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Section: News

New tracking devices monitor teen drivers

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

It used to be that teenagers had to worry about their little brother or sister snitching on them. Now, Big Brother is watching, too.

A new class of monitoring devices is hitting the market that lets parents keep close tabs on how their kids are behaving behind the wheel - whether they're driving recklessly, whether they're wearing seat belts, whether they are really just going to the library like they promised.

Based on technology long used by trucking companies to track driver behavior, the gadgets, which typically are installed under the dashboard, can track a vehicle's acceleration, braking and distance traveled.

Some of the new devices are interactive, capable of notifying parents if their child speeds or drives beyond a predefined boundary - like to a boyfriend's house, or Tijuana. Depending on the product, the alerts come via e-mail, phone or logging onto a Web site.

Alltrack USA, an online retailer that offers a product it calls Real-Time Tracking, even sells a \$40 add-on that lets parents immediately tell their kid to knock it off. From their computer, they can flash a light on the dashboard or blow the car's horn at the driver. It also allows parents to prevent a car from being restarted once it's parked somewhere.

Gadgets like these can range in price from \$140 or so for a basic system without instant tracking, to more than \$400 plus monthly fees for systems that use global-positioning satellite technology.

In about a month, for instance, Road Safety International Inc., maker of the RS-1000 Teen Driving System, plans to add an optional GPS receiver that will push up the total cost of that product to about \$480 from about \$280 now. Currently, its device records the car's speed and other data that parents can only retrieve later.

When Jeff Auerbach put a tracking device in the car used by his 16-year-old son, Andrew, the two of them went shopping for it together.

"What I didn't want it to be was sort of a 'gotcha' spy program," says Auerbach, a patent attorney in Rockville, Md. His hope was that since Andrew knew someone could be checking up on him, he'd be inclined to drive safely all the time.

Andrew says he was a little upset at first. "It's not the greatest feeling" knowing that someone might be watching, he says. But he also says it provided a helpful excuse once when a friend urged him to see how fast his car would go. "It was very, very easy to just say, 'No, it's got a tracker system.' "

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