

business &gt; technology

## Follow that kid

*Today's technology makes it easier for parents to know where their kids are and what they're doing*

By JOE BURRIS  
SUN REPORTER

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Michelle Smith had been reluctant to buy a cell phone for her 7-year-old daughter, Daysha. Then one day in April, a substitute teacher placed the Radford, Va., girl on the wrong school bus.

Instead of being dropped off at her older sister's after-school program as planned, Daysha was sent home - only to find the doors locked.

As she sat on her front porch crying, her mother drove around town, searching frantically for the girl. No one at the school could tell her which bus the girl had been put on.

"Then my next-door neighbor called," said Smith, "and said, 'I have your baby.'"

The scary moment had a happy ending, but Smith didn't want to take a chance on losing her daughter again. So she did what many other parents are doing - she bought her child a cell phone equipped with an electronic device that could keep track of her whereabouts.

Today, Global Positioning System technology has been embedded in phones, watches and even sneakers to let parents monitor their children's whereabouts. There also are credit cards that enable parents to watch their children's spending habits and "black box" data recorders for cars that keep track of where teenagers are driving.

For the generation that relied upon infant video monitors, such gadgets are just another means of helping keep their children safe. But critics worry that such technology doesn't give kids the trust and freedom they need to grow up.

Smith herself once doubted whether a child needed a cell phone, but not anymore.

"I bought her a basic LG phone with a service that tells me where she is within one city block," said Smith. Two weeks after she gave her daughter the phone, the service came in handy when her daughter was again put on the wrong school bus.

"The service told me where she was and that the [bus] she was traveling in was going 30 miles per hour," said Smith. "She went to her grandfather's house, and I picked her up from there.

"I think the service is absolutely worth it. It gives you peace of mind, especially being a parent and knowing that kids are being taken left and right."

Nowadays, most phone services offer GPS technology. Disney Mobile and Sprint feature one called Family Locator, while Verizon, which Smith has, features Chapereone. The services enable parents to locate their children's handsets anywhere in the United States using the GPS system. Once a handset location has been found, the location and a map will appear on the parent's handset screen or on the Web.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles-based GTXC is taking the technology a step farther - literally. The company is experimenting with putting GPS technology in the heels of shoes. Eric Stalnaker, vice president of business/product development, says the GPS shoe was conjured up after the 2002 abduction of Elizabeth Smart, the 14-year-old Utah resident who was taken from her bedroom and found alive nine months later.

Called the Smart Shoe, it looks like a regular low-cut sneaker. The company expects to put the shoe on the market nationally within the next three months. It estimates that the price will be \$99-\$199, depending on the manufacturer. In addition, buyers will pay a monthly subscription fee, estimated to be \$19.95.

### 'Precious resource'

"People spend money to track packages," said Stalnaker, "but what about our kids - are they not our most precious resource?"

Designed for kids ages 5-12, the Smart Shoe can track a child's movements throughout the course of a day.

It also enables parents to set up safe (green zone) and unsafe (red zone) areas. If a child leaves a green zone and heads to a red zone, parents will receive a text and/or Internet message immediately. Ditto, if the shoes cease moving for an extended period - such as when they've been removed.

"It's a fact of life today that both parents work," Stalnaker added. "This is a way for those people to keep better tabs on their children and to have the ability to supervise them from afar."

For parents of teens who drive, Smyrna, Ga.-based Alltrack USA offers a GPS-based in-car monitoring system that tracks not only where a car is but where it has been for up to three months.

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Elizabeth Vandewater, director of the Children and Media Research Center at University of Texas at Austin, said though GPS monitoring is still in its early stages, she likes the idea of such devices.

"My kids are 7 and 11," she added, "and one of the biggest fears of any parent is that their kids are going to be somewhere and they can't find them."

Vandewater said GPS technology is being used in a society that has moved away from a traditional method of keeping track of children - the help of one's neighbors. She said that the best tracking comes when parents establish trust and good communication with their children.

But she added that often new technological devices geared toward children yield an "Oh, my God" response from the public that is overblown.

"I feel that GPS is just another parenting tool," she said, "but they're still like any other technology. They're not used in a vacuum, and the extent to which they keep children safe depends on the context in which they're used."

## Watchful eye

Samuel C. McQuade III, a professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology and author of the book Understanding and Managing Cybercrime, said GPS devices might be a good idea if a child is being threatened, such as during a hostile divorce situation. But he doesn't advocate using the technology for routine monitoring of kids.

"For parents, especially those of young children and adolescents, if they are in good communication with kids, they don't need to know their whereabouts 24/7," he said. "From a maturation standpoint, as kids get older they need more freedom; part of growing up is that they steadily gain independence from parents."

But along with the car-monitoring system, there are other devices that act as a parent's watchful eye during their children's first years of independence. For example, because many youngsters and their money are soon parted, the New York-based company Plastyc Inc. is offering the UPSide prepaid VISA card, which has a computerized monitoring tool that restricts spending.

The tool does not allow the purchase of guns, ammunition, alcohol, tobacco or pornography. It also includes an Internet home page where parents can track their child's spending. The parent is sent a message each time a card purchase is denied.

Patrice Peyret of Plastyc says the card gives parents the opportunity to curb their teens' spending without "being a control freak."

He added that it also enables parents to monitor how much money they're giving their children. "In our research, we discovered that often parents only counted allowance," he said, "whereas children also counted every time they were able to extract money for the movies or food or an item at the store."

"One father told us, 'Oh yeah, I give her about \$40-\$50 a month,'" said Peyret. "And when we asked his teenage daughter, she said, 'Oh yeah, Dad gives me \$100 a month.'"

All these new monitoring devices don't take the place of parenting, but they can ease worries - for parent and child.

Said Smith: "My daughter said, 'Mommy, I'm not afraid anymore, because you always know where I am.'"

## GPS on the Web

Though developed by the United States Department of Defense for military use, Global Positioning System technology has become a popular monitoring tool since being made available to the public in the 1980s.

The technology is free and can accurately locate a person to within 50 feet.

For information on how GPS works, log onto the following Web sites:

Garmin International Inc., a group of companies that design and manufacture communications equipment: [garmin.com/aboutGPS](http://garmin.com/aboutGPS)

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Schriever Air Force Base, Colo., where the GPS command center is located: [www.schriever.af.mil/gpsoc](http://www.schriever.af.mil/gpsoc)

For information on products that offer GPS technology, visit the following Web sites

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