Online Snooping Case

HELEN: Dear Diary-- Oh, I can't believe I just wrote that. It's been years since I

kept a diary and I never thought I'd pick up the habit again. But a friend recently

reminded me how much writing about your problems can help you sort them out,

so, here I am.

Jim and I recently plunged headfirst into our forties, and every day we're amazed

to look around the house to realize that our daughters are already 10, 12, and 14.

Seriously, where has the time gone? Things have been good, though. Jim

recently got another promotion, business is strong at the shop, and all the girls

are doing well in school. In fact, up until a few weeks ago, I would have been

hard pressed to come up with a complaint. One was bound to come eventually,

though. Juliet, our 14-year-old, has officially become sexually active.

It all started innocently enough about six months ago, when she told us she had

a boyfriend. His name is Scott. He's 15, and very polite. And he's always lived in

the neighborhood, so we knew him fairly well and expected nothing but an

innocent first relationship. I remember my seventh grade boyfriend. We held

hands for the first time and I panicked, thinking my father would catch me. I

guess I just assumed it would be the same for Juliet.

When she first told us about Scott, we set very strict rules for when and how they

could spend time together. An adult must be present if they were alone in either

our or Scott's house, only group dates would be allowed, and she must always

be home by 9:00 PM. We naively thought that this would eliminate any chance

for sexual activity, and thought we had done our jobs as parents well.

In the last month or so, though, Jim and I both noticed Juliet becoming more and

more secretive about her plans and activities. She started rushing out after

school and on weekends with little more explanation than, "See you later." We'd

ask her about it later and almost always just got the typical teenage response of,

"Nothing, or, just hanging out." Jim said we owed her the benefit of the doubt, but

something inside me was screaming that something was wrong. And that brings

us to last week.

Juliet's sneakiness continued to grow, and it finally just broke my ability to trust. I

went into her bedroom after she left one day and just started looking around. I

don't really know what I was looking for, maybe drugs, maybe alcohol, birth

control, condoms. I came up empty-handed from my search, and was about to

leave her room when I noticed that her online profile was on the computer-- unlocked. I had always vowed to never undermine the girls' privacy and spy on

them, but it was calling me to do so.

Against my better judgment, I sat down at her desk and clicked over to her

messages. Just as with any teenage girl, it was full of messages between friends

and, of course, puppy love notes from Scott. Most of it was typical junior high

gossip, but then, I found it. In one simple message, Juliet confessed to her best

friend that she and Scott were having sex.

I had always been concerned about the reliability of Scott's parents to keep a

proper eye on what the kids were doing, and sure enough, their seeming

emotional distance and lack of rules left the door wide open for Juliet and Scott. It

was apparently as simple as the two of them locking the basement door and

having sex right there under his parents' noses. I read more of the messages and

figured out the first encounter happened about a month and a half prior, with at

least four other incidents happening in the weeks that followed. I couldn't tell if

she was enjoying it, or if they were even using contraceptives, but I was furious.

I told Jim what I found immediately after he got home that day expecting full

agreement and support, but instead, he criticized me for snooping. We both

obviously think that something has to be done to curb this sexual activity, but we

haven't been able to agree on any course of action.

It's been a rough and uncomfortable week with no clear road forward, so we

finally both agreed to see a counselor and hope that professional advice lights

the way a little bit. Our appointment is tomorrow, and I'm incredibly nervous

about it. Am I a bad mother for snooping? Or is it justified out of concern for my

daughter's mental and physical health?

I'm going to try to get some sleep now, but with this on my mind and two other

girls about to enter their teenage years, too, I'm not sure if sleep will come until

the youngest one is married. Will update tomorrow. Helen.