

By Stephen G. Wallace

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The summer season almost always proves to be the most dangerous for teen driving.

A new study by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Insurance gives parents reason to pause before handing over the keys to their newly released young driver, revealing an alarmingly high number of teens who have had “near misses” while behind the wheel. It also delivers some insight into what may be chief contributors to those events—even if they differ from what most young people think.

According to the study, 68 percent of teens admit to having narrowly avoided a crash. Yet, perhaps not surprisingly, teens are more likely to blame external factors than to point the finger at themselves—even when they are at fault.

Indeed, one in three drivers (34 percent) who say they have had a “near miss” blame another driver, while 21 percent say weather was the primary cause. Yet when asked what they were doing in the car at the time of the incident, teens admitted to an array of distracting or dangerous behaviors: 30 percent were speeding, 21 percent were texting, 20 percent were talking to their passengers, and 17 percent were changing songs on their MP3 player.

Ironically, only nine percent of teens believed excessive speed was the primary contributor to a close call, while 13 percent said texting while driving was to blame. Another six percent passed along responsibility to friends who distracted them.

Close Call Kids

It's no surprise that our ‘close call kids’ are likely to report they regularly engage in dangerous or distracted driving behaviors:

- 36 percent say they regularly talk on the cell phone while driving; and
- 33 percent say they regularly text behind the wheel.

Those numbers are significantly lower for the 32 percent of teen drivers who report never having had a close call.

Reality Gap

Despite these disturbing statistics, 92 percent of teens consider themselves to be safe, cautious drivers.

And few seem to sense the dangers lurking on the roadway once school's out for summer—despite the fact that young drivers are behind the wheel 44 percent more hours each week in the summer than during the rest of the year or that summer is the most popular time of year for kids to be driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, June, July, and August are the deadliest months for teen motor vehicle fatalities when almost 1,000 teenagers die (994 in 2009).

Short Shelf Life

Close calls cause the majority of teens to change their driving behaviors, but only for a while. In fact, nearly half of them say their renewed commitment to more responsible driving lasted only a month or less. And what improvements in driving habits teens do report are more likely to involve paying better attention to other drivers than to texting or speeding less.

Apparently, it takes a tough lesson—actually getting in a crash—for teen drivers to significantly change their driving behaviors. Nearly 70 percent of teen drivers who have been in a collision say the experience changed their driving habits, with the majority of them (58 percent) saying those improvements are “forever.”

There’s got to be a better way.

A Shared Responsibility

The Parent/Teen Driving Contract developed by Liberty Mutual and SADD which can be found at www.libertymutual.com/teendriving is both a conversation starter about safety and a customized agreement that promotes dialogue and saves lives.