

Last But Not Least

Going Back to School on Teen Driving

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



The early morning car crash on Union Bridge Street in Duxbury, Massachusetts, left a late model station wagon wrapped around a tree and sent three teens, two critically injured, to area hospitals. One would die soon thereafter – a grim, and eerily poignant, reminder that fall's not all about reading, writing, and arithmetic. There's a fourth "R" that's just as important: road safety.

With 88 percent of teens reporting that driving to school is their primary reason for being behind the wheel (an average of 16.4 hours per week), there's plenty to worry – and talk – about.

Indeed, the results of a teen driving study by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual (one of the nation's largest automobile insurers) tells the troubling truth.

Speeding: Sixty-four (64) percent of teen drivers say they speed.

Distracted Driving: Sixty-two (62) percent of teen drivers say they use a cell phone while driving, 64 percent say they drive with more than three people in the car, and more than one in five admits to text messaging while behind the wheel.

Impaired Driving: Nineteen (19) percent (nearly one in five) of teen drivers say they have driven after drinking alcohol;

15 percent say they have done so after using marijuana; and 7 percent report the same regarding other drugs.

Seat Belts: Thirty-three (33) percent of teen drivers say they don't wear their safety belts.

It's no wonder that teens have the highest crash risk of any age group or that such crashes remain the leading cause of death for young people ages 15-20. Nevertheless, nine out of ten teens (89 percent) consider themselves to be "safe" drivers.

Maybe more disturbing is the fact that many teens apparently don't consider risky driving behaviors to be dangerous at all. For example, more than one in four teens say they believe speeding, talking on a cell phone while driving, and not wearing a safety belt are safe. In addition, approximately one in five isn't concerned about driving after drinking or using other drugs.

Back to school we go.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 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.

Sobering statistics for sure.

So how can we reverse this trend? Research suggests five action steps that young people and their parents can take to improve road safety during this busy back-to-school season – and all year long.

1. Debunk the Myth of Invincibility.

As much as they might think they are indestructible, teens need constant reminders of the responsibilities and risks associated with driving.

2. Empower teens to take the lead.

Teen drivers may be more inclined to heed the warnings of their peers than of adults.

3. Set a good example.

According to teens themselves, their parents are their number-one influence when it comes to driving behaviors.

4. Establish family driving rules.

Clear expectations – for teen and adult drivers – can go a long way toward preventing crashes.

5. Enforce consequences.

Parents who set and enforce driving rules are less likely to have teen drivers who operate a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, or who speed, talk on a cell phone, eat, or drink while driving.

Sadly, the Duxbury tragedy is not an isolated event. It is part of an alarming trend of dangerous and distracted driving on the part of young people inexperienced behind the wheel and unfamiliar with the road.

With the hustle and bustle of the new school year comes renewed focus on academics, athletics, and extracurricular activities. Let's add driving safety to the list ... and certainly neither last nor least.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. The SADD/Liberty Mutual teen driving research can be found at www.sadd.org and www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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