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INTRODUCTION

Is there anything scarier to a parent than handing over the car keys to a teenager?

Remember what it was like when we got our licenses? We sat through classes that droned on about traffic regulations, watched some gruesome crash films, and spent a couple of hours driving with our fourth-period geography teacher. Then we got our licenses, and away we went.

That doesn't cut it anymore. Your teen faces far more dangers on the road than we did: snarled rush-hour traffic, road rage, multiple distractions, and increased mind-altering substances, just to name a few.

It's no wonder that the leading cause of death for teenagers today is not guns, suicide, or drugs. It's car crashes.

Consider these sobering statistics:

- 58 out of 100 new drivers get into a crash the first year.
- 16-year-olds are 20 times more likely than an adult to die in an automobile crash and 3 times more likely than an 18- or 19-year-old.
- Every single day, 19 people 15 to 20 years old are killed, and more than 1,800 are injured in vehicle crashes.

Notice that I did not use the word *accidents*. We're talking about *crashes*. An accident is when a meteor falls on your car. When your son bangs up your car because the guy in front of him stopped quickly or because the road was slippery, it's no accident. Car crashes are almost never accidents, and the distinction is an important one, because the vast majority of crashes are caused by driver error, and they're preventable.

I didn't originally intend to write a book on this subject. But within a six-month period, five teenagers were killed in three separate crashes near my home. I was further shocked to discover that nearly every teenager in my neighborhood had at least one crash within a year of getting his or her license. My oldest daughter was 14 and would soon be learning to drive, and my son and youngest daughter were right behind her, so I began looking for resources to help my kids become better, safer drivers.

I read every book, article, and publication on the subject that I could get my hands on and interviewed driving instructors, academics, psychologists, professional racers, paramedics, safety experts, parents, and teens. I completed several defensive-driving courses and became a certified driving instructor and a licensed racing-car driver.

The more I learned, the more dismayed I became. Although the auto industry has made significant progress with safety features, innovations in driver education have lagged. In many ways, the methods used to train young drivers today haven't improved much since Ward and June Cleaver sent the Beaver out onto Pleasant Lane. For the past several decades, we've given our teens an average of 30 hours of classroom study and 6 hours of behind-the-wheel training, and then we've done little but mourn the daily, weekly, and yearly toll the highways take on our youth.

Parents have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that their teenagers develop safe driving skills and behaviors. But too many, either underestimating their role or lacking effective methods, have failed to help equip their teens to handle the single most dangerous thing they will ever do, at their most risky age. The results of this lack of parental involvement have often been disastrous.

But here's the good news. Research has shown that the chances of a teen being involved in a crash can be reduced by up to *one-third* when parents take an active part in helping their teens learn to drive and set certain driving guidelines. And the heart of this book, the Crashproof Plan, takes you step by step through a series of driving exercises designed to make your teen a safer, smarter driver. It includes:

- Successful defensive-driving tactics and crash avoidance techniques.
- The most important advanced driving skills to teach your teen.
- How to deal with distractions, hazardous conditions, and drug and alcohol use.
- Strategies for communicating and working with your teen.
- A Crashproof Contract outlining expectations and responsibilities.

And there's much more.

The Crashproof Plan is not designed to replace the standard high school or commercial driver education curriculum. It doesn't deal with the most basic details of operating a car, such as how to drive with a stick-shift transmission. Instead, the Crashproof Plan begins where traditional driver education programs end, offering valuable information, anecdotes, and humor from experts as well as parents just like you. Standard driver education classes will teach your teen the basics of learning to drive. *Crashproof Your Kids* will help keep your teen alive.

You'll find this book essential if your teen:

- Will soon begin or is currently enrolled in a driver education program to obtain a permit or license.
- Has completed such a program and needs to fulfill a period of parental-supervised driving prior to obtaining a permit or license.
- Already has a permit or license and has been driving for some time, but you want to help increase his or her comfort, skill, and safety behind the wheel.
- Has already had a crash or a fender bender, and you want it to be the last one.

My daughter worked with me for more than a year to field-test the concepts embodied in the Crashproof Plan, as she progressed from permit to license to gradually more independent driving. Time will tell how well her crashproofing endures, but I sleep better knowing she has successfully completed this program.

The only thing you need to make this book work for you is the most precious gift you can give your teen: your time. And the return on that investment is priceless.

Every week, I hear or read about another terrible crash involving teenagers, most of them caused by momentary lapses, driver error, or bad judgment. If this book can help one family avoid a life cut short, with memories that will haunt them for years, it will have served its purpose. So let's get started.

Thank you for deciding to make a difference.