

New Ways to Track Your Kids

It's 10 p.m. Do you know where your child is? The latest in high-tech monitoring.

After Nora and Jon Firestone caught their teenage son sneaking around and lying about his whereabouts, the small-business owners from Virginia Beach, Va., decided it was time to get a little sneaky themselves. They bought him the cell phone he'd been asking for but secretly activated a "chaperone" service that maps his location on their

phone. It certainly came in handy the night he disappeared for hours and Nora, using the service, found him partying with other teens. "He wanted to get out of there faster than I did, because he was mortified," she says.

Score one for Mom and Dad. Thanks to a host of space-age gadgetry, parental monitoring is moving to a whole new level of

sophistication—and controversy. With little effort, worried or suspicious parents can now use satellite technology to keep track of everything from when their child arrives at her after-school swim practice to how fast their lead-footed teenager is driving. In all, 70 percent of phones in the U.S. are now GPS-enabled, according to market research firm NPD Group. And these types of devices now have other family uses, like remotely tracking Grandma's heartbeat, skin temperature and other vital signs.

Naturally, all this monitoring does have its limits. For starters, as many parents know, the determined teenager is bound to find a way to outsmart even the best devices. Since they're meant only for monitoring, no gadget can totally ensure the safety of a loved

Photograph by Evan Kalka (woman); Illustration by Ryan Etter for SmartMoney



one. And then there's the nagging Big Brother factor. "It's simply not parenting," says Larry Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and author of a book about raising the "Net generation." (Not that everyone agrees, including the Firestones' son, Aaron. "I'd use that on my kid someday," he says.) Here's how the devices work:

Spy Kids

Like other parents in her New York City neighborhood, librarian Tara Lannen-Stanton recently gave her 12-year-old daughter a cell phone to make sure she safely reaches her after-school activities. While extras like Cell Phone Spy (\$100) and My Mobile Watchdog (\$10 a month) would let her read her daughter's text messages (including the deleted ones) and intercept calls from suspicious numbers, she's chosen to subscribe only to a GPS-based "family locator" service, which pinpoints the location of her daughter's phone. Mondays and Wednesdays at 3 p.m.? School (tutoring session). Fridays at 2:45? Five blocks away from school (piano class). A recent Tuesday morning: Oops, she left the phone at home.

Though wireless carriers offer tracking plans like these for \$5 to \$10 a month, they're far from perfect. Since its technology relies on space-based satellites, Verizon says things like heavy tree canopy and concrete buildings can cause service delays or disruptions. For its part, Sprint warns that its directions can be off by a few hundred yards. Still, the tracking program could provide relief for a growing cadre of anxious parents: A full quarter of 6- to 9-year-olds and more than half of 10- to 14-year-olds now own a cell phone, according to C&R Research.

Say "Cheese"

Cell phone locators and car tracers are one thing, but for a price, the technology for watching your kids (or anyone else) can get much more elaborate. Some options:

- **BODY HEAT-ACTIVATED PLANT CAMERA:** Disguised as an artificial houseplant, this cordless hidden cam (\$600) is triggered by body heat, so it doesn't record constantly and drain the battery. Must connect to TV or computer for playback.
- **AIR IONIZER HIDDEN CAMERA:** This working air freshener, which doubles as a security cam (\$500 to \$600), includes night vision for both day and overnight monitoring.
- **ARCHERFISH QUATTRO:** No playback needed here. This deluxe two-camera system promises live updates via text, picture or video messages to your cell phone or computer. But real-time spying isn't cheap: \$1,700 up front, plus a monthly subscription.

Driving Trackers

Of course, kids have to get a little older to lay claim to the car keys. But when they do, there are vehicle-based tracers, first used by employers to scrutinize the drivers of company cars, that are finding increasing use in the consumer market. CarChip Pro (\$120), for one, plugs into a port below the dashboard, producing an online report that highlights whenever someone slams the brake or guns the gas; Entourage PS, TeenTrax and LiveViewGPS (\$300 to \$600) may require professional installation and a monthly subscription, but they send parents an e-mail every time Speed Racer passes the limit or leaves a specified neighborhood or zone.

Sure, experts say, such monitoring can breed mistrust in teens. But not all parents are operating under the radar. Neil Pitt, for one, says his daughter "has a good head on her shoulders," but his biggest concern is safety. (After all, car crashes are the leading killer for her age group.) With visions of his daughter stranded by bad weather on a lonely road, Pitt recently told her he was installing a device that lets him track her car's location in real time on a computer. It certainly helped the rainy night she had her first fender bender. "It's about peace of mind," says Pitt.

Senior Sensors

Adults concerned about their aging parents have no shortage of health-monitoring sensors to choose from: bed sensors, refrigerator sensors and "quiet care" sensors that learn a senior's daily patterns and alert family members when something out of the ordinary occurs. There's even a new body sensor, the MyHalo chest strap, which lets loved ones log in and track everything from Dad's heart rate and calories burned to his sleep patterns and accidental falls. Products like these aren't cheap: They range from \$85 to \$1,300, plus \$35 to \$125 a month in service fees, and they often have to be professionally installed.

With more options like that, privacy experts say monitoring, communication and education devices for the elderly will balloon into a \$20 billion market over the next decade. How far will the gadgets go? Elder-care researchers at the University of Missouri, for one, say they're working on security cameras that would better respect privacy by depicting seniors in unidentifiable 3-D silhouettes.

So you might want to hold off on that \$600 hidden-camera tissue box—at least for now. 

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For a slide show of some of the latest family-monitoring tools, go to smartmoney.com/mag.