

The Gift of a Lifetime

Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Dangerously

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk was once the rallying cry for an army of young people campaigning to curb impaired driving among their peers. In it lies a simple proposition: that friends have a special responsibility to keep each other safe and alive.

And it worked!

From the early eighties to the mid-nineties, alcohol-related crash deaths among youth plummeted by 60 percent. Thousands and thousands of lives saved through the selfless act of speaking up to protect another.

What a concept.

And one that research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Insurance suggests could play an equally effective role in decreasing other threats to young drivers – and passengers – on the roadway.

Triple Threat

What are those threats and how prevalent are they? According to SADD and Liberty Mutual:

- 91 percent of teens say they speed;
- 90 percent talk on a cell phone while driving; and
- 73 percent read and send text messages while driving.

Yikes!

And what about the passengers?

Well, almost the exact same percentages report riding in cars with drivers who engage in those behaviors behind the wheel.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that a clear majority of teen drivers say they would change their habits if their friends asked them to:

- Speeding: 79 percent
- Talking on a cell phone: 68 percent
- Text messaging: 89 percent

Unfortunately, many teens are reluctant to speak up when a friend is driving dangerously. For example, less than half report they would say something to the driver about speeding (41 percent), talking on a cell phone (18 percent), or text messaging (46 percent).

Brain Drain

Further complicating this already complicated problem is the fact that teens are experiencing significant physical changes in their brains (pruning of gray matter) – particularly in areas linked to the processing of information and judgment.

Marisa Silveri, Ph.D., of the Neuroimaging Center at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts points out that it is during this very time that a young person's ability to "put the brakes" on quick, less thought-out responses may be compromised.

All the more reason the voice of a friend can be a lifesaver.

Speak Up or Else

It's time to change some social norms once again, just like almost thirty years ago when young people forcefully rebranded impaired driving as decidedly "uncool."

Social norms, being the commonly held or understood expectations for behavior, are powerful tools through which we define appropriate beliefs, thoughts and, perhaps most important, behaviors. Conforming to those norms is one way teens seek inclusion – as opposed to exclusion – from the all-important peer group.

Remaining connected to one's peer group and, more to the point, accepted by it is a significant motivator for teens embarking on the long journey of establishing an identity to call their own, becoming independent from Mom and Dad, and developing close, more adult-like relationships with others their age.

Through the "Speak Up or Else" campaign sponsored by the Ad Council and a coalition of state attorneys general and consumer protection agencies, young people are encouraged to change social norms related to driving behaviors by, well, saying *something!*

The campaign asks, "Why speak up?" And answers, "Because reckless driving is the #1 killer of 15- to 20-year-olds."

A key point of the campaign is to make sure that young people understand that how they communicate is up to them, as most kids likely don't want to appear preachy or alarmist. Saying

things in their own way works just as well, probably better, than someone else's way.

Whatever way, the scourge of distracted, dangerous driving among teens must be addressed – and who better to address it than teens themselves? And at what better time?

Spreading the Holiday Cheer

December, which also happens to be national Drunk and Drugged Driving (3D) Prevention Month, is a great time to spread some holiday cheer with the intangible but priceless gift of caring for a friend. And preventing senseless automobile-related tragedies is the best present going. One that can last a lifetime.

Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Dangerously.

Stephen Wallace, author of Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling, serves as national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, visit sadd.org. For more information about Stephen, visit stephengraywallace.com.