

GPS: Supervision or high-tech snoopervision

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PHILADELPHIA _ Do you know where your child is _ down to the exact block?

Is she driving? How fast? Is he really at the library, or at an unchaperoned party across town?

Anxious parents are resorting to increasingly sophisticated technology to keep a virtual eye on the kids 24/7. But some experts wonder whether constant monitoring, sometimes without the child's knowledge, represents necessary vigilance, or the oppressive rule of Big Mother or Father.

Global-positioning system (GPS) satellite technology, now in cell phones as well as cars, is the latest advance for parental snooping _ pinpointing, 007-style, the exact location of users.

Its killer application, says Phil Magney, an analyst with Telematics Research Group, is to monitor teen driving. The technology is equally effective in tailing kids after they get out of their cars.

"People just want to track their loved ones. It's as simple as that," Magney said.

Dozens of businesses already market the service to parents, and "we'll see many, many more in the next year," he predicted.

Deb Cervin, 44, of Rockwell, N.C., secretly installed a tracking device on her daughter's car. "When I was a teenager I wouldn't have liked it," she conceded. "Now, the dangers are different. Sometimes Mom's got to be sneaky."

Other new parental spyware includes security systems that send e-mail alerts when a child enters or leaves the house, and home video cameras that relay live images to parents' computers at work.

"I think we're keeping track of children too much," said sociologist Frank Furedi, author of "Paranoid Parenting," who believes that unchecked anxiety leads to extreme measures that erode privacy and trust.

Parents become obsessed, Furedi said: "When you see the slightest problems, you become worried about them. These technologies inflate your fears rather than lessen them."

Peggy Stein of Felton, Del., is willing to take the heat.

When daughter Kelly, a Drexel University freshman, began to drive two years ago, her mother quietly installed SignalTrac, a dashboard GPS system, in the girl's Mitsubishi Galant. From her home computer, Stein, 43, can follow a real-time map of Kelly's comings and goings (or rather, the Mitsubishi's comings and goings) and rate of travel.

"It's like having a parent in the passenger seat," said Stein, who describes herself as a "worry wart." "It's not like reading the diary of your child's private thoughts."

At first, she was "a little shocked," said Kelly, 19. "It would freak out anybody knowing you're being tracked." Now she views the system as "backup protection," a way for someone to know whether she arrived at her destination safely.

Stein sees parents as a growing market for GPS. She is half of a two-mother team that heads SignalTrac, part of the fleet-tracking company GPS North America in Langhorne.

SignalTrac _ the unit costs about \$500, plus \$34.99 a month _ has seen its customer base triple each of the last three years to about 1,000 parents, said Todd Lewis, the company's technology officer.

The system provides a location history and sends alerts _ a message to a cell phone, for example _ if the car exceeds a predetermined speed or breaches a set geographic boundary.

Lewis recommends that parents tell the kids when they've installed SignalTrac. (Besides, the system works better with an antenna mounted on the rear windshield, something that would be hard to hide.)

Cervin, of North Carolina, had other ideas. She spied on daughter Adie covertly at first, even though safety _ not "trying to be involved in every moment of her life" _ was her motivation.

Within a week, Cervin confronted the 17-year-old with evidence that she was driving past curfew.

Adie was incensed. "I do feel like it's an invasion of privacy," she said. "My friends say, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe your mom is doing that.' "

Yet Cervin was unbowed. SignalTrac "built up trust that was lost from (Adie's) skipping school," she said. "It makes me feel better about giving her a little more freedom."

She says she'll dismantle SignalTrac when her daughter turns 18. "I'm not a total control freak," Cervin said. "I'd like to keep it on, but I'm not going to go that far."

Mothers and fathers have always conducted reconnaissance on their children, starting with the decidedly low-tech method of checking the odometer reading before the engine cools. Modern parents access cell-phone histories and use Internet tracking software.

GPS chips and electronic eavesdropping gadgets previously associated with private eyes take it to a new level, however. Although experts can cite no law against a parent's "spying" on a minor child by using GPS, the practice can corrode the bond between parent and child, therapists warn.

"These technological shortcuts, in the long run, are going to backfire. The kids are going to resent them," Exton psychologist Jeffrey Bernstein said.

Even if you tell the child he's being monitored, a parent is "asking for trouble," he said. "The best thing is to have talks, build trust, catch them doing things right."

In the meantime, products designed for parental "peace of mind" proliferate.

Wherify Wireless, in California, plans to introduce the Wherifone cell phone early next year. Aimed at 8- to 12-year-olds, it consists of five programmable keys _ to avoid massive bills _ and GPS for easy tracking.

And the Teen Arrive Alive service, which offers tracking through Nextel cell phones for about \$20 a month, anticipates a surge in business when federal Enhanced 911 rules take full effect at year's end. Under the requirements, more networks will be adding GPS location-tracking capability to their cell phones.

"These aren't Ozzie and Harriet days," said Jack Church, a vice president at the Bradenton, Fla., company that launched Teen Arrive Alive last year. "There are so many dangers out there."

As long as the phone is on and not in use (good luck with that one), a parent will know whether the child is "driving to a ball game, riding in a friend's car, or hanging out at the mall," the service's Web site promises.

"The demand is far higher than our ability to fill because of our limitation of carriers," Church said.

In Motorola's "latchkey security" system, home surveillance cameras tied to a computer can relay still images to a

cell or work computer, issue a text-message alert when a door opens, and store a history of images for the subscriber to review later.

Peter Kleiner, 44, is part of a test group for the year-old Homesight system, which starts at \$299.

"I go by `knowledge is power,'" said Kleiner, general manager at WYSP-FM (94.1) and a single parent to Jake, 13 and Ben, 11, who occasionally arrive home before he does. Cameras in the garage, kitchen, basement, and upstairs computer room record the day's happenings, and Kleiner looks them over when he gets home.

"This gives me a little check and balance to make sure they stay honest with me," he said.

What do the boys think of the setup? "It's pretty cool," Jake said, "unless you're watching me."

Then there's EZFind Technologies in West Chester, Pa., which plans to add GPS to the low-tech locator tags it now sells for wallets and laptops. Place on child's jacket, then track.

Alexandra Budike, an anesthesiologist, has no misgivings about her in-home cyber-spying. She and husband Gus Pippis, a pharmacist, use home surveillance cameras purchased from the Spy Shop in Ardmore, Pa., for security, and to check on their children, 3 and 5, who have a nanny.

"It turns you into this Almighty," said Pippis, 39. "You can call and say, `Are you doing your homework, or are you watching SpongeBob?'"

Budike, also 39, wants to respect her children's privacy, she said, especially as they grow older. At the same time, she wants to know what GPS in a cell phone or car can tell her.

"It's a tough call," she said. "I'm sure there's going to have to be a boundary. Until then, I will have a say."

HOW GPS TRACKING WORKS

Global-positioning system units send data via GPS satellites, designed and controlled by the U.S. Department of Defense. GPS chips may be placed in cars, cell phones and tags to be attached to clothing.

Parents access a password-protected Web site to learn their child's location, rate of travel, mileage and other information. The data are shown on a map and can be viewed in real time with updates every few minutes. Location is precise down to a few feet, such as an intersection.

For those who would prefer to go to bed rather than monitor their teenagers'

1 a.m. wanderings, most GPS services have a history option that shows a child's travels over extended periods.

Parents also may set up alerts _ essentially e-mails _ to be sent when their children leave a preset zone or exceed a predetermined speed. The messages can be sent to computers and wireless devices, including cell phones and PDAs.