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Distraction behind the wheel

AAA study calls for teen driver
cell phone restriction

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We've all seen them idling next to us at a stoplight or weaving their way through congested Charlotte streets. They may be our children, our grandchildren, our neighbors, our students, our siblings. Bass thumping and cell phone in hand, the people behind the wheel deem navigation of the road as secondary to beating their best friend at the light, changing a compact disc or catching up on school gossip with friends. They are teen drivers and distraction is second nature.

The influence of inexperience

A recent study conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that between 1995 and 2004, crashes involving 15-, 16- and 17-year-old drivers claimed the lives of 30,917 people nationwide. In North Carolina, 1,120 people died in crashes involving young novice drivers during that same time period.

The study also reported that the majority of people killed in teen driver crashes are individuals other than the teen driver; in the study young novice drivers comprised slightly more than one-third of all fatalities in crashes in which they were involved, leaving nearly two-thirds of the fatalities to passengers, pedestrians and other vehicle users.

Car crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers. AAA Carolinas is utilizing the study information to reinforce its plea for a strengthened graduated driver licensing (GDL) system – most notably by stipulating a ban on cell phone usage for teenagers under 18, whether hand-held or hands-free, while driving a vehicle.

"Teenagers multitask and are easily distracted. Therefore, having a cell phone in the car and talking on it

while trying to drive is just one more thing that can take their attention away from the life-and-death activity of driving," said Tom Crosby, AAA Carolinas' vice president of communications. "We're trying to reduce the distractions in the car."

According to Rob Foss, senior research scientist and manager of alcohol studies for the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, more than 40 states have three-stage GDL systems and approximately 10 states have some form of cell phone restriction for young drivers. North Carolina's GDL system was implemented in 1996 – one of the first states in the country to have such a system – and the teen driver crash rates since that time speak volumes about the program's efficacy.

According to AAA, since North Carolina's GDL system was implemented, crash rates have decreased 35 percent for 16-year-olds and 18 percent for 17-year-olds. "The North Carolina system is one of the most comprehensive (in the country)," Foss said. "Ours was carefully designed to implement the fundamental concept of providing plenty of practical driving experience under the safest possible, yet realistic conditions."

Under North Carolina's GDL system, individuals between the ages of 15 and 18 are first issued a limited learner permit, which authorizes use of a vehicle between the hours of 5 a.m. and 9 p.m. for the first six months and always with the accompaniment of an adult supervising driver. After 12 months with no conviction or seat belt infractions, novice drivers may graduate to a level two limited provisional license, which allows for driving without supervision between 5 a.m. and 9 p.m. Only after six months at level two with no convictions or moving violations may a driver graduate to a level three full provisional license. Foss cited as particularly important the six-month 9 p.m. driving restriction for new drivers, the 12-month learner phase, the fact that restricted novice drivers don't graduate to the next license until they have demonstrated six months of driving without a citation and the repeated seat belt mandate for GDL drivers and their passengers.

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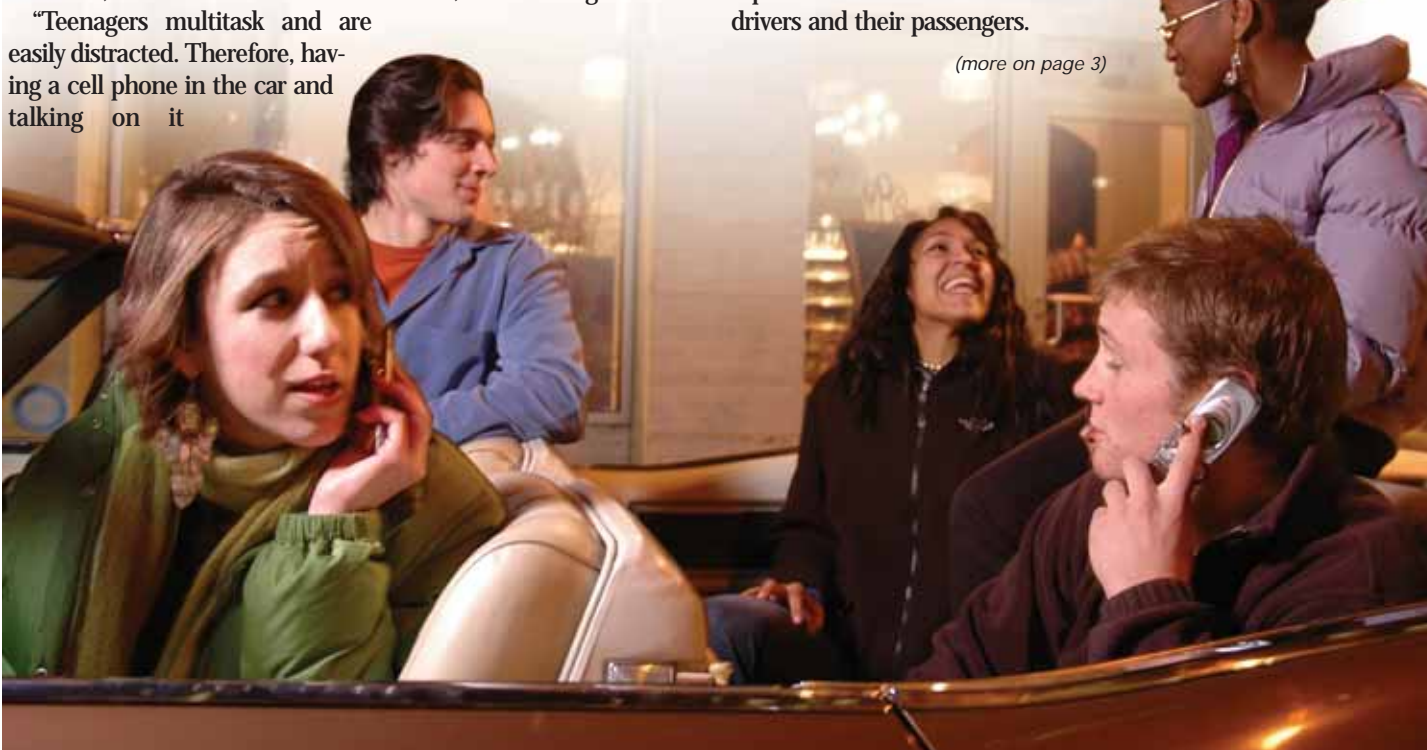
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Driving change

Foss said the North Carolina GDL system was created properly; and with the addition of a 2002 restriction that allows only one passenger under the age of 21 in the car with a provisionally licensed driver, the current system leaves little room for improvement. "There is nothing else in North Carolina that the research literature says is likely to have a beneficial effect," Foss said. "For any age group ... many who are injured are either passengers or riding in another vehicle. This information simply makes the point that ... we all share the road." Foss did, however, concede that although the state lacks research quantifying the role of cell phone distractions in novice driver crashes, a provision in the North Carolina licensing system to ban cell phone use while driving might have some benefit. "It is inescapable that talking on a phone while driving is risky for all drivers, not just teens," he said. "Whether disallowing that would actually result in fewer crashes is just unknown ... and we won't know until somebody does a really good study in a state that has already done this."

Although data naming cell phone use as a contributor to roadside havoc may be hard to obtain, those who have dealt with traffic accidents have little doubt of the devices' impact. "I think a ban for cell phone use for everyone would be a bene-

fit," said Sgt. John Williams, supervisor of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's Highway Interdiction Traffic Safety unit. "We see a problem with all age groups using cell phones and they're directly contributing to wrecks, but we don't really have a way to collect that data right now to know if that's a direct contributor."

Williams admitted that it's difficult to enforce personal behaviors. "There are plenty of laws on the books right now; it's just hard to enforce every single thing," he said. "We can enforce (laws against) speeding, drinking and driving, seat belt usage and some of those things that we see directly affecting crash rates - but eating, reading in the car ... it's very difficult to convince people you shouldn't do that."

According to Williams, speed is the No. 1 killer in Mecklenburg County crashes, with alcohol a close second. Thus, while the focus of CMPD traffic enforcement might remain on "Booze it or lose it," "Click it or ticket" and "Slow down, save a life," Williams agreed a cell phone ban while driving would be helpful for all ages. "It would be more effective across the board," he said. "It's not just teenagers, it's everyone. Inattention is inattention."

Like all laws, changes are made to the GDL system when a legislator decides to sponsor a bill. Currently AAA Carolinas is seeking such a sponsor for its bill to prohib-

it cell phone use while driving for youths in the first two stages of the GDL process. "Trying to get the message to the legislature is sort of like trying to split the atom ... we'll do everything we can," said Crosby. "Getting (the issue) on the radar by getting a bill submitted is a way to begin the conversation and it's what we need."

Readying to hit the road

In addition to a cell phone ban for young drivers, Crosby would also like to see a standardized driver education program for North Carolina. "We don't have a standard curriculum," he said. "The curriculum is currently defined by a department of public instruction. Instructors take some training and things but basically there is no standard." He added that parents also should receive adequate training so they will pass along good driving habits to their children. "We have a period of time where the only person allowed in the car while (the young adult) is learning to drive is the parent, but what if the parent is a lousy driver?" Crosby asked. "Isn't there something we ought to be providing the parent to help ensure the child gets the best instruction?"

In the end, much of the obligation to fashion responsible drivers ultimately falls to parents. Both Foss and Crosby agree. "Parents should be sure that their teen

drives as much as possible while they have a learner permit," Foss said. "Experience is absolutely critical and the only way to get that is to drive. Although it is a lot (of time), parents ought to try to spend 200 hours riding with their teen." Foss added that research suggests the 40-50 hours of recommended driving time is often not enough. "You can master the physical aspects of handling a vehicle pretty quickly, but the things that are critical to safe driving have to do with recognizing hazards and making good judgments about how to avoid them," he said. "Learning that takes time and experience in lots of situations."

Crosby echoed the sentiment. "Parents need to support all the education that their teens can get," he said. "Unfortunately, you find parents who are looking at freedom from being a chaperone for their kids and therefore can't wait until their kids get their driver's licenses. Really they should hold back as long as they can until their teens understand how to handle a car," he said. "Even for parents that have complete confidence in their children, their kids still might not be ready. Parents need to have their children exposed to as much traffic safety information as possible." Hopefully they'll be off the phone long enough to listen. □