

DID YOU KNOW???

TEEN DRIVERS NEED MORE DRIVING, NOT INSTRUCTION; PART 1

As our teenagers approach 16 years old and express the desire to drive, it poses a dilemma for their parents; namely how can we keep our kids safe as they're learning to drive? Some think the main problem is teenage irresponsibility, said Robert D. Foss, the director emeritus of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers at the Highway Safety Research Center of the University of North Carolina. The real problem is lack of experience, and the only way to get to the other side is to have teenagers do more driving.

I came upon a great article by Perri Klass, M.D. in the New York Times (February 19, 2018) that has information that every parent of a new driver should know. The article contains so much advice that I cannot fit it all in one article, so next week's Did You Know will be a continuation on the subject of teen driving and how we can reduce the risks they take.

In this article, Johnathon Ehsani, an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health Center for Injury Research and Policy, described a project in which 90 families in Virginia agreed to have their cars outfitted with video cameras and microphones, along with other data recorders, from the time the teenagers got their learner's permits until a year after they got their licenses.

About half of the new drivers did indeed crash in that first year, mostly with minor accidents, and the data, soon to be published, let the researchers look at the question of what factors were associated with a lower crash rate during the first year of driving. "I personally had all my eggs in the parents-instruction basket," Dr. Ehsani said. The researchers carefully coded all the things that parents and adolescents had said to one another. "Turns out none of that matters," Dr. Ehsani said. "What matters was the extent to which teens practiced under multiple diverse road conditions."

Parents should encourage and supervise practice driving in more varied environments, and not fall into the habit of accumulating practice hours just "driving in routine conditions to places they already know," Dr. Ehsani said. After all, the minute teenagers get their licenses, he said, they start driving to new places, establishing their independence and taking advantage of their new ability.

"My suggestion to parents is that they think of the learner stage as an opportunity to build a library of experience in your teen's head that they can draw on when they're driving alone," Dr. Ehsani said. "Take different routes, make some additional stops, and mix it up a little."

During that practice driving, the parent is advising on any road decisions, anticipating problems, managing anything that has to be attended to inside the vehicle, but not necessarily pushing the teenager to think about how to solve all these problems without a parental co-pilot.

Dr. Ehsani said that teenagers acknowledge that they drive more slowly, with the music turned down, with their phones out of reach, when their parents are in the car with them, even after they get their licenses. Thus, he said, "teens actually know how to drive safely," when they're being watched, and that is borne out by the efficacy of devices that

send information home to parents about how the teenager is driving — but many families don't choose to use those devices.

Next week's article will continue discussing teen drivers and the risks they take and how we can mitigate those risks. Be sure to watch for the next sequel.