

Speaking Up

Teens Are Key to Reducing Automobile Crash Deaths



By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

Targeting the world-changing tenacity of youth, the Ad Council, in partnership with AAA (American Automobile Association) and SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has launched an impressive public-service advertising campaign designed to combat complacency and trigger an avalanche of adolescent activism to defeat distracted – and dangerous – driving. And not a moment too soon.

According to a *Teens Today* driving study from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group, one of the nation's largest automobile insurers, well more than half (62 percent) of high school drivers say they talk on a cell phone while driving and almost two thirds (67 percent) say they speed.

The results are painfully clear. Car crashes are the number-one killer of teens in the United States.

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration research shows 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.

Of course, distracted driving is only part of the problem.

Despite decades of progress in reducing the incidence of impaired driving, *Teens Today* reveals that one in five teens is still drinking and driving and one in nearly eight teens is still using marijuana and driving.

While there is likely no single solution to the scourge of dangerous driving, social marketing campaigns such as this one can help. According to the Social Marketing Institute, the ultimate objective is to influence action through application of standard marketing techniques. Similar campaigns have proven successful in addressing issues ranging from youth smoking to environmental citizenship.

The *UR the Spokesperson* campaign, sponsored by a coalition of state attorneys general and consumer protection agencies, encourages young people to be an antidote for reckless driving by empowering them to speak up when a friend is not driving safely. It also seeks to increase awareness about the dangers of reckless driving and help teens be safe drivers by focusing on reducing speed, avoiding distractions, and wearing seat belts.

Changing social norms about what constitutes appropriate behavior is another sensible strategy worth pursuing. According to Peggy Conlon, President and CEO of the Ad Council, "We want it to become not only socially acceptable but socially expected for teens to speak up when they don't feel safe."

Parents have a critical role to play as well.

The *Teens Today* research finds that setting expectations and following through with consequences cuts down on the number of teens who engage in

unsafe driving behaviors. For example, young drivers whose parents establish and enforce driving rules are less likely to speed, less likely to talk on a cell phone, less likely to drive with three or more passengers in the car, and less likely to eat or drink while driving than are other teens.

Another important step parents can take toward keeping their teen drivers safe is setting a good example.

Yet, while young people say overwhelmingly their parents are or will be 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.

How can parents help?

- Know your state's Graduated Driver License Law, including requirements for supervised driving and restrictions on time of day and passengers in the car.
- Set family rules about driving, such as 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.
- Establish and enforce consequences, including loss of driving privileges for breaking the rules.
- Be a good role model.

Clearly, parents can go a long way toward keeping their children safe when it comes to driving, or riding, in a

car. But teens themselves might actually go farther.

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.

That motivation will do just fine.

And the allocation of millions of dollars towards a public-service campaign promoting youth advocacy will no doubt add to the number of teens ready, willing, and able to speak up and save lives.

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. For more information about the campaign, visit www.URtheSpokesperson.com.

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