

# Snap!

## How Split-Second Decisions Imperil Youth

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By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Educating young people about the dangers inherent in their everyday lives is not an assignment for the faint of heart. It takes reams of information, no small amount of courage, and tenacity not easily maintained. Yet, as we enter one of the most dangerous seasons for teens, the call to action has never been greater.

Even well-intentioned teens may fall victim to a natural neurochemical process that may swiftly erase past reasoning, replacing it with split-second decisions that may surprise, or in some cases confound, them.

During adolescence – and somewhat beyond – dormant cognitive order gives way to mind-numbing change as the brain literally prunes itself, recasting its very structure in the interest of what psychologists call “higher order” thinking skills, such as appraising, predicting, and evaluating. This massive reorganization, in which the gray matter of the brain (which had been thickening up to the start of puberty) begins to thin as excess connections are eliminated and remaining ones strengthened, creates a leaner, meaner thinking machine.

Sounds great.

The only problem is that along with such transformation comes a (hopefully) temporary slighting of the part of the brain responsible for judgment. And a lack of judgment can lead to serious, even deadly, consequences.

Jay Giedd, M.D., a neuroscientist at the National Institute of Mental Health – and a leading researcher on adolescent brains – calls this period “a time of enormous opportunity and of enormous risk,” pointing out that, among other things, it coincides, or perhaps collides, with other developmental forces. In an interview with PBS’ *Frontline*, Dr. Giedd said, “It’s also a particularly cruel irony of nature, I think, that right at this time when the brain is most vulnerable is also the time when teens are most likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol.”

And that is especially troubling when it comes to teens and cars.

Research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Insurance reveals that, despite more than two decades of progress in the area of adolescent impaired driving, one in five teens reports combining driving with alcohol and almost one in eight says the same thing about marijuana.

Add to that analysis other key indicators of teen driving safety – using a cell phone (62 percent), having more than three people in the car (64 percent), and text messaging (22 percent) while driving – and you begin to see the scope of the problem.

And just when more teens than ever are climbing behind the wheel.

According to SADD and Liberty Mutual, during the summer teen drivers average 44 percent more

hours behind the wheel each week and are more likely than they are during the school year to drive with three or more teens in the car (23 percent versus 6 percent), to drive late at night (47 percent versus 6 percent), and to drive when tired or sleepy (24 percent versus 9 percent).

These sobering statistics may help to explain why the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says that more teens die in car crashes during the summer months (June through September) than at any other time of the year. Another cruel irony of timing – the joy and freedom that summer brings crashing headlong into an unyielding cognitive makeover that leaves even the most responsible of teens at risk.

In her book *The Primal Teen*, *New York Times* health editor Barbara Strauch recounts the tale of one such teen, a girl who gets good grades and takes pains to avoid making poor choices. Nevertheless, Strauch reports, she sometimes “acts crazy,” such as the time she countered a truck that had passed her on the highway by then passing it herself ... at a speed of more than one hundred miles per hour. As Strauch says, “She nearly killed herself.”

Speeding cars, and impulses, call out for the type of deliberate, thoughtful processing of information that perhaps only fully mature adult brains can truly master, thereby placing a big, bold exclamation point on the value of parental intrusion into the carefree world of teen driving. After all, young people themselves say that their parents are the biggest influence on how they drive and they report that when Mom or Dad sets and enforces driving rules, they are more likely to stay safe behind the wheel.

Yet another place where judgments can be clouded, and lives forever changed, in a snap!

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