

## Risk and Teen Driving - Part I

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### *Consider this...*

A new and frightening trend called ghost-riding or ghost driving involves teens outside their cars. The idea is to exit the vehicle while it's moving at a low speed – and then dance on or around the car while music pumps out from the dashboard.

I think most parents would recoil at the thought of their teenage son or daughter “ghost driving” and fortunately most teens also agree.

However, in order to understand why some teens behave this way and why all teenagers are attracted to risk and typically exhibit swings of mood that might affect their driving decisions it is important for parents to understand:

- What is risk?
- Where is risk evaluated in the brain?
- How can parents manage risk for the teen driver?

**What is Risk?** Risk is the prehistoric reaction to the unsuspecting predator, in other words, a sense of risk is a survival judgment. It is the result of perception of danger based on the accumulated set of experience, assessment and reactions to stress.

**Where is risk evaluated in the brain?** Risk is processed in a portion of human neural structure called the prefrontal cortex, where judgments are formed. Judgments help us determine a risk threshold. In adults, such emotional responses are adjusted by the accumulated memory of experience. However, balancing judgments with experience and knowledge can be a daunting process for the teen drivers. An unfinished prefrontal cortex also means that teenagers may also have trouble organizing several tasks quickly, evaluating danger and making split second decisions, critical in driving situations. Researchers have speculated that a fully mature brain with a fully mature prefrontal cortex does not finish developing, on average, until about 26!

**How can parents manage risk for the teen driver?** Managing risk for your teen driver is critical. Teenagers look to you for protection and wisdom in the exciting yet fearful time of learning to drive. They will listen to your guidance, watch your behaviors and benefit from your time and their practice. Parents can't hurry the development of the prefrontal cortex; however, they can provide the necessary tools for learning to drive safely: a good parental example, patient and caring guidance, and most of all your time to practice.