



Report #15 - TEENAGE DRIVERS – Ten Deadliest Mistakes

According to the American Automobile Association:

Every year, traffic crashes claim more teenage lives than drugs, guns, suicide and AIDS combined. In fact, teen drivers have the highest collision rate of any age group; they endanger not only themselves, but also everyone else on the road. Studies show that pedestrians, passengers and occupants of other cars account for nearly two out of three fatalities in teen crashes.

AAA experts have identified **10 mistakes** that most commonly lead to fatal crashes involving teens. As a parent, you need to know what they are—and how you can help the young driver in your family avoid them.

1. Overestimating their abilities.

Most teens think they know everything about everything—including driving. After all, they've taken driver's ed, right? As a parent and an experienced driver, you know better. Driver's ed doesn't make you a safe driver any more than a box of instant mac and cheese makes you a good cook.

“In New York State, it takes 5,000 hours of practice to become a licensed cosmetologist,” says Barbara Ward of AAA New York's Traffic Safety Department. “It takes 10,000 hours of practice to earn an electrician's license. But the law requires only 20 hours of behind-the-wheel practice to get a driver's license and operate a motor vehicle in which teens can endanger themselves and others.” For teens, inexperience combined with overconfidence becomes a recipe for disaster.

AAA recommends at least 50 hours of supervised driving in a variety of situations. How you practice matters just as much as how much you practice. “The car is not the place to worry about hurting your teen's feelings,” says Mark Kulewicz, AAA New York's director of Traffic Engineering and Safety Services. Correct mistakes calmly but firmly. Positive reinforcement works wonders for teens, as long as they



don't get an exaggerated sense of their own behind-the-wheel competence.

2. Driving unbuckled.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, safety belts reduce the risk of injury or fatality by a whopping 45 percent. Despite these common-sense stats, however, too many teens neglect their car's simplest and most effective safety device. Experts insist that buckling up is a habit cultivated from a very early age. If you always wear your seat belt—and insist that your teen always wears his or hers, even as a passenger—eventually your child will feel naked without it.

3. Speeding.

About one-third of all fatal teen crashes involve excessive speed. Apart from a young person's natural inclination to move fast, your teen may have inherited a heavy foot from you. According to a recent study sponsored by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, teens with bad driving records are much more likely to have parents with bad driving records— suggesting that children's behind-the-wheel behavior reflects their parents'. If your teen grew up watching you regularly ignore speed limits, why be surprised when he or she does the same?

You can do more than model sensible speed control, however. Increasingly, parents install event data recorders (EDRs)—so-called black boxes—to monitor their teens' driving. Costing as little as \$200, these aftermarket devices keep track not only of speed, but also of other aggressive driving indicators. Some even sound alarms when the vehicle exceeds certain pre-set limits.

If you do resort to an EDR, remember your real purpose—discouraging risky behavior. Many safety experts suggest using an EDR to monitor your own driving behavior as well and sharing the results with your teen. That way, everyone will view the black box as a family safety check, not just a tool to snoop on kids.



4. Carrying rowdy passengers.

When it comes to driving, teens find no safety in numbers—quite the opposite, in fact. A teen driver’s crash risk doubles with one peer passenger. With two or more, the risk increases fivefold.

Such stats form the basis for New York State’s graduated driver licensing (GDL) law, which prohibits drivers with a junior license from carrying more than two passengers under 21 (unless the passengers are family members). Knowing the statistical risk of peer passengers, however, some parents choose to set even stricter limits. Prohibiting all teen passengers for the first few months of driving can give your teen the chance to log valuable solo time in lower-risk conditions.

5. Indulging in wireless exchanges.

Evidence about the hazards of yakking and driving continues to pile up. The wireless revolution has brought even more potentially distracting cellular capabilities: text messaging, transmitting photos and downloading videos and music, for instance.

6. Monkeying with music.

According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, adjusting the radio, cassette, or CD player ranks as the No. 1 distraction among drivers under the age of 20. As if those things weren’t bad enough, the iPod came along. With its thumbwheel and tiny screen, it forces you to look away from the road even longer to choose your tunes, unless you have hardware to control it through the in-dash stereo.

Although you can’t hope to separate teens from their music, you can insist that your teen not root around for CDs and or scroll through playlists while the vehicle is moving.



7. Cruising at night.

Between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., teens' crash rate doubles. Night driving presents so great a risk, in fact, that New York's GDL law imposes restrictions and curfews on teens with a junior license.

Even after teens earn their full license, parents need to emphasize that a car is a vehicle for transportation, not a means of amusement. Going out for a drive at night, with no particular destination and no parental control, creates a situation in which a teen can do something dumb—and dangerous. You control access to the car, so you need to ensure that your teen has a specific destination, especially after dark.

8. Drinking.

First, the bad news: 36 percent of all fatal teen crashes involve alcohol. Now, the good news: Drinking ranks rather low in non-contributing factors for crashes involving first-year drivers. Statistically, alcohol tends to grow as a problem for older teens.

New York's GDL law enforces zero tolerance for drivers with a junior license, and conscientious parents insist on it even for older teens. But serious parents also guarantee a ride home for their children who may have been drinking.

9. Getting into bad situations.

Driving requires good decisions, and even sober teens often make bad ones. For example, getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking can prove just as deadly as driving drunk yourself. So can cramming yourself into an overcrowded car with an overexcited driver. "Teens should know that they don't have to get into a car with a driver who is drunk, fatigued, emotional, or angry, even as a passenger," says Ward.



10. Taking dumb risks.

From slipping past red lights to sitting on the hood of a moving car to drag racing, the list of tragic teen blunders that “seemed like a good idea at the time” goes on and on. Of course, you can’t monitor your teen’s driving habits every minute. But you can’t throw up your hands, either.

You can learn a lot about your teen’s driving habits simply by listening to his or her friends and siblings. Another is a parent-to-parent agreement. It helps you and the parents in your teen’s circle of friends enforce the same rules. And a teen-parent contract spells out the new driver’s responsibilities and sets clear consequences for violations. Those consequences may run from doing extra chores to losing driving privileges altogether.

You can learn more about parent-to-parent and parent-teen driving contracts at www.AAA.com/safety. AAA New York also offers free, informative presentations on teen driving safety for PTA and other community groups. For details, call the Club’s Traffic Safety Department at 516/873-2378