

So Your Teenager is a New Driver

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It is Christmas time again and the relatives are already planning pickup schedules at the airport and shopping trips for the holidays. In many families, the teenager gets to run these errands without restraint. While there are many teens who are cautious and responsible there are others who will try to freeze time by squeezing in a few personal visits “to show-off” without losing time.

The Consumer Affairs Commission (CAC) is however noting the unfortunate wave of carnage on our roads and is warning parents to take more precaution when allowing their teens to drive the busiest time of the year. If you must, we urge parents to prep your teen for eventualities.

A member of the CAC team received a frantic telephone call from a family member in the middle of the afternoon on National Heroes Day of this year. He was very angry that his 19 year-old daughter was stranded somewhere on the Jamaica’s highway with a flat tyre and no spare (at least not one that fitted the car). He was angry with his relative for not informing him about the spare when she handed the car over to him six weeks before.

While his anger is logical, it was misplaced since he was guilty of negligence. Afterall he had six weeks to check the vehicle before allowing this new driver and a teen to head out on the highway on a public holiday to boot.

It is illogical however how casual parents are about handing over the car keys to their teenage children yet the same parent would spend hours grilling a pharmacist about the efficacy and safety of a prescribed drug for his child. It is admirable that we take so much care in administering medicine to our children – we take them to the doctor and we dutifully fill the prescription and we follow the instruction precisely until they are well again. The vigilance we exercise – walking the floors at night checking on their progress, calling the doctor at odd

hours to inform them of possible adverse reactions and taking corrective measures to reduce any possibility of harm, is borders on heroic.

However, the same parent will hand over the car keys to his 19 year-old with rarely a backward glance to ensure that the car is safe for the inexperienced driver to operate. We have no thought that our grown-up 'babies' are heading out to compete for road space with the hundreds of teenagers in search of an opportunity to display some daredevil feat. With some luck in dexterity at the wheel, a 'nearly-miss' is cheered on by his friends as skillful. This chance happening then makes the "no longer unnoticed boy" into a "popular not-quite-a-man" but old enough to gain the admiration of his peers and a few girls. This is teenage road play. Whether parents wish to admit it or not, that's the way of the Jamaican road on any given weekend. This is especially so on a public holiday.

The CAC therefore wishes to remind parents that while much care is taken in adhering to our constant advise and education campaign about planning, budgeting and saving, it is prudent that as the children/adolescents head out to high school or university with Driver's License in hand, that you take some time to teach them about issues of safety on the road, their environment and their person. Call it driver's Education 101.

Take five and keep your children alive

Like the screaming father in this story, negligence is inexcusable, therefore parents should "take five and keep their children alive".

The CAC urges that parents to take five minutes to do the following basic safety checks before your son or daughter gets behind the wheel:

1. Brakes (check response time and tension)
2. Horn
3. Lights (brake, headlights, indicators)

4. Tyres (properly inflated, check spare condition)
5. Jack, lug tools for tyre change
6. Oil, transmission, brake fluids and coolant

In addition, parents should teach their young adults to exercise caution at all times especially in wet weather and high traffic areas, as a car whether old or new, may fail to respond at any time. Lock all doors and open your ears for warnings of an emergency vehicle approaching. Keep your windows up and your eyes on the road for any sudden changes in the road condition.

One for the Road

The most important thing for parents is to know the route the new driver plans to take and who and where she intends to do the “posse pickups”. Whether alcohol will be at the event is a good place to start issuing advice. Do not send your child out in a motor car without taking time to do some brief counseling.

SAFETY CHECKS FOR YOUR TEEN

Parents should ask their children a number of questions before they allow them to take off into the night or hit the highways on a public holiday.

- What is the party about and where is it?
- Will there be a problem with security?
- How far away from the venue will you have to walk?
- What if the car does not start or you get a flat tyre?
- What if he/she is given or drinks alcohol?
- What side effects/impairment would alcohol/drugs cause in operating a vehicle?

It's also a good idea to check the car after he or she returns. If drugs or alcohol was present, you will find it. Does it look right to be checking your daughter's car? Who cares? Your goal is to keep her out of harm's way and keep her alive not to win points for being.

Check for signs of bumps, dents and scratches or unusual wear and tear of the tyres. The safety of your child is paramount so parents should be extra careful not to be your child's best friend when confronted with the truth about your child's activities. Make no mistake, if you don't his friends will. Take charge. There are many warning signs and the proverbial red flag is raised for a reason. Don't ignore it. Probe until you understand what's going on. The roads are not safe for your children. Do not compound the risks of injury by allowing them to use alcohol or drugs.

Teens are more sensitive than adults to the many signs of drug and alcohol use by their peers. Ask your child's friends if they have observed any sign of altered behaviour or mood swings while on campus.

The first rule of safety for the road, for your family, in any situation, is to be aware. That ability is drastically impaired by any chemical abuse – alcohol, illegal or prescribed drugs.

IN YOUR PROBING REMEMBER, YOU ARE YOUR CHILDREN'S KEEPER.