



GPS TECHNOLOGY HELPS PARENTS TRACK TEENS

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The use of Global Positioning System Technology (GPS) in cars and phones to help parents track where kids are and how fast they're driving has sparked heated debates about the lines between privacy and safety.

The same technology used to find hikers lost in snowstorms and track tanks on the battlefield has found a new use -- figuring out if you really are at the mall and if you keep to 15 miles per hour in the school zone.

Global Positioning System (GPS) technology has been around since 1978. There are many military applications for the system, which relies on approximately 30 orbiting satellites maintained by the U.S. Air Force, but increasingly, civilians are using it to predict weather, plot directions and track one another.

Monitored cars

One of the most popular applications of GPS technology for parents has been a small box that is plugged into a car dashboard, allowing them to remotely download data, including the car's location and speed, from the box onto their computer.

In fact, some of these devices automatically email or call parents when their child is speeding or has entered a location previously designated as off limits. In some cases, parents can remotely sound an alarm, honk the horn or flash a light when their teen is driving too fast.

Phone technology

GPS tracking of cell phones is also popular with parents who want to know where their children are. Parents can sign up for services such as Sprint Family Locator, Disney Mobile, and Verizon Wireless Chaperone that enable them to look up a cell phone's location online.

Verizon's service allows parents to mark up to 10 areas with "virtual fencing," and sends a text message if the car breaches a boundary.

Sprint is the only company to inform children about their parents' activities, sending a text message to children each time their parents perform a location check.

There are no rules requiring parents to inform their children that they are being monitored. It is up to the parents to decide whether to tell their kids or not.

Tools to Protect Teens

Advocates for these tracking devices say they help reduce risky behavior, and may even save lives.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among 15- to 20-year-olds, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Jack Church, spokesman for Teen Arrive Alive, a Florida company that offers GPS-enabled cell phones, said in a 2006 San Francisco Gate article, "This is about parents being given tools to better protect their kids. That's not Big Brother. That's parenting."

When teenager Paige White of Los Gatos, California learned her parents had secretly installed a GPS tracking device in her SUV she was shocked and angry.

"I was kind of mad because I felt it was an invasion of my privacy," she told the *San Francisco Gate*.

But now White says she likes the device. "It helps me watch my speed and keeps me honest," she told the Gate.

Big Brother?

Not all teens are happy about the new technology. Katt Hemman, a 17 year-old from Hutchinson, Kansas, told the Southeast Missourian in 2006 that parents' arguments in favor of using the tracking technology mirror those made by the Bush administration in defending warrantless wiretapping.

"A marginal increase in safety isn't worth forfeiting our civil rights, and adults who balk at being spied on and then turn around and spy themselves are hypocrites," she said.

And some psychiatrists argue the tracking devices raise issues of trust and sometimes replace communication and dialogue.

Tracking can lead "parents to think there are technical solutions to human problems," Stephen Mintz, co-chair of the Council on Contemporary Families, told the Oakland Tribune in 2006.

In Case of Emergency

But many parents believe they have much to gain from knowing if their son or daughter is at the library, or a party.

James Davis told the McClatchy/Tribune news service that the Sprint phone equipped with GPS technology he bought his 14-year-old stepdaughter gives him "peace of mind."

"You're never too old to get kidnapped. As long as I know my daughter has her cell phone on her, for a fee, I can know exactly where she's at," he said.

Not a perfect technology

However, the tracking technology is not infallible. The cell phone tracking systems don't always get reception, especially in remote areas. And, as Delly Tamer, founder of online retailer LetsTalk.com told The Dallas Morning News, the locator service "does not work if the phone is off."

Despite the concerns from some young people and privacy advocates, more GPS-enabled devices are in development, ensuring the debate over safety and privacy will only grow in coming years.

--Compiled by Melissa J. Hipolit for NewsHour Extra

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