Parents of Teen Drivers with AD/HD: Proceed with Caution

Of all the health risks to young people – diseases, drug over-doses, homicides, suicides – none is as likely to cause serious injury or even death than are motor vehicle accidents. High-way crashes are the biggest killer of adolescents ages fifteen to twenty in America, accounting for over six-thousand deaths in 1996, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Although teens constitute only 7 percent of licensed American drivers, sadly, they account for 14 percent of drivers involved in fatal collisions.

Greater Risk for Young Drivers with AD/HD

In 1996, Barkley, Murphy, and Kwanik convincingly demonstrated that greater driving risks are associated with a diagnosis of AD/HD. Using official driving records and a computer simulated driving test, they first published their research in Pediatrics (1996). Official government driving records indicate that research subjects with AD/HD were:

involved in accidents approximately four times more often than control subjects (those without the disorder) (1.5% vs. .4%);
more likely to receive traffic citations compared to control subjects (78% vs. 47%), and those citations were most often issued for speeding and stop sign violations;
nearly seven times as likely to be involved in two or more crashes (40% vs. 6%);
over four times more likely to be at fault for the accidents in which they were involved (48% vs. 11%).

Researchers in this study also found that poor driving *performance*, rather than poor driving *knowledge*, distinguished subjects with AD/HD from their peers.

After careful consideration of studies such as this one, it follows that parents of adolescents with AD/HD are at an even greater risk than parents of teens without AD/HD for experiencing: (1) serious injury or death of a child in a motor vehicle accident; (2) higher incidence of property damage; (3) more involvement with legal and liability issues; and (4) higher motor vehicle insurance rates.

What's a Parent to Do?

Last fall, at the CHADD International Conference held in New York City, a new workshop was offered for parents of teen drivers with AD/HD. Parents attending received practical information about their role in reducing risks of accidents for their teen drivers. As the presenters of the workshop, we recommended that parents should consider

and act upon situations that research on teen driving says is especially dangerous. When parents under-stand the increased risk factors involved in putting teenagers with AD/HD behind the wheel, they can act to improve the situation for everyone involved. It is, after all, the parent's responsibility to establish rules and expectations for safe driving behaviors to: (1) protect their teen driver; (2) protect others who share the streets and high-ways in the community; and (3) protect themselves.

Safe driving behavior is dependent upon a person's judgment, the amount of driving experience they have had, and their attitude behind the wheel. Adolescents are at the stage in their lives when they not only feel invulnerable to physical injuries or death, but are also struggling for independence from their parents. This combination can result in risk-taking behaviors. Youth with AD/HD are at an even greater risk, for oftentimes they simply are not as mature as their peers and, consequently, may take significantly longer than other teens in developing good judgment and a mature attitude toward driving. If you are the parent of a teen with AD/HD, you must consider carefully and honestly if he is ready to assume the responsibilities of driving. You must also decide if you are willing and able to assume all the risks associated with allowing your teen to drive.

Don't be manipulated into believing that driving is a teenager's right! Instead, make it clear to your teen that learning how to drive is a privilege she has to earn. If you don't feel safe as a passenger when your teen is driving, her license application should be delayed until you feel more confident of her driving behaviors.

Strategies that rely simply on educating young drivers about the rules of the road have not been very effective in helping to improve safety statistics. So just because your child may complete a driver's education class before applying for a driver's license, don't assume that passing the class means that he will be a safe driver. Gaining knowledge of highway rules or learning about the dangers of alcohol-impaired driving doesn't necessarily change attitudes or alter the risk taking or thrill seeking tendencies associated with immature judgment. It is up to you to spend a lot of time helping your child to gain not only the skills necessary to operate a motor vehicle, but also the judgment and proper attitudes needed to be a safe driver.

Because of the added risks associated with the driving habits of teens with AD/HD, driving should be considered within the context of the overall treatment plan. You can be helpful in determining when medication is needed by observing your child's driving skills and attitudes toward safety at different times throughout the day, when medication varies in effectiveness. Discuss your observations with both your child and her treating physician. If it is agreed that the medication is beneficial for improved driving behavior, it will be necessary for you and your child to agree to consistent medication use during the times she is driving. Earning the right to learn to drive can be used as a powerful incentive for better compliance with medication use, more mature parent-teen interactions, and improved academic performance.

Issues of Insurance

Whenever your teen is ready to drive, you must obtain adequate insurance coverage. Obtaining ample coverage is of utmost importance in protecting you and your child from financial liability for property damaged or persons injured by your vehicle. Select a reputable company and discuss all aspects of liability and collision insurance, considering your total family needs. You may want to consider additional umbrella liability policies to protect yourself from personal injury lawsuits. Discuss insurance issues and costs at length with your teen.

You should also schedule a separate meeting between your teen and the insurance agent. It is not unusual for teens to listen to other adults more carefully than they listen to their parents. Ask your agent to explain how insurance works, the financial benefits good grades have on insurance costs, and the consequences of increased insurance costs associated with accidents and traffic violations.

Helping Your Teen Develop Safe Driving Habits

Parents need to help their teen learn to regulate impulsive and inattentive behavior that leads to unsafe driving behaviors. When you drive, set a good example. Your actions are much more important than your directions. To establish safe driving behaviors, you should:

Provide as much supervised driving time as possible to your child when she has her learner's permit.
Schedule frequent, short (30 minutes or less), well-planned driving sessions. Patience is essential. Try to remain calm and relaxed during the sessions. These lessons should continue even after the teenager obtains his license. Remember that AD/HD is not a problem of knowing what to do. The problem is with performance – doing what you know! Teach your teen to drive as though his life depends upon it – because it does!
After your teen learns basic driving skills, carefully expose her to many different driving conditions: wet roads, rainy or windy weather, snow and ice, crowded two lane roads, interstate highways, rural roads, night driving, etc. Be aware that risks increase when your teen driver and her peers drive together without adults present. Don't assume your child will drive the same way with peers in the car as when you are present. The best policy is not to allow your teen to drive with other teens, and you should never allow other teens to drive your car.
Prohibit late night driving that's unsupervised. Teen outings late at night tend to be recreational and pose additional risk for accidents.
Insist on seat belt use at all times.
Strictly enforce no drinking and driving rules.
Choose safe cars for driving, and retain ownership of the car the teen drives. The combination of high-performance, flashy cars and a young, impulsive driver can be very dangerous. Research from NHTSA shows that teens who own their own cars have more traffic offenses and motor vehicle accidents than those teens who drive cars owned by parents. Teen car owners also received lower than average grades than non-owners.

Role play emergency situations with your teen before he gets a license. Stress the importance of staying at an accident scene. Assemble emergency packets and place them in the glove compartment of all vehicles your teen drives. This packet should include: vehicle registration, insurance card and agent information, emergency phone numbers, home/office phone numbers for parents, coins for emergency phone calls, a list of what to do in case of an accident, a letter about medications being taken and/or allergies.

Become educated about and support graduated licensing efforts in your state. (Only twenty-four states have graduated licensing at this time. This requires young drivers to have a learner's permit and intermediate license before obtaining full licensure.)

Administer medications to your child as needed to reduce impulsiveness and inattention. Ask your physician to write a letter stating that the medications they prescribe for AD/HD are safe to use while driving. If your child is required to submit to a blood test or a urinalysis after displaying poor driving behavior, he should immediately supply law enforcement officers with the letter.

Use a Teen Driver's Contract that specifically addresses the issues of teen drivers with AD/HD.

Initiate consequences of poor driving performance and contract violations immediately! Delayed consequences decrease significance for teens with AD/HD.

Restrict or remove driving privileges as needed. As the parent, you must be in control to teach your teen driver to be responsible for her behavior.

Act - Don't Yak! Require payment of fines, repairs, or increases in insurance premiums when the behavior of the teen involves added costs. Require your teen to honor financial responsibilities as agreed before restoring driving privileges.

All parents struggle with the issues involved when their teenage children begin to drive, but for the parents of teens with AD/HD, there are additional issues that must be carefully considered. The best time to think about your responsibilities as a parent is before your child is ever allowed to get behind the wheel. Once she begins driving, you should continually monitor, coach, and praise her positive driving behaviors and attitudes. You must also be ever vigilant, ready, willing, and able to immediately impose appropriate consequences for rule violations and unsafe driving behaviors to protect your child, other drivers, and yourself.

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References:

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