News from the Teen Driving Study

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Peer Relations Study Group
University of Wisconsin – Madison

Why Study Teen Drivers?

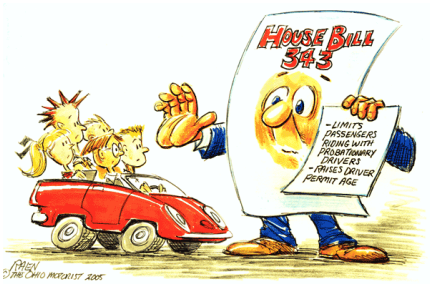
Although young people's driving records have improved in recent years, automobile accidents remain the leading cause of death and serious injury among teenagers. Researchers have spent a lot of time studying teen's driving habits, but one thing that hasn't gotten much attention is the behavior of peers. People assume that peers are major influences on teen drivers, especially when they are passengers, but we have little idea what peers do to influence a teen driver. Our study set out to look at this issue more carefully. We asked 85 upperclassmen from Sun Prairie High School to complete an anonymous survey. They described their driving habits and experiences, and the types of behaviors they encountered when peers were passengers. Our findings indicate that peers may be part of the problem with teen drivers—as well as part of the solution.

A few interesting facts about our study participants:

* About as many females as males completed the survey.
* Most were good students (B average or better).
* Few paid for their car insurance, and only half paid for their gas.
* Only 1 in 4 had been in an accident, but nearly 3 out of 4 had almost had an accident driving.
* Who did they say was in the car when they drive their best?: Parents and siblings, or no one.
* And who was in the car when they drove their worst?: A group that included peers of their own sex.

Study Supports GDL "One Passenger" Requirement—for Girls!

Like new drivers in almost every state in the union, teens in Wisconsin are subject to Graduated Drivers License (GDL) requirements for the first few months after they get their license. The GDL rule that teens object to the most is that they cannot drive with more than one "non-related" passenger (people other than family members) at a time. Adults who put together the GDL rules say this is a safety issue, but teens argue that it actually makes the roads more dangerous because, with fewer people in any given car, it forces more teens (inexperienced drivers) to be driving. Who's right about this issue?

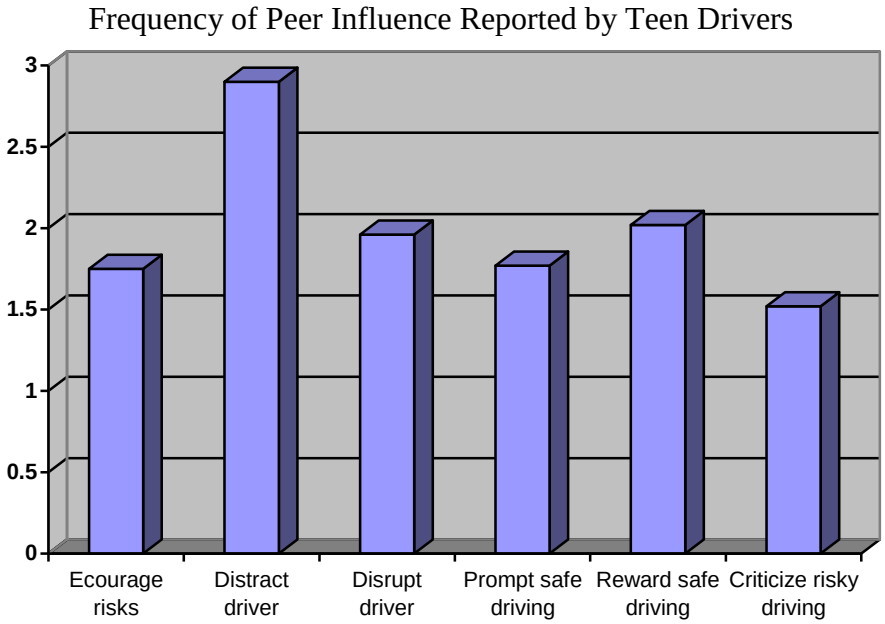


Our study findings support the GDL restriction—but, surprisingly, only for girls. We found that the more often girls reported driving a group of peers, the more problems they had experienced in driving (like getting a ticket, having an accident, or almost having an accident). There was no relationship between problem driving and the amount of time girls drove with just one peer passenger. For boys, it didn't matter whether they had one peer or many as passengers, the more they drove, the more problems they reported. Curiously, boys were more likely to have problems driving if they spent a lot of time with one or more members of the opposite sex in their car, particularly if there were no other male passengers.

One thing that might help to explain these findings is the different pattern of peer influences that boys and girls encountered. Peers who are riding in the car can affect a teen driver in numerous ways, depending on how they behave. We tracked six different types of peer influences among passengers (see related article on back page). Although males and females reported about the same amount of each influence, they were affected in different ways, especially considering who was riding with the driver.

Female drivers faced considerably more pressure from passengers to engage in risky driving when there was a group of peers in the car than when they were driving with just one peer. Male drivers said that the more often they had girls as passengers (including just driving with their girlfriend), the more often passengers distracted them from driving or even disrupted their driving.

One more interesting thing: the more often girls drove with just their boyfriend, the more they reported that peer passengers criticized their dangerous driving and encouraged them to drive safely. "Perhaps, when they're just with their girlfriends, boys don't worry as much about impressing their peers," said Professor Brad Brown, who directed the study. "Boys may feel more comfortable encouraging their girlfriend to drive safely."



"But I was just sitting there!" How Passengers Influence Teen Drivers

One curious difference between adult and teenage drivers is that adults tend to have fewer accidents when they are not driving alone, whereas the presence of passengers increases the accident rate for teenagers. People commonly assume that because teens have less experience driving they are more easily distracted by passengers. But there's little information about how young people behave as passengers and how that affects a teen's driving behavior. In this study we looked more carefully at ways that peers might affect young drivers—for better or worse. In anonymous surveys, we asked teen drivers to report how often their peers engaged in three types of behaviors that could impair their driving, and three types of behavior that could improve it.

The most common peer influence that teens faced involved behaviors that distracted their attention from driving, such as when passengers moved around in the car, or argued with or hit another passenger. Two other types of negative influence—disrupting the driver (poking or shoving the driver or grabbing the brake or steering wheel) or encouraging some form of dangerous driving (racing another car, speeding up to pass someone, or running a yellow light)—occurred less often (see the bar graph).

As for more positive influences, teens did report that peer passengers praised them fairly often for driving safely or encouraged them to drive safely (e.g., slow down, keep at a safe distance behind another car). Peers were least likely to criticize bad driving (yell at the driver for running a stop sign, or ask to be let out of the car).

Regardless of how often they occurred, the negative forms of peer influence seemed to affect drivers more than positive influences did. The more frequently drivers encountered negative influences, the higher the rate of problem driving behavior they reported. Although passengers encouraged risky driving relatively rarely, this behavior had the strongest association with problem driving. The amount of positive peer influence that teens reported was unrelated to the number of problems they encountered in driving.

These findings point out the importance of how teenage passengers behave in a car. Very common behaviors such as talking to the driver, playing with the radio, or calling the driver's attention to people on the sidewalk, may seem innocuous, and they may not be bothersome to older, more experienced drivers. But for teen drivers, these minor distractions can seriously challenge their ability to drive safely. Worse yet, passengers can get caught up in a moment and encourage risky driving, not realizing that the driver is likely to follow their advice—and quite possibly get a traffic citation or cause a serious accident. Lessons on "passenger etiquette" need to become a more central part of driver education courses.

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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 distract them while they're driving.

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:
www:prsg.education.wisc.edu