

Every move they make, mum's watching

By Louise Williams
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IT'S not quite Big Brother, more like Big Mother.

Avalon lawyer Meredith Kelly doesn't have a hope of getting to the school on time, but she knows exactly when her eight-year-old son, Michael, walks through the school gate. So too does her husband, Peter, even if he is away in China on business.

Michael's the first kid on his northern beaches block to have a new child's mobile phone that doubles as a tracking device. He is the red blip on his parents' computer screen or their mobile phone displays. If he wanders out of one of three "safe zones" his parents have nominated, his phone texts theirs and tells them something is up and where he is. The system even keeps a record of everywhere he has been for the previous 30 days



Playing tag ... eight-year-old Michael Kelly can be monitored 24 hours a day.

Photo: Andrew Meares

People tracking is no longer just the stuff of covert military operations or spy movies. Putting mobile phones and GPS together is an ideal technological marriage, says an expert in the technology, Associate Professor Andrew Dempster of the University of NSW.

Globally, we're on the verge of a boom in over-the-counter locator devices, he says of the first child-tracker to hit the Australian market.

In the US, all mobile phones are now required to double as locators for emergency services, he says. Phone companies must be able to pinpoint any individual handset to within 150 metres so the emergency services can respond, even if the caller can't tell them where he or she is. In Japan, the technology is being tailored to user-pay location services, like mobile phones and cars that can lead you to your destination. But children are also being remotely monitored. Japanese manufacturers began incorporating GPS locators into school bags in 2004, eyeing the growing market of parents anxious about rising crime.

The Australian distributor of the new iKids phone, Mark Gullickson, said most buyers were from Sydney and Melbourne where many families often have both parents working, or a single parent. The phone costs \$300, plus \$28 a month, even though it limits children to calling four preset numbers.

"Michael is getting to an age where he can walk home himself, but I feel more comfortable if he's in contact with me," said Ms Kelly. Most days he is still picked up from school, but the Kellys also juggle a younger child and demanding jobs. "When my husband is overseas and I'm out with the kids, he can even use the phone to find us," Mrs Kelly said. While the Kellys are thrilled with the extra assurance the phone offers, they have had a "mixed reaction" at the school gate, including outright disapproval of mobiles for young children.