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## Interest in satellite child locators grows

By May Wong

Aug. 25, 2002 | SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) -- Given the recent spate of high-profile child abductions, Eric Wasman now double-bolts his front doors and shuts his windows even on hot nights.

And soon, he'll arm his two young daughters, ages 4 and 2, with high-tech, satellite-linked bracelets he hopes will keep them safer and buy him some peace of mind.

The bracelets, locked onto a child's wrist and worn like an oversized wristwatch, have built-in technology that lets parents track their children's whereabouts by Internet or phone. In a kidnapping or other worst-case scenario, the wearer can contact 911 by pressing two buttons.

"When it comes to your kids, you can't be too careful," said Wasman, a mortgage broker in Redwood City. "And the worst thing is just not knowing."

Experts on missing children warn that such devices, while expensive -- Wasman will be paying about \$800 for the pair and about \$30 in monthly service fees -- are not foolproof and could give parents a false sense of security.

"Parents need to realize what these devices can and cannot do," said Tina Schwartz of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "It doesn't take the place of safety education and line-of-sight supervision."

The locators have won endorsements from both Oprah Winfrey and Marc Klaas, whose 12-year-old daughter, Polly, was abducted from her bedroom and killed in 1993.

The 3-ounce locators Wasman is considering are due to be released next month by Redwood Shores-based Wherify, which spent four years developing its locator and tracking service. Similar people trackers are offered by Applied Digital and other companies.

Wherify's GPS Personal Locator combines global positioning system satellite and digital wireless technologies to pinpoint a wearer's position within a few feet, the company says.

Parents can view satellite or street maps on Wherify's Web site or call a toll-free number to obtain their kids' location and movements within a minute.

A "bread crumb" mode lets parents preset times for tracking: The monitoring service would contact the parent by phone, pager or fax if the child isn't at the right location.

Parents lock the bracelet, made of water-resistant material, onto a child's wrist and can unlock it by key or remotely. Cutting or forcibly removing the band would activate an alarm for the company's emergency operators.

A series of high-profile kidnappings of children this year has worried parents across the country. In suburban San Diego, a man was convicted last week in the kidnapping and killing of 7-year-old Danielle van Dam. Samantha Runnion, a 5-year-old kidnapped from Orange County, Calif., and Cassandra Williamson, 6, kidnapped in Missouri, were both found slain. And Elizabeth Smart, a teenager taken from her bedroom in Utah, is still missing.

"I've probably had hundreds of phone calls and e-mails on these tracking products over the past six months," said Randy Smith, founder of the Lost Children's Network.

He considers the technology "a great way for a working parent to be at the office and see if little Sally made it to day care by the shuttle."

Despite the attention to recent cases, experts say abductions by strangers remain rare. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates the total number of cases annually at 100 now, down from 200 to 300 in the 1980s.

Still, Richard Winn, a Pine Grove, Pa., a father of 9- and 6-year old girls, says he's been waiting for a child location gadget for years and plans to buy two locator bracelets.

"I don't mean to sound paranoid, but there are real threats out there," Winn said. "And I'm not shallow-minded enough to think it can't happen to me."

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