

An Electronic Leash for Teen Drivers

Are aftermarket GPS systems that track a car's whereabouts parents' best friend or a teenagers' worst nightmare — or both?

by HILARY JOHNSON, ForbesAutos.com

Brian Aladesuyi, 17, of Kennesaw, Ga., took his father's new gold Jeep Liberty out for a spin, went farther from home than he was supposed to, and sped. But he figured his dad would never know because he was away on a business trip — in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

But using global-positioning-system (GPS) technology, his dad, Kayode, 47, shut down the Jeep's ignition when his son stopped the car at a friend's house.

"I decided to teach Brian a lesson," Aladesuyi says.

It worked.

"Brian never sped again. Brian never goes where he's not supposed to go. I know I have a defensive driver on my hands."

The product that Aladesuyi uses, AutoSearchGPS Vehicle Management System, was developed by his own company, EarthSearch Communications, in Marietta, Ga. It competes with other GPS systems aimed at tracking teenagers, including those from AllTrack USA, Global Tracking Group and Mobile Teen GPS, among others.

These devices, which typically cost between \$200 and \$1,700, use GPS technology and software to monitor teens' whereabouts and transmit data in real time to a computer or cell phone, or store it onboard for later review.

Most of them are repackaged versions of devices originally used to help businesses monitor their vehicle fleets. The manufacturers of these devices are seizing on what they see as an opportunity and marketing them to parents as a tool to safeguard teen drivers. The safety potential is compelling, with car crashes being the No. 1 killer of teens in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What's Available

The market for this technology is small so far, but it's sure to get bigger as more consumers get used to GPS devices, says Dominique Bonte, an analyst with ABI Research. "GPS navigation is really becoming a mainstream thing," he says. "It's really entering the mass market, and as it does, other services will go mainstream, too, including teen tracking and even pet monitoring."

Other than the price factor, choosing which device to use is a matter of how much control a parent wants.

Smaller and less expensive devices, like AllTrack USA's \$209 Travel Eyes, are installed on the car and log data that can be downloaded to a personal computer via a USB port and reviewed. They don't allow parents to know where their kids are hour-by-hour or minute-by-minute.

Other, more expensive models, like Global Tracking Group's \$389 UBI-4000 and EarthSearch Communication's \$499 AutoSearchGPS, allow parents to track their kids in real time on a computer or cell phone. Some require a monthly fee that can range from \$7 to nearly \$100, depending on how often parents access real-time data feeds.

These more sophisticated GPS trackers allow parents to set up "geo-fences," which help limit kids' driving area. Should the child go past the "geo-fence," parents are alerted through a message on their cell phone.

A few of the models, including the AutoSearchGPS, even allow parents remotely disable a vehicle's engine using software installed on a cell phone. This function only works once the driver has already shut off the engine.

Big Brother Onboard

Some safety experts say that parents should definitely consider installing GPS tracking devices on their teens' vehicles. But it's important for parents to use them judiciously in order to maintain a good rapport with their kids, says David Shavzin, one of the founders of Safe Teen Driving Club, Inc. in Atlanta.

"It's important to not make GPS a restrictive or a punitive tool," Shavzin says. "It's not 'Big Brother,' but it should be used to coach teens. And used that way, we believe it can be very successful."

Sutherland Mazda, a dealership in Buford, Ga., experimented with marketing the AutoSearchGPS tracking device to customers for a short time, but didn't end up selling many units. Some parents "love" it, says Gregory Perry, a sales consultant at Sutherland Mazda. But other parents — and their teens — reacted less favorably. "Others feel like it's an invasion of privacy. They say, 'Wow, I'm not sure I want to be tracked,'" Perry says.

Shavzin says that parents often ask him whether they should tell their teen driver the device is going in the car. "We say 'absolutely.' It's really meant to be a tool to discuss with your teen, and help them learn," he says.

As to choosing from among the GPS tracking products on the market, Shavzin suggests balancing the cost with the service you get, "in terms of the amount of information and the frequency of the data provided."

Basically, for less money, you know fewer details, and for more, you can know almost everything about your teen's driving, including hard acceleration or braking.

Shavzin says the options available will only become more numerous as the technology matures. "You'll start seeing all sorts of other information — are seatbelts on, are there other passengers in the car — that technology is just going to be growing and growing."

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AutoSearch GPS Vehicle Management System

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