

JUST 'CHECKING IN': HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SHARING THEIR LOCATION

Teens who have grown up with mobiles have few qualms about sharing their physical location with online friends. But could over-sharing this kind of personal information via location services lead them into difficulties or put them at risk?



Families that have thrown away their paper map in favour of an in-car navigation device to get from A to B are already using location services. These devices, which rely on a global navigation satellite system (Global Positioning System), have become increasingly popular in recent years.

GPS and Wi-Fi services on laptops, mobiles (particularly smartphones like the iPhone or BlackBerry® devices) and other portable devices, such as games consoles and iPads, are also going from strength to strength and, combined with social networking services, offer people new ways of staying in touch and getting information.

Parents who follow tech trends might already be using geo-location apps and services like Foursquare, Google Latitude and Gowalla to share their location with their online contacts. If not, they might be rather confused by their friend announcing they've just become 'Mayor of Edinburgh' or been awarded a Sweden country pin.

"If you're like me, when you find a place you really like, you want to tell your friends you're there," says Michael Sharon of Facebook® on the company's blog. Having launched a location service called 'Places', Facebook® is keen to promote the benefits of services that enable internet users to share where they are in real time from their computer or mobile device. Children's

charities and other parenting experts have expressed some concerns, however.

Putting people on the map

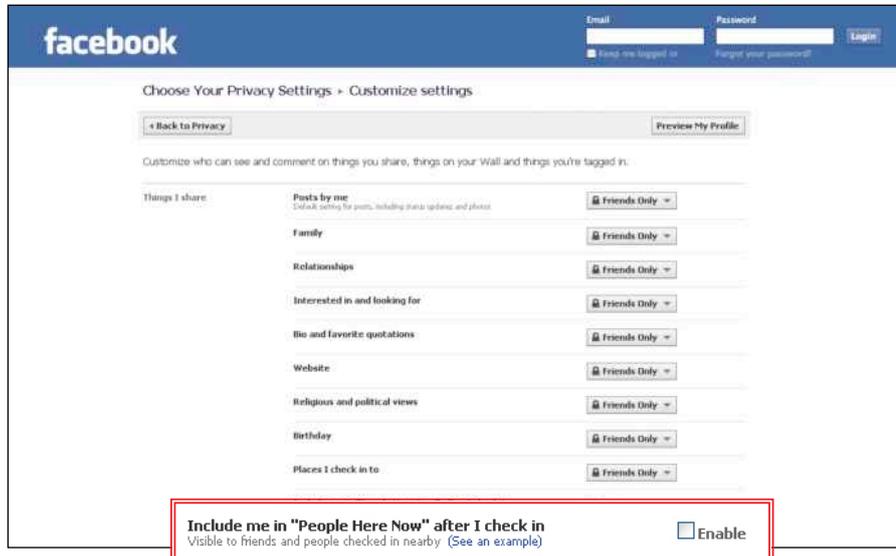
Whilst location services are currently in their infancy - according to Forrester Research, only a few million consumers use geo-location apps on a regular basis - they look set to explode.

Straplines like "Check-in, find your friends, unlock your city", gaming themes where users receive badges, and the fact that many location services are free (either built-in or free to download as an app) are bound to attract curious teens.

Young people who already spend much of their time on the world's most popular social networking site will no doubt welcome Facebook® Places. Letting friends know that they're out shopping or at a gig will no longer require a text message or a status update, they can simply call up a list of nearby places on their mobile, "check-in", tag which friends they're with and share their location with their Facebook® pals.

"It wasn't so long ago that internet users were wary of using their real names on the Web, now many happily announce their location to their online friends," explains Annie Mullins OBE of Vodafone. "For young people, in particular, it's simply another way of staying in touch and blending the real world with their digital world."

It's another way of blending the real world with their digital world



1000s, of people - some of whom they might not even know in real life."

Publishing details of their physical location could expose children to some risks so it's vital that parents discuss how location data could be used and how their son or daughter can use location services safely. For example, if they regularly check in at the same locations, it might not take long for someone following their online check-ins to know where they live or go to school. Or, if they check in at the local cinema or football club, users of the same service will be able to see that they're there.

Using location services might lead to young people being offered deals and promotions by local businesses, so parents should discuss how to handle this - especially if they are targeted with age-inappropriate advertising. Some location service providers, such as Facebook® Places, restrict the type of advertising that minors receive.

Furthermore, there is a risk that indicating where they are, indicates where they are not. This was highlighted in 2010 by the creators of PleaseRobMe.com, which searched Twitter for location-related messages, revealing how easy it would be for burglars to determine whether someone was at home or not.

Facebook® maintains that with Places, users are in complete control of what they share and the people they share their location with. For minors, only 'friends' will be able to see when they check in anywhere. Young Facebook® users can customise their privacy settings even further - so that friends cannot 'tag' them if they're out together, for example - but they need to be aware that they'll explicitly need to opt-out of certain features.

Are your kids over-sharing?

With mobiles and social networking now part of daily life for many young people, sharing information with a large group of virtual friends has become second nature. Comments, photos, videos and, now, location are revealed at the click of button.

According to a study into 'The Secret Life of Teens' by online security firm McAfee, 69% of 13-17 year olds have included their physical location in their social networking status. And, with research by UK regulator Ofcom showing that many children under the age of 13 are lying about their age so that they can access social networking sites, they could be doing the same to access location services that are meant for over 18s.



"Kids know not to talk to strangers - it's one of the first lessons you teach them. But online, there's a sense of trust and anonymity, so kids let their guard down," says Tracy Mooney of McAfee. "Kids would never hand out their name and address to a stranger in the real world, so it's alarming to see how many kids do that very thing online."

Are young people not aware of the potential pitfalls of revealing where they are at any given moment? Or do they simply live by the mantra 'it won't happen to me'?

"Broadcasting where you are to all your Facebook®, MySpace or Twitter friends could be risky, especially for young people," adds Mullins. "They're putting their trust in their online social networks, which might be made up of 100s, or even

POPULAR LOCATION SERVICES



Facebook® Places – www.facebook.com/places



Foursquare – www.foursquare.com



Google Latitude – www.google.com/latitude



Gowalla – www.gowalla.com

HOW DO LOCATION SERVICES WORK?

Location services use the geographical location of your computer, mobile phone or other portable device with location capabilities (such as a Nintendo® DS) so that you can receive relevant local information (such as traffic updates) or share your location with your various social networks (such as Twitter)

* Source: Ofcom, June 2009.

EXPERT VIEW:

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New location applications, such as Facebook® Places, are certainly creating a stir. It's not hard to see why. Knowing where someone is right now, or knowing where they have been or are likely to be, can be very useful or fun, or both.

Aside from 'Places', Google and Yahoo! respectively have 'Latitude' and 'Fire Eagle' and there are plenty of others already here or on the way. They all do similar kinds of things: you can track someone or allow yourself to be tracked.

From a child safety perspective, these applications present a number of challenges and, to be frank, a number of worries. Some children may be slow to understand the implications of these new services but stalkers and bullies may not be. This is one of the reasons why children's groups across Europe, via the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online, are beginning a campaign for greater safeguards to be built in. So parents need to get up to speed. Again!

Whether or not you want your children to use these services, it reminds us of the importance of doing two basic things:

- Sit down with your child, ask them to take you to their social networking profile and go through every single friend to whom they are linked. Ask them to tell you who each one is and how they know them.
- Explain that one of the reasons you are doing this is because, whilst it is not a good idea anyway for children to have perfect strangers on their buddy list, now these new location apps have arrived, it makes that more important than ever. Be ready to explain why, but without scaring them out of their wits!

Rather unhelpfully, some location service providers specify 18 as the minimum age for users whereas others say 13. Either way, since no location provider actually confirms a new user's age, in effect any child could be doing it. Who said the 21st century was going to be easy?

TAKE ACTION

1 FAMILIARISE yourself with the location settings on your and your child's computer and mobile devices - especially their social networking services like Facebook® - and turn them off if you'd rather not share your/their location

2 ENCOURAGE your child to respect minimum age limits on location services (many are for 13+)

3 EXPLAIN why it's not a good idea to reveal lots of personal information online, even to friends - sometimes it's just better to keep things to yourself

4 DISCUSS the potential pitfalls of location services, such as strangers finding out where they live or go to school

Future innovation

Whatever people think of location services, they're here to stay. From providing ticketless travel for the general public to helping the security forces track criminals, geo-location capabilities on mobile devices look set to play an increasingly important role in society.

"Moving forward, the use of the location of a personal mobile device as a reliable surrogate for the individual is stimulating new applications in healthcare, financial payments and social networking to name just a few," adds Caroline Dewing

of Vodafone's Future Agenda programme - www.futureagenda.org.

For young people, it all seems very exciting; for parents, perhaps a little scary. The important thing is that parents help their kids to understand and manage the potential risks.

As James Steyer of Common Sense Media points out, "Mobile phones and devices can bring new educational and creative opportunities for children. But whether their impact is positive or negative, mobile phones and portable digital devices are not going away." 📱

For more more information about location services, go to
www.vodafone.com/parents/locationservices

USEFUL WEBSITES



Common Sense Media –
www.common sense media.org



Facebook® Places –
www.facebook.com/places



Vodafone Parents' Guide –
www.vodafone.com/parents/locationservices