

Driver distraction: Do as I say, not as I do (or what you think I do)

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(Medical Xpress)—While it may come as no surprise that parents who talk on cell phones, send texts or eat and drink while driving have teenagers who are more likely to do the same, what teens think their parents do behind the wheel matters more than what mom or dad say they do.

A new study by the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute and Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc. shows a significant [correlation](#) between parent and teen [driving](#) distraction behaviors, suggesting that parents play an influential role in modeling risky behavior on the road.

"Children look to their parents for a model of what is acceptable," said Ray Bingham, research professor and head of UMTRI's Young [Driver Behavior](#) and [Injury Prevention](#) Group. "Parents should know that every time they get behind the wheel with their child in the car they are providing a visible example that their child is likely to follow."

UMTRI and Toyota researchers surveyed more than 2,600 newly licensed U.S. drivers ages 16-18 and nearly 3,000 parents of drivers in this age group, including 400 pairs of [teens](#) and parents from the same households, during August and September 2012. They found that parents who more frequently engage in driving [distraction](#) behaviors have teens who engage in distracting behaviors more frequently than other young drivers.

A key finding, however, is that what teens think their parents do while driving has a greater impact on [teen behavior](#) than what parents actually report they do. For example, if a teen's parent reports dealing with passenger issues while driving, the teen is twice as likely to do the same. But if a teen thinks his or her parent deals with passenger issues while driving, the teen is five times more likely to do so themselves.

Likewise, if a teen's parent reports looking for something in the vehicle while driving or reports eating or drinking while driving, the teen is twice as likely to do the same, but are four times more likely if he or she thinks his or her parent looks for something in the vehicle while driving and three times more likely to eat or drink behind the wheel.

Bingham and colleagues say that teens think their parents engage in distracted driving more often than may be the case. A third of teens believe their parents use an iPod or other electronic device for music while driving, while only 10 percent of parents report that they do. Seventy-one percent of teens believe their parents read or write down directions while driving, while 55 percent of parents say they actually do. Eighty-five percent of teens believe their parents deal with passenger issues while driving, while 70 percent of parents say they do.

"Overall, teens think that their parents engage in distracted driving behaviors more often than may be the case, which may allow them to justify certain high-risk behaviors behind the wheel," Bingham said.

Another major finding from the study is that parents may underestimate how much their teens text while driving. More than a quarter of teens (26 percent) read or send a text message at least once every time they drive, although only 1 percent of their parents said their teen did this.

Other findings include:

- Cell phone use by teen drivers is similar to parents. More than half of teens and about 60 percent of parents say they use a hand-held cell phone while driving.
- Texting while driving remains pervasive. About 25 percent of teens respond to and 30 percent read a text message once or more every time they drive. Nearly one in 10 parents respond to a text once or more every time they drive, while 13 percent of them read a text or email once or more while driving. Perhaps even more alarming: 20 percent of teens and 10 percent of parents admit they have extended, multi-message text conversations while driving.
- Digital and social media are significant driving distractions. More than half of teens say they search for music on a portable music player while driving, while just 12 percent of parents do. More than one in 10 teens say they update or check Facebook, Twitter or other social media while driving.
- Teens regularly drive with young passengers despite serious risks. More than two-thirds of teens say they drive with two or three teen passengers in their car with no adults, which is shown to double the driver's risk of being killed in a crash. Nearly half of teens do so with more than three teen passengers and no adults, which quadruples a driver's risk of being killed. In addition, 50 percent of teens say they deal with passengers while driving and 30 percent say they do this at least once a trip.

The study, sponsored by Toyota's Collaborative Safety Research Center, was designed to shed new light on frequently discussed driving risks and to identify effective recommendations to help keep teens safe and help parents serve as more effective driving role models. It also looked at a range of risk factors that receive less public attention but pose great risks on the road, as well as the role parents and peers play in encouraging distracted driving behaviors.

"Driver education begins the day a child's car seat is turned around to face front," said Tina Sayer, CSRC principal engineer and teen safe driving expert. "As the study shows, the actions parents take and, by extension, the expectations they set for [young drivers](#) each day are powerful factors in encouraging safe behavior behind the wheel. Seat belts and good defensive driving skills are critical. However, the one piece of advice I would give to [parents](#) to help them keep newly licensed drivers safe on the road it is to always be the driver you want your teen to be."

Provided by University of Michigan

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