At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about TRACKING DEVICES

Bluetooth tracking devices like Apple's AirTag and Samsung's SmartTags have exploded in popularity, with millions sold each year. These small tools help people locate their lost items, but their discreet design has also made them attractive for more sinister purposes. From stalking to bullying, tracking devices present unique risks that trusted adults need to understand and address.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

STALKING AND HARASSMENT

Because of their tiny size and unassuming appearance, tracking devices can easily be hidden in bags or clothing. They've been used to monitor individuals without their knowledge, with a lawsuit in the US labelling AirTags "the weapon of choice of stalkers and abusers". In the UK, use of tracking devices in coercive control and stalking cases reportedly rose by 317 percent between 2018 and 2023.

TOOLS FOR BULLYING

Tracking devices could allow bullies to follow or locate their targets even outside of school. This makes it difficult for children to find refuge, potentially extending the trauma of bullying into spaces – like home – that should feel safe and secure.

FALSE ACCUSATIONS

Because tracking devices are linked to user accounts, they could be misused to 'prove' ownership of someone else's possessions. Someone could, for example, plant a tracker on another person's belongings to falsely claim them as their own.

INVASION OF PRIVACY

These devices are designed to share location data with the user via other people's phones, which can unintentionally broadcast someone's movements without their consent. This makes them vulnerable to being monitored by strangers without realising.

DIFFICULT TO DETECT

Many tracking devices are designed to be discreet, but that also means they're easy to hide. Without proactive checking or the right tech to detect them, children and young people might not realise they're being tracked.

Advice for Parents & Educators

WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS

If a child's peers always seem to know their location – whether in person or hinted at online – it could be worth checking for tracking devices. Some, like AirTags, will eventually make a noise if separated from their owner. Listen out for a chirping sound.

USE DETECTION APPS

Apple devices running iOS 14.5 or later will notify users of unknown AirTags nearby. Android users can install Apple's 'Tracker Detect' or the third-party app 'AirGuard' to scan for tracking devices from various manufacturers.

CHECK LIKELY HIDING SPOTS

Common places where trackers may be planted include jacket linings, bag seams, pockets, or under bike seats. If you find one, take a photo of the serial number before disposing of it – this could help police trace the account it's linked to.

HAVE THE CONVERSATION

Talk to your child about what tracking devices are, what signs to look out for, and how they might be misused. Emphasise the legal consequences of using them to prank, harass, or monitor someone.

Meet Our Expert

Alan Martin is a seasoned technology journalist with bylines in Wired, TechRadar, The Guardian, The Evening Standard, The Telegraph, and The New Statesman. He specialises in consumer tech, online safety, and emerging risks in the digital landscape.

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