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Kids tracked by GPS watch

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Anxious parents are using technology to monitor every movement their children make, hoping to give them a semblance of independence while not compromising their safety.

The latest gadget to cater to parents' desire for eternal vigilance is the TicTocTrack, a watch designed for kids that is fitted with a GPS tracking device. It will be launched at the CeBit technology conference at Sydney Olympic Park on Monday.

The watch is an advance on GPS-enabled pager-type devices that can be clipped to a child's backpack or kept in their pocket.

There are also mobile phone apps that allow parents to track family members' location via their phone and see movements from previous days, and security apps like FBI Child ID, created by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, which allows parents to store a photo of their child and identifying details for quick access in the event the child ever goes missing.

TicTocTrack watch developer Karen Cantwell, from Brisbane, said the watch was not intended to replace parental supervision.

"It's not a panacea for child safety, but it gives parents that peace of mind when they can't be with their child," she said.

Parents receive an update on their child's location every five minutes via their phone or web browser. They can also set "safe areas", and receive SMS alerts when their child enters or strays from these boundaries.

The watch comes with an SOS button that a child can press in the event they get into trouble. Parents are immediately alerted to the SOS call, and can then track their child through updates every 10 seconds.

The \$150 watch is intended for primary school children who are not old enough for a mobile phone.

However, Lisa Wood, from the University of Western Australia's school of population health, said tracking devices could inadvertently undermine any sense of independence parents tried to give their children by letting them travel alone.

"It's really important kids feel trusted and feel their parents have confidence in them from an early age," said Associate Professor Wood, who has researched parental fears about children's safety.

She said parents should help children develop the skills to deal with unexpected situations, and encourage them to practice safe behaviours such as sticking to known, safe routes, and travelling in the company of siblings or friends.

Professor Wood acknowledged that developing a child's independence was a tricky issue for parents. "It's hard for parents to let go," she said. "Deep down, they want to give their kids freedom and independence but they worry about other people judging them on that."

Randwick mother-of-four April Palmerlee believes her older children enjoy a greater degree of freedom than many of their peers. Henry, 12, and nine-year-old Portia are dropped off at swimming training at 5am and must then make their own way to school.

"With four kids, it's impossible to get everybody where they need to be all the time," Ms Palmerlee said. "My husband is from a small town, so he really likes that the kids can spread their wings in a safe way.

"I feel like [parents today] are on top of their kids all the time, so they don't develop a sense of independence the way we did."

Her children have their own mobile phones, but Ms Palmerlee said it was rare for them to hear the phone ringing or answer calls. "It's more for them being able to contact me."

She thinks a gadget like the TicTocTrack watch would be worth a try. "I think the kids would think it was a cool piece of kit, like a spy watch, and it could be good back-up."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/digital-life-news/kids-tracked-by-gps-watch-20140503-zr3ga.html>