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High-tech devices remind teenagers to drive safely

By Tona Kunz Daily Herald Staff Writer Wed Sep 28, 10:38 AM ET

Until recently, parents handing over the car keys to teens could do little more than pace the living room floor, pray and guess at what their offspring were doing on the roadways.

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But that was before technological advances allowed for palm-sized computers that let parents ride virtually beside their teens by using cyber-space to download cruise details.

Thanks to a growing industry aimed at tracking teens, parents can get detailed route maps of where their children drove or even receive pages when teens arrive at predetermined destinations.

Think of it as a daddy in the dashboard.

And some suburban police think it could be just the help they need.

"Depending on if it became popular, you could see accidents decrease by having parents monitor their cars," said Aurora police Sgt. Bill Lomax, who oversees the department's patrol division.

Real-time tracking

The technology started on a personal level as a diagnostic tool to let drivers know when maintenance was needed and gauge when mechanics were calling for unnecessary repairs, and on a corporate level as a way for vehicle-driven companies to keep track of their fleets' movements.

"Then in 2004 the teenage driving thing became all the rage," said Doug Kohl, a media spokesman for California-based Davis Instruments which makes CarChip. "Sales took off."

That interest by parents in keeping an eye on mobile teens fueled a rise in products that record the roads traveled by a vehicle, their speeds, bad driving behaviors and even the time they are moving.

Depending on the product parents pick, they can get downloadable reports pointing out driving patterns like speeding, hard braking or swerving that can serve as starting points for conversations about good driving habits. Route maps with time indicators can help parents determine if teens are telling the truth about where they spend their free time.

Real-Time Tracking and Drivesafe also send phone or Internet messages to parents, giving them the chance to call teens home for aberrant driving. Some models produce by companies like Alltrack USA also give parents the opportunity to remotely disable the car's starter.

Some products act as pseudo parents riding along by alerting motorists to bad driving with audible tones or lights on the dashboard triggered by aggressive or erratic driving. The lights or tones continue until the behavior stops.

The technology taps into the fears and nurturing nature of parents.

In Illinois, the data recorders are available primarily online. Manufacturers tout clients throughout the suburbs, including Naperville, Arlington Heights, Woodstock and Sugar Grove.

At least a half-dozen companies now produce a version of a computer or satellite-based tracking system costing roughly between \$100 and \$500, marketed toward nervous parents. In Detroit, schools have started using the devices in their driver's education vehicles.

Progressive Insurance launched a pilot program with 5,000 drivers of all ages in Minnesota to see whether the data boxes can alter driving behaviors. Drivers can earn up to a 25 percent discount off insurance premiums depending on how much they drive, when and how.

But while advocates call the devices learning tools, critics say they invade teens' privacy if used without the teen's knowledge or permission.

"We are definitely opposed to methods like black boxes or other devices used to spy on teens," said Alex Koroknay-Palicz, director of the Washington D.C.-based advocacy group the National Youth Rights Association. "Any invasion of privacy erodes trust. It does damage to the parent-child relationship, and that definitely negates any educational benefits."

The Davis Instruments media spokesman Kohl disagrees. He said the devices have made both him and his son better drivers because the audio alarms that sound during bad driving serve as a constant reminder that he is a role model for his son sitting in the passenger seat.

Teens in need

Auto accidents are the leading cause of teenage deaths. Nationwide, drivers 16 to 20 make up 6 percent of all motorists but account for nearly 20 percent of all traffic fatalities, according to the National Safety Council.

In 2004, crashes on Illinois roads claimed the lives of 133 teens between the ages of 15 and 19.

Recent studies by **The National Institutes of Health** and the University of California suggest teens simply aren't developmentally ready to drive a vehicle alone risk-free. The decade-long brain imaging study points to developmental changes well into the early 20s, which impact decision-making and impulse control.

That means teens can have trouble making quick judgments of the risks of certain behaviors behind the wheel or prioritizing among activities like talking on the cell phone or to friends or maintaining good driving skills, Kohl said.

He saw the truth of the study himself when he noticed a correlation between the reports he got from CarChip on his teenage son's speeding and when friends or siblings were riding along. The more distractions, the more paternal warnings fell to the back of his mind until the CarChip alarm sounded.

Kohl hopes that those automated reminders when he can't be in the car will keep his son from becoming a statistic.

Does it work?

The relatively new use of the technology to track teens means a lack of studies to back up whether the data devices compensate for youthful impulses or reinforce good driving habits.

"I don't think their use is widespread enough yet to study," said Russ Rader, media director of The National Insurance **Institute for Highway Safety**.

The not-for-profit think tank has stopped short of endorsing the use of data recorders by parents without studies on their effectiveness but does condone anything that gets parents more involved in monitoring or teaching teens good driving skills.

"We look at this from the standpoint that the more parental involvement the better because too many teens end up driving in risky situations, even with graduated driving laws in many states," Rader said.

"But they shouldn't take the place of parents driving with teens," he added.

Better driving habits, no matter how they are learned, save lives, traffic analysts say.

In the report "Prescription for Teen Driver Safety" published last month by End Needless Death on Our Roadways, an Elmhurst-based consortium of physicians from throughout the country, safety advocates outline a list of things to do to cut down on teen deaths.

One of the recommendations is to have parents check that until a driver turns 18, seat belts are worn, the number of passengers is limited and driving is limited between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m.

Manufacturers of teen tracking devices say their products make it easier to follow such recommendations. Plus, the devices can help teens build up trust with parents by proving good behavior.

"Will teens be mad about it? Probably," Lomax said. "I'd rather my children be mad at me than dead."

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