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Help Teach Our Teens Not to Text and Drive

by

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“Three little letters. That’s what killed my little sister.”

These chilling words are from a teen who sent a text message that caused her little sister to lose control of her car, roll it several times and ultimately die in that accident. These very real stories are overwhelming to any parent: A boy reads a text, loses control of his car and loses his girlfriend. Forever. Another is the story of a young man who hits and kills a bicyclist. All involved sending or receiving a text while driving. Illegal but more prevalent than any of us can imagine.

According to recent statistics, car accidents and fatalities of 15- to 24-year-olds are both up. In fact, more than 15 percent of all vehicle fatalities in Tennessee involve teen drivers. And, according to a recent *Tennessean* editorial, “they are higher in the Nashville area than almost anywhere in the United States.” Texting while driving is not just dangerous, it is deadly.

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The Tennessean also called on our state legislature to tighten the laws and increase the criminal penalties. And it should. However, we all must be part of the solution. We must reach out to our teens — and others who text and drive — and educate them about this disturbing trend. As with seat-belt campaigns of yesteryear, we must also engage our youth as advocates to their peers. Awareness and education about the dangers of distracted driving should be incorporated into every driver education course, school curriculum and dinner-table conversation.

According to the federal government, there are three types of distracted driving: visual, manual and cognitive. Texting while driving is the most dangerous, as it includes all three of these and makes you 23 percent more likely to be involved in an accident. And the problem is not slowing down. More than 198 billion texts were sent or received in one month in 2011, a 50 percent increase from the year before. And, while most Tennesseans do realize it is dangerous, a University of Tennessee study found that 25 percent admit they still do it, and 75 percent of teens say it is a “common” practice. The U.S. secretary of transportation recently deemed it a “national epidemic.”

Recently, a coalition of national organizations announced it will launch an impressive ad campaign to counter these troubling trends. You may have already seen some of the public service announcements on television. They seek to educate drivers — especially our youngest drivers — about the very real dangers of texting while driving. ATT is one of those concerned corporate sponsors that are helping fund this nationwide “Don’t Text While Driving” (DTWD) Campaign (www.att.com/gen/press-room?pid=23182). In addition to a number of powerful video testimonials, the campaign will also hold a “Day of Action” on Wednesday asking citizens here and all across the country to take a DTWD pledge and truly commit to stop texting while driving. Please take the pledge at www.itcanwait.org and share it with any young driver in your life, “b4 its 2 L8” (before it’s too late).

Other corporations have launched similar initiatives, from Disney using its popular “Cars” characters to educate younger children that “only bad guys drive distracted” to the “UPS Road Code” teen defensive driving program in partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs in Memphis.

These aren’t topics that are fun to talk about; but maybe, just maybe, talking about them will prevent another senseless death of someone’s baby sister, girlfriend or daddy.

No text is worth dying over. It can wait.

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The Free State Foundation is a nonpartisan, Section 501(c)(3) free market-oriented think tank located in Rockville, Maryland.