

Teach teens to drive safely - and save their lives

(ARA) - In 2009, 3,466 teenagers died in the United States from automobile crash injuries, according to Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). Such injuries are by far the leading public health problem among youths 13 to 19 years old. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers in America. Mile for mile, teenagers are involved in three times as many fatal crashes as all other drivers. The crash risk among teenage drivers is particularly high during the first months of licensure.



An IIHS review of recent literature confirmed that driver age and experience both have strong effects on driver crash risk. Crash rates for young drivers are high largely because of the driver's immaturity combined with driving inexperience. The immaturity is apparent in young drivers' risky driving practices such as speeding. At the same time, teenagers' lack of experience behind the wheel makes it difficult for them to recognize and respond to hazards. They get in trouble trying to handle unusual driving situations, and these situations turn disastrous more often than when older people drive.

Research shows which behaviors contribute to teen-related crashes. Inexperience and immaturity combined with speed, drinking and driving, not wearing seat belts, distracted driving (cellphone use, loud music, other teen passengers, etc.), drowsy driving, nighttime driving and other drug use aggravate this problem.

The National Highway Traffic and Safety Association (NHTSA) recommends a multi-tiered strategy to prevent motor vehicle-related deaths and injuries among teen drivers: Increase seat belt use, implement graduated driver licensing, reduce teens' access to alcohol and increase parental responsibility.

- * Keep your hands on the wheel.
- * Keep your eyes on the road.
- * Keep your hands and eyes away from your cellphone while driving.

"You need to teach safe driving behavior from the beginning," says Lyman Munson, vice president of risk services at [Fireman's Fund Insurance Company](#). As the parent, you can start by modeling safe driving behavior whenever you drive your children, from the time they are infants."

Give teens an edge by teaching them some basics about cars and the rules of the road early, well before they hit driving age. Ease them into driving with short trips in familiar areas, at low speeds, in daylight and with an adult. Choose a safe car that is predictable in its handling and easy to drive.

Insurance carriers often offer good student and safe driving discounts for teens. Parents can include these incentives in the discussion regarding safe driving. Fireman's Fund recommends parents use devices such as Cellcontrol to disable cellphone use while driving.

Munson also suggests parents talk to their teens about safety issues and the rules they are setting. Explain each one of your rules and the consequences for breaking it. Write up a contract with your teen driver to make sure they drive by the rules and drive as safely as possible. Include the most important issues. Here's a sample:

Spell out the rules:

1. Alcohol: Absolutely no alcohol
2. Seat belts: Always buckle up
3. Cellphone/texting: No talking or texting while driving
4. Curfew: Have the car in the driveway by 10 p.m.
5. Passengers: No more than one at all times
6. Graduated drivers license: Follow the state's GDL law
7. Parental responsibility: Set your house rules and consequences