

By Keith Ferrell

Driver's Edge

Taking some wise precautions can help keep your teen safe behind the wheel.

Cars and kids have been a potentially deadly duo for decades. Automobile crashes continue to claim the lives of 5,500 teenagers a year, making motor vehicle crashes the leading cause of death for 16- to 20-year-olds. Despite the fact that teenage drivers account for only 6 percent of the driving public, they are involved in a staggering 14 percent of all fatal car crashes. Two-thirds of the teenagers killed are male.

Those numbers have also remained remarkably stable, even allowing for population increases, and are likely to remain so. But that doesn't mean that there aren't steps that parents, schools, and government agencies can and should take to help keep teen drivers safe.

Peer Pressures, Cultural Messages

Perhaps chief among the reasons for the high rate of crashes involving teenagers is the nature of teenage psychology and culture.

Teenagers are passing through a time of rapid change, a process accompanied by plenty of turmoil and lane changes on a variety of fronts — physiological, hormonal, emotional, social, and cultural. It

is a time of passage, and the chief rite of passage for American teens remains the driver's license.

At just that moment — the 16th birthday, as a rule — the challenges, dilemmas, temptations, and distractions of becoming an adult become most intense. And that's when we place our children behind the wheel of a powerful machine capable of moving at high speeds. Driving an automobile is a skill requiring total focus and constant close attention, snap decision-making, and split-second reactions.

Temptations and risks are also part of the adolescent experience. The new driver takes the wheel at just that



time when peer pressure to experiment with alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs becomes especially intense. Making matters worse, the automobile provides the teenager with the means to “get away” and abuse substances in “private.”

Additionally, our entertainment media — TV, movies, and an abundance of video games — actually celebrate reckless driving, setting an example that’s all too tempting for teens to emulate.

Hormones and Distractions

The role of the teen brain’s physiological development cannot be underestimated. While the findings are thus far inconclusive, some scientists argue that the prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain responsible for decision-making — doesn’t fully develop until we reach our 20s. If this is true, we may be placing our children in decision-intensive situations before their brains are fully equipped for those decisions.

All of those factors face a completely inexperienced driver. Not surprisingly, younger teens are at greater risk of causing crashes than older. A Canadian study found that the highest rate of teenage car crashes occurs within the first month of licensed driving. Sixteen-

At just that moment — the 16th birthday, as a rule — the challenges, dilemmas, temptations, and distractions of becoming an adult become most intense.

year-old drivers cause 35 crashes per million miles driven, a rate almost twice that of 18-year-olds, who cause 20 over the same distance. For the general driving population, the rate is an average of four crashes per million miles of driving.

The paradox of putting a teenager behind the wheel of an automobile is nothing new. It wasn’t even new when most of our parents were teenage drivers, for that matter. Nor is all of the turmoil, uncertainty, experimentation, and risk-taking inherent in being a teenager. It’s always been a volatile combination. But there are a variety of factors that are new and widespread among today’s teens, and which further raise the risks of the car/kid combination turning tragic.

Those factors include a range of electronic technologies. Gone are the days when the in-dash radio was the only electronic device to be found in a car. Cell phones and pagers, iPods and other music players, GPS devices, and even DVD players are among the variety of devices that turn our kids and their cars into mobile media centers. These devices demand attention and distract from the demanding task at hand. Electronics add to the longstanding appeal of the motor vehicle as a “party place.”

The Parent’s Role

What’s a concerned parent — and society — to do? Several things, as it turns out.

- **Know your child.** Be sure your child knows what you expect of her or him behind the wheel. In part, this means setting a good example with your own responsible driving. Don’t talk on the cell phone, eat, or drink when you’re behind the wheel, and be sure your children understand that you expect the same of them.
- **Set strict rules and enforce them.** Your teenage driver should know:
 - **Seat belts are required.** Some studies show that barely 60 percent of teens wear safety belts.
 - **Where and when she is allowed to drive.** Nighttime driving is extremely dangerous and should be limited.
 - **How many passengers are allowed.** The fewer, the better for both limiting distractions and the temptation to show off in front of one’s friends.
 - **Phones and other devices, as well as eating and drinking, are not allowed while driving.**
 - **Alcohol and drugs are absolutely prohibited** (and not just behind the wheel!)
 - **Stay within the speed limit and obey all traffic signals.**

- **Consider creating a written contract with your new driver.** The contract should spell out your family’s rules and regulations governing automobile use and operation. It should

also contain appropriate and rigorously enforced penalties for even minor violations.



- **Practice with your teen in a safe location.**

Don’t place all of the responsibility for driving instruction on the driver-training program. Most states’ driver-training courses offer around 30 hours of classroom learning. Much of that time is taken up with videos, with barely a fifth that much used for behind-the-wheel training. Parents should do a lot of hands-on teaching to reinforce what their teens are learning in class.

- **Teach responsible driving with all motor vehicles.** The laws in most states allows children younger than teens to operate ATVs, mini-bikes, and other off-road vehicles, but it is best to wait until your child has a driver’s license to allow him to operate any motorized vehicles. When he is ready, be sure he operates them responsibly, including wearing appropriate safety gear.

Placing your child behind the wheel of a motor vehicle is one of the largest steps a parent can take. It’s important that you take the step *with* your child, helping to ensure that when they drive away, they are equipped to do so safely and return home the same way. ●