Secondly, [schools' defence that they don't film the students going to the loo](#) leads me to wonder – are schools routinely spying on their students throughout the school? I suspect the answer is YES, they are, but that is the subject of another feature.
- 6 Following my own research, I now know that surveillance in school toilets and changing rooms is taking place across the UK and has been going on for some years. This is horrible, just horrible. Students should not have to suffer the discomfort of suspecting or knowing they are being watched and filmed – while in, or even on, the loo.

Most people like to be private for their number ones and twos. If they like not to be private, they like to choose who they share their bodily functions with. I did believe, until researching this feature, that this was the norm in the UK.

Students not wanting to go to the loo at school - not going to the loo at school - not feeling all right about doing so - phoning a parent to pick them up just so they can go to the loo in privacy and feel safe - well, news stories about school CCTV describe all of these issues.

- 7 Apart from the physical discomfort and consequences of holding on to wee - urinary tract infections, for one - the reality that students must surely avoid drinking fluids - what about the emotional distress they experience? Including the unspeakably horrible distress of risking - or even having, God forbid - an "accident." How do menstruating girls manage?

Do they miss school, as so many girls do in Africa, because they do not feel comfortable about using the toilet?

In my day, the problem was locks on toilet doors - they were always broken. It looks now as if I had it easy.

- 8 Newton Abbot College apologised to parents for a lack of communications and consultation about the installation of CCTV. But the college failed to apologise to them - or to the students - for installing the cameras. They just apologised about the lack of consultation. A consultation, incidentally, which might have ended in a strong kickback.

There seems to be no awareness by the school that spying on their students without consent, is anything like wrong.

- 9 The stated purpose of the CCTV is to improve student behaviour.

I think students being spied on actually teaches students the opposite. It shows them it is all right to take a cavalier approach to people's physical and emotional comfort. It is training them that it is all right to ride roughshod over other people and that it is OK to do what you want - unless you get found out - then you just say sorry.

The cameras are achieving the exact opposite of what the school claims they are trying to achieve.

- 10 So, what can parents do about it? Quite a lot, once they know.

Schools often back down and remove their surveillance equipment when parents find out and get angry. This has happened in [Belfast](#), in [Plymouth](#) and earlier this year, in [another Devon school](#).

- 11 The Information Commissioner's Office [ICO], which deals with data privacy, can order schools to [remove CCTV cameras](#).

The ICO makes clear, taking photos and film footage of people has to

comply with the law and particular care needs to be taken when this involves children.

Cameras should only be used in toilet areas in exceptional circumstances.

Schools need to justify their use of CCTV.

Apart from being "proportionate and necessary", the CCTV needs to address a pressing need not addressed by other measures.

12 To me, all this says, schools need to present their case to parents - and students.

Consultation with students and parents would be great, but that seems to be an alien concept to many schools. There are, however, exceptions and I will cover one later on in this feature.

It seems to me that schools need to explain clearly and evidence the nature and scale of the problem and how they have explored different solutions. If they don't do this, they may be breaking the law. It also seems to me that, if schools are breaking the law - or even bending it - they are sending a clear message to their students, this is all right to do.

One Newton Abbot College parent was quoted by [Devon Live](#) as saying that campaigners have tried for years to change legislation to allow CCTV to be installed in care homes to protect people from abuse, neglect and rape. CCTV is still not allowed in care homes, so why is it allowed in schools, for far more flimsy reasons?

13 But how big is the problem?

In 2012, [90% of secondary schools](#) were using CCTV cameras - a lot of cameras - with about 10% of schools using them in toilets and changing rooms.

Even then, [Big Brother Watch](#), an organisation that monitors surveillance in our society, was extremely concerned about what happened to the footage of children and why the schools were using CCTV.

The recent Newton Abbot College story shows that the problem has certainly not gone away.

14 As a concerned parent asked in a [Freedom of Information request](#) to the Department of Education in 2012:

Who is manning the cameras?

Where are these images sent to?

Was written parental consent gained on EVERY child?

Do you not think that this is very intrusive?

Isn't this the exact profile of what a paedophile would do?

Do you think the British public are daft?

Do you not think that this is very Orwellian [Big Brother]?

When is the government going to stop infringing on the rights of others?

It's time for all these questions to be answered!

- 15 Does CCTV in the loos do any good? Some people say it stops bullying.
- Er... no. If bullying in the loos is off the table because someone's watching, bullies just operate elsewhere. They're not daft.
The fact that schools seem not to understand fundamental points such as this, worries me deeply.
- 16 One parent pointed out that, ironically, unless the cameras are in toilet cubicles, [the cameras are completely pointless](#) because that's where the bullying goes on.
- Yep, that's what I remember. The same parent added: "There's enough dodgy stories coming out of schools without them installing CCTV in the children's toilets too. Surely there has to be a better option?" Indeed, there must be. The parent had not spoken to the school about the issue as they said they "don't want them to take my concerns out on my son." Who is it that is doing the bullying in schools, once again?
Are we now afraid of the teachers and the school system?
- 17 [Big Brother Watch](#) said that there are many ways to teaching children good behaviour, that do not take away their privacy when they use the loo.
- They describe schools' use of CCTV as a [heavy handed, unacceptable and frankly lazy approach](#) and advise working with parents and students to address problems, rather than spending money on inappropriate surveillance.
- 18 Interestingly, a Department for Education independent adviser on behaviour in schools said, years ago, [cameras did little to stop bad behaviour](#).
- He advised, rather, that schools use a better, human solution - to train staff to create a supportive culture.
Now, that sounds like an extremely good idea – it's my kind of language and approach.
If only schools thought so. Instead...
- 19 In early 2020, some schools in England [put body cameras on teachers](#) in a trial planned to lead to permanent surveillance, expanding their reliance on the expensive and ineffective tech solution which schools, it seems, prefer.
Why do they think that children and young people should get used to the idea of being constantly watched? What is their motive?
- Is it part of a master plan to get our children used to the idea that they are being watched everywhere, all the time – and even in the loos?
- 20 If stopping bullying – and other problem behaviour, such as vandalism – in toilets is the intention, what about this idea?
- What if schools have just one set of toilets for staff, students and visitors of all sexes?

This was the courageous and brilliant choice made by Vic Goddard, the head of Passmores Academy in Essex.

The [architect-designed toilets](#) that this new school had, following intensive consultation with students at another school – now there's an idea!, look fabulous.

21 The fact that a staff member might walk in – and might even already be there – must surely be a better solution to problem behaviour than expensive, intrusive surveillance cameras.

Another advantage is an improvement in staff-student relations. Sharing facilities is a great leveller!

22 I wish more schools came up with good solutions like this one. It seems that the first solution, never mind how pointless or terrible, is the best one, so the school can be seen to be doing something.

This is not a problem confined to schools. We see it all the time, in administration at every level. Local to us a street lamp was put in the wrong place – oddly in the middle of a footpath? Administrators closed the footpath – at great inconvenience to users! Never mind that if it's daylight, the lamp can be seen and avoided. If it's dark, guess what – the lamp can be seen because it's lit – it's a street light! A simple red and white cone would have done the job to warn people of a stupidly placed street light – if a job was necessary. Other than putting the lamp in the right place – as one would expect it to have been!

And expensive solutions are always better. Of course.

It is a trait so often seen among government departments. I/D the problem quickly – do something, anything, but throw plenty of money at it – then tell the world how good you've been at acting so quickly and by spending someone else's money.

23 Returning to Passmores Academy's toilets, there is no CCTV in them, I am delighted to say. No need, because staff members go in there! What a great way to bring in supervision of the student facilities – assuming supervision was somehow needed!

24 Mr Goddard did, however, blot his copybook, it has to be said.

Toilets: 10 out of 10. Innovative thinking: 10 out of 10. Student involvement: 10 out of 10.

Response to Freedom of Information request: 2 out of 10. Oh, dear!

Mr Goddard said that the [FOI request from Big Brother Watch about CCTV in school toilets](#) was a waste of his time. This off-the-cuff remark perhaps hints at the gung-ho attitude that is at the root of the problem: "When it comes to student privacy, you don't need to ask us – the schools – any questions, that's a waste of our time."

25 Schools have not got it covered, as this subject - surveillance of their students - shows, only too clearly.

26 I think now is an excellent time for schools to answer some questions:
And this opens a door on another but related area.
I wish it didn't go on – but it does!

27 What is their view on being supplied with [surveillance cameras made by Hikvision](#)?

This supplier, a major supplier of CCTV to schools and leisure centres across the UK, is a Chinese company.

Hikvision is believed to be guilty of serious human rights violations and to have used cameras just like the ones they supply to schools to monitor Muslim minorities in Chinese internment camps.

28 What have schools done to make sure that Hikvision does not receive data from the schools?

US intelligence agencies are concerned about [the risk of Chinese intelligence using these cameras](#) to spy on - or collect data from - people outside China. Hikvision has been blacklisted by the US government. But - despite the issues being raised in Parliament – it has been not been blacklisted by the UK government.

29 If schools claim to be short of funds - why do they spend money on surveillance?
Wouldn't this money be better spent on education, not enforcement?

30 Why do schools film students without consent - from them or from their parents?
Permission is normally required to photograph or film people.
In the case of children, photographing or filming them can result in criminal prosecution.

31 How do schools solve problems?
How much consideration takes place of a range of different solutions?

32 What happens to the film footage of children?
Especially as a main CCTV supplier has been found guilty of human rights violations.

33 Finally...

Is CCTV surveillance in toilets and changing rooms going on in our own local schools?

And what else might schools be doing that parents don't - yet - know about?

By: Helen King

Source: Tetbury CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

[LINK](#): Parents furious after Devon school installs CCTV in toilet facilities

[LINK](#): Secondary school criticised for installing CCTV in pupil toilet areas

[LINK](#): CCTV of PE kids seized by Salford police

[LINK](#): Belfast school removes CCTV from toilets after backlash from parents

[LINK](#): Plymouth school removes CCTV cameras after furious parent protest

[LINK](#): Devon school defends decision to install CCTV cameras in boys' toilet

[LINK](#): School ordered to remove CCTV after fitting cameras in toilets

[LINK](#): CCTV cameras being used in school changing rooms and toilets

[LINK](#): Big Brother Watch

[LINK](#): Information Commissioner's Office

[LINK](#): CCTV in toilets and changing rooms in school - Fol request

[LINK](#): Should schools use CCTV in toilets?

[LINK](#): Schools trial body cameras to aid safety and monitor behaviour

[LINK](#): Chinese cameras blacklisted by US being used in UK school toilets

[LINK](#): Passmores Academy on YouTube



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