

Parents can help prevent teen driver car crashes

Whenever one gets behind the wheel of a car the process of risk assessment begins. This is why drivers look both ways before entering the roadway. The driver is determining issues of risk before taking action.

Often, the driver is also trying to determine how much risk he or she can get away with. If the speed limit is 50 the driver may be thinking about going 55, 60, or more. The driver considers the choices and the likely consequences thereof. The process is quick and based upon prior driving experience.

Parents have driven much more than their new teen drivers. Parents have driven in all seasons, driving conditions and roadways. They are keenly aware of collisions and their aftermath from personal experience or through the experience of family or friends. As such, they base their risk assessment decisions on years of these experiences. This is totally unlike a new teen driver though.

Of concern about the teen driver is lack of judgment. This means that teens do not have the same depth of experience on which to base their risk assessment as more experienced drivers. Hence they may make poor decisions. Add heightened emotions or impulsive thinking and judgment can be further impaired.

Lack of experience and lesser judgment is not often recognized by teens. They cannot see what they never had or are yet to develop. They cannot appreciate their lack of experience and as such will argue that they are as fully capable of assessing risk as older adults.

Teens have a marvelous capacity for language. They have just spent the past several years in high school and elementary school before that. Some teens convince their parents that they know more than their direct experience could have ever possibly taught.

Some parents think that because they trust their teen or because their teen is good or because their teen is convincing, that their teen will exercise good judgment when using the car. However, parents are cautioned to remember that their teen's judgment just doesn't have the wealth of experience to back it up. No matter how good or well-meaning the teen, they simply are not fully equipped for the management of a motor vehicle under all circumstances. The issue therefore is not trust, but experience, the basis of sound judgment.

This is well known to insurance companies. Insurance companies do not consider young persons experienced until about age 25 because this is the average age when crashes start to significantly decline.

Teen driver car crashes are the leading cause of permanent injury and death in teens. Each year in the United States more than 5,000 teens lose their lives in motor vehicle crashes and another 400,000 suffer injuries. Canada has proportional numbers, as does virtually every industrialized nation.

Parents must talk with their teens to set limits and determine responsibilities, expectations and restrictions on the use of the car. It's not until the teen reaches about 25 years of age that they will truly appreciate such actions taken by parents. Hence parents must withstand any backlash.

To reduce risk, parents can restrict the number of passengers allowed in the vehicle; insist that their teen buckle-up and do so as well. Parents can also discuss the radio or car stereo. Turn the radio on and discuss an acceptable limit for the volume. If a teen is out after midnight, parents should continue to drive. Crash statistics show that the hours between midnight and 5:00 am have the greatest number of deaths from teen driver car crashes. It is better to lose some sleep than pick one's teen up at the hospital or morgue.

Lastly, don't let the tail wag the dog. Remember, your car, your rules. Responsibility as a parent is the safety of the child until the child is truly independent.

To help parents discuss driving responsibilities and expectations, there is a free Safe Driving Contract from the I Promise Program, teen safe driving initiative.

Parents are the path to the keys. Make the safe driving contract a step along the way.

Go to: www.ipromiseprogram.com

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.