



News from the Teen Driving Study

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Peer Relations Study Group

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Why Study Peer Influence on Drivers?

Getting a drivers license is a big event for most teenagers. It makes it easier to get to part-time jobs and social activities, and provides a sense of freedom and maturity. But it is also a serious responsibility. Driving accidents remain the leading cause of death and serious injury among teens. Every hour on weekends and every two hours during the week, on average, a teenager in the U.S. dies in a traffic accident. In Wisconsin alone there are two fatal car crashes every week, on average, among drivers age 16-20.

Contrary to popular belief, most fatal accidents involving teenagers are not alcohol related. In fact, the most common time for accidents among new drivers is between 3 and 4 p.m.--right after school lets out. Why? Watch students leaving school and you'll see one reason: the behavior of peers.

We know that peers can have a profound influence on young people. Studies also suggest that young drivers are more accident-prone when there are other teens in the car, but we don't know really know why.

To look more carefully at peer influences on teen drivers, we conducted a study among students in two Wisconsin high schools. We asked students to describe conversations with peers about driving and how often peer passengers did various things that might help or hinder their driving. Teens also reported on their own driving behavior. This newsletter summarizes some of our findings. The results suggest ways in which parents and driver education programs can foster safer driving habits for both teen drivers and their passengers. There are also important lessons in our findings for teen drivers and passengers.

Shenanigans Riding Shotgun? Teen Drivers Describe Common Behaviors of Peers in Car

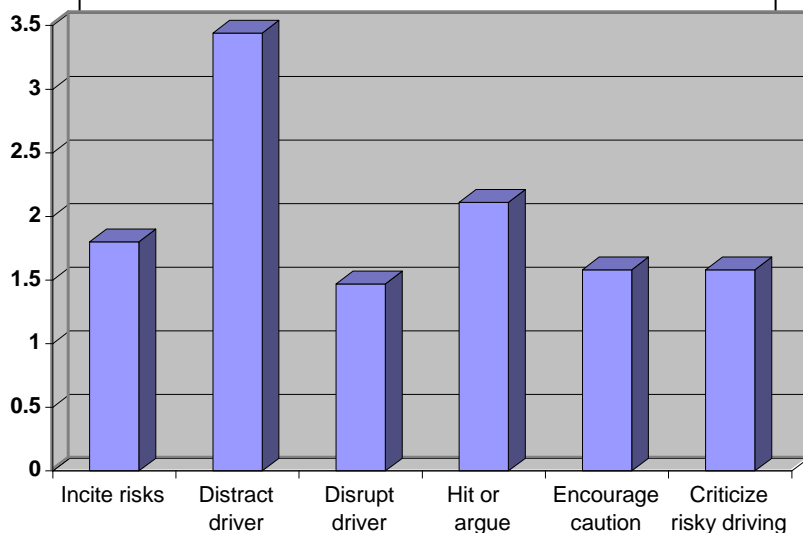
You've seen movie scenes with a car full of teens zooming down a street, music blaring, passengers hanging out the window or up through a sunroof, yelling comments at passers-by, maybe poking the driver or grabbing the steering wheel. Is that really how teens behave as passengers in cars driven by a young driver?

Not really, according to the 150 high school students who participated in our study. We asked them how often their peer passengers engaged in 40 different behaviors. They said it was rare for peers to move the driver's seat, grab the emergency brake, or cover the driver's eyes—behaviors that could seriously disrupt driving. Much more common were simple distractions, such as talking to the driver, saying something to make the driver laugh, adjusting the radio, or diverting the driver's attention to something inside the car or outside but not "on the road." Making gestures while talking, moving around in the car, yelling at someone outside the car were also fairly common – but, somewhat surprisingly, so was remarking that the driver was doing a good job at driving.

Our 40 items fell into 7 basic categories of passenger behavior, and distraction was the most frequent of these categories (disruption was the least). Another common category involved aggressive behavior—pushing or shoving the driver or another passenger, or criticizing or arguing with someone inside the car. But students reported that peer passengers would also affirm their safe driving fairly frequently: saying they were a safe driver, praising them when they drove defensively.

Other categories—inciting the driver to take risks like tailgating or racing another car, encouraging more cautious driving, or criticizing dangerous moves such as passing illegally or running a stop sign—didn't occur very often, but that might depend on gender or time since getting a license. For example, for girls, inciting risky driving was more common in the first 6 months the teen had her license than among girls who'd had their license a longer time, whereas for boys, incitement was more common in the second 6 months of driving (just after GDL restrictions had ended).

Frequency of Peer Influence Reported by Drivers



Do Peers Really Affect Teen Drivers ?

Teen drivers do seem to be affected by peers' behaviors, both inside and outside the car, our study shows. But peer influences depend on the driving behavior in question.

We asked teens to report on four driving problems. Two happened slightly more often to boys than girls: getting pulled over by police or given a ticket. There weren't gender differences for the other two: having an accident or almost having an accident. Not surprisingly, rates of problem driving were higher for those who had their licenses longer. They showed a sharp increase for boys in the second six months of driving (after GDL had ended).

Although distracting the driver was the most common passenger behavior that teens reported, peer incitement of dangerous driving had the biggest impact on rates of problem driving.

We also asked teens how often they took risks (tailgating, passing illegally, eating or using a cell phone while driving) either when they drove alone or with passengers. Incitement, again, was the strongest peer predictor of risky driving when alone, although peer behavior that disrupted the driver also was a predictor. On the other hand, the more often that general conversations with peers about driving focused on safe driving, the less likely teens were to report risky driving when alone. These conversations that occurred when teens weren't driving had little effect on rates of driving problems.

As for risky driving with passengers in the car, passenger activity that distracted the driver was a strong predictor. Also, the more that general peer conversations focused on dangerous driving, and the less conversation affirmed the value of safe driving, the more risky driving with passengers teens reported.

Even the sheer presence of peers in the car was associated with dangerous driving. Curiously, however, this was more of a factor for girls than boys, and girls' driving problems and dangerous driving were especially connected to how often they drove *groups* of friends—whether boys or girls—rather than just one passenger. These findings support the GDL limitation on passengers for young drivers—at least for girls.

The value of peer conversations that emphasize safe driving is noteworthy. Such conversations seem to decline as students have their licenses longer, whereas peers' stories about or affirmations of dangerous driving remain pretty constant over time.

One final surprise was that rates of driving problems were not very strongly related to how often teens reported witnessing dangerous driving by peers. Girls reported seeing such dangerous driving more often than boys, except among teens who'd had their license 6-12 months. Boys reported a sharp increase in seeing peers drive dangerously after the first 6 months with a license—and a sharp drop in how often conversations with peers focused on safe driving.



Other fun facts

- Time spent driving is limited. About 25% of teens say they drive 3 hours a week or less; half say they drive no more than 5 hours a week.
- Over half of our participants say they are passengers in a teen driver's car no more than an hour a week.
- Less than 20% of teens say they drive a car that they paid for, and only 30% pay at least part of their car insurance. But more than half pay for their own gas.
- Teens say they drive their best when alone or with their parents in the car. They drive their worst when with more than one peer or, again, when alone!

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Finally, a few tips:

What can teens do?

Based on our study findings, here are some things that teens can do when they are passengers in someone's car to help the driver drive safely:

1. Let the driver concentrate on driving. Try not to bug the driver by talking too much or too excitedly, or asking the driver lots of questions, or drawing the driver's attention away from the road.

2. Tell other passengers to chill. If things get too loud or if other passengers start moving around in the car, tell them to chill out so they don't bother the driver.

3. Don't "overload" the car. Especially for the first 6 months after someone gets a license, don't ask the person for a ride if she or he already has one passenger. Better to beg a ride from your parents now than to make them pick you up at the hospital later!

4. Quell the cell. Trying to drive a car while talking on a cell phone is ridiculous, but passengers talking on phones also can distract the driver unless they keep the call quiet and don't drag the driver into the conversation.

5. The shotgun seat isn't a Hollywood stage. If you're riding shotgun, your main job is to help the driver drive safely, not entertain everyone else in the car.

What can parents do?

And here's what our study findings suggest to parents:

1. Be firm about GDL. Most people say boys need a firmer hand and closer supervision when it comes to driving, but our findings suggest that girls should stick to the GDL rules as well—especially the "one passenger" rule—in the early months of their driving.

2. Keep an eye on your child's friends. Teens often find that having a car is a great way to impress people and make friends. But peers who just want to bum a ride may not have the driver's best interests at heart. You want your child giving rides to peers who will help them drive well and not incite them to drive recklessly.

3. Keep on ridin'. Even after they get their license, teens can benefit from your experience. Look for chances to continue to ride with them. Praise them when they drive carefully, and give them gentle reminders of things to look out for.

4. Share responsibilities. Like all of us, teens tend to take care of things better when they have to pay for them. Have teens share in the costs of operating a car—from gas to insurance.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Visit the Peer Relations Study Group website:
<http://prsg.education.wisc.edu/>