

A Lease on Life

Parents Play a Pivotal Role in Keeping Teens Safe During the Summer Driving Season

by Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

William Shakespeare wrote, “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date,” apparently foreshadowing the all-too-soon approach of fall. But a short summer season is time enough still for even the most unlikely of kids to find trouble in the most likely of places: cars and roadways.

Unshackled from their school desks, homework assignments, and extracurricular activities, teens find new freedoms during the summer months – and often they involve automobiles. According to research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group, young people spend 44 percent more hours driving each week in the summer than during the school year.

Why is this a problem? Because too many teens exercise poor judgment behind the wheel. For example, more than half (62 percent) of high school drivers say they talk on a cell phone while driving and two thirds (67 percent) say they speed.

When comparing summer driving habits against the rest of the year, we find that teens are more likely to drive with three or more passengers in the car (23 percent versus 6 percent); more likely to drive late at night (47 percent versus 6 percent); and more likely to drive when tired or sleepy (24 percent versus 9 percent).

But these aren’t the only issues. Inexplicably, a large number of teens continue to tempt fate by driving impaired. Data reveals that one in five teens is drinking and driving and one in nearly eight is using marijuana and driving.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that, on average, more than 300,000 teens are injured in car crashes each year, nearly 8,000 are involved in fatal crashes, and more than 3,500 are killed. And the numbers spike during June, July, and August. That means it’s time to act.

So what can parents do? Fortunately, a lot!

Reviewing driving laws, setting family driving rules, and following through with consequences when those laws and rules are broken cuts down on the number of teens who engage in unsafe driving behaviors. For example, young drivers whose parents establish expectations and enforce the rules are less likely to speed, less likely to talk on a cell phone, less likely to drive with three or more passengers in a car, and less likely to eat or drink while driving than are other teens. They are also more likely to wear safety belts and obey traffic signals.

“These findings cannot be overstated. We all know that speeding contributes to crashes, and studies show the crash rate among teen drivers doubles or quadruples with two or three passengers, respectively, when compared to driving alone,” said Greg Gordon, Liberty Mutual vice president, Consumer Marketing, citing statistics from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. “Parents can make a big difference by clearly establishing expectations for their teens and following through on consequences, including loss of driving privileges, should those expectations be breached.”

Sensible rules might include no driving after 10 p.m.; no use of alcohol or other drugs; no eating, changing CDs, handling iPods, or putting on makeup; and no cell phone use, including text messaging, while driving. And possible consequences should include the temporary loss of driving privileges.

Another important step parents can take toward keeping their teen driver safe is setting a good example. While young people overwhelmingly say their parents are the biggest influence on how they drive, almost two thirds (62 percent) of high school teens say their parents talk on a cell phone while driving; almost half (48 percent) say their parents speed; and almost a third (31 percent) say their parents don't wear a safety belt. Conversely, teens who believe their parents are a good influence are significantly less likely to ride in a car with a driver who is drunk or on drugs, for example.

Finally, get to know your state's Graduated Driver License Law, including requirements for supervised driving and restrictions on time of day and passengers in the car.

Clearly, parents can go a long way toward keeping their children safe when it comes to driving, or riding, in a car. But teens have a role to play as well. By speaking up when their friends engage in distracted, dangerous driving, they can help to prevent needless tragedy. In fact, research shows that young drivers may be more likely to listen to their peers than to adults because they don't want to lose friends or be labeled as bad drivers.

For many teens, summer represents a much-needed break from the stress of school, sports, and extracurricular commitments. But freedom and fun have their limits. Developing a dialogue that transcends perfunctory warnings and reflects reasonable discipline will go a long way toward making sure that kids make it back to school when the fleeting lease on summer is over.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. Visit www.sadd.org and www.libertymutualinsurance.com for more information about teen driving.