

Role Models for the Road

Parent Tips

DISTRACTED DRIVERS PART III:

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TEXT MESSAGING THE TEEN DRIVER

Perhaps a story is a good way to start.

Eighteen-year-old Richard Tatum was driving when he sent his girlfriend a text message. "I don't even remember hitting the truck," says Richard, "because I was looking down at my phone when I hit it."

"He was using his text messaging on his cell phone, and crossed the yellow line and had a head-on collision with a cement truck," explains his mom Linda.

His car was totaled; he barely survived. "So it crushed my pelvis and hip and my knee," says Richard. "I tore two ligaments and chipped a piece of my knee cap off."

According to the Allstate Foundation, **13 percent of teens admit to text messaging while driving.** "You just look down, text, look up, drive, look down, text," says Richard, "and it's not hard to do so everybody does it."

According to Australian research, **the average teen takes their eyes off the road 10 percent of the time** - to check road signs, change the radio, or just look around, but when teens send a text message that jumps to 40 percent. **"You are talking a 400 percent increase in the amount of time that your eyes are off the road,"** says Joe Neely, Jr., a driving instructor with the National Safety Council.

The researchers found another startling fact about text messaging behind the wheel. "And now you are talking [about] a **140 percent increase in lane violations**, where you are weaving across lanes because you are not paying attention," says Neely. "It is extremely frightening." (For more information, go to <http://www.nsc.org>.)

Some 158 billion mobile text messages were sent in the U.S. last year, up almost two-fold from 2005, according to a New York Times report. And, while it's unknown how many of those were typed by drivers in moving vehicles, it doesn't take scientific research to figure out that we're talking a big number.

If you haven't noticed, texting mania is gripping our nation's young people. Go to <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/30/technology/30social.html?ex=1182657600&en=55fa12bbabded22b&ei=5070> for more information.

Due to the dangers of combining driving, talking on the cell phone and/or texting, the Virginia General Assembly now prohibits drivers age 15, 16 and 17 from talking, sending text messages or snapping photos with a phone while driving on Virginia roads. The ban also applies to hands-free devices. Teenagers may use a cell phone during an emergency, such as if someone thinks he or she is being followed.

Tips for Parents

- Be a good role model. Do not use your cell phone while driving.
- Clearly explain to kids that using a cell phone while driving is equivalent to a .08 blood alcohol level which, in most states, is considered legally drunk, according to research conducted by the University of Utah.
- Insist that your teenager comply with Virginia law, which forbids teens from using a cell phone or text messaging while driving. Make them sign a contract agreeing to these rules. If you catch kids using a cell phone at the wheel, revoke their driving privileges.

A study, "The 100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study" conducted by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and released in April, tracked the behavior of 241 drivers of 100 vehicles for more than one year. The drivers were involved in 82 crashes, 761 near crashes and 8,295 critical incidents. Go to <http://www.iii.org/media/hottopics/insurance/cellphones/>.

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A COMMUNITY HEALTH INITIATIVE

For additional information go to
www.SafeTeenDriving.org
Prince William County Public Schools
Department of Motor Vehicles