Cellphones: Just a leash for children?

By Steven Barrie-Anthony, Times Staff Writer

Fifteen-year-old Jordan Murphy loves to play hoops, so after school he and his brother Joshua, 13, jump on bikes and troll their neighborhood in Shawnee, Kan., for pickup games. Often they pedal through a hectic blind intersection to get to courts at the civic center, and then toss their bags on the ground and start dribbling. They don't hear their cellphone ringing—ring—ring—dŋn, don't allay the fears of their single mother who's telling herself that all's fine, probably, but if only they would just answer the phone....

Then in April mom Jacqui Fahnow bought Jordan and Joshua a cellphone from Sprint Nextel that doubles as a tracking beacon. Now if the kids haven't arrived at the civic center or other designated courts by 3:15 in the afternoon, Fahnow's phone jingles and up pops a color map of their location, replete with street addresses. If they're at or near the courts or at Aunt Valerie's house or the grocery store, Fahnow doesn't worry; if they're far afield, she knows where to find them. Peace of mind for just $9.99 a month.

It's like having another set of eyes, says Fahnow, who owns an office management business. "This will be even more useful when they get older and start driving. With four wheels under you, a lot of things can happen."

Keeping tabs on the kids

Sprint Family Locator, which debuted in April, is just one of many newly released cellular services that use global positioning satellites — originally developed for military use — to allow family members to keep tabs on each other via their phones. Disney Mobile, which opened for business earlier this month, includes child tracking among its basic features. Verizon Wireless' Chaperone service lets parents enclose up to 10 areas in virtual fencing, and to receive a text message if their children breach a boundary.

This technology isn't cutting-edge, exactly; similar location based services have been marketed with limited success over the last few years, notably Nextel's Mobile Locator designed for companies to track employees. But cellular carriers are in a tizzy to fulfill a Federal Communications Commission mandate that 911 operators be able to pin down phone locations — and it stands to reason that they recoup their investment by offering that same capability to subscribers.

Carriers make beaucoup bucks, parents like Fahnow rest easier; everybody wins.

Everybody except the people being tracked, say teens and privacy advocates who peg this trend to an unhealthy desire for control. "What do we get out of this?" asks Hugon Ligon, a 16-year-old from Oklahoma City who has discussed the technology with his mom but as of yet remains untracked. "We go to school every day, we work our butts off, and there are such strict limitations on our life already. We need to expand our boundaries, to become more independent, and yet now we have one more thing to pull us down."

Communication technology has become synonymous with youth, says Hunter, who carries a T-Mobile Sidekick II so that he can text and instant message and occasionally even call his friends. Kids these days rarely galavant around the neighborhood until dinnertime, as their parents did; boogeymen on the evening news have driven them indoors, and community has in large part gone virtual. Which makes it particularly galling that technology would become a turncoat, an informant. "Most parents can barely turn on a computer," Hunter says. "They're always asking us for help."

As is the case with Kansas mom Leila Pellant, who couldn't figure out how to set up Sprint Family Locator — and asked her son Spencer, 14, to activate it for her. Spencer obliged, and thenceforth the service "keeps Spencer on point all the time, knowing that I can find out where he is," says Pellant, a real estate agent. "As far as privacy goes, my children don't deserve total privacy."

The argument that it's OK to track kids because it'll keep a few of them from being kidnapped or making mischief is spurious reasoning, says 17-year-old Katt Hemman, from Hutchinson, Kan. It's the same argument that the Bush administration makes in defending warrantless wiretapping, she says. 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.

Hers is a generation always looking queasily over its shoulder, says Katt, whose parents haven't (yet) signed up for cell tracking but do monitor her Internet activity. "I don't trust as many people as I want to," she says. "I have moments where
I don't trust my own family because I feel as if they're reading everything I write on the Internet."

Of course, kids will fight back, much as they do when schools attempt to block access to MySpace and other "noneducational" websites. One teen guesses that encasing his phone in aluminum foil might divert the signal; another especially crafty teen reveals his plan, should mom and dad ever begin phone-surveillance: 1) Tell parents he's going to a friend's house. 2) Go to friend's house. 3) Tie his cellphone to their dog, so it moves around. 4) Leave to live an unobserved existence.

Privacy versus safety

But what if your kid is too lazy or obedient to fight back? Or if you track her without her knowledge — and catch her in a lie? How do you explain that you've been watching her through a satellite in the sky? (The Sprint Family Locator notifies kids via a text message when they've been located; other companies, such as Disney Mobile, do not.)

"It's an invasion of privacy in a huge way," says Charles Sophy, a psychiatrist and the medical director for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. "You're sending them a message that you don't believe in them, don't trust them to make solid decisions."

Already Sophy has encountered a number of sticky situations surrounding cellphone tracking, "especially with these high-end Hollywood people in L.A.," he says. Tracking without permission often leads to painful family meetings, with everyone — not least of all the parents — apologizing for their misdeeds. Still, Sophy says that in a world of natural and man-made disasters, tracking can "absolutely" be of benefit if prefaced by honest family conversation. Even teens find the safety net appealing if they ignore the Big Brother (or Big Mother) aspect, and some admit that tracking might coax their most out-of-control friends back from the brink.

Of course if kids and the rest of us continue using technology for ever greater self-revelation, the debate over surveillance may be rendered moot. Soon MySpace will be accessible on cellphones, and experts say that mobile social networking, instant messaging and the rest are poised to merge with tracking technology to provide not just virtual access to all friends at all times, but physical access as well. "It will be hard for science fiction to outpace what's going to happen," says Jonathan Zittrain, professor of Internet governance and regulation at Oxford University. "You'll walk into a café in Paris, and ask your cellphone if any of your buddies are in Paris. Or you can ask it if any of the friends of your 10 best buddies are in Paris."

Alan Phillips is an ardent proponent of this revolution. In 2002 he caught his 14-year-old son skateboarding when he was supposed to be at a friend's house, and Phillips promptly founded uLocate Communications, in Massachusetts, to develop location-based services for mobile phones. These days the Phillips family can check each others' locations via a cellphone click (or on the Web) and can even view the rate of speed at which family members are traveling.

"My son plays soccer," Phillips says. "We set up 'geofences' so that when he's coming back from games on the bus, every time his phone comes within five miles of the school, we are alerted. So that we know when to pick him up."

Very convenient; but even Phillips admits that sometimes the ever-present eye is a little much. "I have intentionally turned off my phone to suppress data from my wife," he says. "If I'm leaving late and had told her that I'd meet her somewhere...."

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