

Robots used to keep Japan's children safe

Getting children safely to and from school is seemingly no easy feat these days, and some local governments in Japan are prepared to make full use of available technology to ensure that students are kept safely out of harm's way.

Earlier this week the Chuo Elementary School in Osaka's Chuo district started using vending machines as a way to keep an eye out for children getting to school. Vending machines that sell everything from soft drinks to magazines are common enough across Japan's urban districts, and the machines around the Osaka public elementary school have been equipped with big gray sensors on top. Those sensors are able to read the integrated circuit chip tags the size of a business card that have been planted into the backpacks of about 100 students who have volunteered to take part in the experiment that will run until March 20.

Once a child passes by a vending machine that is equipped with sensors that can read the integrated circuit tags, the sensor will send an e-mail message to the individual's parents alerting them that their child had passed by that machine, with the time and location of where they passed, in addition to sending out photos of the child passing by. The messages will be sent twice daily, once when the student is going to school, and again when the student is on his or her way home.

Unlike in the United States, walking or taking public transportation to school is the norm at most Japanese elementary schools in major cities, and in fact, many schools ban parents from driving their children to their doors from the very real fear of causing traffic jams and accidents. So seeing groups of 6-year-olds with the traditional leather-crafted backpacks trudging off to school in the morning is a common enough sight.

Yet in recent years there have been growing concerns about the safety of children as they commute to school, and the memory of one knife-yielding man stabbing several children on their way home several years ago remains fresh in the minds of many.

In fact, such incidents have pushed the city of Osaka to collaborate with Ritsumeikan University and manufacturers to come up with the latest idea of mounting sensors onto vending machines.

In launching the so-called street-corner vigilance robot, Osaka prefecture's governor Fusae Ota said, "There is no such thing as absolute safety. By supplementing the robot in addition to vigilance by members of the local community, we want to ensure safety by twofold or threefold."

Some parents, however, appear to be worried that there is too much faith in the power of robots and technology in general, arguing that schools and local authorities should do more to ensure local community members band together to be on the lookout more instead.

If the pilot project is successful, the robots are expected to be in full use in the area within the next three years.

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