

Teenage Drivers? Be Very Afraid

By Bruce Feiler
New York Times



Spend enough time having parenting conversations, as I've done personally and professionally for the last dozen years, and certain patterns emerge. In nine out of 10 cases, if you're talking about highly motivated parents, the message to Mom and Dad is: back off, chill out, park the helicopter.

Whether you want your children to be independent, resilient, creative; whether you're talking to teachers, psychologists, grandparents; whether you're discussing homework, food, sports; the recommendation, time and again, is relax.

Recently, I stumbled onto a topic in which the advice was the exact opposite.

Among the people who know what they are talking about, the unanimous message to parents is: You're not worried nearly enough. Get much more involved. Your child's life may be in danger.

What's the topic? Teenage driving.

"If you're going to have an early, untimely death," said Nichole Morris, a principal researcher at the HumanFIRST Laboratory at the University of Minnesota, "the most dangerous two years of your life are between 16 and 17, and the reason for that is driving."

Among this age group, death in motor vehicle accidents outstrips suicide, cancer and other types of accidents, Dr. Morris said. "Cars have gotten safer, roads have gotten safer, but teen drivers have not," she said.

In 2013, just under a million teenage drivers were involved in police-reported crashes, according to AAA. These accidents resulted in 373,645 injuries and 2,927 deaths, AAA said. An average of six teenagers a day die from motor vehicle injuries, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Charlie Klauer, a research scientist at the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, said her research suggested the numbers were even higher because many teenage accidents go unreported. "We believe one in four teens is going to be in a crash in their first six months of driving," Dr. Klauer said.

How to address this problem is not as simple as it seems, especially as technology has taken over teenagers' lives.

One father I know bought his son a manual-transmission car because it required him to use two hands, to eliminate the option of using a cellphone. I recently overheard a conversation between my sister and her 16-year-old son in which she reminded him not to text while driving, and he replied, "But I'm using Google Maps, and the text pops up automatically on the screen."

So what's a parent to do, especially one who knows teenagers are always one step ahead of any rules they try to impose?

FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRIVE WITH THEM When I asked Dr. Morris what parents should be most worried about, she answered definitively, "Other passengers." Adding one nonfamily passenger to a teenager's car increases the rate of crashes by 44 percent, she said. That risk doubles with a second passenger and quadruples with three or more.

Most states have what are called "graduated driver's licenses," meaning some combination of learner's permit, followed by a six-month or so intermediate phase, followed by a full permit. Restricting the number of passengers who are not family members is among the most common regulations in the early phases, but Dr. Morris said most parents disregard the rule once that time expires.

That's a huge mistake, she said. "Even if your state drops the non-familiar-passenger restriction after six months, parents should make it their own rule," Dr. Morris said.

Distraction is highest when boys ride with other boys, she said, whereas boys actually drive safer when girls are in the car. Altogether, passengers are a greater threat than cellphones, she believes. "Your cellphone isn't encouraging your teen to go 80 in a 50, or 100 in a 70," she said.

Dr. Klauer has done three studies, in which she places video cameras in cars and monitors drivers for a year. Even when teenagers know they're being monitored, they still use their telephones for texting, talking or checking Facebook at least once every trip, including ones only a few blocks.

"Teens' prevalence for engaging their devices is higher than other age groups," she said, "and their risk for being involved in a crash when they do is higher."

Even if the phone is tucked away in a pocket or backpack, enticing beeps or ringtones make it hard to resist. Dr. Klauer recommends blocking all notifications before even getting in the car. "You're more likely to do it if you're sitting calmly at home," she said. "In the moment, it's really hard not to look at the screen."

THE TWO-SECOND RULE If your child insists on using the phone for navigation or listening to music, the research suggests there's only one safe place for it to be: in a dock, at eye level, on the dashboard. The worst places? The cup holder, the driver's lap, the passenger's seat.

"The real enemy is taking your eyes off the forward roadway," Dr. Klauer said. "Anything more than two seconds is extremely dangerous. The longer you look away, the worse it gets."

Though she's skeptical young drivers actually need navigation for most trips, Dr. Klauer said audible turn-by-turn directions are preferable to paper maps, because there's less rustling in your lap. Similarly, streaming music has advantages over flipping radio channels, as long as the driver is not selecting each individual song.

EVERY TIME IS A DANGEROUS TIME Just because technology has introduced threats doesn't mean the old threats like drinking or driving at night have gone away. In 2013, almost a third of teenage drivers killed in crashes had been drinking, the Transportation Department found. Also, safety experts say, driving late at night is much more dangerous than during the day.

Jennifer Ryan, the director of state relations at AAA, told me the organization recommends that teenagers not be allowed to drive between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. for the first six months of having their license. "We encourage parents should go beyond that if they don't feel their teen is ready," she said.

To help navigate these issues, AAA has a sample contract parents and young drivers can sign, with consequences agreed in advance.

BELLS AND WHISTLES ARE A PARENT'S BEST FRIEND Over all, teenage driving deaths have been declining in recent years, though specialists agree it's because of improved safety features on roads, such as more impact-resistant median barriers and smarter technology in cars. These include automated brakes, airbags, forward collision warning systems and lane departure warning systems.

Dr. Morris encouraged parents to adopt as many of the safety features as possible. "I did not grow up in a wealthy family," she said. "I drove a \$3,000 car when I was in high school. But if the idea is that these bells and whistles aren't necessary for teens, I would argue against that. I know it's expensive for parents, but any advanced safety feature is well worth the money and peace of mind."

BE A BACK-SEAT PARENT The most surprising thing I learned is how passionately researchers believe that parents are not doing nearly enough to supervise their

children. "Our studies show that the more the parent is involved when a teen is learning, the lower their chances are for a crash," Dr. Morris said. "That means asking questions, supervising them, giving them opportunities on different types of roads under different conditions." The mistake parents often make, she said, is thinking, "Finally I don't have to car-pool you everywhere!"

Dr. Klauer said that in her studies she would send video snippets to parents when their children violated the law. When parents looked at the results and discussed them with their teenagers, results improved. The only problem: Half the parents never even looked at the warnings. "I know you trust your child," Dr. Klauer said. "But if you're not paying attention, chances are they're not driving as safely as you think they are."

The bottom line: Teenage driving may be that rare outlier when it comes to parenting. As soon as you give your children the keys to the car, it may be time to pull the helicopter out of the hangar for a spell and follow them down the road.