

I tracked my kid with Apple's Airtags to test its privacy features

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New York (CNN Business) I clipped a keychain with one of Apple's tiny new Bluetooth trackers, [AirTags](#), onto my son's book bag and waved goodbye to him on the school bus. I watched on my iPhone's Find My app as the bus stopped at a light a few blocks down from our street.

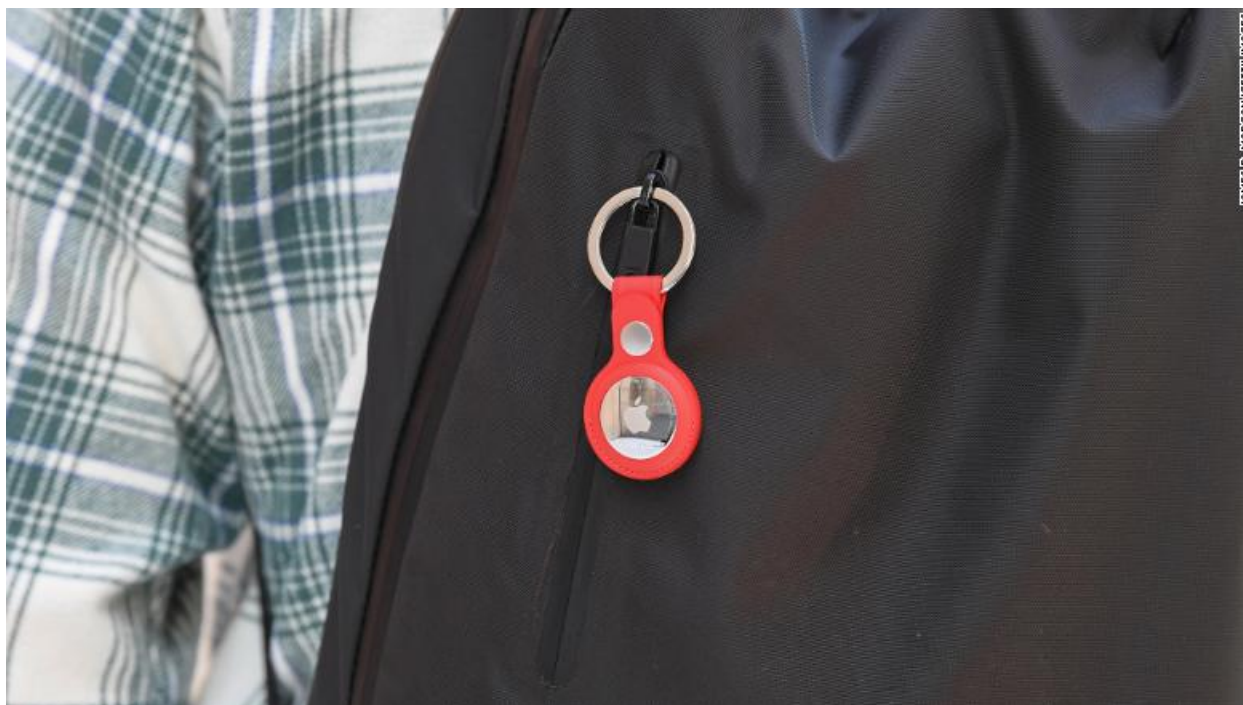
But then the tiny "key" icon on the app stopped moving. The item was "last detected" seven minutes ago at a busy

intersection less than a mile away. Traffic, maybe? Five more minutes passed with no update. Is there an issue with the app? After another 10 minutes, my heart started to race; still nothing.

Finally, the tracker was detected four miles away in front of his school. Relieved, I decided more information in this case was worse; I'd go back to just tracking my keys. Apple later told me the delay was due to the tracker needing to communicate with Bluetooth on other iOS devices in the Find My network along the bus route before the AirTag's location could be updated to iCloud and the app.

Still, my experiment highlighted how easily these trackers could be used to track another person. After all, I knew the moment he arrived at school and when he got back on the bus to head home.

Earlier this month, Apple ([AAPL](#)) launched \$29 Tile-like Bluetooth locators that attach to and help you find items such as keys, wallets, laptops or your car, giving nearly anything a digital footprint. Location trackers aren't new — there are similar products from Samsung, Sony and Tile — but AirTags' powerful Ultra Wideband technology chip allows it to more accurately determine the location and enables precise augmented reality directional arrows that populate on the iPhone or iPad's screen.



A key ring containing an AirTag attached to a book bag in Sydney, Australia.

While AirTags are explicitly intended for items only, Apple has added safeguards to cut down on unwanted tracking. For example, the company does not store location data, and it will send an alert to an iOS device user if an AirTag appears to be following them when its owner is not around. If the AirTag doesn't re-tether to the owner's iOS device after three days, the tracker will start to make a noise.

"We take customer safety very seriously and are committed to AirTag's privacy and security," the company said in a statement to CNN Business. "AirTag is designed with a set of proactive features to discourage unwanted tracking — a first in the industry — and the Find My network includes a smart, tunable system with deterrents that

applies to AirTag, as well as third-party products part of the Find My network accessory program. We are raising the bar on privacy for our users and the industry, and hope others will follow."

The safeguards are a work in progress as the software rolls out and users begin interacting with the devices. When my babysitter recently took my son to an appointment, using my set of keys with an AirTag attached, she was not informed that she was carrying an AirTag — separated from my phone. (She hadn't yet updated her phone's software to iOS 14.5.)

Non-iPhone users can hold their phones close to the AirTags and, via short-range wireless technology, information pops up on how to disable the tracker, but that's if the person knows they're being tracked and locates it. In addition, three days is a long time for an AirTag to keep quiet before making a noise.

Apple told CNN Business it may adjust these features through software updates to improve the AirTags' tracking deterrents. It also said the three-day alert window was determined so as to not inundate users with alerts. For example, if a spouse puts an AirTag on a gym bag and leaves it in a closet while at work, whoever is at home may consider the noise a nuisance.

Despite the safeguards, some privacy experts and groups are still concerned about unwanted tracking. For example, the National Network to End Domestic Violence — which sits on advisory boards of tech companies including Facebook and Uber — has been vocal about how AirTag and similar devices could be used by an abuser to discreetly monitor someone's whereabouts.



Apple's new AirTag location trackers

"Abusive individuals will misuse any type of technology as a tactic of abuse, regardless of the intended purpose or how helpful it can be to someone else," Erica Olsen, safety net project director at NNEDV, told CNN Business. "Location tracking is very common and a significant concern for survivors, but this isn't specific just to AirTags. Apple's privacy and security notifications can actually make this device harder for abusive people to misuse than others on the market and that point shouldn't be lost." However, she said more work needs to be done to "maximize privacy."

Albert Fox Cahn, founder and executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project and a fellow at the NYU School of Law, agreed, saying AirTag's safeguards "don't go far enough."



AirTag could give a nice bump to Apple's growing lineup of smaller stuff

"Three days of tracking is more than long enough to create a privacy risk. For those living with their abusers, they might never find out they're being tracked if their abusers can frequently come within range of the AirTag," Cahn said. "Similarly, it is helpful that AirTags will alert nearby iPhones to their presence, but those using Android won't receive an alert if an AirTag is tracking them."

Apple said one of the main reasons it spent so much time developing safeguards was the sheer size of its Find My app network. But it's the AirTags' reliance on that broader network that creates much of the need for the safeguards in the first place, Cahn said. "That's because Apple is turning more than a billion iOS devices into a network for

tracking AirTags, while Tile will only operate when in range of the small number of people using the Tile app. ... The benefits of finding our keys a bit quicker isn't worth the danger of creating a new global tracking network."

Although AirTags launched just last week, tech analysts already believe the trackers could be the next big accessory win for Apple. Accessories — from iPhone cases and chargers to tablet keyboards — are a critical part of its revenue growth strategy.

But as AirTag adoption grows, Ramon Llamas, a director at research firm IDC, echoed that Apple will need to expand its safeguards, as nefarious parties will "find a way to get around privacy issues one way or another."

"This is a work in progress, especially as the use case continues to evolve," Llamas said. "For now, AirTags is intended for items."

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