

Study finds teens not exposed to diverse driving experience

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

In advance of National Teen Driver Safety Week (Oct. 17-23), AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has released the first naturalistic study using in vehicle cameras to capture teenage drivers and their parents during their supervised driving phase.

Nearly half (47 percent) of parents in the study reported that after the yearlong learner's stage, there was still at least one condition in which they did not feel comfortable letting their teen drive. Yet, more than one-third (37 percent) of these families allowed their teen to obtain a license within a month of being eligible, although a few families restricted driving in certain scenarios.

The average amount of weekly driving varied greatly among families, ranging from just 20 minutes to almost five hours, the study found.

Sixty-eight percent of parents reported that opportunities to drive together were limited by busy schedules of both parents and teens. Teens averaged just over an hour and a half of supervised driving per week, mostly on routine trips along the same routes.

Meaning, few teens gained significant experience in more challenging situations, such as driving in inclement weather or in heavy traffic. After a full year of driving:

—One in three parents said they still didn't consider their teen ready to drive unsupervised in heavy traffic or on the highway.

—One in five didn't think their teen was ready to drive unsupervised in the rain.

“Driving in a variety of settings is the best way to build competence; starting early and practicing often can make the crucial difference between being a tentative novice driver or one capable of handling challenging and unavoidable driving scenarios,” said AAA Foundation President and CEO Peter Kissinger.

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“Until now, there’s been almost no scientific research on what parents actually do while supervising their teens’ driving. This study reinforces that parents are ideally positioned to assess their teen’s early driving ability and provide invaluable training and guidance during this critical time.”

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers in this country. The first few years of unsupervised driving are the most dangerous—1,368 U.S. teen drivers age 15-18 died in traffic crashes in 2008. However, teens are clearly a danger to others as well because the total number of deaths resulting from these crashes was 3,431.

“Humans learn complex tasks like driving more from direct experience than by being told what to do,” said Arthur Goodwin, the report’s primary investigator and a Senior Research Associate with the University of North Carolina (UNC) Highway Safety Research Center. “Parents should ask themselves: Do I want my teen to learn how to handle bad weather, darkness, rush hour traffic or narrow rural roads without me in the car?”

Although graduated driver’s license (GDL) systems vary by state, most require at least six months of supervised driving for beginners; several states require up to a year. During the supervised stage of GDL, the research showed parents need to:

—Ensure ample practice in all driving situations, including frequent practice at night, in bad weather, in heavy city traffic, on rural highways and on busy interstates.

—Share their driving “wisdom” to help teens spot dangers that aren’t obvious and see the “big picture.” Parents should use “I” statements, explaining what they would do in critical situations, so teens will be more likely to listen to and remember.

—Teach teens to drive defensively, be wary of other drivers and anticipate the unexpected things they might do. For example, “Even when I have a green light, I always glance both ways to make sure other cars are stopping, because sometimes they don’t.”

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The AAA Foundation commissioned the UNC Highway Safety Research Center to conduct the study. The initial phase concluded in January 2010 and the second phase will conclude this fall as researchers continue tracking teens once they obtain their provisional license.

Ultimately, the study will shed light on how teens handle the high-risk transition to independent driving and provide insight on the nature of distractions facing newly licensed teen drivers.

AAA offers online tools and information to help parents work with their teen drivers. The motor club's new Web site, www.teendriving.aaa.com, helps parents and teens manage the complex learning-to-drive process by providing them with state-specific information that they need based on the teen's progress toward licensure.

The site features AAA StartSmart, a series of online lessons and newsletters based on the National Institutes of Health's Checkpoints program, which has been proven to help parents improve teen driver safety and is being offered nationally for the first time.

Launched this summer, the site also offers an online version of AAA's Dare To Prepare workshop and lessons from the motor club's Teaching Your Teen To Drive program, both of which assist families that are or soon will be learning to drive.

For more information about the teen driving study or to see the full report, visit www.AAAFoundation.org.