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Speed trap

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The high-tech gadget can rat out a teenage leadfoot in precision detail, tracking speed as well as any jack-rabbit starts, hard braking and seat belt use.

Smaller than the tiniest cell phone, this portable "black box" can be a data-logging spy for curious parents.

When Fred Fedorchak plugged the \$180 CarChip E/X into the 2001 Lexus SUV his two teenage daughters drive, an immediate blinking light signaled it was ready to go. Inside his garage, the Crown Point foot surgeon was surprised how easy it installed into the on-board diagnostics connector under the steering wheel.

Later, he also was amused how it "chirped" every time his daughters cruised past 70 mph or when they accelerated too quickly.

Not surprisingly, "they weren't as amused as I was," he said.

The CarChip tracked the teen girls' average speed, maximum speed, hard braking, extreme braking, hard accelerations and extreme accelerations. Each chip is provided with CD software allowing users to view a vehicle's driving data through a summary, chart or graph.

The summary for the Fedorchak teens -- Veronica, 19, and Lauren, 18 -- printed out in black and white, except for two red-ink warnings: First, for one trip's maximum speed -- 88 mph -- and second, for two incidents of hard braking and hard acceleration.

Lauren said the "chirping" sound at 70 mph was annoying at first.

"The (CarChip) was always in the back of my mind," she said. "But then I realized how it could help my driving."

An advanced model CarChip, and other similar devices on the market -- called trip loggers or event data recorders -- gives drivers an audio warning if they cruise too fast or maneuver too aggressively. If drivers obey the device's warning, it stops and won't record it. If the warning is ignored, it grows into a consistently louder noise.

The expensive data-logging technology has been around for many years for fleet managers and corporations. But only recently has the price been affordable to the masses, chip makers say.

"We started out with auto do-it-yourselfers, but we have seen a lot more parents of teens becoming interested," said Davis Instruments spokeswoman Lisa Allphin, the company that makes the CarChip E/X.

And for good reason. Nationwide, drivers 16 to 20 years old make up 6 percent of all drivers yet are involved in nearly 20 percent of all traffic fatalities, according to the National Safety Council.

Recently, the National Safety Council, along with the advocacy group End Needless Death on Our Roadways, issued a ranking of the deadliest states in the country for youth-related driving fatalities.

Indiana ranks 21 in traffic fatalities involving at least one driver 16 to 20 years old per 100,000 drivers of that age group. Illinois ranks much better at 41. Washington, D.C., ranks worst at No. 1.

"Youth-related driving fatalities are an epidemic in the United States," said Dr. Thomas Esposito, director of Loyola University Medical Center's Injury Analysis and Prevention Program and an official with the advocacy group.

According to a National Institutes of Health study, the part of a teenager's brain that determines risks and controls impulsive behavior does not mature until the mid-20s.

Still, the debate whether such monitoring devices can compensate for youthful impulses is a hot issue.

Supporters, like insurance companies, see the device as a potential tool in accident investigations. Critics say the devices, like the hidden black boxes in many newer model cars, invade a driver's personal privacy regardless of age.

Yet the devices are still under the radar in society.

A spokesman for the Indiana State Police said he never heard of such devices. And a spokeswoman for the Indiana Department of Transportation said the agency's director of Intelligent Transportation System didn't know of them either.

Stu Summers, owner of Excel Driving Instruction in Valparaiso, is familiar with the devices and their potential to deter reckless driving habits. But, he said, a teen's driving behaviors -- not their skills -- are more likely to get them into trouble.

"Knowing the consequences of undesirable behavior is more important than a technology that merely records driver actions," he said.

Summers said like with most aspects of parenting, using a 21st century monitoring device still comes down to the age-old enforcement of teen boundaries.

"If parents don't push back occasionally and give guidance on out-of-bounds actions, the black box would have little value."

So, what prevents teens from simply unplugging the device before zooming off in dad's car?

"It will report it was disconnected," said Davis Instruments' Allphin.

Allphin said some parents use the CarChip as a "bargaining tool" or for their own graduated licensing program - allowing teens to use mom's car or to have their insurance paid if their data reports come back clean of red ink.

Summers said a better remedy for curbing teen traffic accidents and deaths is for parents to set standards and then reinforce them with their own driving habits.

John Ulczyk, of the National Safety Council said, "parents play the most important role in managing their

children's early driving experience."

Lauren Fedorchak wasn't too keen on her father's CarChip idea at first, but she chirped a new tune after a few days.

"To be honest, it made me realize that my parents cared about my safety," she said.

[EXTRAS]

Does your vehicle have a "little black box"?

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, roughly 15 percent of U.S. vehicles come with a "black box," a hidden computer chip that can track speed, seat belt use and other operations. Last year, about two thirds of all new cars came with the data-logging devices -- usually without the owner's knowledge -- and by 2008 all vehicles should have them, NHTSA states.

Today, a handful of states have pending legislation to better regulate the boxes, and to require that drivers be told of their existence. Indiana and Illinois are not part of this group.

What's the difference between a device like the CarChip and a vehicle's built-in "black box" computer?

"The computer in the car is just that - a computer," said Davis Instruments spokeswoman Lisa Allphin. "It has lots of data, but until now, that data was only available to a dealer or mechanic. The CarChip is not a computer, but more of a computer translator," she said.

"It picks up data and allows the consumer to access it. CarChip is just reading the data, it is not affecting the car's operation in any way. That's why CarChip is not a spy system or a 'Big Brother' type of thing. It is the opposite, allowing you to access your own data and doing with it what you please."