

Black boxes for cars slow to catch on

Some teenagers call tracking driving an invasion of privacy

By Robert Davis And Jayne O'donnell
USA TODAY

A growing number of highway safety advocates are calling for the use of high-tech "black boxes" in cars — \$280 devices that can show parents a young driver's every move — at a time when roughly 10 teens die every day in the USA in crashes involving teen drivers.

But the technology has yet to catch on in households across the country. Many parents say they're unaware that there's a black box for cars.

And some teens object to the technology as an invasion of privacy. Even the nation's top highway safety official couldn't persuade his wife and son to accept the device.

"We had this debate in my own household," Jeffrey Runge, who heads the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said this week at a USA TODAY roundtable discussion on the risks of teenage driving.

When Runge brought home the device to put in the car their teenage son drives, his wife resisted. "She said, 'Well, that really doesn't demonstrate very much trust.' I didn't win the argument."

The same debate has been repeated in many other homes, says Larry Selditz, who heads Road Safety International, which makes the black box.

The box, used primarily to monitor and train emergency-vehicle operators, has become popular, though, among pockets of concerned parents. But Selditz says some families struggle with the same question the Runge family did: "When does that cross the line of distrust?"

The black box, easily installed in cars made after 1995, has a memory card like a digital camera's that can be removed and plugged into a home computer. The parent can then download a detailed report — from seat-belt use to how fast the car traveled to the use of signals. The device also growls at the driver when he or she exceeds safety thresholds while braking or turning.

Runge calls the device useful for both teaching and monitoring. Other safety experts who took part in the USA TODAY discussion agreed.

"The technology is terrific," says Allen Robinson of the American Driver & Traffic Safety Education Association. "A 16- and 17-year-old, when they come back home, they might tell you one thing. But the black box is going to tell you something else."

But one roundtable participant, Alexis Grant, who advocates for teen rights, was critical of the black box.

"It is invasion of privacy," she says. "If you actually show your parents that you're responsible all the time, even when they're not around, they will be able to trust you more, and they won't have to

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Discussion: What are black boxes? How do they work? According to safety advocates, how will the boxes help parents? Why hasn't the technology become widespread? Why did Jeffrey Runge of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration choose not to install a black box in the car his teenage son drives? Are black boxes an invasion of privacy? Explain.

Activity: Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's site on teen driving (see address below). Read the introduction, and then click on and read the "CDC Fact Sheet about Teen Drivers." Next, using information from the article and the CDC site, decide whether each statement below is a fact or an opinion. If the statement is an opinion, explain why a person might hold that view. If the statement is a fact, support it with an example. (Be sure to state the source of your information.) Finally, as a class, discuss your opinions on black boxes in light of your research. www.cdc.gov/ncipc/duip/spotlite/teendrivers.htm

Statement

Fact or Opinion?

Teens speed and run red lights more than older drivers.

Teens are unsafe drivers.

Parents who install a black box in the car their teenager drives are showing that they do not trust their child.

Black boxes are an invasion of privacy.

Teens feel invulnerable to car accidents. They have an "it won't happen to me" mentality.