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Friday, April 15, 2005



Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News

Lahser High teacher Tony Midea, left, uses CarChip to help gauge student drivers like Graham Beegen and Danny Hernandez, right.

Parents snoop on teen drivers

High-tech tracking systems tell them how fast their kids drive and where they go.

By Nick Bunkley / The Detroit News

A growing number of teens are taking along a few unexpected passengers when they hit the open road in search of long-awaited freedom.

Nervous parents in Michigan and across the country are becoming virtual back-seat drivers in the latest and most high-tech fight against soaring teen crash rates.

With so-called "black box" technology, parents can follow their teens in real time to find out how fast they're driving, where they're going -- even whether they're signaling



Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News

The CarChip device uses so-called "black box" technology to track drivers. The system notifies parents of arrival times, vehicle speeds and deviations from destination routes.

CyberSurvey

Watching Teens?

Should parents use monitoring devices to track their kids' behavior behind the wheel?

- Yes, it may save their lives
- No, it's invasion of privacy

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before turns. Other products track every detail so parents can later download the data and look for signs of dangerous behavior.

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In Metro Detroit, vehicle-tracking devices are being used not only by parents but in some driving courses as well. Tony Midea, a Lahser High School counselor who teaches driver's education for the school district and through TSA Driving School in Sylvan Lake, plugs a tiny gadget called the CarChip under the dashboard for some students' lessons.

The CarChip records just about everything a student driver does, and it beeps if the driver accelerates too quickly, hits the brakes too hard or has a lead foot on the straightaways.

Oh, but there's more.

John Jacobson Jr. automatically gets a call on his cell phone the moment his son gets to school in the morning and when he arrives home in the afternoon. He's also alerted anytime 16-year-old Joe drives too fast or strays from the area between home and work.

And when Joe goes out with friends on Friday night, his parents can go online and immediately pinpoint his location.

"I'll go to the computer and pull it up and say, 'He's on Antioch Road and he's doing 32 mph,'" said John Jacobson, who paid about \$500 to outfit his son's car with a device from Georgia-based Alltrack USA. "We worry a lot less for the fact that we know we can find him, and we know he knows."

The source of Jacobson's worries: Teenagers are four times more likely to be involved in a crash than other drivers and three times more likely to die in one, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show that about 15 teens are killed on America's highways every day, making crashes the leading cause of death for that age group. Two crashes that killed nine teens April 1 in southern Lapeer County underscore the potential for tragedy when inexperienced young drivers are at the wheel.

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"This is not just about spying on your kids to see how they're driving," said Jack Church, vice president of Teen Arrive Alive, a Florida company that markets a black box to parents. Church has been trying to cut young-driver death rates since his 20-year-old son, Robert, crashed his truck and died five years ago.

"It's truly about safety," Church said. "You want to give your kids freedoms. You want them to grow. But if you have to make a choice between your kid's implied right to privacy and their safety, it's a no-brainer as a parent."

James Winfield, co-founder of DriveHomeSafe.com, a Web site dedicated to cutting teen crash rates, said black-box technology could reduce crashes, but it doesn't reduce parents' responsibilities.

"It's just technology. It by itself is not going to modify your kid's driving," Winfield said. "The tech is only going to be able to help you to the extent that the kids are willing to respond."

Lahser's Midea bought the CarChip several years ago to track gas mileage and engine performance on his own car. For driver's education, it allows Midea to focus less on the speedometer and more on other aspects of a student's driving.

"Today we're going on Woodward, and I figure the speed limit is 50 in some places," he said before taking two students on the road recently. "So I set it for 60. I'll probably warn them before that, though."

Frank Velasquez, sales manager for CarChip maker Davis Instruments in California, dismisses any criticism that such devices unfairly spy on teens' driving. After hiding the CarChip in his son's car, Velasquez was shocked to find him driving 93 mph on one freeway.

"There's no way I would ever have known that he was driving like that, but the CarChip told it all," he said. "As a parent I would much rather sit down with my son and talk to him about it before an accident."

Vehicle monitoring devices were initially marketed to trucking companies and other businesses with vehicle fleets, but the companies that make them are seeing demand from parents grow quickly. New models being introduced have features designed especially for parents, such as the ability to remotely disable a car's starter using Alltrack USA's product. For \$40 more, parents who don't like what they see can flash a light on the dashboard or honk the horn as a warning.

Mark Allbaugh, a Bloomfield Hills native who owns Alltrack USA, said he knows teens wouldn't exactly be thrilled to have their parents constantly watching over their shoulder.

"I would not have liked it," Allbaugh said, "but I look back and I drove kind of crazily as a kid, and I probably would have been more sensible if I had had something like this."

The technology has proven to be invaluable for parents, including a Houston father who bought the satellite tracking system from Teen Arrive Alive for his 16-year-old daughter. When the girl was late getting home, the man located her car and drove to that spot, where an ex-boyfriend was attacking her, according to Church and a story in the Houston Chronicle.

The device also can be helpful when friends dare a teen to drive recklessly or drag race, Church said.

"Instead of just saying no and being called a chicken, now he can say, 'I've got this stupid GPS device and my mom can see how I'm driving. I can't do that,'" Church said. "The kid saves face and may have just saved his life as well."

While teens might perceive a black box in their car as compromising their freedom, it might allow them to actually have more autonomy, said Wright Gore, whose Texas company sells a product called SmartDriver. Like the CarChip, SmartDriver requires parents to unplug the device after the teen

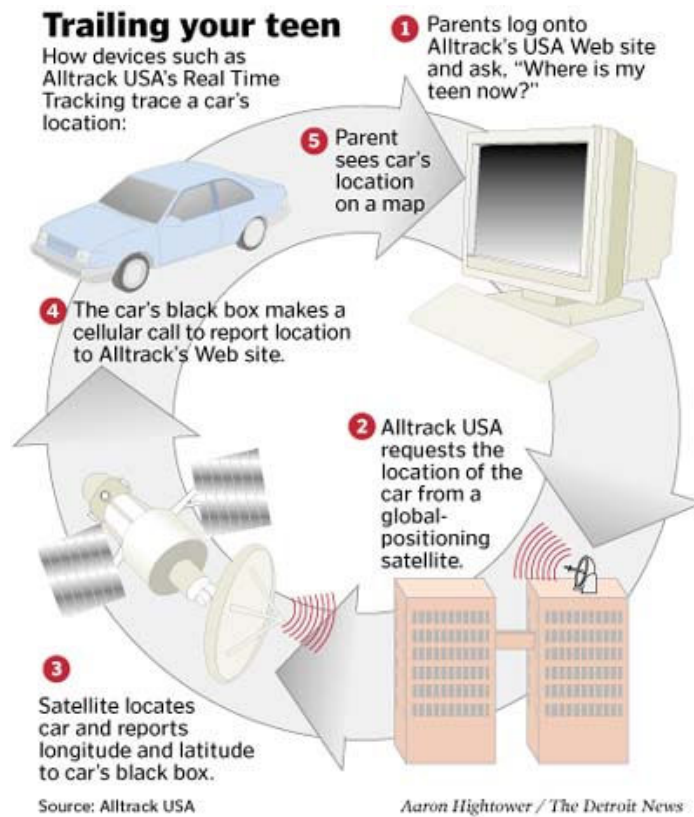
gets home and connect it to a computer to view data it saved.

"After a month or two of using our device and the teen has demonstrated his ability to drive responsibly, parents trust their teens more," Gore said. "They're more willing to let them drive the car more often or grant them responsibility."

Jacobson, who lives near Kansas City, Kan., said his son doesn't mind being monitored and has proven to be a fairly responsible driver. The tracking device has captured just two instances when his son drove too fast but no other problems.

"For \$500, it gives you so much peace of mind," Jacobson said. "He hangs around with good kids, but you just never know. Once they leave the house, you just don't know."

You can reach Nick Bunkley at (313) 222-2293 or nbunkley@detnews.com.



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