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Despite recent progress, the new AAA report confirms that carrying young passengers, under 21 years of age, is still a major risk factor for 16- and 17-year-old drivers.

Parents urged to “hit the brakes” for the sake of their teen drivers

by **MICHELLE SALEMI**

May 28, 2012

When it comes to a car full of teenage drivers, two’s not a party and three’s not a crowd-- it’s a death sentence, Traffic-safety experts support this by saying that the risk of teen driver fatality quadruples with multiple young passengers.

According to a recent study released by the AAA Foundation of Traffic Safety, a strong association exists between the number and age of passengers present in a vehicle and the risk of a teen driver dying in a traffic crash.

Crash data analyzed by the AAA Foundation found that in Illinois, between 2006-2010, there were 273 fatal crashes involving a 16-to17-year-old driver. Of those crashes, 52 percent happened when at least one other passenger under 21 was in the car with the teen driver.

Beth Mosher, director of public affairs at AAA Chicago Motor Club, said that placing appropriate limits are a

key part to lowering the fatality rate.

"The connection between carrying young passengers and increased fatal crash risk is clear," Mosher said. "By limiting the number of passengers that 16- and 17-year-old drivers can have in the car, helps ensure that teens stay focused on the road and gain the experience they need to become safe drivers."

In Illinois, drivers follow a three-level Graduated Driver license program, which gradually phases in driving privileges for new teen drivers as they gain experience behind the wheel. The second and the third phase have restrictions in place that limit new teenage drivers.

In the Initial Licensing Phase (Drivers 16-17):

- For the first year of licensing, or until the driver is age 18, whichever occurs first, the number of passengers is limited to one person under age 20, unless the additional passenger(s) is a sibling, step-sibling, child, or step-child of the driver. After this period, the number of passengers is limited to one in the front seat and the number of safety belts in the back seat.
- A nighttime driving restriction is in place Sunday-Thursday, 10 p.m.-6 a.m., and Friday-Saturday, 11 p.m.-6 a.m. (local curfews may differ from the nighttime driving restriction).

In the Full Licensing Phase (Drivers 18-20):

- No age-related restrictions apply except in cases where a driver fails to move from the Initial Licensing Phase to the Full Licensing Phase.
- Cell phone use while driving for people under age 19 is prohibited except in the case of an emergency to contact a law enforcement agency, health care provider or emergency services agency.

Mosher said the AAA finding, along with the restrictions in the law, should send a strong message to parents.

"We know that carrying young passengers is a huge risk, but it's also a preventable one," Mosher said. "Parents can make their teens safer immediately by refusing to allow them to get in a car with other young people, whether they're behind the wheel or in the passenger seat."

But with teenagers, sometimes it's not as easy as telling them no.

Experts from different professional fields share how their experience, in the work place and life, has taught them to deal with teenagers and their driving habits.

A LAWYER:

Steven Harris, a personal injury attorney in New York, explains the rationale behind restrictive laws for new drivers and why teens should accept them.

"States can enact laws to target specific groups of people that don't violate people's rights. So they can target teenagers with driving restrictions because they are considered reasonable for safety reasons. Teens will realize they are enacted to keep them safe."

A PSYCHOLOGIST:

Dr. John Duffy, a clinical psychologist in La Grange, Ill., who specializes in teenage behavior, discusses the role social reputation plays in teenage driving.

"Teens are highly distractible behind the wheel, and my young clients have admitted that they behave more casually and 'cool' with multiple friends in the car when they are driving. I've also heard that they are far more likely to engage in risk-taking driving, such as speeding. Many have said they are more likely to allow distractions, loud music in particular, when driving with several peer passengers."

A RELATIONSHIP EXPERT:

April Masini, author of advice column AskApril.com, discusses teens' relationship with technology and the need to be constantly communicating, even while in the car.

"Distracted driving has become a terrible problem among teen drivers. Teens have more distractions than ever before because of smart phones that don't just dial and receive calls, but transmit photos and texts quickly. Teen drivers don't want to miss anything and will be distracted by their phones and by others in their cars with phones. Garden-variety distraction is nothing new, but the lightning fast news that smart phones deliver to teen drivers and teen drivers' passengers, is. More people, more smart phones, equals more accidents."

A FINANCIAL ADVISOR:

Andrew Schrage, co-owner of Money Crashers Personal Finance in Chicago, discusses insurance policy issues parents face with teenage drivers and offers some solutions.

"When parents add teenagers to their auto insurance policy, the premium usually increases significantly. In order to offset some of these costs, consider the following ideas:

Drop Comp and Collision: This is a good strategy for older cars. Since they're usually not worth much, it makes no sense to maintain both comprehensive coverage and collision coverage.

Buy a Safer Car: The type of car you and your teen drive also affects your premium. A few to consider are the Saturn Astra, the Scion xB, and the Hyundai Sonata.

Get Your Kid Involved: A child who maintains at least a B average or completes a driver safety course can qualify for premium discounts.

Your options are slightly limited as a parent, but there are several other things you can do. First, make sure your teens are 100% clear on the driving laws that apply to them, and fully explain the consequences of not abiding by them. Second, get to know your child's friends. Invite them over to the house or get to know their parents. You can make a pretty accurate judgment assessment after only a few personal meetings."

A BUSINESS EXPERT:

Joel Ohman, a certified financial planner and the founder of the website CarInsuranceComparison.com, examines the active role parents should take in their teenager's life.

"Parents of teens should understand that regardless of state law, they, the parents, have the greatest influence on keeping their teens safe on the road. Parents can keep their teens safe by communicating their own parental restrictions on how many teens can be in a vehicle with a teen driver. It's certainly OK to be more restrictive than the state law. Arranging for alternate travel if needed, and by taking an active role in being present in the car with a teen driver to teach safe driving habits."

A PARENT'S EXPERIENCE:

Brock Brereton, a San Jose, Calif., father of a newly licensed teen driver, understands the temptations of teenage driving from experience, but also has his own advice to help his children.

"When I was a teen, it was not against the law for us to drive with all our peers. Suffice it to say, I consider

myself fortunate to be here today. We lost several classmates our senior year -- I could have very easily been in those cars. Because of this, I have given both my daughters this very advice:

'There is nothing either of you two will do that I have not already done. So, if you ever find yourself stranded at a party, do not get into anyone else's vehicle, call me anytime, anywhere, no questions asked.'

As a father, I would not have it any other way."

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