

Get Your Teen's Attention when Teaching the Dangers of Distracted Driving



Windows down, music turned up, friends giggling in the back seat, freedom . . . It's the moment all teenagers dream of – getting their drivers license.

Teen drivers are often euphoric with this new sense of independence. After all, getting a drivers license is a big rite of passage. Teens are inundated, and rightfully so, with statistics and horrific stories that point to the dangers of driving while intoxicated. However, new research shows that distracted driving is among the leading causes of auto accidents, and the problem is getting worse.

“Although laws have been put into place in the spirit of eliminating dangerous distractions for drivers, it's critical that parents, teachers and influencers at large talk to teenagers about the dangers of driving distracted,” says Duke Daugherty, vice president of auto at Fireman's Fund Insurance Company. “It seems harmless to take your eyes off the road for a few seconds to send a text, or change the station, but those few seconds could cost the loss of lives, and a lifetime of angst.”

Research compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (<http://www.nhtsa.gov/>) estimates that distracted driving caused 6,000 deaths and 500,000 injuries in 2008.

And data shows that these numbers are continuing to grow. Research also shows that teen drivers are four times more likely to be involved in a distracted-related collision than any other age group.

In general, three types of distractions are most dangerous for teenagers on the road. These distractions can be visual (actions that require drivers to take their eyes off the road), manual (actions that require taking hands off the steering wheel) or cognitive (actions that require drivers to take their minds off what they're doing).

Local agencies, police departments and focus groups have put into place programs intended to inform teenagers of the dangers of distracted driving, but it's crucial for parents and schools to keep the dialogue going so teenagers understand the urgency of the problem.

“Encourage your teenagers to be completely alert and fully focused on the road and their surroundings while driving,” says Daugherty. “Parents need to model good behavior in front of their kids by not texting or making calls that distract from driving. If we all take steps to show how important this is, we will see a drop in the behavior by teens.”



Discuss and stress the following driving guidelines:

- Keep both hands on the steering wheel and eyes on the road (use mirrors).
- Avoid cell phone use – Cell phones are the number one distraction for teenager drivers. Cell phone use falls under the categories of visual, manual and cognitive distractions. Mobile technology has made texting, surfing the Internet and social networking all too easy.
- Encourage teenagers to avoid using their phones, for anything at all, until they are safely pulled off the road and parked. Devices are available to disable cell phone use in autos.

Drivers younger than age 20 represent the highest proportion of distracted drivers involved in fatal crashes, according to the National Automotive Sampling System (NASS). Reiterate to

your teenagers that making a phone call, using the Internet or sending a text message is never more important than somebody's life. If they are driving with friends who participate in cell phone use while driving, encourage them to be bold and speak up.

Teenagers should also refrain from the following activities while driving, according to the US Department of Transportation:

- Eating and drinking.
- Having lengthy or involved discussions with passengers.
- Grooming.
- Reading (including maps).
- Using a PDA or navigation system.
- Watching a video.
- Changing the radio station, CD or MP3 player.

It only takes one simple distraction to cause a potentially fatal car accident. Remind your teenagers to avoid participating in distracted driving (<http://www.distraction.gov/>) activities, and to be advocates for their own safety and their peers as well.

For more information about Fireman's Fund, contact your independent agent or visit www.firemansfund.com.