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Talk With Your Teens About Distracted Driving

SPONSORED Failing to do so could have devastating consequences.

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Donovan Tessmer's life was just getting started — he had a girlfriend, great friends, a loving family and was about to start his senior year of high school with 25 letters of interest from universities hoping to recruit him to their football programs.

But two weeks before his 17th birthday, Donovan's life was cut short when he was thrown from the backseat of his girlfriend's car. The main culprit in the crash: distracted driving.

Ground-breaking research from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that distraction is a factor in

nearly six out of 10 teen crashes — four times as many as reported in official police reports. The report also found that cell phone use is among the top two most common forms of distraction for teen drivers.

No distraction is worth it

Donovan's mother, Martha Tessmer, is now an advocate for the prevention of distracted driving. She travels around the country to educate parents and teens about how quickly life can change by doing something as seemingly simple as sending a quick text from behind the wheel.

"Anything you do in that vehicle that's going to take your eyes off the road, your hands off the steering wheel or your brain off your driving — that is what will put you in danger," she warns.

"Your kids are watching what you do behind the wheel from a very early age, so it's critical that you model safe behavior."

Tessmer is urging parents to be proactive. Jennifer Ryan, Director of State Relations at AAA couldn't agree more, "Don't wait for your teen to have a license before having this talk." Ryan outlines one way that parents can get through to their kids from the start:

"Before parents begin practice driving with teens, they should create a parent-teen driving agreement that includes strict ground rules and consequences related to distraction," she says.

Set an example

Additionally, says Ryan, it's important that parents lead by example. "If mom is always texting and driving, or dad is always fiddling with the radio instead of keeping both hands on the wheel, their children will begin to view that behavior as normal. Your kids are watching what you do behind the wheel from a very early age, so it's critical that you model safe behavior," she says.

AAA and Tessmer also recommend that parents remain active and involved with their teen drivers. "Remind them that every time they get into the car, they have to be safe, because you want them to come home to you," says Tessmer. "My son got into the car, and after a kiss and a hug goodbye, I never saw him again."

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