

# Staying Safe on the Road and Knowing the Laws in the Age of Distraction

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Along with much of what was once normal life, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended driving patterns. Gone for many drivers are commutes, carpooling, routine trips and visiting family and friends. In their place have come relocations, new styles of vacations, and unfamiliar territory to navigate. Newness and uncertainty are distracting enough all on their own. When driving, they only add to the other distractions competing for attention. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) [state-by-state distracted driving laws summary](#)<sup>1</sup> is a practical tool to share with loved ones.

As with all rules for safe and legal driving, education is the key. Distractions may arise while driving, but there are many we can prevent.

Certain tasks should never be done while driving: holding a cellphone, texting, eating with utensils, reading or writing, applying makeup, and reaching for something in the backseat. Recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic causes changes to routines, drivers may not be on familiar ground as they quarantine in temporary homes or drive rather than fly to some destinations for the first time. Multiple generations are together in new ways as well, often in the car as a family unit.

“Driver distraction is much more than just an electronic device,” says Tina Sayer, principal engineer for the Collaborative Safety Research Center at Toyota Motor North America. “It’s much more than just a phone. A distraction can be reading billboards, or handing a rear-seat passenger a sippy cup, or something like that. We need to remember that it’s [not just the electronic device](#).”<sup>2</sup>

When electronic devices *are* distractions, the data is significant. According to [NHTSA](#)<sup>3</sup>, sending or reading a text can take a driver’s eyes off the road for five full seconds. For comparison, at 55 mph, that’s like driving the entire length of a football field with your eyes closed.

To counter this risk, most U.S. states have passed laws that ban both handheld cell phone use and texting while driving. One group in particular warrants special focus: younger drivers. NHTSA estimates that at any given moment 470,000 drivers are holding a phone to their ear. And, 15- to 24-year-olds account for the largest percentage of [handheld cell phone use](#)<sup>4</sup>. Seven percent of those who died in distraction-related crashes in [2018](#) were teens 15 to 19 years old.<sup>5</sup>

## **Keeping Teens Safe Behind the Wheel**

Solutions, though, are available. [Research](#)<sup>6</sup> shows that teens can help lower distracted driving-related injuries and fatalities just by speaking with their peers. Teens listen to one another. So simply reminding a friend about the risks associated with distracted driving can save lives. Therefore, crafting compelling and intentional messaging that speaks directly to this specific demographic is crucial.

“Sharing a message to a population in general doesn’t necessarily get to the right people,” explains Sayer. “If the targeted group doesn’t look up to those giving the message or isn’t concerned about how those other people feel about them, then it loses all of its effectiveness.”

While peers can play a big role in promoting safe driving, parents, teachers and employers can also raise awareness, and most importantly, lead by example.

Toyota recommends parents take a step farther by drafting a formal agreement between their teen or younger driver and them. Sayer suggests printing out the agreement and keeping it somewhere visible, such as the by the door leading to the garage or on the front of the fridge. Sayer says it’s also important to review the agreement periodically.

“You can use a [parent-teen mutual driving agreement](#)<sup>7</sup> that outlines what’s okay in the vehicle and not okay,” says Sayer. “We encourage putting the distracted driving laws for your state in your agreement.”

Here are 3 tips for communicating with teens:

- Start with the laws: “Do you know what the laws in your state are? Are they different for teen drivers vs. adult drivers?”
- Then move to the personal: “What are the “laws” in your family? Are the expectations for the parents the same as the teens?”
- Finally, a solution: Use a written mutual parent-teen driving agreement, such as the one on [Teendrive365inschool.com](#)<sup>8</sup>, that outlines what is acceptable and unacceptable for your family.

## **Parental Guidance**

Additionally, Sayer suggests that parents are a teen’s most influential role model and should pay attention to their own driving behaviors with that in mind.

“You need to be the best example, because even younger children are watching you. They are learning how you are driving now and will imitate those behaviors in the future,” she adds. And it doesn’t stop there. Sayer believes that even after teens pass written and road tests and are ready to drive solo, they still need parental supervising.

“After your teen gets their independent license, you need to get back in the car with them,” Sayer suggests. “Lots of times we see supervised driving decrease significantly as soon as the teen gets their license, but you need to check back in and make sure that the teen is still following the rules and the things that you think are important, as well as the rules of the state.”

As the nation gets back on its feet and we discover a new normal, all drivers—teen and adult—will benefit from understanding the laws wherever they are now living, working, and going to school.

To learn more about NHTSA’s efforts to combat distracted driving, click [here](#)<sup>9</sup>. Below, find more information about distracted driving laws by state.

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