Episode Book

EPISODE #5715

No Phone, No Panic: Safety Without Surveillance

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel asked one question that's really five: what do good communication and safety practices look like when a parent is unreachable for a few hours? This episode pulls apart the three problems wearing one trench coat — safety, logistics, and power — and finds the line between a check-in that reads as care and one that reads as surveillance. Drawing on relationship researcher Dr Clare Rosoman, Australian eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant, and Griffith University's María Atiénzar Prieto, we work through the reversibility test, the boundary-versus-control distinction, and the surprising role of object constancy in why silence spikes panic. Then we test the whole framework against the best case study available: Shabbat, where a community has practiced intentional unreachability every week for centuries — with printed prep lists, auto-replies, a life-overrides-everything principle, Rabbi Yuval Cherlow's rulings on hospital calls and dementia, and synagogue tablets built to summon help without a phone in anyone's pocket.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's got a question this week that sounds like one question and is actually about five.



Herman

That's usually when they get good.



Corn

Here's what he's asking. A parent takes a young kid out for a few hours, no phone. What do good communication and safety practices actually look like? So he wants the practical stuff. How do couples tell each other where they're going, when they'll be roughly back, how they handle a change in plan. He wants a judgment call on when the parent at home should reasonably start to worry. He wants to know if there are no-phone protocols families can agree on ahead of time, and he names Shabbat specifically, because there's a whole community that does intentional unreachability every single week by design. And then he draws a line he wants us to respect. He wants us to sort genuine safety from ordinary courtesy from the stuff that slides into unnecessarily restrictive or controlling.



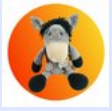
Herman

Five questions.



Corn

He's thorough like that.



Herman

That line he drew is the whole episode, though. Because safety, logistics, and power are three different problems wearing one trench coat, and most people arguing about this are arguing about different ones without noticing.



Corn

So pull them apart.



Herman

Gladly.



Corn

Start with the mechanism. Why does a check-in read as care in one house and surveillance in another? Same behavior, opposite verdicts.



Herman

The behavior isn't what determines it. The consent is. Dr Clare Rosoman at the Brisbane Centre for Attachment and Relationships put it well on ABC Radio National. She said the motivation behind location sharing and check-ins is usually a sense of safety, knowing where the other person is to reduce anxiety. Which is fine. But she said it has to be done through mutual agreement, it has to enhance a feeling of safety and connection between partners. And then the line that matters. If that's the only way you feel safe and connected, that's a problem, because it creates an insecure coping strategy in the relationship.



Corn

Insecure coping strategy. Meaning the checking becomes the thing holding the relationship together.



Herman

Right. And the moment the checking stops, the anxiety comes back worse, because you never built the capacity to tolerate not knowing. The ritual replaced the trust instead of feeding it.



Corn

Julie Inman Grant's version of that test is even cleaner. She's the eSafety Commissioner in Australia. Her formulation is that it stops being acceptable when sharing stops being voluntary and becomes something expected or demanded. And then she names the actual danger. Location sharing becomes dangerous when it becomes part of a broader pattern of pressure, manipulation or control.



Herman

One instance is nothing. A pattern is everything. That's the hard part for a person inside it, because no single text looks like abuse. The pattern only exists at scale.



Corn

Which is why the reversibility test is so useful. Rosoman's point is that people can openly turn it on and off without punishment. That's it. That's the whole criterion. Can you switch it off on a Tuesday and have nothing bad happen?



Herman

And Inman Grant's number is the one that should stop people cold. More than one in ten adults think it's reasonable to track a partner using a location-sharing app.



Corn

One in ten.



Herman

That's not a fringe view in a corner of the internet. That's a tenth of the adults you pass on the street.



Corn

What does "track" mean in their head, though? I suspect a chunk of that number is picturing something benign. Checking the little dot when dinner's late.



Herman

Possibly. But benign is a choice you make with the other person, not a thing you declare about them. The other finding on this is the one nobody wants to sit with. María Atiénzar Prieto, a PhD candidate at Griffith University, looked at who actually uses this technology for safety purposes, and found young women, but not young men, primarily engaged with it that way.



Corn

So the safety framing is being applied to one partner more than the other.



Herman

The person being tracked is disproportionately the woman, and the framing that makes it sound reasonable is safety. Which is exactly the disguise control prefers.



Corn

Give me the boundary line. Because I can already hear the objection. "So I'm not allowed to care if my wife's okay?"



Herman

That's the sharpest distinction in the whole literature, and it runs on one question. Whose behavior does the rule govern? A healthy boundary governs your own. "I will call the police if you're not home by midnight."



Corn

Mine. I'm saying what I'll do.



Herman

Control dictates the other adult's behavior. "You must text me every hour." Same anxiety underneath, opposite direction of control. One of the sources puts it in a sentence I can't improve on. A healthy boundary explains what you will do to protect your well-being. Controlling behavior tells another adult what they must do so you can feel safe.



Corn

Which means the person who says "text me every hour" believes they're being responsible.



Herman

They're describing their fear. It just comes out as an instruction aimed at somebody else's hands.



Corn

So run the red flags.



Herman

Negative reaction when you turn location sharing off. That's the reversibility test failing in real time. Atiénzar Prieto also names questioning you about why you go to certain places, or why you took a different route home. Think about what that requires. The other person knows your routes. They know the alternatives. They've built a model of your movements precise enough to flag a deviation.



Corn

That's a lot of attention to be paying to somebody's commute.



Herman

And one of the relationship sources, Uncrumb, frames the whole thing as this. Someone who cares about your safety will offer help but respect your right to say no. A controlling partner will demand compliance and act hurt or angry if you choose independence.



Corn

Hurt or angry is the tell. Because hurt is not an argument. You can't respond to hurt. You can only fold.



Herman

That's the mechanism. The anger reframes your autonomy as a wound you caused.



Corn

So why does silence hurt so much in the first place? Because for some people a partner being unreachable for two hours is a non-event, and for others it's a panic. That's not a character flaw on either side. Something's driving it.



Herman

Object constancy. The ability to hold a stable sense of connection with someone who isn't in front of you. When it's underdeveloped, temporary unavailability doesn't read as "they're busy." It reads as genuine panic. The person's gone, and the part of you that should keep them present doesn't hold.



Corn

And the phone makes that worse, because text strips out everything. No tone, no face, no body. One source describes it as a blinking cursor and your own projections.



Herman

Which is the cruelest part of the whole thing. It's not the silence that spikes the anxiety. It's the silence plus the feedback channel you're staring into. The instrument that was supposed to reassure you is the thing manufacturing the uncertainty.



Corn

So a couple can do everything right and still hit this, because one of them cannot hold the connection through two hours of nothing.



Herman

And then the check-in protocol becomes a substitute for the capacity they never built. Which is why it has to be negotiated and not assumed, and why a protocol that makes one person feel safe can quietly be making the other one responsible for somebody else's



Herman (continued)

emotional regulation. Every hour, forever.



Corn

There's the trade I was looking for. The check-in solves the anxious partner's problem by handing the other partner a job.



Herman

And if it's offered freely, that's a gift. If it's extracted, that's a levy.



Corn

Now the flip side. Because the assumption underneath all of this is that reachability is the safety baseline. If I can reach you, you're safe. If I can't, something's wrong.



Herman

And there's a community that has inverted that assumption every week for a few thousand years and built a working safety system on top of it.



Corn

Apply the criteria, then. The best test case in the room is a group that's been doing intentional unreachability for centuries.



Herman

Shabbat runs about twenty-five hours. Friday sunset to Saturday nightfall. No phone, no messages, no screens. Now, the naive version of that in a secular person's head is that observant families just accept a day of being uncontactable and hope for the best. That's not what happens. What happens is preparation.



Corn

Walk me through it.



Herman

The published framework is very concrete. Before the cutoff you print what you'd otherwise pull up on your phone. Addresses, directions, recipes, emergency phone numbers. You set an auto-reply that says you're observing Shabbat and will be unreachable until Saturday evening. And you tell the people close to you, explicitly, how to reach you if something is an emergency.



Corn

So the unreachability is scheduled, announced, and bounded.



Herman

And here's the design feature that makes the whole thing work. The governing principle is pikuach nefesh. The obligation to preserve life overrides virtually every other commandment. Which means the framework already contains its own emergency override. Some observant families keep a phone accessible but powered off, specifically for urgent situations.



Corn

Powered off, but not absent.



Herman

That's the inversion right there. In the standard model the phone is a routine tether, on all day, ambient. In the Shabbat model the phone is an emergency backstop that stays dark unless it's actually needed. Same object. Completely different role in the household.



Corn

So what does the framework do when the emergency is real? Because "prepare before the cutoff" only gets you so far if somebody's in a hospital.



Herman

This is where it gets interesting, because there's a rabbi who's ruled on exactly this. Rabbi Yuval Cherlow at Tzohar. His ruling is that a family may answer a phone on Shabbat if it might be coming from a hospital. But he attaches a condition. You ask the staff to call only if necessary and not for anything non-vital. And his governing instruction is that families should do everything they can before Shabbat, thereby reducing the amount of phone calls.



Corn

He's not loosening the rule. He's saying the preparation is the point.



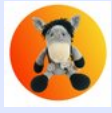
Herman

He's saying most of the calls you'd need are calls you should have made unnecessary by arranging things in advance. The live call is the failure state.



Corn

And the dementia case. You mentioned a phone for a parent with dementia?



Herman

Tzohar rules that a person must remain available for a parent with dementia whose anxiety constitutes a real danger to their health. That's the framework flexing all the way over. If the distress is itself a medical danger, availability is required.



Corn

Wait. So the same logic that says "you don't have to answer the phone" also says "you absolutely do, if the person on the other end is in real medical distress from not reaching you."



Herman

Which is the honest version of this whole topic. There's no absolute rule. There's a preparation habit and a set of judgments about what's actually dangerous.



Corn

And there's infrastructure. You said communities built something.



Herman

This is my favorite detail in the entire research. Nedarim Plus, working with United Hatzalah and Magen David Adom, developed a system of tablets in synagogues that lets someone summon emergency help without carrying a phone. You don't break Shabbat. You don't carry anything. You walk to the tablet.



Corn

So they built an emergency channel that doesn't depend on anyone having a phone in their pocket.



Herman

They externalized the emergency function to the building.



Corn

The general analogue of that exists too. I went through the long-distance emergency planning material, because that's the closest thing outside of religious practice.



Herman

You went down that rabbit hole.



Corn

It's a good rabbit hole. The standing recommendations are a dedicated emergency phone kept charged but in airplane mode. Predetermined check-in windows. Six in the morning, two in the afternoon, eight at night. Predetermined physical meeting points, and the example they give is specific, a particular Starbucks with a generator.



Herman

Of course it's a Starbucks. That's the most American emergency plan I've ever heard.



Corn

And then the 72-hour rule. If either partner goes completely dark, you contact the other's local emergency contact on day three.



Herman

Day three.



Corn

That's the number I keep turning over. Three days before the structured plan says start making calls. Now, no parent on earth is waiting three days with a toddler unaccounted for.



Herman

Right. That rule was written for adult partners in different cities, not for a five-year-old.



Corn

Which is exactly the point. There's no formal threshold anywhere for how long a kid can be out before a parent worries. The searches came up empty. No published guidance on the age a child can be out without a phone, no missing-person reporting threshold that maps onto this. The only concrete time-based rule I could find is that 72-hour escalation, and it's clearly not meant for this situation.



Herman

So families are improvising. Every one of them.



Corn

There's also a gap in the general literature, and I want to say this plainly because I don't think anyone's filled it. There is no named, standalone, no-phone family protocol framework in the parenting or relationship research. As of right now. If you want one, you're borrowing from Shabbat practice or from long-distance couples' emergency plans, and neither of those was written for a parent taking a kid to the park.



Herman

Name the escalation checklist from that guide though, because it's the piece families can actually steal.



Corn

Check the last-seen status across whatever platforms you've got. Then text the partner's emergency contact. Text, not call, and the reason given is that most people ignore unknown numbers. And if it's urgent, call local emergency services and ask for a wellness check. The person who wrote it says they've done wellness checks twice, and their line about it is, better embarrassed than sorry.



Herman

Spelled out, that's the actual anatomy of how you'd handle it. Not "worry at hour four." A sequenced list of actions.



Corn

And Gottman's piece of this is the least dramatic and maybe the most useful. Their framing is that agreements are what bring unspoken expectations into view. The problem isn't that couples disagree about check-in frequency. It's that neither of them ever said what they were assuming.



Herman

They assumed, and then one of them violated a rule that was never spoken.



Corn

Which is unfalsifiable. You can't break a rule nobody made. You can only discover you were being held to one.



Herman

Okay. Build the sorting rule.



Corn

Four questions. First, is it mutual and reversible? Can either partner decline it without punishment? Second, does it govern your own behavior or does it dictate the other adult's? Third, does it exist to reduce anxiety, or to enable a genuine safety response? Fourth, is there a pre-agreed emergency channel that doesn't depend on the routine tether?



Herman

And a practice that fails the first or the second is control.



Corn

By definition. Because those two are the ones that are actually about power. The third and fourth are about efficacy.



Herman

Run it on a concrete case. "Text me when you arrive."



Corn

Mutual? Usually. Reversible? You'd want to check, but for most couples, sure. Governs your own behavior? You're telling the other person to text, so it dictates theirs. Hmm. But it's a single event, not an ongoing pattern, and the alternative is nothing.



Herman

Which is why the pattern question has to be in there. One request isn't control. The pattern is.



Corn

Now run "You must text me every hour."



Herman

Fails on reversibility. Try declining it and see what happens.



Corn

Try declining it and you get the hurt. The anger reframing your autonomy as a wound. And it fails the third test too, because an hourly check-in doesn't enable a safety response. It doesn't tell you anything about whether the person is safe. It tells you they can operate a phone.



Herman

Which is the thing people miss. Frequency isn't safety. A check-in every hour gives you a hundred and sixty data points a week and not one of them tells you whether something's gone wrong. The person texts you, and then six minutes later they're in trouble, and you've got an hour of comfort in between that was never true.



Corn

It's reporting, not protection.



Herman

It's reporting. Which is exactly what makes it feel like control from the inside, even when both people would say they agreed to it. Because one of them is generating data for the other one's anxiety, and the data never actually resolves the anxiety. So they need more of it.



Corn

The 39 melachot. I want to come back to something in the Shabbat framework, because I think it makes the contrast sharper.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

All the forbidden categories of work derive from building the Tabernacle. They're not arbitrary prohibitions about fun. They're prohibitions about creative labor, about construction, about the things that build a world. The phone is forbidden on Shabbat for the same reason. It's a tether to the weekday world.



Herman

The phrase from the guide is that a phone in your hand is a tether to the weekday world, and Shabbat asks you to untether completely. That's not a rule against communication. That's a rule about what the day is for.



Corn

So the design isn't "no safety net." The design is "the safety net is pre-built so the day doesn't need it." Print the numbers, tell the contacts, keep the phone charged and dark. All the preparation happens before the cutoff, which is why the cutoff can be absolute.



Herman

Prepare before, so the boundary can be clean during. That's the whole philosophy in one sentence, and it's transferable to anybody.



Corn

Average person checks their phone ninety-six times a day. Roughly once every ten waking minutes.



Herman

So the baseline condition for most families is that nobody is ever actually unreachable, and nobody's built the muscle for it.



Corn

Which explains why a phone-free afternoon feels like a crisis to people who've never done it. It's not that something's gone wrong. It's that the ambient reassurance has stopped, and nobody knew how much they were leaning on it.



Herman

And that's the real argument for the Shabbat model as a template. Not that everyone should observe Shabbat. That intentional unreachability, done with preparation, is a skill, and it's a skill most families have let atrophy.



Corn

One more thing before we bring this home. The framework isn't a general one. Nobody wrote a guide called "the parent takes the toddler out and doesn't carry a phone" and published it. Families are filling a gap.



Herman

Which is exactly why the prep list is worth more than the rule. If you're doing this at all, the Shabbat checklist translates directly. Print what you'd otherwise pull up. Tell people where you're going and roughly when you're back. Set an auto-reply if you're the one who'll be dark. Give one person, one specific person, the authority to reach you if it's real. And keep



Herman (continued)

the phone in your bag, powered off, as the backstop.



Corn

And let the routine tether go.



Hilbert

There's an old dispatcher's protocol for families up in the hills, and it started with a laminated card.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

Before a family drove out to a remote road, they'd call in what they called a route card. Where they were headed, which road, when they expected to arrive. The dispatcher wrote it on the card and put it in a tray. If they didn't call back within two hours past the expected arrival, the dispatcher started making calls. Landline first. Then the neighbor.



Herman

The card was the protocol.



Hilbert

Names, numbers, the two-hour margin. All of it on the card, so nobody had to remember it or negotiate it at the moment. That was the whole trick. The worrying wasn't the spouse's job. The spouse was at home with the kids. The dispatcher did the worrying, because the dispatcher had the card and the clock.



Herman

So the safety function was external to the couple.



Hilbert

It has to be. Otherwise the person who loves you becomes the person who's watching you. Same feeling, different thing. When the dispatcher called, nobody's marriage was on the line. It was just a man with a card checking whether the car had made it down the hill.



Corn

And that's why the Shabbat thing works.



Hilbert

Same reason. The shul tablet, the printed numbers, the neighbor who knows to knock. The net is outside the house. The couple doesn't have to police each other, because somebody else is holding the card.



Herman

The card was for a remote road though. What about a normal Tuesday?



Hilbert

A normal Tuesday, you don't need a card. You need a person. One person who knows where you went and when you said you'd be back, who isn't your spouse. That's it. That's the whole system.



Corn

Let me pull on that. Because I think Hilbert just handed us something the research couldn't. Every protocol we've discussed, the Shabbat prep, the check-in windows, the meeting point, they all work better when the worrying isn't a job the two partners do to each other.



Herman

The whole design principle is delegation. Not delegation of care. Delegation of the monitoring function. If I'm the one who decides when to get worried about you, then I'm also the one with standing to ask you why you're late. If a third party holds that, you and I are just two people who love each other and happen to know the plan.



Corn

Which is the answer to one of Daniel's questions that I hadn't been able to land. When should the parent at home reasonably become concerned? The honest answer is, whenever the pre-agreed structure says so. Not when their anxiety says so.



Herman

The structure has to exist before the day it's needed. That's the laminated card. That's the printed numbers. That's the shul tablet. A physical thing that says what happens, so nobody has to invent it while they're scared.



Corn

Which means the line between a protocol that reduces anxiety and one that just relocates it is this. Does the protocol tell you what to do, or does it tell the other person what to do?



Herman

One's a plan. One's a leash.



Corn

Hilbert, the card was in a tray on whose desk?



Hilbert

A man named Reuben. He kept a radio on, and a kettle on, and the tray was where the cards went. I kept one of those cards in my wallet for about nine years. Eventually the family moved off the hill.



Corn

Do you still have it?



Hilbert

No. Reuben's widow has it. She keeps the tray too.



Corn

The cutting-room floor. One thing we didn't get to. The same emergency guide makes a point that most people get wrong.



Herman

Go.



Corn

Your backup method has to not share infrastructure with your primary. So if you're relying on WhatsApp and your backup plan is a text message, you don't have a backup plan. Both of them need a cell tower. If the tower's down, you have one plan and no plan.



Herman

Which is why the Shabbat model keeps a landline in the frame, and why the dispatcher had the neighbor's number, not just the family's.



Corn

Two different systems. That's a backup.



Herman

Where does that leave Daniel's question? Because he asked five things and I think we've got answers to most of them.



Corn

The plan is the answer. Not the rule, and not the frequency. Tell each other where you're going and when you'll roughly be back, and treat a change of plan the same way. That's courtesy, and it costs nothing. Agree in advance on the emergency channel, and make it a channel that doesn't depend on the routine tether, because the routine tether is the part you want to be able to drop on a Saturday. And when it comes to worrying, hand the worrying to a structure. A printed number. A friend who knows the plan. A standing window. Something outside the marriage.



Herman

Because the moment the worry belongs to your partner, they need data, and the moment they need data, you're reporting in.



Corn

Where the practice fails the reversibility test, that's not a protocol. That's a policy somebody imposed on somebody else and dressed as love.



Herman

The question Daniel should take home isn't whether to check in. It's who's doing the worrying, and whether that worrying is a shared plan or one person's burden.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing us, and to Daniel for the question.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a question, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.