

Young Drivers and Deadly Passengers

(How to make novice drivers crash, part 4)

Stephen Haley (Aug 2012)

“Three teenage passengers killed themselves and their driver in a horrific crash last night.”

It's a headline you will never see. Drivers are required to be in control, whatever their passengers do.

Yet it is well documented that the crash rate of young drivers is greatly increased when they carry peer passengers¹. This article is about how this happens, and how the effect can be prevented. It sets out 'passenger skills'.

The risk multiplies quickly for each extra young passenger. Especially at night, and for male drivers and passengers - though both sexes are substantially affected. With three or more passengers the risk can be four times that of driving alone.

As a result, graduated licensing systems in a number of countries place a restriction on peer passengers, including New Zealand and parts of the USA, Canada and Australia.

Interestingly, some studies found that risk is only increased when the driver thinks the peer passengers have a risk-taking lifestyle themselves (with smoking, drink, drugs and driving). And also that risky behaviour can be induced simply by the presence of peers in the car, rather than what they actively do². So that passengers might often be unaware of the influence they have.

These are useful insights. Although in fact, little is known overall about the extent to which peers exert active pressure. Even more unknown is the extent to which risk-prone drivers have more risky friends.

In stark contrast, having adult passengers significantly decreases a young driver's risk.

A harsh reality for young drivers is that their risk is very high when the car is full of peers, and would involve more people in any collision. The casualties are usually all close friends. And the car is most often full at night when they are out to have a good time.

So it is worth understanding how these passengers might play their part. And how the situation can be made safe, beyond having restrictions which keep them out of the vehicle. We should believe that 'how-to-do-it-safely' is a better and fairer approach than 'just-stop-doing-it'.

We will see that both the drivers and the passengers can make use of specific skills.

How does it work?

Before reaching for solutions, let's see 'why and how' having peer passengers is so dangerous.

There are three main things happening in these cars:

1. **The appeal of showing off** - For most young people, learning to drive is a huge step in their intense desire for independence and more control of their own lives. But some use the new freedom as a chance to show off to their friends. Perhaps seeking to raise their position and popularity in a group.

For someone who feels they have something to prove, driving can offer a new way to parade some physical bravery and daring. Or even a bit of rebellion at something.

¹ [Teen driver risk in relation to age and number of passengers](#), Tefft et al, May 2012, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
Passenger effects on teenage driving and opportunities for reducing the risks..., Williams et al, Journal of Safety Research, Vol 38, 2007
[Understanding passenger influences on driver behaviour](#), Regan et al, 2001, Report 180, Monash Accident Research Centre, Melbourne
[Carrying passengers as a risk factor for crashes fatal to 16 and 17 year old drivers](#), Chen et al, JAMA Vol 283(12), March 2000
[The situational risks of young drivers: the influence of passengers, time of day and day of the week on accident rates](#), Doherty et al, Accident Analysis & Prevention, Jan 1998, Vol 30 Issue 1

² [The effect of passengers and risk taking friends on risky driving and crashes/near crashes among novice teenagers](#), Simons-Morton et al, Journal for Adolescent Health, Dec 2011, Vol 49
[The effect of passengers on teen driver behavior](#), Goodwin et al, Apr 2012, Report: DOT HS 811 540, Washington DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Young males especially, are wired for an 'action-oriented challenge' as they seek excitement and a purpose. And operating this machine can trigger the urge with ease.

Showing off is to deliberately create danger, trying to impress or to frighten the peers. Typically, it uses reckless speed, cornering, tailgating, overtaking, skidding or racing.

2. **Peer pressure to ignore danger** - This encourages the driver to do things they would not otherwise do. And to create risks they do not want to take. (Another article in this series covers peer pressure in more detail³).

The pressure can be 'active' in what is actually said or done. And some adolescents are very keen to have control over their friends in this way. Or the pressure can be 'passive', when the driver just assumes what the peers want - perhaps with nothing being said at all.

Either way, it works on the driver's firm belief that they must conform to the peers' expectation in order to gain or maintain acceptance and fit in. Which is even more potent when 'peer rejection' is one of the strongest fears that young people have.

Craving popularity is at a peak in adolescents, and this can be seen being exploited and magnified in the explosive growth of texting and social media. And also by the intense selling of celebrity culture.

In the car, even reacting to danger as if it is fun sends a strong message to the driver. And when car occupants are 'in party mood', they can be quite rash with the pressures they apply or assume.

3. **The weight of distraction** - Young people are especially prone to distraction. They are programmed at this stage of life to seek things that are new and exciting. This is both a great strength and a great weakness as they reach out to become adults.

So how they handle this tendency in the car is a specific part of learning to drive.

Some do it well, while others have 'distracted habits' that prevent concentration. There is a wide variation, but those who think that driving needs little attention will be most easily distracted.

Certainly though, young passengers tend to create more distractions for drivers of peer age than for older drivers. Whether or not it is intentional, the young driver's thoughts are taken off their task. And their eyes often come off the road for quite long times.

One study found that the two most common distractions, especially at night and with multiple passengers, are⁴:

- loud conversation
- 'horseplay', larking around.

Predictably, very high danger occurs when risks add together, such as loading peer pressure onto a new driver who has been drinking, fears losing friends and thinks passing the test proved that he/she is a good driver.

Passenger skills (The skills sections below are written more directly to young people themselves.)

Having seen how passengers can increase crash risk, this section looks at how to prevent it.

It sets out passenger skills, and separately for the driver and the passenger to fit the different roles.

The skills are about how both drivers and passengers handle themselves. And inevitably, some parts will be easier to carry out than others for different people.

The vast majority of young people are not deliberately reckless. They are fun loving and excitable, certainly, but not suicidally so. In modern language, everyone in the car shares a 'duty of care' to each other.

³ [Peer pressure - driving under the influence](#), Stephen Haley, 2010, Skilldriver project

⁴ [Distracted driving among newly licensed teen drivers](#), Goodwin et al, 2012, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

Skills for young drivers

The tips below will help to prevent increased risk when you have peer passengers in the car. They are your 'passenger skills' - things that matter that you can learn to do better. Some are easier to do than others, of course. But knowing what they are is a good first step.

Driver Tips - how to survive peer passengers

1. **Accept your limitations:** This can be a big obstacle, so let's take it first. New drivers have typically driven only a few hundred miles before passing their test, and this is deceptive. It's not far, and means there are still a lot of critical skills to learn about how driving works in practice.

Also, and you may think it makes no sense, some of the skills you need most are not covered in the test. Crucially, it is assumed that drivers will discover for themselves how to think about and handle risk. And in time they do, but it takes a long time. This is the skill that lets highly competent drivers make it look so easy.

So all new drivers, young and older, spend a lot of miles trying to work out how skilful drivers achieve a low risk. And many have collisions in this process.

2. **Specific omissions:** More obviously for us here, the test will not have prepared you for:
 - carrying distracting or disruptive passengers
 - coping with peer pressure or the urge to show off
 - the effect of extra weight on bends and braking, especially in a small car.

Yet you might suddenly be faced with all of these very soon after you pass.

3. **Put car control in its place:** The 'secret' that skilful drivers have is not about car handling skills. In fact on public roads it's just the opposite. It's about understanding and managing risk. And doing so early enough to make physical control very easy. It's about thinking and making decisions well ahead of anything getting remotely tricky. These skills can be taught, but it's rare at pre-test level.
4. **Remember you are the (trusted) driver:** You have control, and however your passengers behave, they do not want to get hurt and are still trusting their driver to keep them safe. It's a big responsibility, and takes some thought if this is the first time you've had such potential to do harm.
5. **Know the black spots:** Young drivers 'specialise' in crashes on weekend nights, in bends and on country roads. The impacts are often head-on with other vehicles, or off-road into ditches or solid trees. It's a clear picture of when to be extra steady.
6. **Always belt-up:** There is a trend to think it's 'cool' to not wear a seat belt. But it's pointless, because they halve casualty rates. Passengers will often take a lead from you. So just say naturally, "Belts on please" as you put yours on. Being belted also helps to keep them still while you're driving.
7. **Avoid showing off:** Some male and female drivers find they have a real temptation to show off, but most passengers object strongly to it. And in reality it looks a bit attention-seeking and desperate. Definitely avoid looking as if you have something to prove, or need to use the car to test yourself. If you discover the urge for an action-oriented challenge, public roads are the wrong place to let it loose. Driving can still be enjoyed at a tamer level - and the real test is a mental one. It's better to save this testosterone for times when trying to impress will be appreciated.
You can take satisfaction in the respect you get from delivering your friends without an embarrassing incident. It might also help if you try consciously for 'uneventful' journeys. This is an advanced aim that even racing drivers have when they are off the track.
If ever you find someone who likes you showing off, be acutely aware that they are a threat to you. And very possibly in ways beyond driving.
8. **Dismiss peer pressure:** Recognise that peer pressure is trying to control you, and make you do something you don't want to do. After all the effort you spend trying to win control away from adults, you find that a friend wants to steal it too. Remember that this negative peer pressure seeks out weakness, and gives control of the driver to the passengers.

Typical pressures include to go faster, take bends harder, overtake without enough space or line of sight, take drink or drugs, not wear a seatbelt, etc.

Make the rejection calm but firm, such as, "I can do the driving, thanks".

- 9. Say no to drink and drugs:** You already know about this, but it's still a big problem. Put simply, drink and drugs place chemicals into your blood that change how you think. The changes are biological, and cannot be overcome by willpower or hoping it won't happen.

Driving ability is directly diminished by over-confidence, reduced coordination, slower reactions, poor judgement of 'speed, distance and risk', mood shifts, confusion and hallucinations. Which can also be compounded by the brain having the illusion of doing a better job, not worse.

In all cases, the driver's decision-making is passed to something they can't control. For passengers, this is a gigantic betrayal of trust - even if they are also under the influence and ask you to drive.
- 10. Know your car:** Be very familiar with your car before taking passengers that could make your job more difficult. Young drivers are often out in their parent's car which they have not driven much.
- 11. Hold back when full:** For most drivers their first car is a small one, and often an old one. And these are the cars most likely to handle differently when full. It's simple physics. So the driver gets taken by surprise - when steering or braking hard, and loses control at a very bad time.

Not being caught out is easy. Go a bit slower if you have 2 or 3 friends in the back, and leave more space in front than usual. The trick is to learn how the car reacts to loads gradually and securely.
- 12. Reject distractions:** Be aware that young people are easily distracted. And that all new drivers find it hard to know what to focus on, and tend to spot dangers later anyway.

It's a dangerous combination. And it's a good start to avoid giving your attention to things you know are nothing to do with your driving.
- 13. Duck out of conversations:** Don't try to be part of all the chatter. Be happy to switch off. And especially when handling specific risks, such as junctions, dense traffic, blind bends, poor weather or darkness. Experienced drivers do this a lot. Don't be afraid of missing something.

Learning to drive didn't prepare you for a lot of chatting at the same time. If it's necessary, and when you're ready, just say, "Sorry, I missed that", or "Say that again". Your friends should see that you are controlling your attention, and accept that you do it.

Importantly, don't look at someone who talks to you. You can still hear them with eyes on the road.
- 14. Slow for distraction:** If something in the car reduces your driving attention, easing down your speed will give more time to cope with whatever it is. It's an easy and effective action.
- 15. Leave the phone alone:** Don't use the phone when driving. Not for anything - calls, texting or social media. If really necessary, ask a passenger to take incoming calls. Don't be confused when the law permits hands-free use. In fact, the mental effect can be worse than being drunk - for all drivers.
- 16. Start low and easy:** There has to be a first time. And it can be easier with peer passengers to start with just one trusted friend in the car. And work up as you learn how to keep full control. However many passengers you have, try to have a trusted friend in the front with you. It gives you support if needed, and confines any problems to the back.
- 17. Assess your passengers:** They are young, so looking for excitement, but be conscious of anyone who might be a problem. Coping with them will be easier if you are not surprised.

Be sure to notice when you have non-drivers on board. They may have little understanding of what a driver's task really is.
- 18. Set expectations early:** Make sure your passengers know what you expect of them. Ideally even before they get into the car. If you need to, draw some lines.

You can set simple rules: "No fiddling with the stereo" (unless you ask them to), "Anyone acting the fool gets out", "If you want a crash, don't get in". However strong you need to be. Keep a balanced head, and be firm but not over the top. Get known for being calmly in good control of your driving.

Especially, do not allow larking around by touching you or the controls. That's an absolute red line.
- 19. Control who gets in:** If you believe that someone will be disruptive, perhaps from past experience with them, don't take them in the car. Any other passengers should thank you for it.
- 20. Take a hint:** Round the other way, if anyone ever hesitates to be your passenger, don't ignore it. It's important, and reflecting on the reason for it could do you a big favour.

Drive well. Enjoy carrying your friends, and look after them.

Skills for young passengers

The tips below will help you to stop a young driver's crash risk from rising when you are in the car. They are your 'passenger skills'. And some will be easier to do than others.

They are part of maintaining as much control as you can over what happens to you.

Note that passengers are often unaware of the effect they are having. This is because young drivers can be strongly affected just by their peers being in the car, without them having to do or say anything.

From your past, if you were disruptive in your parent's car as a child, now is the time to cast off the habit. And you will also find that learning good passenger skills will help you to be a good driver too.

Passenger Tips - how to survive a young driver

- 1. Decide to be helpful:** You can purposely decide as you get into the car to make the driver's job easier if you can. This underpins the points below on how you can do it. Sometimes it's as easy as doing nothing to distract them. You can also be a calming influence on others who might want to prevent the driver doing a good job.
Adopt the mindset of a 'trusted friend' - someone the driver is glad to have on board. And always remember that the best passengers are the ones who 'think like drivers'.
- 2. Know they are learning:** Your driver will be still learning a lot of the skills they need. Especially the ones not covered in the test. And even more so if they are in their first few months of driving.
Although they may not realise it, their job is far more demanding until they become good at dealing with risks early, when they are easier to handle. And this takes time to learn. Also know that your young driver is statistically more likely to crash on weekend nights, on country roads and on bends. Understand too that they may well find the car handles quite differently with people in the back - especially when there is more than one.
- 3. If you don't drive:** Any non-driver passenger should be very aware that there is a lot more to driving than the simple hands-and-feet actions you can see. The most critical part is the mental activity that you can't see. It's about understanding totally what is going on, weighing up options and making a stream of decisions about what to do. And doing all this well before the actions have to be taken.
- 4. Negative peer pressure:** If a driver tries to impress you by taking risks, tell them they don't need to do that. Trying to impress is a bid to be popular, so hints that it's not happening usually work: "Can we settle down a bit, I'm not liking this at all". Or firmer if necessary, "This isn't impressing me, it's just stupid".
Some drivers change noticeably just because their peers are in the car. And they are far more likely to take higher risks if they think the passengers are risk-takers themselves. So if you seem to enjoy danger, you will encourage bad driving.
Also help the driver to resist any pressure from other passengers. It usually needs only one supportive friend to let someone stand their ground. It can be as simple as saying, "That's definitely a bad idea" or "I don't think I want him/her to do that".
- 5. Positive peer pressure:** Let your driver know what will impress you, and bring positive peer pressure into play. Drop hints that you don't want a 'reckless ride', just a peaceful journey: "I like this driving - no doubts about arriving in one piece". If they seek to be popular, they will be sensitive to this influence too.
- 6. Avoid distractions:** Young drivers can be easily distracted, but need all the focus they can muster to get their thinking right. So avoid doing anything that would divert their attention. The worst distraction for young drivers has been found to be 'loud conversations'. And high volume bass thumping music demands it's own attention too. So try for less decibels in the confined space.
Be sure not to look at the driver when either of you is talking. And encourage them not to look at you: "I can still hear when you look at the road". Especially make sure their eyes are not on you when they have to deal with junctions or tricky traffic.
Definitely discourage the driver from using their smartphone. It's an addiction which is one of the fastest growing dangers. If necessary, use it for them. Similarly, if there is anything like navigating to do, try to make sure it's you that does it, not the driver.

7. **Avoid drink and drugs:** Of course... Whatever state the passengers are in, look at the driver. And weigh up why you would give control of your welfare to someone who isn't in full control of themselves. And be sure not to share the illusion the driver may have that: "There's nothing wrong with me. I can drive fine, just watch...". The risks are huge, and you already know that a lot of young drivers who crash are drunk or on drugs.
8. **Wear the seat belt:** Put your belt on automatically, even if you are the only one. And encourage others to as well. Thinking it's 'cool' to leave belts off is pointless when they halve casualty rates. The bravado doesn't protect at all. Wearing belts also helps to stop anyone moving around in the car.
9. **Only get in if you want to:** Getting into a car is a decision. Sometimes your options may be limited, and make it an awkward choice. But it is your choice.
Do you trust the driver? What's their reputation? Did they just drink too much? Could anyone else in the car be a problem? And so on.
If the driving turns dangerous after you get in, say how you feel: "Can you stop driving like this, please". Most times that will fix it. But if necessary try, "Stop the car, I feel sick!". Blame the driving, the motion, what you ate or drank - but they are unlikely to continue.
Don't be afraid to speak out - it's your life, and others in the car may well feel the same way. It is quite common for young people to fear being driven by their peers. And also to comment on their bad driving.
10. **Set up a parent rescue:** If practical, create a safety net by asking a parent or other family member to collect you if necessary. They may be surprised, but should welcome the mature request - even if they do imagine being in bed when you call.
If the need does arise, your friends might like to be rescued too, and perhaps even the driver as well.

Enjoy the freedom with your friends, and look after your drivers.

Wrapping up

The increased risk when young drivers have peer passengers is not inevitable. For both drivers and passengers, there are 'passenger skills' that could help to prevent it.

And offering 'skills' rather than 'advice' is important. Firstly, 'skill' is the right word - something we can learn to do better. But also, young people instinctively see it as more worthwhile to invest in things that sound like the future rather than the past. So they are keener to 'learn skills' than to 'take advice'.

Focusing on this topic suggests that a lot more could be done to teach passenger skills. Not only to youngsters who are learning to drive, but also to children as part of their road safety training at school.

Banning youngsters from doing risky things might sometimes seem to be an easy and obvious solution. But it holds them back, and usually feels unfair to them. It stunts their development, and is likely to also surface as resentment somewhere.

If we put encouragement before restriction, it is a more positive and helpful adult role. And it means thinking very hard about how to teach young people to manage risk safely.

This not only gives them the benefits of the activity - in this case driving, it also instils a far more self-reliant, robust and responsible approach to becoming an adult themselves. It's a better picture of what an adult needs to be.

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