

Back to School 101: Safety Measures for Teen Drivers

By the American International Automobile Dealers (AIADA) Staff

The back to school season is a time of excitement, busier schedules – and for parents, concern that their teen drivers stay safe on the road. Whether as drivers or passengers, teens are at a statistically higher risk of injury and fatality when riding in an automobile. The good news is that teen fatalities have dropped in the last three decades – in the mid-70s, nearly 10,000 teenagers died every year in automobile crashes. In 2003, that statistic fell nearly 50 percent to 5,240 deaths.

“Even though teen fatality rates have fallen, it’s vital to remember that each is a tragedy for the family, friends and community concerned,” said Marianne McInerney, President of the American International Automobile Dealers Association (AIADA). “Every day, new teenage drivers are getting behind the wheel, and the only way to ensure their safety is to make sure they’re as prepared as they can be.”

The main causes behind the higher teenage crash and fatality rates are consonant with everyone’s gut feeling – due to inexperience, peer pressure and propensity to take more risks and not worry about safety precautions such as seat belts, all contribute to teen drivers being involved in more vehicle crashes than any other group of licensed drivers.

“We were all teenagers once, and there’s nothing like the excitement, the sense of freedom, that comes from being able to drive an automobile,” McInerney said. “While we should try to remember that, as parents, our task is to understand the dangers confronting our teen drivers and help them be as prepared as possible for when they’re finally out driving on their own.”

Rather than worry in the abstract, parents can best protect their teens by understanding how, where and when crashes involving teens occur, and take steps to minimize the risk. The best way to prevent crashes and encourage safe driving among teens is before they get into the car.

“Knowledge and preparation are the most effective antidotes against fear,” McInerney said. “The data regarding teen vehicle fatalities falls into clear patterns, and suggest obvious strategies for doing the best to create a safe teen driver in your family. We encourage all parents, teachers and anyone who interacts with teens to familiarize themselves with the potential dangers, as well as the best ideas for teaching safety.”

What Parents Need to Know:

- The crash rate per mile driven among 16-19 years-old is 4 times the risk among older drivers. Risk is highest at age 16. The crash rate per mile driven is twice as high among 16 year-olds as it is among 18-19 year-olds.

- Fifty-four percent of teenage motor vehicle crash deaths in 2003 occurred on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday.
- Forty-two percent of teenage motor vehicle crash deaths in 2003 occurred between 9 pm and 6 am.
- Fifty-nine percent of teenage passenger deaths in 2003 occurred in vehicles driven by another teenager. Among deaths of passengers of all ages, 20 percent occurred when a teenager was driving.
- As further evidence of increased risk taking when passengers are present, a study of driving behavior in England found that young drivers with young male passengers drove more dangerously than drivers without passengers.
- Alcohol levels of greater than .08 BAC are responsible for 16% of automobile fatalities for 16-17 year old drivers, and 32% for 18-20 year olds.
- Seat belt use among teenagers is lower than the general population -- in fatal crashes, more than half of all teen drivers were unbelted. Nearly two-thirds of teenage passengers who died in crashes, however, were unbelted.

What Parents Can Do:

- Drive like you want them to drive. Research shows that teens with crashes and violations have parents with poor driving records.
- Require safety belt use. Make it a mantra -- when you're in the car with your teen, don't even put the key in the ignition until everyone is buckled up.
- Become familiar with restrictions on beginning drivers. Most states have some form of graduated licensing, which limits the amount of time certain age drivers can be behind the wheel. To enforce the rules, you have to be familiar with them -- to learn about the law in your state, go to www.iihs.org/safety_facts/state_laws.
- Supervise practice driving. Parents should take an active role in helping their teenager learn how to drive. Make it fun, "quality time" by planning a series of practice sessions in a variety of situations, including night driving. Let your teens work up to challenges like driving in heavy traffic or on highways. Make it a priority to spend at least six months in supervised practice with your teen.
- Restrict night and weekend driving. Most young drivers' fatal crashes occur on weekends and at night, so teens shouldn't drive much later than 9 pm. The problem isn't just that such driving requires more skill. Late outings tend to be recreational, and even teens who usually follow the rules can be easily distracted or encouraged to take risks.

- Restrict passengers. Teen passengers in a vehicle can distract a beginning driver and lead to greater risktaking. Because young drivers often transport their friends, there's a teen passenger problem as well as a teen driver problem. About 6 of every 10 teenage passenger deaths (59 percent) during 2003 occurred in crashes with a teen driver.

- Go beyond driver education. High school driver ed may be a great start, but you may also want to consider an investment in a more intensive defensive driving school, such as those offered by established performance driving companies.

- Prohibit driving after drinking. Communicate loud and clear that it's illegal and dangerous for a teenager to drive after drinking alcohol or using any other drug. While alcohol isn't a factor in most crashes of 16 and 17 year-old drivers, the statistics climb for the 18 to 20 year old group.

- Choose vehicles for safety, not image. Teenagers should drive vehicles that reduce their chances of a crash and offer protection in case they do crash.

The original article can be found at <http://www.aiada.org/article.asp?id=49769>