

# Plan Your Smart Home But Weigh Privacy Risks

*Many Smart Devices Are Able To Listen In To Conversations And Communicate To Distant Servers*

NEW YORK: You might have heard of lights that turn off with an app or voice command. Or window shades that magically rise every morning.

Technology companies are pushing the “smart home” hard, selling appliances and gadgets that offer internet-connected conveniences you didn’t know you needed. But before you succumb to the temptation \_ for yourself or others \_ consider that these devices might also give companies and hackers a key to your homes.

Here’s how to get started on your smart home and what to worry about along the way.

## STARTING THAT SMART HOME

A smart home can encompass features as simple as remote-controlled lamps and as sophisticated as thermostats that know when you’re home and turn up the heat automatically. Down the line, you may want to mix and match these tasks into routines, such as a wake-up ritual that automatically starts the coffee maker, lifts the window shades and plays the news.

With the right tools, you can check remotely whether you remembered to lock the doors \_ and lock them if you forgot. Some systems can also create temporary digital keys for guests and contractors.

Many people start thinking about a smart home when they get a voice-activated speaker such as Amazon’s Echo or Google Home, although such gadgets aren’t strictly necessary. Nor do you even need actual smart lights and appliances, as you can buy smart plugs, adapters that control existing lights or whatever you plug into them.

If you catch the smart-home bug, you can add appliances with the smarts already built in as you replace your existing ones. Major remodels also offer an opportunity to make bigger smart-home plans. You probably wouldn’t want to get new window shades now only to replace them with smart ones a year later.

## THE RISKS

There are some concerns to keep in mind. Many devices are constantly listening for commands and connect to corporate servers to carry them out. Not everyone is going to be comfortable with live microphones in their homes (though your phone may already be doing the same thing, if you had enabled assistive features such as “Hey Siri”



The Nest Secure alarm system on display during an event in San Francisco. Technology companies are pushing the ‘smart home’ appliances and gadgets that offer internet-connected conveniences you didn’t know you needed. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg,



This photo shows an Ecobee smart thermostat, room sensor and connection components in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. Smart thermostats, which let consumers adjust their home temperatures remotely using any internet-connected device, are among the most popular smart home technologies, with the global smart thermostat market surpassing \$1 billion in 2017, according to Research and Markets. (AP Photo/Cathy Bussewitz, File)

and “OK Google”). For the most part, recordings will leave home only when you trigger the device, such as by speaking a command phrase like “OK Google” or pressing a button to get the device’s attention. But an Amazon device mistakenly recorded and sent a family’s private conversation to an acquaintance after the device mistakenly thought it heard the trigger word followed by a “send message” request.

Check what safeguards a device offers before buying. Smart speakers, for instance, typically have a mute button to disable the microphone completely. Mozilla’s Privacy Not Included project seeks to warn consumers about

products with security or privacy problems. A general web search also might turn up complaints.

In general, it helps to stick with major brands, as their corporate reputations are at stake if they’re caught taking shortcuts. Bigger companies can also quickly fix security holes that crop up. Gadgets from startups and no-name brands may offer little or no protection; those companies may be more concerned with rushing a product to market.

Bigger companies, however, are also more likely to use your data for marketing. So consider the trade-offs.

LEAVING A DIGITAL TRAIL  
Even if a product works as in-

tended, it may be leaving a record that can resurface after hacks, lawsuits or investigations.

Manufacturers, for instance, typically store the voice commands their gadget send over the internet and use that data to help them personalize their services \_ and, potentially, advertisements. These voice snippets may include music or conversations in the background. Reputable brands let you review and delete your voice history; be sure to do so regularly.

And think twice about smart locks and their digital keys. In a child-custody dispute, for instance, your ex might subpoena the records to learn that you’ve been staying out late on school

nights. If you rent, a landlord might suspect an unauthorized occupant if you create a guest key that’s used daily.

## CHOOSING A SYSTEM

As cable and internet services become commodities, the companies behind them are turning to smart homes for new sources of revenue. AT&T’s Digital Life and Comcast’s Xfinity Home offer cameras, door controls and other smart-home devices. The packages are good for those who prefer one-stop shopping, though you might save money and get more choices by shopping around.

For the do-it-yourself approach, consider which company’s services you’re already using heavily.

If it’s Amazon, then devices powered by its Alexa digital assistant might work best. There’s a range of Alexa products, including refrigerators and washing machines.

You can command an Alexa microwave oven to “reheat one potato” instead of having to look up how many seconds. It’ll also reorder popcorn with a command \_ from Amazon, of course.

Likewise, if you’re a heavy Google user, choose devices that support Google’s Assistant. Apple has products under the umbrella of HomeKit, while Samsung has SmartThings. Some products will work with more than one digital assistant.

Some devices, especially cameras, come with extra fees for extended storage and other features. But in most cases, you have to pay only for the product.

- Canadian Press

## Is Ford’s Elimination Of Child Advocate’s Office Impacting Indigenous Kids?

QUEEN’S PARK: The NDP’s Anti-Racism critic Laura Mae Lindo is pointing out that, with Indigenous children far more likely to be in care than non-Indigenous children, Doug Ford needs to reverse his elimination of the Child Advocate’s office to avoid putting up another discriminatory barrier for Indigenous youth.

“In my riding of Kitchener Centre, Indigenous children are five times more likely to come into care than white children,” said Lindo. “Black kids are twice as likely to come into care as their white counterparts.”

“It’s obvious that Indigenous and racialized children and youth will be disproportionately impacted by this dangerous cut, because they are consistently overrepresented in care across the province. If Doug Ford doesn’t reverse his dangerous elimination of the Child Advocate’s office, he’s putting up another barrier and allowing another form of institutional discrimination that disproportionately hurts Indigenous and racialized kids.”

Earlier this week, people with lived experiences in care, child and youth advocates, and parents packed into the legislature to express their disgust and concern, and to support the NDP’s call for the Ford Conservatives to reverse the cut.

Ford’s removal of the Child Advocate

office will leave the most vulnerable children and youth in Ontario to fend for themselves. Prior to this cut, when children in care — those who are supposed to be under the watch of the government — were being abused or hurt, they were able to turn to the independent Child Advocate.

Lindo also stressed the importance of equitable access that the Office of the independent Child Advocate provided youth across Ontario.

“This callous cut means that Indigenous youth will no longer have access to the Thunder Bay Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. And urban and rural youth across the province will lose access to a phone line that connected them directly with an advocate. This will drastically reduce their chances of connecting with professionals who will advocate for their best interests.”

According to Ontario Children’s Advocacy Coalition spokesperson Anna Amy Ho, Ford’s decision will drastically increase the risk of Ontario children falling through the cracks.

“This will strip them of their ability to be heard when their safety, health and well-being is at risk,” said Ho. “Nearly 13,000 children in government care will now have no way to hold guardians like foster homes accountable.”

**HAPPINESS PROGRAM**

**January 18-20**

Fri.: 6.30 pm - 9.30 pm  
Sat./Sun.: 10.30 am - 1.30 pm

Fee: \$375  
Student: (\$275)

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