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Parents' gizmos high on tech, low on trust

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Paige White was surprised when her parents figured out soon after she started driving last year that she'd gone 9 miles to a party, not 4 miles to the friend's house she'd told them she was visiting. It seemed to her almost as if her car was bugged.



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It was.

Paige's parents had installed a device in their daughter's SUV that can tell them not only how far she's driven, but how fast and whether she's made any sudden stops or hard turns.

"I was kind of mad because I felt it was an invasion of my privacy," said the Los Gatos resident, now 17.

Parents, some of whom feel outmatched by their offspring in this tech-savvy world, are using a growing number of gadgets, software and specially equipped cell phones to track kids' driving, read their instant messages and pinpoint where they're hanging out.

Move over, Big Brother. Big Mother is in the house.

But cyber-snooping is simply a new tool, experts say. It doesn't resolve the dilemma parents have grappled with for generations: How much free rein do you give children so they can learn the lessons they need to grow up and be independent?

"There's a gap between parents and kids which is unbridgeable: We want them to be safe, and they want to have a good time," said Anthony Wolf, a Massachusetts child psychologist and author of "Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me & Cheryl to the Mall?: A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager."

Proponents of the new technology say it can help protect kids -- whether from predators lurking online or their own bad driving. But while there may be gains, monitoring also can take a toll.

"The bottom line is, surveillance will cut down somewhat on potential risk behavior kids will engage in, but it is at a cost," Wolf said. "To the extent that you do surveillance, you are potentially interfering with your kids developing responsibility for their own lives."

Bill White had safety in mind when he decided to get the CarChip, made by Davis Instruments in Hayward, for Paige's car when she first got her license.

"I know how I drove when I was in high school," said White, 47.

About the size of a 9-volt battery, the device plugs in beneath a car's dashboard and records driving behavior. The data it collects can be downloaded to a computer, and the device can sound an alarm when the car speeds or accelerates too fast.

While her friends make fun of her for having one, Paige now admits liking the CarChip.

"It helps me watch my speed and keeps me honest," she said.

Supporters say tracking teen driving can save lives. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds, with 3,620 young drivers killed and 303,000 injured across the country in 2004, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Teen Arrive Alive, a Florida company, offers Global Positioning System-enabled cell phones that allow parents to go online to check the location and speed of a car their child is driving or riding in.

"This is about parents being given tools to better protect their kids. That's not Big Brother. That's parenting," said company spokesman Jack Church, whose 20-year-old son died in a drunken-driving accident in 2000. It took two days to find the car and the young man's body in a ditch.

Church concedes the technology wouldn't have saved his son's life, but said it could have spared him and his wife the agony of searching for two days.

Another company, Alltrack USA, offers a service that e-mails or calls parents if the car they're monitoring exceeds a certain speed or leaves a defined geographic area. DriveCam, which now installs cameras in fleet vehicles, plans to offer a monthly service to parents and teens next year that will let them watch video clips of their driving and receive coaching from driving experts.

CarChip-type devices differ from the "black boxes," or event data recorders, installed by manufacturers in many cars to record speed and other data in the seconds before a crash. A California law that limits access to that data does not apply to the types of accessories parents are using.

Nor do privacy laws give kids protection from prying parents.

"In the United States, we sort of think of children as being the property of their parents," said Jennifer Granick, executive director of the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School. "Generally, there's not going to be anything that says parents can't keep tabs on their children."

Another way parents are doing that is with GPS-enabled cell phones. Sprint's Family Locator service allows parents to map the location of their children's cell phones online. Verizon's similar Chaperone service, introduced last month, can send parents text messages if their child leaves a predetermined zone.

SmartWear Technologies in San Diego plans to take GPS monitoring to another level in the fall, offering radio-frequency tags for children's clothing. Already in many items because major retailers use them to track inventory, the tags can be encoded with identification and even a child's medical history. A GPS component will be available next year, said company President Bob Reed.

Orinda mother Melinda Reilly said she is struggling with whether to get her 15-year-old daughter a GPS-enabled cell phone that Reilly can track in the event of the "worst-case scenario" that she couldn't reach the teen by phone.

"When I mentioned it to my daughter, she turned white. She said, 'You wouldn't use it to track me down?' I said, 'That too -- but you don't have anything to hide, right?' " said Reilly, 52, who now asks her daughter to check in frequently from her regular cell phone.

"All of these devices, I think, help parents. They're largely not as sophisticated as their kids are in this tech-driven world," added Reilly, who writes a blog urging parents to be more involved in their children's safety ([parentsheadsup.blogspot.com](#)). But, she said, "These are very hard choices for parents."

Parent educator and author Jane Bluestein said monitoring kids without cause could backfire, especially when children appear to be following rules and have a good rapport with their parents.

"I think it's going to add a lot of stress to a lot of relationships that really don't need it," said Bluestein, who lives in Albuquerque and wrote "Parents, Teens and Boundaries: How to Draw the Line."

"To track kids for the sake of tracking kids -- I know it gives parents a sense of control, but I think it points to bigger problems in the relationship: mistrust, a need to control, a need to think for your kids."

It's more important, she said, "for parents to teach kids how to think and act when they're not there." But she said monitoring also could help kids to regain their parents' trust if they've violated it by breaking curfew or lying about where they're going.

Other experts tout the technology as a helping hand for all parents, saying they could be unaware of what their children are up to, especially online.

Internet safety consultant and Bay Area police Officer Steve DeWarms particularly likes software that goes beyond Web filters, which keep children off objectionable sites. Newer software allows parents to track their children's Internet use remotely and can copy instant messages and online chats into e-mails that are sent to parents.

DeWarms knows a father who was tracking his 14-year-old daughter's online correspondence when he learned, while out of town, that a 24-year-old man she'd met online had bought her a bus ticket to visit him out of state. The father thwarted the plan by calling his wife and telling her not to let their daughter out of her sight.

DeWarms even advises parents not to tell older teens they're being monitored, because they may simply avoid the bugged computer.

"The dilemma is, it's like peeking into your kid's diary or journal. The question is: What do you do with that information?" said DeWarms. "It may seem as though parents are going to extremes to monitor their children. However, I'm sure if we asked our parents if they ever listened in on one of our telephone conversations, they would be guilty of it."

One Pleasant Hill mother has been using SpectorSoft's eBlaster for about a year to track her sons' online activity, including instant messaging. She's found the boys, 14 and 16, looking at "light porn" and discussing oral sex, and she's ferreted out weekend parties where no adults were going to be home. In those cases, she's made family plans without telling her sons what she knew.

She said the boys think the history function on the computer lets her check up on them. They don't know she has the software or the level of detail she can see, and she asked not to be named for that reason. She said she fears telling them about the software because they may not use the computer as much.

"It has been a chance for my husband and I to bring up subjects that may not come up having to do with sexuality and drugs," she said. "My oldest son said at first he felt we were raiding his privacy. We said the Internet is not a private thing."

"They may fight it, but way deep down, I think they want those boundaries that aren't there for them otherwise on the computer," she said. "It's something they need until they grow up."

Companies that make such software say sales have increased as parents have become more concerned about a range of issues, including pedophiles using the Web to solicit children and teens talking graphically about sex online. SpectorSoft President Doug Fowler said monthly sales of eBlaster have risen from 100 or 200 copies four years ago to 2,500 or 3,000 this year.

No numbers are available for overall use of the various types of monitoring technology, though Church, of Teen Arrive Alive, said sales are lower in more liberal places such as the Bay Area, where parents may be more concerned about their children's privacy.

SpectorSoft recommends that parents tell children they are using the software, Fowler said, but he pointed out parents are not legally required to do so. Other companies are mum on the subject. Fowler said safeguards are built in to keep children from removing the software from the family computer.

Daily City mother Jean Aro said she would have been tempted in the past to know her children's whereabouts at all times, but now that the technology is available, she's not buying.

"I don't know what kind of message I would be giving my child," said Aro, 51, who has four children and stepchildren ages 13 to 26. "It would have made me mad as hell as a teenager."

"When you know you're being trusted, sometimes you want to show it," she said. "If they feel they're not trusted, they're going to be trustworthy."

Child-tracking technologies

Car: Devices can record distance, speed and driving behavior, such as hard braking and sharp turning. Some pinpoint a car's location using Global Positioning System technology and alert parents if a teen driver exceeds a certain speed or leaves a defined geographic area. One, the CarChip, costs \$139. Monthly services cost \$20 and up.

Cell phones: GPS enables parents to locate a child's phone on an online map. One service will text message parents if the phone leaves a predetermined zone. Monthly services typically cost \$10 to \$20.

Software: Various programs can track Web activity and record online chats, instant messages and e-mail. Parents can receive reports and alerts by e-mail and, in some cases, by phone or text message. Prices range from \$40 to \$100 in one-time or annual fees.

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