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# Peace of Mind When They Ask to Borrow the Car



Douglas Joyce of Punta Gorda, Fla., with a tracking report on the driving habits of his son, Douglas Joyce. 17  
 By ELIZABETH OLSON  
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THERE is no moment where childhood and incipient adulthood collide that is more universal than the moment a teenager gets behind the wheel of a car. For the teenager, it is simple — it is the first real taste of freedom. But for the parents, that is when the worrying begins.

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For Teenage Drivers, Ever-Present Parents (November 3, 2007)

Some parents, though, are adopting new technology to monitor their fledgling drivers.

David Phipps, a security consultant in Baltimore, is one of them. After his daughter, Katie, got her driver's permit, Mr. Phipps said

he worried about her safety on the road. So this year he bought a palm-size global positioning device that uses satellite technology to keep an eye on her [Toyota Scion](#).

"I can click on the 'track now' button," said Mr. Phipps, of Bel Air, Md., "then go online, and in 35 seconds I can see where she is.

"My wife and I wanted it for her safety, and for our peace of mind," he said.

Mr. Phipps bought his device from an online retailer, Global Tracking Group. The device can send notification by e-mail or text message.

Such gadgets can be installed under the dashboard or, in some cases, plugged into the cigarette lighter or other vehicle power outlet to check on the driver's behavior, whether it is reckless driving or speeding, where they are going and, for some devices, even whether they are wearing their seat belts.

In addition to the cost of the device, parents pay a monthly fee for the G.P.S. tracking, which uses satellites to pinpoint the car, then transmits the information via cellular tower.

Proponents say the devices help teenagers become more aware and therefore become more responsible drivers. But most teenagers understandably are not thrilled at more parental control.

"It's part of our family's package for driving the car," said Douglas Joyce, 17, a high school senior in Punta Gorda, Fla., of a deal with his parents to have a global positioning system in his car. His father, also Douglas Joyce, a doctor, had installed one in his daughter's car in November 2004 after she drove to Tallahassee without telling him.

She has since graduated from high school, Dr. Joyce said, and the G.P.S. device was placed in his son's car when he started driving. Dr. Joyce said the device, from another online company, Alltrack USA, has made a "tremendous difference" to his peace of mind.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death nationwide for 13- to 19-year-olds, according to government statistics. The [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#) said 5,288 teenagers died in vehicle crashes in 2005, the latest data available.

States like Maryland, which have had a rash of teenage driving deaths in recent years, have strengthened under-18 driving restrictions, including more time in the car with parents to learn driving basics. While no statistics show that monitoring prevents youthful driver injury and death, some parents are convinced that knowing what their teenagers are up to is far better than not knowing.

Insurance companies are beginning to agree, with some offering discounts for families with tracking technology in their cars. Starting Oct. 4, the Safeco Corporation began offering up to a 15 percent discount on policies for customers in 39 states who opt for "Teensurance," which includes roadside assistance and the installation of a free G.P.S. device.

The device allows the parent to set a vehicle's maximum speed, how far it can travel and a curfew — at which time the car can no longer be driven. If the curfew is violated, for example, parents receive a cell phone or e-mail notification — for a monthly service fee.

Another insurer, A.I.G., offers a similar product, MobileTEENGPS, but does not give a discount, and other companies offer anti-theft device discounts, which include G.P.S., because of its ability to locate a car — whether a teenager is driving it or not.

An alternative to G.P.S. tracking is a device like CarChip, which records, graphs and reports how the car is being driven. The black box can be removed from the car and the data downloaded to a computer to determine, for example, where the vehicle has been and whether it has been driven dangerously.

Pat and Mike Manley, of Staten Island, N.Y., used CarChip several years ago to track their teenage son's driving after he got a speeding ticket. They installed the CarChip for six months and checked it routinely to detect any problem driving, Mrs. Manley said.

"If you realize you are being monitored, it keeps you constantly aware," she said.

The Manleys told their son that they were monitoring him, which is what the car companies advise. But some parents do not tell their children, arguing that hidden devices are the only true way of knowing how their teenager is driving the car.

Frank Velasquez, sales manager for CarChip manufacturer, Davis Instruments in Hayward, Calif., said he downloaded data from his 18-year-old son's car and found that it had been driven down a nearby highway at 88 miles an hour and that the return trip was even speedier — 93 miles an hour.

"It was eye-opening," Mr. Velasquez said. "He was a model student, on the honor role, a scholar athlete with a part-time job. But this just brought it home that he was a teenage boy, and because of it, I sat down with him and talked about how much a speeding ticket costs, how getting a ticket at that speed could cost him his license and how his insurance rate could have soared. I'd rather have been telling him those things before an accident."

Newer models like the CarChip Pro have more bells and whistles, like an audio alarm that can be set to go off for speeding, hard braking and abrupt accelerations.

Alltrack, based in Georgia, allows parents to remotely disable the car's starter or honk the horn as a warning or allow a car door to be unlocked for the driver who locks the car key inside. Parents can also be alerted, by e-mail or text message, if the driver exceeds a preset speed limit. There is a monthly service charge for these services.

A number of devices offer a "virtual fence," which sets an electronic limit on where the car can be driven and notifies the parent when the car leaves the preset area.

Even so, many parents are reluctant to sign on to what their children — or friends — may see as spying, said Wright Gore, president of SmartDriver, a Houston firm that sells a black box for recording speed, accelerator usage and distance traveled, among other driving indicators.

"A lot of them think it's the kid with the Trans Am down the block," Mr. Gore said, adding that parents represent only about 20 percent of his business.

"Our customers are often the parents who sense they have a problem," Mr. Gore said, "and they want to know for sure — before it's too late."

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