

Selling Surveillance to Anxious Parents

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KEVIN REYNOLDS, a real estate appraiser and father of two, is confronting a quandary: should he put his daughters under electronic surveillance?

It's a question more parents will face in the next months, thanks to new technology that lets them use cellphones to monitor their children's location.

Next month, [Verizon Wireless](#) plans to introduce a child-monitoring service, joining [Sprint Nextel](#) and [Disney Mobile](#), which started similar services this spring. Cingular is working on the concept, too.

The systems track cellphones by satellite, allowing parents to look on the Internet to make sure their children arrived safely, say, at school or at a friend's house.

"If you don't do it and something happens to your kids, how would you feel?" said Mr. Reynolds, 49, contemplating giving such phones to his daughters, ages 4 and 8. But he is also wary of being overly intrusive.

"It's Big Brother on a kid's level," he said. "What's it like to live in a world where everybody has a device that tracks where we are?"

We may soon find out. Several new programs for consumers use cellphones to tell us — and our parents and employers, not to mention advertisers — where we are, how fast we're moving, what direction we're moving in and how close we happen to be to restaurants, movie theaters, banks and other businesses.

Soon our cellphones will locate, record and even herald us with digital precision: "You are here."

These location-based services take advantage of technology built into dozens of the newest phones. It can instantaneously identify a phone's location by using satellites and the Global Positioning System, or by determining the location of the cell tower connected to the phone.

For the telecommunications companies that are eager to sell these services, they are a possible new source of revenue at a time when nearly every American old enough to read the user manual is already carrying a cellphone.

For users, the technologies raise social, psychological, legal and interpersonal questions. A gadget that could save lives or bring peace of mind by identifying where a lost,

rebellious or even kidnapped child is can also be viewed as a surveillance device, threatening one's privacy.

There is also the question of reliability. The network could fail, or the person with the phone could turn it off, making it futile as a monitor and perhaps causing more concern.

"If I was going somewhere I wasn't supposed to, I'd just turn it off and say my phone died," said Marshaye Savoy, a 10th grader at Grant High School in Sacramento.

Marshaye lives with her mother, Maisha Savoy. Marshaye's grandmother Montreal McClain, 54, said she had mixed feelings about the service. Mrs. McClain worries that it will be worthless if a child turns it off — but she likes the idea of being able to locate Marshaye.

"Children tell us they're going to be in one place and they're in another — this could make them accountable," Mrs. McClain said, adding that she was also afraid of children being abducted. "There are a lot of wicked people."

The companies behind the technology bristle when it is characterized as a surveillance tool. Sensitive to accusations of fearmongering, cellular carriers argue that they are supplying parents with "peace of mind."

Verizon Wireless, which plans to introduce its \$9.99 monthly service, called Chaperone, in June, said it tried to balance privacy and safety concerns, discussing its plans with law enforcement officials, educators and missing-children advocates.

Concerns about the services have not stopped Verizon from plunging ahead. The company aims to take the concept beyond spot-checks on a child's whereabouts. For \$19.99, parents can program a child's phone with geographic boundaries (around a school, say). When a child leaves the area, the parent will get a text message indicating the perimeter has been breached.

"Whether the child is arriving at or leaving the zone, the parent will get a text message," said Lee Daniels, who oversees location-based services at Verizon. The company calls the service "geo-fencing."

"It's a tool to enhance peace of mind," Mr. Daniels said, though he acknowledged that the system might not always work.

"You'll always have that risk that the kid can turn off the phone, destroy the phone, take off the battery," he said. "It's not the be-all, end-all. We don't see this service as being an alternative to a parent, or as a babysitter for the parent."

Chaperone and its geo-fencing service could be good for the phone companies' sales. Industry analysts say the companies, whose rapid growth has begun to taper off as American society has reached cellphone saturation, are looking for new revenue sources.

Location-based services — from child monitors to car navigation systems — are a hot opportunity, the analysts say.

"They will be very big," said Ed Snyder, an analyst with Charter Equity Research. "Tracking your kids is something everybody will pay \$5 or \$10 a month for."

Sprint Nextel hopes people will pay for other things too, like determining how far and how fast they run and bike. In February, the company began offering a service called Bones in Motion, which for \$9.99 a month records the distance traveled, speed, elevation and even calories burned during a workout.

In March, the company introduced a search engine for mobile phones that lets people willing to pay \$2.99 a month find businesses nearby. For instance, a person can click on the phone to search for restaurants, and the phone will report back the nearest ones, with phone numbers, maps and directions.

Infospace, the company that makes the mobile search technology, has programmed the service so that, with a few clicks, a phone user can find movie theaters, A.T.M.'s, even doctor's offices — some 13 million business nationwide.

Infospace, Verizon Wireless and others said that another promising concept would allow people to make their whereabouts known to friends. With this service, friends can receive alerts if they are in each others' vicinity — at the mall, say, or a club.

This idea of mobile social networking could extend to Internet dating services. For example, members in a dating service could receive notifications if others in the service were nearby.

Another technology under development at Verizon Wireless would allow people who can receive e-mail on their phones and other portable devices to click on any physical address pasted into the e-mail to receive information on its proximity and directions.

Earlier this year, Verizon announced a service that uses satellite systems to let people with certain phones use them to get turn-by-turn driving directions, either in text format or spoken aloud by a computerized voice. The service, called VZ Navigator, is one of several new phone-based car and on-foot navigation tools the carriers are offering.

Lowell C. McAdam, Verizon's chief operating officer, said location-based services were the next big advance for the industry.

"Before you knew the phone was out there; now you know exactly where the phone is," he said. "It allows you to do a whole bunch more complicated tasks."

The issues raised by the services are part of a growing awareness that cellular communications can be a double-edged sword, allowing enormous efficiencies at the expense of making people accessible any time and virtually from anywhere.

There are also potential legal issues raised by location-based services, particularly the child-monitoring technology, said Roger Entner, an analyst with Ovum Research.

In the nightmare situation, he said, a child with a phone might be abducted and harmed but unreachable because the phone had been turned off or the network was down. Another potential problem, Mr. Entner said, could arise if adults used the service to track one another without permission. For instance, he said, a disgruntled spouse could surreptitiously attach a phone to his partner's car to track its movements.

By offering these services, the carriers "put a lot of responsibility on their shoulders," Mr. Entner said.

The carriers counter by saying they are not responsible for how people use the services, nor are they pitching the technology as 100 percent effective.

"Sprint cannot and does not guarantee the availability of its network, products and services in all instances," the company said in a statement, adding, "We believe wireless customers understand this and do not expect otherwise."

Critics also say that some of the monitoring services capitalize on and reinforce fear not just among parents but among employers, too.

"There's too much hype and too much worry," said Parry Aftab, executive director of wiredsafety.org, an organization that, among other things, educates the public on how to protect children using technology. "I've never seen parents more freaked out than they are now." Ms. Aftab said she blamed television mostly for blowing things out of proportion.

"These technologies reflect our neuroses by having to protect against very unlikely scenarios," said James E. Katz, director of the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University. The devices, he said, could "diminish the quality of life between now and when a catastrophe occurs, if it ever does."

For her part, Ms. Aftab is a consultant to Disney Mobile for its own child-monitoring service, a job she said she took only after the company agreed it would not use fear to market the service. "Under no circumstances should they be talking about 'peace of mind,' because that's just selling fear," Ms. Aftab said.

But, perhaps underscoring the gray areas raised by the technology — and putting Ms. Aftab at odds with her employer — George Grobar, general manager of Disney Mobile, says "peace of mind" is exactly what the company is selling.

"It lets parents follow up and make sure their kids have arrived somewhere," he said.

What is also critical is that some employees have been equipped with monitoring phones.

"We hardly have any privacy as it is now — you go to a gas station and there's a camera on you, there are cameras outside of residential homes," said Pam Dickey, a San Francisco resident who works in sales for a major pharmaceutical company, which has asked its national sales force to carry phones that monitor their whereabouts. "Now you have a telephone that will potentially tell people where you are, too — when you're in the bathroom, and how long you're there.

"It's too much an invasion of privacy," she said.

She said she had no plans to ask her daughter to carry such a phone. But Megan Dickey, 17, a junior at Lowell High School in San Francisco, said she wouldn't mind if her mother did ask.

"It's a really good safety feature," she said. "You never know what will happen, and it seems like more bad things are happening now."

"But isn't crime going down?" asked her friend, Morgan Molvig, 17, also a junior at Lowell, as they recently ate lunch on campus.

Morgan says she wants no part of such a device. "I want my parents to trust me," she said. "I would feel my privacy was being invaded."