

TECH

Nannies who do double duty as phone police

SAN FRANCISCO

BY NELLIE BOWLES

Silicon Valley parents are increasingly obsessed with keeping their children away from screens. Even a little screen time can be so deeply addictive, some parents believe, that it's best if a child neither touches nor sees the glittering rectangles. These particular parents, after all, deeply understand their allure.

But it's very hard for a working adult in the 21st century to live at home without looking at a phone and enforce a screen-free environment. And so, as with many aspirations and ideals, it's easier to hire someone to do this.

Enter the Silicon Valley nanny, who each day returns to the time before screens.

"Usually a day consists of me being allowed to take them to the park, introduce them to card games," said Jordyn Altmann, 24, a nanny in San Jose, Calif., of her charges. "Board games are huge."

"Almost every parent I work for is very strong about the child not having any technical experience at all," Ms. Altmann said. "In the last two years, it's become a very big deal."

From Cupertino to San Francisco, a growing consensus has emerged that screen time is bad for children. It follows that these parents are now asking nannies to keep phones, tablets, computers

and TVs off and hidden at all times. Some are even producing no-phone contracts, aimed at ensuring zero unauthorized screen exposure, for their nannies to sign.

The fear of screens has reached the level of panic in Silicon Valley. Vigilantes now post photos to parenting message boards of possible nannies using cell-phones near children. Which is to say, the very people building these glowing hyper-stimulating portals have become increasingly terrified of them. And it has put their nannies in an awkward position.

"In the last year everything has changed," said Shannon Zimmerman, a nanny in San Jose who works for families that ban screen time. "Parents are now much more aware of the tech they're giving their kids. Now it's like, 'Oh no, reel it back, reel it back.' Now the parents will say 'No screen time at all.'"

Ms. Zimmerman likes these new rules, which she said harken back to a time when children behaved better and knew how to play outside.

Parents, though, find the rules harder to follow themselves, Ms. Zimmerman said. "Most parents come home, and they're still glued to their phones, and they're not listening to a word these kids are saying," she said.

NO-PHONE CONTRACTS

Parents are now asking nannies to sign stringent "no-phone use contracts," ac-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY MA/THE NEW YORK TIMES; GETTY IMAGES (WOMAN AND CHILD)

ording to nanny agencies across the region.

"The people who are closest to tech are the most strict about it at home," said Lynn Perkins, the chief executive of UrbanSitter, which she says has 500,000 sitters throughout the United States. "We see that trend with our nannies very clearly."

The phone contracts basically stipulate that a nanny must agree not to use any screen, for any purpose, in front of the child. Often there is a proviso that

the nanny may take calls from the parent. "We do a lot of these phone contracts now," Ms. Perkins said.

"We're writing work agreements up in a different way to cover screen and tech use," said Julie Swales, who runs the Elizabeth Rose Agency, a high-end company that provides nannies and house managers for families in Silicon Valley. "Typically now, the nanny is not allowed to use her phone for any private use."

This can be tricky. These same parents often want updates through the day.

She said that at least wealthy tech executives know what they want — no phones at all. The harder families to staff are those that are still unsure how to handle tech.

"It's almost safer to some degree in those houses because they know what they're dealing with," she said, "as opposed to other families who are still trying to muddle their way in tech."

"NANNY-OUTING"

Some parents in Silicon Valley are embracing a more aggressive approach. While their offices are churning out gadgets and apps, the nearby parks are full of phone spies. These hobbyists take it upon themselves to monitor and alert the flock.

There are nannies who may be pushing a swing with one hand and texting with the other, or inadvertently expos-

ing a toddler to a TV through a shop window.

"The nanny spotters, the nanny spies," said Ms. Perkins, the UrbanSitter chief executive. "They're self-appointed, but at least every day there's a post in one of the forums."

The posts follow a pattern: A parent will take a photo of a child accompanied by an adult who is perceived to be not paying enough attention, upload it to one of the private social networks, like San Francisco's Main Street Mamas, home to thousands of members, and ask: "Is this your nanny?"

She calls the practice "nanny-outing." "What I'll see is, 'Did anyone have a daughter with a red bow in Dolores Park? Your nanny was on her phone not paying attention,'" Ms. Perkins said.

The forums, where parents post questions and buy and sell baby gear, are now reckoning with public shaming and privacy issues. Main Street Mamas has recently banned photos from being included in these "nanny spotted" posts, Ms. Perkins said.

"We follow and are part of quite a large number of social media groups around the Bay Area, and we've had families scout out nannies at parks," said Syma Latif, who runs Bay Area Sitters, which has about 200 nannies in rotation. "It'll be like, 'Is this your nanny? She's texting and the child is on the swing.'"

Sometimes a parent will step in to de-

fend the nanny and declare that the phone use at that moment was allowed.

"They'll say, 'Actually it was my nanny, and she was texting me, but thank you for the heads up,'" Ms. Latif said. "Of course it's very, very offensive on a human rights level. You're being tracked and monitored and put on social media. But I do think it comes from a genuine concern."

Commenters will jump in to defend someone — or to point out that no one can be sure whether the perpetrator is a parent or a nanny. "There is this thought that the moms can be on their phones," Ms. Latif said. "They can be texting, because it's their child."

Others say it shouldn't make a difference. Anita Castro, 51, has been a nanny in Silicon Valley for 12 years. She says she knows she works in homes that have cameras set up to film her. She thinks the nanny-outing posts cross a line and feel like "an invasion."

"I use the forums to find jobs, but now just reading the titles: 'I saw your nanny ...'" Ms. Castro said. "Who are these people? Are they the neighbors? Are they friends?"

Another nanny told Ms. Castro about quitting after one snooping mother followed her around during visits to parks.

"She'd pop up and say, 'Hey, you're not on your phone, are you? You're not letting him do that, are you?'" Ms. Castro recalled. "So she finally just said, 'You know, I don't think you need a nanny.'"



Clockwise from top: Kevin Roose, a technology columnist, recording a podcast episode; an encryption key for computer access; and the SelfControl app, which he uses to focus.

Keeping tabs on election disinformation

Tech We're Using

BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

How do New York Times journalists use technology in their jobs and in their personal lives? Kevin Roose, a technology columnist in New York who has been writing about disinformation online, discussed the tech he's using.

As a technology columnist, what are some of your favorite tech tools for work?

For work, I use a company-issued MacBook Pro. I hate, hate, hate the keyboard on it, so I sometimes use an external keyboard, which makes me look incredibly cool at the coffee shop. But my only other option is using my MacBook Air, which is about seven years old, runs out of hard drive space every time I use it and has a battery life of maybe 20 minutes.

A few years ago, I got hacked really badly. (It was my own fault — I was hosting a TV show about tech and volunteered to have a few professional hackers attack me, as an experiment.) As a result, I'm pretty paranoid. I use physical security keys, VPNs, an encrypted email provider and half a dozen secure texting apps to communicate with sources and colleagues.

I know I should be using to-do apps and bullet journaling, but I'm still pretty old school about taking notes. I carry a little brown Field Notes notebook in my shirt pocket, and I write down everything that could possibly be of interest — story ideas, errands to run, people I need to call, words I want to look up — in my atrocious chicken-scratch handwriting, in no particular order. When I fill up a notebook, I add it to a big pile on my bookshelf. I'm excited to reread them all when I'm old and nostalgic, and see some indeci-



pherable interview notes along with 46 pages of "CALL WALGREENS."

When I really need to get work done, I use an app called SelfControl, which blocks my access to certain potentially distracting websites for a set period of time. Mine is set to block Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Reddit, and I usually set it for two or three hours at a time. I also bought noise-canceling headphones this year, because my colleagues, God love them, are always talking on the phone with their sources. I'm pretty into a Spotify playlist called Focus Flow, which is perfect for drowning out their lovely, incessant yakking.

What are some of the trade-offs of using this tech?

I like taking physical notes because I retain information better when it's written on actual paper. The downside is that I spend a lot of time scrambling around my apartment looking for the notebook I left in a jacket pocket or under the sofa. There's also a definite trade-off between security and convenience. I probably spend 30 percent of my day typing in two-factor authentication codes. But I sleep better than I used to.

You've been covering the spread of**online disinformation in the run-up to the midterm elections. What is your advice for spotting disinformation? What tools do you use to do that?**

A lot of spotting disinformation is hanging out in the right places. I spend a fair amount of time on Reddit and 4chan and in private Facebook groups where a lot of hoaxes and viral rumors tend to originate. I also rely on tips from our readers, who have been submitting hundreds of examples of disinformation from their own feeds. And Twitter (deep, heaving sigh) is useful, too.

Recently, I've also been spending a lot of time on Crowdtangle, a tool that allows you to see what's spreading rapidly across Facebook at any given moment. (Crowdtangle used to be an independent company, but Facebook bought it in 2016.) I have a series of dashboards set up that allow me to monitor thousands of Facebook pages on different topics and see which false claims are being shared by which people and pages.

What kind of election-related tech shenanigans have you seen recently?

There have been a fair number of shenanigans on social media this cycle — things like coordinated influence campaigns, fake Facebook ads, and

hacking attempts on campaigns and think tanks. We've also seen new forms of disinformation, including the spreading of false claims over peer-to-peer texting apps.

What are you doing to combat those annoying robotexts?

I actually haven't gotten that many political robotexts. I do get frequent robotexts from a Caribbean restaurant in Queens, which I've never been to but whose promotional list I somehow got on. (I will make it to the Friday night fish fry soon, I promise.)

Outside of work, what tech product are you obsessed with?

I cook a lot, and I'm still pretty into my Instant Pot.

I've also been working on my sleep recently, which is very Arianna Huffington of me. Recently, I bought a \$15 noise machine on Amazon. You can fill your bedroom with jungle noises, or ocean waves, or crickets on a summer night. It's phenomenal.

On the recommendation of several friends, I also bought a gravity blanket, which is weighted down with heavy beads. It's meant for people with anxiety, but I just like the way it sits heavy on my body and prevents me from rolling over too much at night.

Answer to housing crisis may be in the backyard

BY TIM MCKEOUGH

In the San Francisco Bay Area, a region filled with technology companies interested in design, Yves Béhar is a designer interested in technology.

Among other things, Mr. Béhar and his company, Fuseproject, have helped create August smart door locks, PayPal's brand identity, an app-connected height-adjusting desk for Herman Miller, the Snoo smart bassinet and Ori robotic furniture.

For his latest project, Mr. Béhar has turned his attention to housing. Working with LivingHomes and its manufacturing offshoot, Plant Prefab, which has attracted venture capital funding from Amazon's Alexa Fund and Obvious Ventures, he has designed the YB1: a modular, customizable dwelling unit (or A.D.U.) to serve as a stand-alone residence in just about any backyard.

A.D.U.s — secondary residences like in-law units associated with a larger home — are already popular in cities like Portland, Ore., Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, and have recently been getting a lot of attention in California. Over the past few years, the state and numerous counties and cities have introduced new laws and programs aimed at encouraging homeowners to build A.D.U.s in response to housing shortages.

Mr. Béhar, who is presenting his first YB1 at the Summit ideas festival in Los Angeles this weekend, spoke about the design ahead of its unveiling. (This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Why should people care about accessory dwelling units?

It's basically an extra building you can build in your backyard. This is now being recognized as a solution for adding housing, whether it's for aging parents, students or people who are just starting out.

It's a solution for housing stock in cities, and hopefully bringing costs down. And people can do it themselves rather than waiting for local government or developers.

Prefab houses haven't quite lived up to the hype of providing well-designed, mass-produced affordable homes for all. What did you think you could bring to the table?

It's been a very fascinating field that has had its ups and downs. The traction prefabs were having was much lower than anticipated for single-family homes.

What's really transformational for the field, I believe, are these new A.D.U. laws. Interest has really boomed. I'm anticipating that the A.D.U. market will grow substantially in the next decade or two.

For people who decide to build an A.D.U., what is the advantage of going prefab?

The reason prefabs make so much sense in the A.D.U. context is that the

added construction is easy on neighborhoods and neighbors. It can take two, three years to build something, with all the noise and visual pollution. And wasted materials that come with that.

But with the YB1, it takes about a month to build it in a factory and a day to install. It comes prewired with all your electrical, HVAC, appliances — everything is ready to go. Prefabs make it so much more accessible for people to add housing stock, and it's so much cleaner.

How is the YB1 different from other prefabs?

Designing a prefab to fit in someone's backyard is a different exercise than thinking about completely new construction on a virgin piece of land. It's a smaller space, and it has neighbors, fences and privacy and light issues. I realized that a one-size-fits-all approach wouldn't function well, and would really restrict adoption.

Our approach has been to think of it more as a system that allows maximum flexibility. It's built on a four-foot system: Every four feet, you can decide whether you have a full-height wall, a full-height window, a clerestory or a half-size window. You can decide how much light you have, and where the view comes from. You can maximize privacy and the program of the home to be really specific to your needs.

There are two different flat-roof heights — one with clerestory, one without — and a pitched roof, which gives you the option to have a loft space upstairs.

What are the key materials and features?

It's a steel structure with concrete panels or slatted wood panels in a natural or black finish. There's a shutter system that creates shadow with an overhead awning. We have a roof that is designed to capture rainwater.

The first YB1 is a 625-square-foot unit that costs about \$280,000, but you've said future units will be available for less than \$100,000. How will you get the price down?

This one has a lot of glass, almost all the way around, and is a full-featured one with really nice appliances and finishes. So it's toward the higher end of what we build.

Plant Prefab is investing in robotic construction and new assembly technology, which will help us to bring the cost down. We think of it a little like a Tesla Model S versus a Tesla Model 3, with a progression of products that will be priced differently.

How soon will that happen?

We're working on it right now and actually have a project for low-cost housing here in Northern California, where they're interested in a nice little number of them. Based on that particular project, I think we'll have an opportunity in the next year or so.



A rendering of the YB1, a prefabricated accessory dwelling unit designed by Yves Béhar, the founder of the design firm Fuseproject, which is based in San Francisco.