

# **Crashproof Your Kids!™**

## **A multi-part series on teen car crashes and how to reduce them in your community**

The number one killer of teens today is not drugs, guns or suicide. It's car crashes. We have an epidemic of teen car crashes today, with more road rage, distractions and traffic congestion than ever before. Roadside crosses commemorating yet another fatal teen car crash sprout all over the country, grim reminders of the toll the highways continue to take on our youth each year.

As an author and the father of three teens, I couldn't find good information or programs on how I could help make my kids safer, smarter drivers. So I got involved. I read everything I could get my hands on, interviewed hundreds of experts, became a certified driving instructor and race car driver and ultimately wrote the book *Crashproof Your Kids! Make Your Teen a Safer, Smarter Driver* (Simon & Shuster, May 2006).

Because television is a vital source of information for parents of teens, I've created a simple framework which can serve as a starting point for creating a high-interest, localized series exploring the key factors causing teen car crashes today and providing strategies and tips on how we all can play a part in reducing them.

For each segment, I can provide additional information, ideas, expert advice or sound bites as needed.

A suggested outline:

## Part 1

### *Teen Car Crashes: Our Deadly Epidemic*

More than 58% of new drivers are involved in some kind of car crash within the first year of learning to drive, and over 80% within the first three years. Sixteen 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.

This initial segment outlines the problem, with eye-opening statistics and a few myths punctured.

**Reporter** *“The phenomenon of roadside crosses commemorating teens killed in car crashes is relatively new, but the problems causing teen car crashes are not. These crosses have sprouted up all over the country in the past few years, grim reminders of the toll our highways continue to take on our youth. What can we do about it? We’ll give you plenty of answers tonight as we begin the first of a five part series on teen driving. Stay tuned to learn how to reduce the odds that your teen will be involved in a car crash”.*

### **Potential Topics to Cover**

\* Drinking and driving have gotten most of the attention, but studies show that nearly **90%** of teen car crashes are caused by *driver error*.

\* While our roads have become increasingly dangerous, the way we train teen drivers hasn’t changed in decades.

**B-Roll suggested: crashed cars, roadside crosses, crash-test dummy collision footage.**

### **Soundbites:**

**Reporter** *“We hear a lot these days about teen drivers and car crashes. Some of the statistics are a little frightening”.*

**Timothy Smith** *“You’re absolutely right. We have an epidemic of teen car crashes in this country. The leading cause of teen deaths today is not guns, suicide or drugs. It’s car crashes. Studies have shown that up to **58%** of teens will be involved in a crash within their first year of driving, and **80%** will be involved in a crash within 3 years of learning to drive. That’s shocking, and in my opinion it’s unacceptable in a country with our resources”.*

**Reporter -- Why do teens crash at such a high rate?**

**Timothy Smith** *“Many people assume that drugs or alcohol are the primary cause of most accidents, but the truth is that over 90% of teen car crashes are caused by driver error. We simply don’t adequately train teen drivers in this country. It takes 30 to 50 hours behind the wheel for beginning drivers just to function well in basic traffic, yet driver education programs typically provide only 3 to 6 hours of behind-the-wheel training! With that amount of time it’s impossible to teach skills that will actually help keep teens alive on the road, like emergency braking, defensive driving strategies, or visual scanning techniques”.*

## Part 2

### *Teaming with your Teen*

School-based and commercial driver education programs are set up only to help teens obtain a license, with little time and few programs designed to help them become more skillful, aware drivers. It’s up to parents to crashproof their kids.

**Reporter** (video arcade): *“Video games like this are probably your teen’s first exposure to what driving a car might be like. Much like many car commercials, they give the message that driving is fun and glamorous when you go fast, and that losing control and crashing a car aren’t realistic possibilities. How can you instill safe driving attitudes in your teen when they are assaulted daily with these kinds of images? We’ve got some answers for you later in part 2 of our series on teen driving.”*

### **Potential Topics to Cover**

- \* You are the role model. Assessing how your own driving affects your teen’s approach to the road. Good and bad habits to be aware of.
- \* For every parental crash, the likelihood of their teen crashing increases 7%. For every traffic violation on a parent’s record, their teen’s odds of incurring a violation increase 13%.
- \* How to obtain joint commitment to work together as a team to improve your teen’s driving skills and behavior. Establishing a Crashproof Contract.
- \* What traits are good indicators of risk for your teen’s driving behavior.
- \* The effect of gender on teen driving and parental interaction.
- \* 6 key things to keep in mind while working with your teen.

**B-Roll suggested:** Driver Education car with teens inside; footage of adults driving with multiple distractions; video game arcade; car commercial with speeding car images; shot of a parent driving with a teen.

**Soundbites:**

**Reporter:** *“So what should we be doing about it?”*

**Timothy Smith:** *“Well, we need to spend far more time and effort helping our teens become safer, smarter drivers. Today’s driver education programs only prepare our kids to pass state driving exams, and that won’t change any time soon. It’s really up to parents to step in and take more responsibility for ensuring that our teens don’t end up in car crashes. And unfortunately, many parents today are failing to take an active role in the single most dangerous thing their kids will ever do”.*

## **Part 3**

*Getting Behind the Wheel*

Part 3 focuses on what every parent can do immediately to help reduce the odds their teen will be involved in a car crash.

**Reporter:** *“Is it more dangerous on the road today for teens than it used to be? How can you help make your teen a safer, smarter driver? We’ll explore these and other issues tonight in part 3 of our series on teen drivers.”*

### **Potential Topics to Cover**

- \* Protect your bubble--space management and following distances.
- \* Improving visual scanning and awareness skills.
- \* Emergency braking skills and using anti-lock brakes.
- \* Tips from professional racers help keep your teen alive behind the wheel.
- \* Top danger areas for highway and urban driving.

**B-Roll suggested:** Traffic with 1-2 second following distances; cars parking and moving in and out of lanes at a mall; car braking quickly; video of a professional race.

**Soundbites:**

**Reporter:** *“Is it more dangerous on the road today for teens than it used to be?”*

**Timothy Smith:** *“Definitely. Teens drive in far more dangerous conditions now than 10 or 20 years ago. There’s a lot more road rage, traffic congestion and distractions today. So we’ve got a model for teen driver training that was developed maybe 50 years ago that wasn’t really adequate then and it’s even less so now”.*

## **Part 4**

### *Reducing Risky Behavior*

Part 4 explores the effects of risky behavior and distraction on teen crashes, and suggests ways to reduce them.

**Reporter:** *“Reducing teen deaths and injuries in auto crashes involves more than just better driving skills. It involves dealing with behaviors and attitudes which make teen drivers especially risky. Part 4 of our series on teen drivers will explore how to deal with drinking, distractions, speeding and road rage. Stay tuned to find out how you can help your teen avoid destructive driving behavior”.*

### **Potential Topics to Cover**

- \* Dangerous distractions—reducing the danger of cell phones, passengers, food and other distractions.
- \* Going fast—tips for making sure your teen doesn’t speed.
- \* Drinking and driving—how to reduce the odds of your teen getting behind the wheel or in a car when alcohol’s involved.
- \* Road Rage--effective ways to answer the anger.

**B-Roll suggested:** **Teen walking with drinking goggles on; video of car speeding in neighborhood; shot of teen in car with phone, food, radio, talking; interview with local MADD official or police/ER department personnel.**

### **Soundbites:**

**Reporter:** *“But aren’t we now giving more attention to things like drinking and driving, graduated licensing, and restrictions on cell phones?”*

**Timothy Smith:** *“Yes, we are, and it’s all helpful. The problem, though, is that although we know that driver error is the main cause of teen crashes, and that alcohol,*

*cell phones and teen passengers all add huge risks to driving, we haven't done a good job equipping teens or their parents with information and programs on how to reduce all those risks. There was nothing out there to help me help my three teens stay alive on the road. That's why I spent two years reading everything I could get my hands on, got certified as a race car driver and a licensed driving instructor, and then wrote *Crashproof Your Kids!*, so that concerned parents would have a good resource".*

**Reporter:** *"That's not easy, though. You're talking about improving driving skills as well as affecting behavior that can make teens unsafe drivers".*

**Timothy Smith:** *"You're right, but every parent can make a major impact on their teen with a little help. In my book, *Crashproof Your Kids!*, I outline a step-by-step series of behind-the-wheel exercises that parents can do with their teen to improve their car control skills and deal with the most dangerous driving behaviors. And there's plenty of advice on how to help your teen handle multiple distractions as well as reduce the likelihood that your teen will drink and drive or be the victim of road rage, for example".*

## **Part 5**

### *The Homestretch*

The final segment explores additional ways to keep teens safer, and summarizes the series.

**Reporter** (on a car lot) *"Are you increasing the chances that your teen will end up in a car crash by making the wrong choices in a car for them? We'll give you the latest on which cars to buy and which ones to avoid, and we'll also update you on the latest ways to track your teen's driving behavior."*

### **Potential Topics to Cover**

- \* Should you consider an advanced driving school for your teen?
- \* Tracking devices. The many ways parents now have to track the whereabouts and driving behavior of their teens.
- \* Selecting a car for your teen. Which cars to buy and which ones to avoid.

**B-Roll suggested:** Teen tracking devices; car lot shots; summary of series recommendations.

**Soundbites:**

**Reporter:** *“We’ve talked about a lot of ways to reduce teen crashes this week, and your point is that much of this responsibility lies with parents. Isn’t that asking a lot of parents, most of them with little formal training?”*

**Timothy Smith:** *Look, parents today routinely spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars helping their teens become better at sports or music or academics. Very few teens **die** doing these activities, though. Research shows that when parents get involved and set certain guidelines, they can reduce the odds of their teen crashing by over **30%**. And that’s exactly what my book helps parents do. The only thing you need to help crashproof your kid is the most precious gift you can give them--your time. And the return on that investment is priceless. The whole philosophy of crashproofing your kids can really be summed up with a couple of words:*

***I love you. I’m worried about you. I want you back tonight.***

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The sound bites and B-roll involving Timothy Smith in the preceding pages are available at [www.crashproofyourkids.com](http://www.crashproofyourkids.com) for your use. Some additional potential questions and answers you may want to consider:

***What can parents can do to help ensure that their teens don’t crash?***

The most important thing to do is simply to get more involved. We have completely outsourced the development of our teen’s driving skills and behavior in this country, with tragic results. Although their help is appreciated, it’s not the ultimate responsibility of our high schools or of private driver ed companies to make sure our teens stay safe on our highways. It’s **our** responsibility, as parents.

We need to get better educated on what we can do to help our teens. That’s why I wrote *Crashproof Your Kids*, because there was nothing out there to help parents help their kids.

***Can parents really make that big a difference? You’re talking about improving driving skills as well as affecting behaviors that make teens unsafe drivers.***

Every parent can make a major impact on their teen with a little help. You don't have to be a certified driving instructor to make a difference. You only need to be a concerned parent with some proven tools and information you can use. In *Crashproof Your Kids!*, for example, I outline a step-by-step series of behind-the-wheel exercises that parents can do with their teen to improve their car control skills and deal with the most dangerous driving behaviors. And there's plenty of advice on how to help your teen handle multiple distractions and reduce the likelihood that your teen will drink and drive, or be the victim of road rage.

***What are some of the key principles behind the Crashproof Plan?***

First, parents need to assume more responsibility for the driving behavior and skill development of their teens.

Second, you need to put a plan in place (which includes your teen's input) to give you both a blueprint for what you want to accomplish, in terms of improving driving skills and reducing dangerous driving behaviors.

Finally, you need to commit it to writing, so you both are clear on any incentives or penalties you want to have in place as part of the plan, which I call the Crashproof Plan.

Then, just do it. You can't help but have a positive impact on your teen if you get more involved.

***But aren't a lot of parent's poor drivers, too? How can you teach a teen to be a better driver if you're not a great driver?***

Very few of us are great drivers. That doesn't mean we can't be effective teachers, or help our kids stay safe on the road. But you've raised a great point. The first thing you need to do as a parent is to be honest about your own strengths and weaknesses as a driver, and acknowledge that to your teen. It can be very powerful to say to your teen, "Look, I don't have a great track record here, I'm not proud of it and I don't want you to emulate it, O.K.?" They will respect that you are aware of your own shortcomings and that you want them to be better than you in that respect.

***Is it different in other countries?***

Yes. Developing teen driving skills is taken far more seriously in many other countries. In Germany, for example, obtaining a driver's license is possible only after turning 18, completing 20 hours of driving with a certified driving instructor and passing a rigorous test which is failed by more than half the takers. When you pass, it then costs over \$2,000 and you get a two-year probationary license. The more important point is that the rate of teen crashes in Germany is far less than the U.S., and the same phenomenon occurs in many other countries with more rigorous teen driving requirements, such as Sweden, Australia and England.

***Are there any other points you'd like make about this subject?***

Yes. The first is that the investment that parents make today in their teen's driving safety can have a very positive effect on future generations. In other words, if you take you kid's driver training seriously, the odds are far better that your kids will similarly take ***their*** kid's driver training seriously, so you get benefits that trickle down throughout multiple generations.

The second is that the principles in *Crashproof Your Kids* have application outside of learning to be better, safer drivers. Don't underestimate the degree to which you're doing is actually *teaching your teen how to drive through life*. Think about it. You're demonstrating that complex tasks require commitment, practice and homework. You're communicating to your teen that by respecting herself, her passengers and others on the road, she'll not only be safer but happier during her journeys. Sounds to me like a pretty good metaphor for the daily conduct of your teen's life.

**Additional questions and answers more specific to the book, *Crashproof Your Kids!***

***How did you come to write this book to help parents accomplish this?***

The book resulted from a convergence of factors. A couple of years ago, when I was being trained as a race-car driver, it struck me that there were a number of things that racers know that could be taught and used by all drivers. For example, the basics of car control, tire traction in various conditions, emergency braking and visual scanning techniques. At about the same time, my daughter was 14 and would soon take drivers ed, and her younger brother and sister were right behind her, so I was thinking about how I might get better prepared to help them become safer, smarter drivers.

The clincher was when 5 teenagers, all living within minutes of me, were killed in 3 separate crashes within 6 months, all of them caused by driver error. I knew I had to do something, but I found that there was very little out there to help me. So I read everything I could get my hands on, interviewed hundreds of driving instructors, parents and teens, got certified as a driving instructor in Illinois, and the end result is that I wrote the book, called *Crashproof Your Kids!: Make Your Teen a Safer, Smarter Driver*.

***What can readers expect to get from the book?***

First, hundreds of tips, strategies and behind-the-wheel exercises parents can do with their teen to help *crashproof* them. Second, a prioritization of what things you should do in what order, and why. Third, a flexible plan that busy parents and teens can fit into their schedules. And finally, parents will understand that they're not alone, as they read stories and anecdotes, some funny, some tragic, from other parents going through the same thing.

***You've outlined a step-by-step Crashproof Plan for parents in your book. Can you tell us a little about that plan?***

Sure. The Crashproof Plan is designed to make it easy for parents to put together an action plan with their teen that fits your busy schedules. Each exercise builds on the previous one, allowing your teen to handle more and more complex and dangerous driving situations. The Crashproof Plan addresses driving skills, driving attitudes and behavior and also how best to communicate these concepts to your teens. Sometimes that's the most difficult part, figuring out how to communicate this information to your teen without it degenerating into a shouting match or stony silence.

***What are some of the key driving skills covered in the book?***

Advanced braking technique is one important one. Teens aren't trained to brake quickly enough, or hard enough. They aren't taught the techniques of emergency braking, or how to "stomp and steer" if they have to avoid something while braking. That's covered in the book.

Visual awareness is another area. You can teach a teen how to significantly improve the way they take in information while driving. You can stretch their field of vision, create better patterns of scanning for potential hazards. And you can do it with several exercises that any parent can do with their teen.

Another simple example. The average driver on the road today maintains about a 2 second following distance. That means if the car in front of you suddenly stopped dead, it would take you 2 seconds to crash into them. That's barely enough time for a highly-trained race-car driver to avoid a crash, let alone the average Joe sipping a cup of coffee and changing his radio station. Your teen needs to maintain at least a 4 second following distance in good conditions, more in hazardous ones.

The other thing I need to make clear is that a huge part of keeping your teen safe has to do with their attitudes and driving behavior. So the Crashproof Plan has many strategies to help parents reduce other driving risks—drinking, drugs, speeding., multiple passengers, cell phones and road rage, among others.

***Is this a book for teens as well as their parents?***

It was written primarily for parents, but the book has lots to offer teens, too. Many of the behind-the-wheel exercises can be done by a teen alone or with a friend. I think that there is a growing sense among teens today that they have to take driving seriously. They've seen too many of their friends killed in car accidents, many of them involving driver error or alcohol.

*You mention in the book that you worked with your daughter in developing some of your behind-the-wheel exercises. What was it like to help teach your own daughter to drive, and use some of those experiences in the book?*

My daughter ended up a bit of a guinea pig, because I was developing many of the concepts and exercises for the book as I was helping her learn to drive. It was probably more stressful for her to go through it knowing I was writing a book, but I can tell you that she now takes her driving very seriously, because I did. I also found that the time we spent together in the car was really valuable. Fathers in particular sometimes have a hard time communicating with their daughters as they enter the teen years. Driving with her gave us lots of time alone together, and I think that for both fathers and mothers, it can be a very good time to help strengthen the bonds and get to know each other even better.