

Guest Commentary

by Colonel James Wolfenbarger, Chief of the Colorado State Patrol

405 words

Parents Hold the Key to Keeping Teen Drivers Safe

As Chief of the Colorado State Patrol and the father of two young boys, I understand the anxiety parents face when their teenager starts to drive. Their concerns are valid -- last year in Colorado, 63 young drivers, age 15 to 20, were involved in fatal crashes and 47 in this age group were killed, making motor vehicle crashes the leading cause of death for teens. But parents can improve their teen's odds of survival.

Parents have more influence over their children's decisions than they think. Becoming involved by learning about Colorado's Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws and enforcing the rules is vital. GDL laws may feel inconvenient, but they are saving lives, contributing to a 50 percent decline in the number of Colorado teens killed in crashes.

The GDL system is designed to phase-in beginning drivers. In Colorado, there are various driver training requirements depending on the teen's age when he or she starts the license process, but all teen drivers must log at least 50 practice hours with a parent or legal guardian. Parents should use this practice time wisely by exposing their teen driver to a variety of roads and conditions. Enroll them in professional behind-the-wheel training, a driver's education course and a 4-hour driver awareness program, such as "Alive at 25," www.aliveat25.us.

Distractions are one of the biggest factors in teen driving crashes. Colorado's GDL law addresses this by prohibiting teens from having any passengers under age 21 for the first six months of their license, and then allowing only one passenger under 21 for the second six months (siblings are exceptions). Teen drivers also cannot talk or text on cell phones. There is a midnight curfew for teen drivers, and the driver and every passenger must buckle up.

Most importantly, parents need to talk to their teens about safety and write a contract together to ensure the rules are clear and have specific consequences. The risk of severe consequences, such as loss of a license, actually empower teens by giving them an excuse to get out of dangerous situations. Parents and teens can download a contract and learn more about Colorado's GDL laws at www.COteendriver.com.

Finally, parents and all adults should model positive behavior, keep your hands on the wheel, your eyes on the road, always wear a seat belt and require all passengers to buckle up. Together we can continue to save more young lives and protect Colorado's future.