

TEEN DRIVERS NEED MORE DRIVING, NOT INSTRUCTION: PART 2

Last week's article was the first of a two-part series on teen drivers, based on a February New York Times article by Dr. Perri Klass, and what we as parents need to do to keep them safe while they learn the finer points of safe driving. Lack of experience was the greatest factor for poor teen driving and that the best way to help teens improve their driving ability was to give them more driving experience under multiple diverse road conditions. Today's article will continue the task of mitigating the risks that are inevitable with teen drivers.

According to Robert D. Foss, director emeritus of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers at the Highway Safety Research Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, teenagers are at higher risk for crashes for several years after they get their licenses. Boys are somewhat more likely to be risky drivers, and kids whose friends are risky drivers are more likely to drive that way themselves. There's an adolescent style of driving with fast starts and sharp turns and late hard braking, which tends to decrease with age; some of this is lack of experience, but some may be experimenting with the car, and enjoying the fun of driving dramatically. Still, the typical teenage driver, Dr. Foss said, is driving carefully, and trying to follow the rules.

All novice drivers of whatever age have higher crash rates, but for older people, the rates start lower and come down faster. And similarly, talking on cellphones or texting are risky behaviors for any of us as drivers, but the risk increases more sharply for adolescents. There are a variety of technological "fixes" out there that parents may want to consider, from apps to cellphone blocking technology (more on this in a future "Did You Know" article) but no clear data yet about what helps, or what is most likely to be used. And of course, road safety depends not only on your own level of distraction, but also on the other drivers around you.

"Now cars are loaded with distracting technology," Dr. Foss said. "Something that used to be as simple as picking a radio station now on some vehicles is infinitely more complicated and distracting than what I had on my 1954 Ford when I started driving, and we're not going to ameliorate that by saying, now don't be distracted, concentrate on the road."

But those same newer cars also can come with important safety features, and since most teenagers will drive a car that already belongs to the family, it should be the safest possible car. "Parents tend to put the teen in the oldest car the family owns, which in general is the least safe car," Dr. Foss said. Teenagers should be driving cars with every possible airbag, and with electronic stability control, which helps prevent rollover crashes. Ideally, they should not be driving very small cars or compacts, which are not as protective. If you do buy a car for your teenager, Foss said, think about safety, and find one that's as safe as possible for what you can afford. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has a list, updated every year, of recommended safe cars for teen drivers in different price ranges.

If you remember one thing from this article it's this: "The single most predictive factor in crashes is exposure," Dr. Simons-Morton said. "Novices need to practice; they need experience to develop safe driving judgment." Maneuvering a vehicle is relatively easy", he said, "but managing the whole driving task in this complex environment is something adults take for granted, but it's really complicated to learn."

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