Why are so many young people involved in fatal crashes? Because young people do not take safe driving seriously! They consider driving a fun activity and a chance to prove how brave they are — often to their peers — and in general push the limits of physics by performing some very dangerous stunts. Why do they do this? Because they are young and immature, and have poor driving role models.
Driving parenting is a life and death situation

It’s not just good parenting to talk to your children about safe driving; it’s a life and death situation. You need to discuss everything about traffic safety with your sons before they even reach driving age. Start when they are young passengers — both boys and girls — to stress the importance of using their vehicle restraints. Insist that they are buckled up before every trip. You can also emphasize the importance of following all traffic signs and signals, and safe driving rules and regulations. Say, for example, “the roads are dangerous and this is why dad always drives defensively to be in control of the vehicle and to be able to react in an emergency or when others make mistakes.”

When your son is ready to drive, make sure that he takes driving lessons and passes his driving test. Once he has his driving license, and for the first six months, restrict his driving to only when supervised by you and during the daytime. This way you can monitor his driving to make sure that he drives defensively. Once you feel confident that he has gained enough experience, allow him to drive on his own. But set limits that clearly outline the consequences of breaking the rules, i.e., loss of his driving privilege, monetary fines and even injury and death. You may think that you cannot get through to your son, but research tells us that children do listen to their parents. You do influence your son’s driving habits. Remind him that driving is a privilege — a privilege that he will lose if he doesn’t drive by the rules of the road and your own rules.

Modeling safe driving

Talking to your son about safe driving is important, but not as important as modeling safe driving. Many parents are unaware of the influence they have on their children’s driving behavior. Your driving style and behavior behind the wheel, including how you react to various driving situations and mistakes by others, are more significant to your son’s developing driving habits than anything you may say. Remember that even as a young child your son observes your driving behavior and learns from you. Children naturally imitate their parents and when it comes to driving, fathers need to model good driving skills and behavior so that their sons follow their lead and avoid risky behaviors.

Stress the importance of obeying these rules. If he fails to do so, he will lose his driving privilege for a certain period of time depending on the rule. For example, if he is observed using a mobile phone, he will not be allowed to drive for a week; if he is speeding, he will not be allowed to drive for a month. Repeated violations will result in taking the keys away from him altogether.
**Risky behaviors**

What are some of the risky driving behaviors of young drivers?

**Speeding** — Young drivers believe that they are immortal — nothing bad can happen to them — so they exhibit the worst of all risky behaviors: driving at unsafe, high speeds. Speeding is one of the most common factors contributing to traffic crashes. Speeding reduces a driver’s ability to steer safely around curves or objects, extends the distance necessary to stop a vehicle, and increases the distance a vehicle travels while the driver reacts to a dangerous situation. It’s important to note that the relative proportion of speeding-related crashes to all crashes decreases with the driver’s increasing age.

**Aggressive driving** — The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines aggressive driving as driving that takes place when an individual commits a combination of moving traffic offenses so as to endanger other persons and property. Aggressive driving is exhibited in many different ways including not following the rules of the road (i.e., running red lights and stop signs), disregarding other drivers’ rights (i.e., cutting in front of them, tailgating and swerving in and out of lanes), not giving the right-of-way to pedestrians and others, and honking and making angry gestures.

**Distracted driving** — Distractions are deadly because they take a driver’s mind and eyes off the road. Even only a few seconds is enough to prevent a driver from seeing a hazard and will delay his reaction time. Distractions coupled with a lack of driving experience put young drivers in a very vulnerable position for a crash. Young drivers are usually distracted by any of these actions: eating or drinking; tuning the radio or listening to a portable multimedia player; smoking; searching, talking, calling or texting on a mobile phone; steering with knees (kneeing); using a GPS; and staring at something on the road.

**Following too closely** — Tailgating is dangerous because it shortens the amount of time a driver has to react to a hazard on the road. And remember, the higher the speed, the longer it takes to stop safely. All drivers should follow the two-second rule: Watch the rear bumper of the vehicle in front as it passes a fixed object; count two seconds: “one thousand one, one thousand two.” This rule helps determine and maintain a safe following distance under normal road and weather conditions. One or more seconds should be added for each factor that causes driving conditions to deteriorate: rain, fog, shamals, night driving, heavy traffic, road construction or health issues.

**Carrying too many passengers** — When a young driver has too many friends in the vehicle a safety issue can arise. Friends talking and laughing may distract the driver from driving safely. Friends may try to influence him to take risks that he might not otherwise take, like stunt driving or speeding. Young passengers may try to interfere with the driver physically (playfully blocking his eyes, placing their foot on the accelerator, elbowing him), making it difficult or impossible to drive safely.

**Driving when tired or sleepy** — According to the US National Safety Council (NSC), young drivers are often sleep deprived. When it comes to sleep, the brain is like a bank. You deposit a certain amount of sleep every night or you may have a sleep deficit. If the driver has a sleep deficit over many nights, his brain will not be fully functional for him to drive safely. The driver should get enough sleep or catch up if he misses sleep, eat a light meal before driving, make frequent stops, drive with one other person and pay attention to sleep deprivation warning signs — if too tired or sleepy, he should get off the road and rest.

**Failing to buckle up** — Vehicle restraints do not prevent crashes, but they help prevent fatalities and minimize the severity of injuries in the event of a crash. When a driver and passengers are in a collision, their bodies go through three separate collisions of their own: first, the collision the body feels when the vehicle makes the initial impact; second, the collision of the body against parts of the vehicle (i.e., the dashboard, steering wheel, doors, seats and seatbelts); and third, the collision of human organs inside each body. The severity of all three of these collisions worsens as speed increases. When vehicle occupants are properly restrained, the impact of the collision is reduced.

**Spell out the rules**

Clearly define the family’s safe driving rules and consequences. Write up a contract that both you and your son sign:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Seat belts:</strong></th>
<th>Always buckle up!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobile phone:</strong></td>
<td>No searching, texting or talking. Turn off the mobile phone when in the car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curfew time:</strong></td>
<td>Have the car back home by 10 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passengers:</strong></td>
<td>No more than one at a time (increase the number of passengers with time).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substances:</strong></td>
<td>No use of any kind, including medications that can cause drowsiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distance:</strong></td>
<td>Establish the maximum distance that he can drive from home (increase the distance with time).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Driving safely:</strong></td>
<td>Follow all established rules including speed limits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family car only:</strong></td>
<td>No driving anyone else’s vehicle, including friends’ vehicles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apply the crash prevention formula

**Recognize the hazard** — Scan ahead, around and behind the vehicle. Check the rearview and side mirrors every three to five seconds. Use the “what if …” strategy to stay alert and spot hazards. There are two types of hazards. Driver hazards are those created by the driver, by his own behavior and by making unsafe driving decisions like running a red light or speeding. Driving hazards are those created by the traffic environment — the road, weather or other drivers. While you may not create these hazards, you need to anticipate that these can happen and be prepared to respond appropriately.

**Understand the defense** — Know what to do to avoid a hazard. Know the consequences of your driving choices. Know the basic defensive driving actions. By following the established traffic rules and regulations, you improve your chances of staying safe.

**Act correctly** — Be alert and concentrate on the driving task. Choose the safest driving maneuver to avoid a crash. Remember that other drivers may act in time, but they may act incorrectly. Be ready to respond appropriately to the mistakes of others to avoid a crash.

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**A message from a parent to a young driver**

Understand that you are in control in most driving situations. You are the only person who can control your behavior. You are the one who makes decisions for yourself and who chooses to act as you do. Stand up to those in the vehicle who push you to behave in an unsafe manner. Who is the boss of you anyway? Look your passengers in the eye and state your case firmly and confidently. Don’t back down. Tell them that you want to drive safely because you want to stay alive.

Identify actions you can take to gain control of the driving situation. Even though you cannot control certain driving conditions (i.e., weather, light, road conditions, traffic and other drivers) you can control how you react to them. Take the lead. Make rules for your vehicle and anyone riding with you, such as everyone wears a seat belt and no one distracts you from driving safely. They need to keep the noise down and do everything possible to keep you focused on the task of driving safely.

Recognize the legal and personal consequences of both good and poor driving choices. For every decision you make, there is a result and a consequence. With control comes responsibility. Have a backup plan in case things get out of control. Stop the car if your friends are acting up. Call for a ride for your friends if necessary. Your choices are for yourself and your friends. Your friends will come to respect you and eventually follow your lead.