




TIME BEHIND THE WHEEL

Shepherd Center patient Zach
Lindsey of Macon, Ga., participates
in driver rehabilitation training with
instructor Jim Kennedy.



BETTER PREPARING TEEN DRIVERS IS KEY TO PREVENTING TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES.

BY SARA BAXTER

Parents worry about their teenagers driving — and with good reason. Automobile accidents injure 250,000 teens a year and are the number one cause of death among teenagers. At Shepherd Center, about a third of all car-crash patients are between the ages of 14 and 19.

Alan Brown knows this fear all too well. On a rainy day in July 2003 in Cartersville, Ga., his 17-year-old son Joshua drove his truck through standing water. The vehicle hydroplaned and crashed into a tree. Joshua died nine days later.

Looking back, Brown expresses remorse about his son's inexperience as a driver. "Joshua didn't take driver's education," he says. "We didn't have access to it, so all he got was what I taught him."

Experience is the primary factor in producing good teen drivers, says Rob Foss, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Good drivers have a deeply ingrained understanding of what driving is all about. They know what they need to be doing, and that knowledge can only come from experience."

In helping their teenagers gain that experience, parents can look to state drivers licensing for the minimum requirements. But experts encourage parents to go much further to help their teens get the experience they need to drive safely.

Most states require supervised driving for at least six months. Many also mandate 50 documented hours of supervised experience and every state grants driving privileges on a "graduated" basis, typically up to age 18. New drivers in Georgia, for example, are prohibited from driving between midnight and 6 a.m., and in the first six months after a driver obtains a license, only immediate family members may ride as passengers.

But Dr. Foss notes that studies show teens need a minimum of 120 hours of driving experience before being licensed to drive independently and safely. Also, he says new drivers should be prohibited from driving after 9 p.m. instead of midnight during the graduated licensing period. That's because 70 to 80 percent of nighttime crashes among high school-aged drivers occur between 9 p.m. and midnight, and about 85 percent of their nighttime trips occur during that window.

PHOTO BY LOUIE FAVORITE



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THE PARENT AS COACH

“Graduated licenses help teenagers build up their skills so they master them,” Dr. Foss says. “This gradual experience has helped prevent crashes.” To guide their teenagers through the learning process, he advises parents not try to act as a driver’s education teacher but as a coach during supervised driving.

“Don’t tell them what to do,” Rob cautions. “If you tell them 20 things, you’re wasting your breath on 19 of them. Let them make a mistake if it’s not dangerous. Speak calmly in a mild tone and give helpful advice. Research shows this is more effective.”

Jim Kennedy, a driver rehabilitation specialist at Shepherd Center, suggests that parents emphasize the following process as they supervise their teen’s driving — meanwhile realizing that these actions become intuitive as drivers gain more experience in various conditions:

1. Search the environment, including a check of mirrors.
2. Identify hazards, conditions and situations.
3. Predict what others will do.
4. Decide what to do.
5. Execute that decision.

“The reaction time for teens is quick,” Kennedy says, “but their knowledge base is limited, so they may not react the right way.” Take the case of a car veering off the road. “The instinct is to yank the steering wheel the other way and probably go too far in the other direction,” he says, “but, of course, that can have consequences.”

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

After the death of his son, Alan Brown embarked on a mission to ensure that Georgia teenagers gain experience behind the wheel before receiving a driver’s license.

In 2005, he was instrumental in getting the Georgia General Assembly to pass Joshua’s Law, which requires every 16-year-old in the state to take driver’s education and participate in 40 hours of supervised driving to qualify for a license.

Even still, many experts — and Brown, as well — recommend that

teenagers log more than the required number of supervised hours behind the wheel and that they go beyond driver’s education classes to get more hands-on experience.

“If you have completed the minimum requirements in driver training, you are a minimally trained driver,” says Homer Stillwell, founder of Accident Avoidance Workshops, a defensive driving program. “At best, you have been trained in ‘normal’ driving conditions, which means you know how to operate the vehicle and what the lines and signs mean. But there’s more to driving than that.”

The experts agree that the key factor is supervising teen drivers in the many varied conditions they will experience as independent drivers. One tool to help parents with this task is a smartphone app called Time to Drive (timetodriveapp.com). It records the total amount of driving and driving in a variety of conditions, keeps track of hard stops, provides tips for parents, encourages the parent-teen team to meet driving goals and shows a map of past trips. (See the apps sidebar for more ideas.)

And parents can lead by example. “Kids start learning to drive the minute you put them in a car,” Brown says. “If you speed or text, they will think it’s OK.”

In preventing more teen driving crashes, Shepherd Center is making its own contribution. As part of its injury prevention efforts, the hospital has launched a safe driving campaign themed “Reasons — Big and Small.” It presents a series of answers to a simple question that matters to every driver: “What’s your reason for wanting to arrive at your destination safely?”

As part of the campaign, which kicked off in April, Bridget Metzger, Shepherd’s director of injury prevention and education, is visiting high schools and making community presentations.

“The number one thing kids should know is that they are driving a potentially lethal weapon and should pay attention,” Metzger says. “I’ve worked with a lot of injured teenagers here at Shepherd Center. Their only wish is that they could go back and turn it around. Most car crashes are preventable.” *

1.–3. Teen-aged drivers receive defensive driving instruction at an Accident Avoidance Workshop in metro Atlanta. 4. Shepherd Center patient Zach Lindsey of Macon, Ga., participates in driver rehabilitation training with instructor Jim Kennedy.

PHOTOS BY MEG PORTER AND LOUIE FAVORITE



DRIVING SAFELY: THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

While you do not want the cell phone anywhere near your child as he or she drives, several mobile applications and devices are available that actually help teens with the driving process, whether it's blocking cell phone use, acting as a coach, promoting safe driving or tracking accidents. Here's a list of applications that might help your teenager be a safer driver:

TIME TO DRIVE (www.timetodriveapp.com), developed by the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center (HSRC) and the Center for the Study of Young Drivers, this app helps parents supervise their teen drivers during the practice period. Time to Drive will record the total time of driving and driving in a variety of conditions, keep track of hard stops, provide tips for parents, encourage the parent-teen team to meet driving goals and show a map of past trips. It also generates a log of trips you can provide to the department of motor vehicles. It is available in the iTunes store for \$3.99.

DRIVE SCRIBE® (www.drivescribe.com) is a free smart-phone application aimed at preventing distracted driving. It leverages the phone's GPS system, mapping data and accelerometer to monitor speed, traffic regulation compliance and sudden movements, such as slamming on the brakes or swerving. Drivers place the smart phone in the car and listen to audio notifications of upcoming stop signs and speed-limit excesses. Aimed at teen drivers, DriveScribe also blocks texts, emails and incoming phone calls. Parents can even elect to receive texts and emails generated from the application to let them know of their teen's progress.

WISEDRIVE (downloadable for \$.99) automatically detects drivers moving at high speeds, disables audio text messaging notifications and sends out an automated reply.

MY MAX SPEED uses the internal GPS to log speed and location every five seconds and downloads all data into a spreadsheet. The app is available for Android smartphones for \$4.99 on the Android Marketplace.

SAFE DRIVER monitors the location and driving practices — such as a car's top speed, excessive acceleration, braking and turning — of drivers and alerts others via email or text whenever the driver exceeds a specific speed. (It even shows where the infractions occurred.) The basic app is free, and an upgraded version costs \$4.99.

DANGERS OF DISTRACTED DRIVING is a free app that discusses the consequences of distracted driving, introduces the concepts of feet-per-second and following too closely, and provides visual scenarios to illustrate the concepts discussed.

STEER CLEAR MOBILE®, a free app from State Farm Insurance, consists of five modules: self-assessment, driving logs, safe driving pledge, video testimonials in which teens describe accidents they were in and the mistakes that caused them, and then a final self-assessment. When completed, drivers are eligible for a State Farm safe driving discount.

NEWLYLICENSED.COM sells car magnets that identify new drivers in hopes that other drivers will use caution, courtesy and patience on road when they encounter young drivers. The hope is to reduce teen accidents. * Sara Baxter

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