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## Driving While Adolescent

*What you and your kids need to know*

*Laurie Snyder*

On Lamorinda's roads, even mature drivers find it challenging to dodge darting deer without sending their cars over embankments or into telephone poles. But when you're "fresh out of the box," you think you know everything, says Orinda Police Officer Mike Gray. "Today's kids have got a lot more to deal with than we did."

The national statistics are worrisome. More American teens die from car accidents than any other cause.

Inexperience remains a major factor in teen crashes - as it was when today's parents were teens. The twist today, however, is the added impact of technology, coupled with other temptations.

Texting, talking, or tinkering with cell phones, iPods and other electronic devices, as well wider access than ever before to alcohol and drugs, have been cited as key contributors in a number of high-profile crashes.

Gray thought one young man he pulled over was texting, but he was actually watching a video - while driving. To avoid getting caught texting while driving, Gray says teens now hide their cell phones down by their legs - meaning they're looking away from the road for even longer and in more dangerous ways.

Nationally, the risk of crashing a car - for adults as well as for teens - is four times higher while using a cell phone.

"It doesn't take a lot to distract teen drivers - or any driver," Gray said. Think about how much ground you cover at 40 miles per hour while looking down for four seconds to text. "You can do a lot of damage in that 600 feet."

Because Lamorinda roads can be challenging even on the best of days, the following statistics should give area parents even greater pause:

National statistics show that nearly four out of every 10 teens killed in automobile accidents had blood alcohol content (BAC) levels greater or equal to 0.01 percent. And the April 2011 issue of Accident Analysis and Prevention stated a full 75 percent of serious teen driver crashes nationwide happened because teens were going too fast for road conditions, were distracted, or failed to scan for, detect and respond to hazards.

That's exactly what happened in Orinda recently. A car that crashed on Ivy Drive was estimated to have been traveling between 53 to 60 miles per hour (over 30 miles per hour over the posted speed limit) when it sideswiped another vehicle. One passenger was severely injured.

"The speed limits are set at what they are," Gray said, "because that's the safe speed for maintaining the roadway." For beginning drivers, depth perception, vision and line of sight are not as well developed as they are for more mature drivers.

Gray, who is a member of the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department, served on San Ramon's graveyard shift before coming to Orinda five years ago. He has witnessed it all - kids, parties, property destroyed when a car hits a neighbor's car or house, people fleeing the scene of accidents. His is the face you or your kids are most likely to see peering through your driver's side window if you're pulled over in Orinda - and his is the face you'll see if your teen ends up in traffic court.

He understands that parents like the peace of mind that cell phones provide, but urges parents and their teen drivers to put those phones in their car trunks so they won't be tempted to talk or text while driving.

"It's hands-free, not ear-free," he said.

What concerns Gray even more is the prevalence of alcohol use by area teen drivers. Although Orinda hasn't had many traffic fatalities, drinking and driving has become one of the biggest issues faced by the City's police and parents.

Area kids, afraid of being caught drinking and driving, have been fleeing accident scenes. When that happens, noted Gray, drivers face the added charge of hit and run. It's important for parents to teach their children that it's better to behave responsibly and stay with their cars in the event of an accident.

For Gray, any accident is personal. He's a dad. He tears up when he thinks of the young Lamorindans who have been hurt or killed over the years. He remembers every single one of them, and it clearly pains him as much as if those kids had been his own.

He'd rather not have to pull anyone over - but he'll do it to save the lives of you, your children, and your neighbors.

Stats to Remember:

The greatest chance of crashing one's car happens within the first six months of becoming licensed.

The fatal crash rate for drivers ages 16 to 19 is four times higher than for drivers ages 26 to 69 - and, at night, nearly twice as high for 16-year-olds.

Two-thirds of all teens killed are not wearing seatbelts.

Parent-Teen Driving Resources:

To make sure that you and your teens are and remain the best drivers that you can be, check out the following websites:

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute:

teendriversource.org: [www.teendriversource.org/](http://www.teendriversource.org/)

California Department of Motor Vehicles Key Sites:

Parent Teen Training Guide:

[www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/dl603/dl603.pdf](http://www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/dl603/dl603.pdf)

Selecting a Driving School:

[www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/brochures/fast\\_facts/ffd133.htm](http://www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/brochures/fast_facts/ffd133.htm)

Teen Driver Web: [www.dmv.ca.gov/teenweb/index.htm](http://www.dmv.ca.gov/teenweb/index.htm)

Edmunds.com:

Finding Driver's Ed Programs That Really Work: [www.edmunds.com/car-safety/finding-drivers-ed-programs-that-really-work.html](http://www.edmunds.com/car-safety/finding-drivers-ed-programs-that-really-work.html)

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[back](#)

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