

# Driven to Distraction: Teens Behind the Wheel

Cell phones, music, partying passengers. With so much competing for teens' attention, it can be hard for them to stay focused behind the wheel.

By Richard Laliberte



Eddie Guy

Reggie Shaw doesn't remember much about the crash. In the early morning of September 22, 2006, he was driving to work on a two-lane country road in Logan, Utah, when his car crossed the center line and clipped an oncoming vehicle. What happened next was so traumatic that Shaw's 19-year-old mind blocked out the details: The other car swung out of control and was hit broadside by a pickup truck. Though neither Shaw nor the truck driver was hurt, two men in the other car were killed instantly. "I was in total shock," Shaw says.

How could something so horrible have happened on a routine morning drive? The answer came in a forgotten detail revealed by phone records. At the time of the deadly collision, Shaw had been sending a text message. "Texting while driving was something I did all the time," he admits. "I never imagined a simple message could change lives forever. It was an ignorant, terrible, selfish choice that will haunt me for the rest of my life."

Sentenced to 30 days in jail, 200 hours of community service, and a year's probation for negligent homicide, Shaw got off easy. The outcry over his case led Utah to pass tough new laws banning texting while driving, and to stiffen fines and jail time for violators.

Distracted driving has become epidemic for a generation of kids who have grown up with technology at their fingertips. Between 1999 and 2008, deadly nighttime crashes involving drivers between the ages of 16 and 19 increased by 10 percent—and researchers largely blame driver distraction on texting or talking on cell phones. Today, 30 states and the District of Columbia forbid texting behind the wheel, and 28 ban any type of handheld cell phone use by novice drivers. Other states are considering graduated licensing laws that restrict young drivers from using mobile electronics until they're older and more experienced (see "Learning Curve"). A federal law is in the works as well. "It's definitely a hot-button issue," says Judie Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. "I've never seen so much legislative activity over a safety concern."

But laws alone aren't enough to keep kids focused on the road, and restricting mobile devices doesn't bring crash rates down. That's because enforcement isn't the only issue, according to Flaura Winston, PhD, principal investigator at the Young Driver Research Initiative, a collaboration between Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm Insurance. "Most laws ban only handheld phones, but hands-free phones are just as distracting," she says. "While physically holding a device is dangerous, a kid talking hands-free is also likely to stop scanning the road and stare straight ahead. It's like having tunnel vision."

Almost 90 percent of teens say they've seen other kids talk on phones behind the wheel, according to the Young Driver Research Initiative. And since young drivers are already disadvantaged by their inexperience, this type of diversion adds yet another layer of danger.

The good news is that kids who don't pay attention to laws can still be persuaded to drive more safely—by you. "Parents who talk about distractions and set rules can reduce the likelihood of teens using cell phones by 30 percent and slash their crash risk by half," Winston says. The first step? Make sure kids are well-versed in the sad, scary facts.

## Cell Phones Can Be as Dangerous as Alcohol

Tailgating, swerving, constantly changing speed—these seem like signs of drunk driving. But they're actually behaviors of someone on a phone behind the wheel, according to a study at the University of Utah. Researchers used a driving simulator to compare people who were drunk with those on cell phones and found that while people with a blood alcohol content of .08 percent tended to drive more aggressively than cell users, both groups crashed at about the same rate.

A cell phone conversation impairs the brain—similar to the way downing an 80-proof vodka-orange juice cocktail does. But in this case it's an overload of stimuli, not alcohol. "The frontal and parietal cortexes are responsible for spatial processing, decision-making, coordination, and focus—all critical for driving,"

says study author and psychology professor David Strayer, PhD. A phone conversation introduces other thoughts into that careful calibration. "Overstimulation is actually worse for teens than for adults because their brains aren't fully developed," says Strayer. A teen might look directly at a hazard and still not grasp it; this is called inattention blindness. "The brain may not produce thoughts like, 'That light is red and I should stop,'" Strayer says. The look-but-don't-see phenomenon slows cell users' reaction time and makes them 10 times more likely to run a stop sign. "You'd think drivers would be more likely to notice something important, but they don't," Strayer says. "They're just as blind to a pedestrian as to a billboard." Even people using hands-free phones are four to five times more likely to be in a serious crash than drivers who aren't on a phone. And while drinking-related crashes kill fewer teens today than 20 years ago, non-alcohol driving fatalities are steadily climbing, Strayer says. "We've traded one threat for another."



## Teens Know Driving and Texting Is Risky But Still Do It

In surveys by the Allstate Foundation, 87 percent of teens say texting while driving is a huge risk. Another 65 percent describe themselves as good drivers who pay attention. Yet two-thirds of those same teens say they've texted behind the wheel themselves—and far more say they've made or answered a call. The top reason for taking such dangerous risks? Not thinking about consequences at that moment.

Strayer also blames denial. "People think they're better at multitasking than they actually are." Tech-toting teens are oblivious to things that would indicate poor driving, like swerving or hitting the brakes at the last minute. "Distracted drivers who come close to crashing don't even realize it," says Charlie Klauer, PhD, a research scientist at the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute who placed cameras on the inside and outside of 100 cars and watched real-road driving. Teens think their behavior is safe if they take quick glances and keep checking the road, she says. (After all, other drivers take their eyes off the road to check their mirrors and change lanes.) But the difference is time: Klauer found that crash risk for drivers who look away from the road for more than two out of six seconds is two times greater than for an alert driver. And texting requires looking away for an average of 4.6 seconds. In fact, drivers are five times more likely to crash while texting and dialing than while glancing at a passenger.

Tyler Mayer of Greenville, Michigan, learned that lesson on the Fourth of July in 2009 while driving to a family gathering with his girlfriend. The 18-year-old checked an incoming text message and suddenly found his pickup heading off the road. Swerving, he lost control and rolled three times. "I only had my eyes off the road for a few seconds," he says. "But the truck was totaled." Fortunately, both teens were buckled up and escaped with minor bruises and scratches.

## We're Programmed to Answer

Even a teen who knows better than to initiate calls behind the wheel will dive for a vibrating phone. "People are conditioned to pick up when the phone rings," Winston says. There's also pressure from senders to get a reply. "You feel like you have to answer right then and there," says Nicole Meredith, 18, of Louisville, Kentucky. "Everyone wants an instant response." Waiting to reply didn't occur to Meredith in July 2008 as she drove to a sleepover at her best friend's house. When her pal texted wanting to know where she was, Meredith started to text, "I'll be there ... " In those few seconds she crossed the left lane, hit the median and spun out. "Everything was a blur," she says. "I heard the tires screeching and a huge boom." She collided with a barrier that kept her from smashing into oncoming traffic on the opposite side of the highway and was lucky enough to walk away unharmed. Other teens suffer far worse consequences. Amanda Martin, 17, of Southbridge, Massachusetts, was texting several friends on her way to school one morning in 2007 when her car left the road and hit a tree. She died that day. "Coming around a curve, she just sailed off the road," says her mother, Melissa. "There were no skid marks—she never even hit the brakes."

## Other Distractions in the Car Take Their Toll

From her camera-in-car research, Klauer has seen kids do so many dangerous things—from changing clothes to putting in contact lenses—that nothing surprises her. Even listening to music can be distracting on several levels, according to Winston. "The song might take a teen's mind to an emotional place where she's dreamy or upset instead of focused on the road. Kids often crank up the volume and sing or dance along, which distracts the brain even more and makes a driver less likely to hear a siren or

honking horn. Sometimes friends turn up a song that the driver doesn't like just to tease her—and then she's yelling in the car."

Additional passengers are a huge problem as well: Almost 70 percent of teens say they've seen people in the car "acting wild" while a friend was driving. Even one extra person in the car doubles the probability of a crash. Two or more? The crash risk for a young person escalates by a factor of five. "What happens is car piling," Winston says. "The driver offers to take a friend, but that friend asks him to drive another friend who wants to pick up someone else. Soon the car becomes like a party in your living room—a place to dance, fight, talk about upsetting things, and scream out the window." Of course kids don't fully comprehend these hazards: According to Allstate, 44 percent of teens admit they drive more safely alone, yet only 14 percent consider friends a big distraction.

## Girls Are Risky When Driving, Too

While boys have a history of more aggressive driving (and higher insurance rates to match), distractions are closing the safety gap. Girls are more likely than boys to talk and text on a cell, sing, dance, and eat behind the wheel, according to the Allstate Foundation. In fact, 66 percent of girls frequently drive while singing or dancing to music, and 63 percent crank up the volume. And they're more likely to blow off the risks: Half of girls (but only about a third of boys) say they'll probably use a cell phone while driving in the future. They are also less likely to speak up if a friend's driving behavior makes them uncomfortable. That's troubling to Reggie Shaw. "I learned the hard way how deadly distracted driving can be," he says. "Every day I look in the mirror and see someone who took lives in an accident that didn't have to happen."

Got a teen behind the wheel? Ask questions and read about other moms' experiences at [momster.com/fc/teendriving](http://momster.com/fc/teendriving) >>

## Learning Curve

Congress is now considering the Safe Teen and Novice Driver Uniform Protection (STANDUP) Act, which would encourage states to adopt standards for gradually phasing in full driving privileges to young drivers as they gain experience, skills, and maturity. Provisions include:

- No permits before age 16
- No more than one friend under 21 in the car without an adult until a teen is fully licensed at 18 or older
- Restricted night driving until a teen is fully licensed
- No cell phones behind the wheel at least until fully licensed

Send a note to your representative in support of the bill now >>

### Tech Support

The Steer Clear Mobile app teaches young people positive driving behaviors and can increase eligibility for a discount on State Farm auto insurance in some states. Kids can log driving experiences, get safety tips, and learn about road hazards. The free app is available for iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad.

Check out more useful driving apps for teens here >>

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## Driving the Message Home

When a teen resists your rules, keep the conversation positive by combining hard facts with a supportive, caring attitude, says Kenneth Ginsburg, MD, an adolescent medicine specialist at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Your Teen Says	You Say
The reason you think texting is a distraction is because you don't know how to do it. I'm much faster.	You're definitely better at it than I am. But it's not just about what your fingers are doing. Your

	mind is no longer on the road because you are thinking about other things.
How do you even know cell phones are dangerous?	To prevent a crash, a driver has only three seconds—or less—to notice what's happening, process it, and make a quick decision about what to do. I don't use my phone behind the wheel, either, because we can't afford to waste those seconds.
I can't say no to my friends when they ask for a ride. That would be rude!	I like your friends, but I also care about their safety—and yours. Even well-behaved passengers can increase a new driver's crash risk fivefold. We can revisit this after you've been driving for a year without incident.
If I can't answer my cell phone, my friends won't be able to reach me when they need to.	I am not asking you to be disconnected from your friends. I just want you to turn off your cell until you get where you're going or pull over to a safe area if you need to make a call or send a text.

**The Power of Example**

Forty-seven percent of adults admit to texting while driving; 34 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds admit to texting while driving.

Seventy-five percent of adults with cell phones admit to talking on the phone while driving; 52 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds say they have talked on the phone while driving

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**Roadblock to Common Sense: Teen Drinking and Driving**

Distracted driving is just one factor making car crashes the leading cause of death for teens. Drinking and driving also remains a serious problem, according to Mothers Against Drunk Driving. An impaired teen lacks coordination and judgment; couple that with inexperience behind the wheel and you've got a deadly combination. In fact, 40 percent of all alcohol-related fatalities in the United States are caused by teens drinking and driving. While zero-tolerance laws have helped reduce teen casualties, it is still important for parents to emphasize that driving after any amount of drinking is not just illegal, but unsafe. Let your teen know that instead of getting in the car with someone who has consumed alcohol, she should call you for a ride—no questions asked.

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