TEENAGERS AND DRIVING

Nature of the Problem
Motor vehicle crashes are one of the leading causes of injury death among young people ages 15 to 20 years. Between 1990-1999, 119 teenagers died and 10,459 were injured as a result of motor vehicle crashes in Contra Costa County. The risk for crashes is especially high during the first years in which teenagers are eligible for driver's licenses. Between 1990-1999, 14% of drivers involved in police-reported crashes in Contra Costa were between ages 15 and 20. There seems to be a gender factor in motor vehicle-related fatalities (68% male, 32% female) and in police-reported crashes involving drivers ages 15 to 20 (59% male, 41% female).

Two factors work against young drivers: lack of driving experience, and human development. Young drivers need time to develop driving skills and judgment through on-the-road experience. Young drivers tend to overestimate their own physical and driving abilities while underestimating dangers in the driving environment. This leads to risky driving behaviors such as speeding, passing inappropriately, following too closely and driving without seat belts. National statistics illustrate the problem:

- 41% of fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers involved only the teenager's vehicle.
- 45% of crashes that killed young people involved speeding.
- 36% of crashes that killed young people involved alcohol. For young drivers 15 to 20 years old, alcohol involvement is higher among males than among females. Data shows young drivers driving under the influence tend to not wear seat belts; in 1997, 71% of the young drivers in fatal crashes where alcohol is involved were unrestrained.
- Analyses of fatal crash data indicate that teenage drivers are more likely to be at fault in their crashes.
- Teenagers do more of their driving at night, and in smaller and older cars compared with adults. About 52% of teenagers’ fatal crashes occur at night, especially weekend nights.
- Passengers can cause distractions and create peer pressure to participate in risky behavior, thereby increasing the crash risk. Almost two out of every three teens who died as passengers in 1998 were in vehicles driven by other teens, especially 16-year-olds. Fatal crashes involving drivers this age are much more likely to occur with three or more people in the vehicle.

In recent years, driving experts have concluded that far more driving experience is required, after initial licensing, before a novice achieves the skills, judgment and performance that result in safe driving.

PREVENTION
California has a law limiting purchase of alcohol to those 21 years and over, and a “zero tolerance” law for blood alcohol concentration, which have successfully reduced alcohol-related crashes among teenagers. However, enforcement is needed to make these laws even more effective.

In California and Contra Costa County, teenagers do not automatically get full licensure when they turn 16. The California graduated licensing program gives young drivers more practice in developing driving skills under adult supervision and the motivation to practice safe driving skills and behavior. Graduated licensing has three distinct stages, requiring a
crash-free/conviction-free driving performance before the young driver can get a full license. California reported 5% fewer crashes and 10% fewer traffic convictions for drivers 16 and 17 years old in the five-year period after the program began. The California graduated licensing requirements are:

Stage 1: Learner’s Permit
- Minimum of 15 ½ years old.
- Pass vision and knowledge test, including rules of road, signs and signals.
- Complete basic vehicle skills training.
- Licensed adult (at least age 25) required in the vehicle at all times.
- Must remain crash- and conviction-free for at least six months to move to the next stage.
- Parental certification of at least 50 hours of supervised driving practice to move to the next stage.
- Zero alcohol while driving.
- All passengers must wear safety belt.
- Permit is visually distinctive from other driver licenses.

Stage 2: Intermediate (Provisional License)
- Complete Stage 1.
- Minimum age of 16.
- Pass a behind-the-wheel road test.
- Complete advanced driver education training.
- Holding period of 12 months.
- During the first six months, a teenager must be accompanied by a driver 25 or over between the hours of 12 midnight and 5 am, or if transporting people under 20 at any time.
- During the second six months, a teenager may transport people under 20 without supervision, excluding the hours of 12 midnight and 5 am.
- Must remain crash- and conviction-free for at least six months to move to the next stage.
- Zero alcohol while driving.
- All passengers must wear safety belts.
- Provisional license is visually distinctive from a regular license.

Stage 3 – Full Licensure
- Must complete Stage 2.
- Must be at least 17 years of age.
- Zero alcohol while driving
- All passengers must wear safety belts.

What parents can do?
When parents understand the risks involved in letting their 16-year-olds go behind the wheel, they can act to improve the situation:
- Give 16-year-olds as much supervised driving time as possible. High school driver education courses without additional supervised practice driving have little or no effect on reducing crashes. Parents should carefully evaluate commercial driver education
programs, provide plenty of practice time in various driving situations and talk honestly with their children about the inherent dangers of driving.

- Attend a driver’s education and training class that involves teens and their parents.
- Be aware of high-risk situations where 16-year-old drivers and their peers travel together without adults.
- Prohibit unsupervised late-night driving.
- Just because a young driver buckles up every time you’re in the car doesn’t mean belts are used all the time, especially when your child is out with peers. Tell them to buckle up all the time.
- Choose safe cars. Large ones are safer than small ones, and air bags enhance safety.
- Prohibit driving after drinking any alcohol.

**What providers can do?**

**Education:** Provide and advocate for quality driver’s education and training courses. Since driver’s education and training is no longer taught in high schools, teenagers and parents are turning to commercial driver’s training programs. Unfortunately, these vary greatly in quality. Educate parents/guardians regarding the dangers of teens and driving, particularly the tendency to overestimate their teen’s skills, judgment and performance in driving.

**Enforcement:** Law enforcement officers should continue to enforce current alcohol purchasing, zero tolerance and graduated licensing laws, and work with community groups to provide education on these laws.

**Environment:** Offer driver’s education programs that involve teens and their parents, in order to provide an understanding and knowledgeable environment about the inherent risks of driving. Other ideas include evaluating good driver’s education programs and getting media attention, creating peer education programs to influence risky driving behavior and providing alternative activities for teenagers to discourage drinking.

**COST**

In 1997, the estimated nationwide economic cost of police-reported crashes involving drivers between 15 and 20 years old was $31.9 billion, not including lost quality of life.

**LOCAL RESOURCES**
Mt Diablo Adult Education Program  
Offers a teen/parent driver’s class

Teen Driving Subcommittee  
Childhood Injury Prevention Coalition  
[http://www.ccprevention.org/cipc/](http://www.ccprevention.org/cipc/)  
or [cipc411@yahoo.com](mailto:cipc411@yahoo.com)

John Muir Medical Center Trauma Services  
Every 15 Minutes Program

**OTHER RESOURCES**
Institute for Youth Development
http://www.youthdevelopment.org

Children’s Safety Network
http://www.cdc.org/HHD/csn

Campaign Safe & Sober
http://www.safeandsober.org

American Automobile Association
http://www.aaa.com

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
http://www.iihs.org/

California Office of Traffic Safety
http://www.ots.ca.gov/youthquake