

Teen Drivers Pose Risk to Child Occupants

Researchers find that children transported by teen drivers are at a much higher risk of injury



Photo courtesy Chrysler Group

A national study of children in car crashes reports that children who were driven by teenagers were three times as likely to have a serious injury as those who were driven by adults. The risk was highest for young teenaged passengers, ages 13 to 15.

According to researchers from Partners for Child Passenger Safety (PCPS), a research partnership of The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm®, teen drivers were more likely than adult drivers to be involved in more severe crashes and less likely to have child passengers under age 9 years properly restrained. The researchers propose modifying state licensing laws to provide education and requirements that promote safer driving by teenaged drivers.

The study, published in this month's issue of "Injury Prevention," looked at 19,111 children in 12,163 crashes reported to State Farm. Overall, teenagers drove four percent of these children in crashes. When a child was injured, however, teenagers were much more likely to be driving—12 percent of the injured children had a teen driver. These children were not just their peers: 40 percent of teen-driven child passengers

were younger than 13 suggesting that teens regularly drive younger children.

"The excess risk of injury to children in teen driver crashes can be primarily explained by the more severe crashes those teen drivers incurred," states Flora Winston, MD, Ph.D., principal investigator for Partners for Child Passenger Safety and the scientific director of TraumaLink, a pediatric injury research center at Children's Hospital. "The severity is likely a function of a teen driver's inexperienced driving or risk-taking behavior and immaturity."

Dr. Winston and her colleagues also noted higher likelihood of no restraint use and front row seating for child passengers who were driven by 15- to 17-year-old drivers. Children riding with these novice teen drivers were 3 times as likely to have no restraint at all as those with adult drivers. Also, children under age 13 years riding with novice teen drivers were more likely to sit in the front seat as compared to those with adult drivers.

"Parents need to understand the excess risk of allowing their teens to drive younger siblings," says Dr. Winston. "Parents should reinforce over and over the importance of safe driving habits

among their teens to not only reduce their high crash rates but also to make sure that the teen driver and the passengers are appropriately restrained on every trip."

Enhanced public policy that includes child restraint and rear-seating requirements in state graduated driver's licensing (GDL) programs could provide teens with the necessary motivation to properly restrain all child passengers.

Nearly all states have some form of a GDL law in an attempt to address the persistent public health issue of teen driver crashes. Approximately 26 states have passenger restrictions during the intermediate licensing stage to prevent or limit the number of teenaged passengers - a known risk factor for teen crashes. All current passenger restrictions exempt transporting family members.

"Busy parents have come to rely on their older children helping with shuttling siblings to various commitments," says Dr. Winston. Rather than restrict sibling passengers, Dr. Winston recommends GDL programs provide appropriate education and disincentives, such as postponement of full-driving privileges if all child passengers are not properly restrained. ■

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