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Handing your kids the car keys can be a trip to the unknown.

"The greatest fear for any parent is when your son or daughter gets a driver's license and they leave the house," said John Jacobson of Leawood. "You have absolutely no control over what's going on."

But parents like Jacobson are grabbing some of that control back with technology that makes them virtual backseat drivers.

It's technology that has been used for years to follow trucks or diagnose engine problems, only now parents are using it to monitor their kids' driving habits.

Jacobson, for example, uses global positioning technology that alerts him by cellular phone and e-mail to where his 16-year-old son is driving and how fast.

The device, which costs about \$400 and is about the size of a candy bar, is just one kind of technology gaining popularity with angst-ridden parents.

At least six companies are marketing different variations to parents over the Internet.

Some gadgets even allow parents to remotely disable the engine's starter, honk the horn or turn on a light on the dashboard telling their child to hurry home. Others only detail information about speeding, braking and accelerating.

Parents say the devices give them an option they never considered for ensuring their kids' safety. And one insurance firm has discounted its rates for families that share data with the company.

But some teenagers say it amounts to unwarranted snooping. Scott Paradise,

an 18-year-old from Shawnee, wouldn't want the device on his car.

"I would say that's a little too much of an intrusion," said Paradise, a 2005 graduate of Rockhurst High School. "I think it should be more about trust than a parent knowing every single detail of my driving."

Other teens are more understanding.

"I have some friends that I would be worried about where they're going," said Meaghan Wood, 15, of Overland Park. "Knowing that their parents know where they're going would give me some peace of mind."

Parental supervision

An owner of a trucking company, Jacobson got the idea for using the technology on his son's 2004 Infiniti G-35 because his company uses similar devices to follow its fleet.

"It used to be we'd be sitting around on Friday night and my wife would say, 'I wonder where Joey is,'" he said. "Now if you want to know where he is, go and get on the computer and find out."

"My son's problem is that he pushes the limits," Jacobson said.

Joe Jacobson declined to comment for this story, but he previously told CNN: "It's kind of a neat feature, but kind of a pain.

"Getting your license has a sense of freedom, I suppose responsibility. It's just really a way to get out of having your parents on you all the time and then questioning you constantly, 'Why are you going here and what are you doing?'"

Some local highway safety experts were only vaguely familiar with the technology and couldn't say how extensively it was being used locally.

The National Highway Safety Traffic Administration takes no position on the devices because there's no definitive research showing their effectiveness, said spokeswoman Elly Martin.

The agency isn't even certain which driving behaviors are the best to

monitor, she said. The other issue is how parents use the information to instruct their teens. And what about manipulation?

"Some kids are incredibly computer savvy," Martin said. "Could they actually bypass the system? Could they edit the data? Could they make themselves look very good?"

The technology is gaining popularity amid mounting fears about teen traffic fatalities. The National Safety Council has called it a national crisis, saying that 44 percent of all teen deaths are caused by automobile crashes.

Almost 30 percent of all crashes in Missouri last year involved a driver under age 21. Drivers between 15 and 18 were involved in about 20 percent of all crashes in Kansas last year.

The seriousness of the problem is not lost on the companies that sell the technology.

"The bottom line is that your teenager's life and safety is priceless!" claims an ad by Alltrack USA of Smyrna, Ga. "Leave Nothing To Chance!"

### Collecting data

Kent Swafford of Lenexa recently bought a small box-shaped data processor known CarChip that plugs into a computer port under the dashboard. The box, which can sit in the palm of your hand, continuously collects data from the car's computer system.

Billed as an engine diagnostic tool, the device tells Swafford how many miles he racks up in his work as a piano technician. Once the information is downloaded onto a computer, it also tells how fast he drove, how hard he braked and how fast he accelerated.

Naturally fascinated by gadgets, Swafford experimented with his then-20-year-old daughter's car, but lost the data during the download. He plans to try it again as his 15-year-old son learns to drive. Swafford said the charts created by the technology could be used to teach.

But there are skeptics. Count among them Dennis Jones, a traffic safety specialist at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg.

"Is it a teaching tool? Probably not. It's just a tattletale," Jones said.  
"I would be hard-pressed to say you teach anybody anything after the fact."

Sellers of the devices believe the mere presence of the technology in the car will discourage risky driving.

"If the kid knows that there is a way for the parent to know how they're driving, they're going to drive in a safer manner," said Jack Church, vice president of marketing for Teen Arrive Alive of Bradenton, Fla.

At least one insurance company sees value in the devices for consumers.

Last year, Progressive Insurance began offering discounts of up to 25 percent for a limited number of Minnesota drivers who agreed to install a small box similar to the one Swafford bought. Discounts were based on what the data showed about their driving habits.

A matter of trust

The technology could have emotional ramifications for the family that doesn't use it carefully.

Carol Roeder-Esser, a licensed clinical social worker at the Johnson County Mental Health Center, said parents should be upfront with their kids about the device or risk turmoil.

"You want to have a good relationship with your teen so you can talk about things. You wouldn't want them to think, 'What other sneaky things are my parents doing?'" she said.

The devices might cause some teens to rebel because they're not recognized as soon-to-be adults, cautioned Nancy L. Murdock, professor of counseling psychology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

"Sometimes as a parent, you need to keep your kids safe," she said. "But adolescents, a lot of times when you crack down on them, it creates some bad feelings. It might make an adolescent angry."

Some teens think they have little choice if their parents choose to follow

their driving, especially if their parents own the car.

"When you're under 18, you have no privacy," said 17-year-old Dennis Matthews of Kansas City, Kan. "Living with your parents - it's their way or the highway."

Matthews' father, Bill, said he considered buying a device to monitor his son's driving but decided against it.

"We're concerned parents. We like to know where our child is and what he's doing." Bill Matthews said. "We did not do it mainly because we felt it might be keeping him in check too much. You've got to give a kid a certain amount of responsibility."

But for Jacobson, it was safety first:

"I am for free press and free speech and all of that. But there comes a time when your moral and fiduciary responsibility is to try to keep these kids going in the right direction."

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First glance

Some gadgets detail information on speeding, braking and accelerating. Other gadgets do a lot more than that.

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