Parent Decision-Making About Teen Driving

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Introduction:

This research explored how parents make decisions regarding their teen’s driving and the issues which were included:

• The decision to obtain a permit or license
• Assessing the teen’s readiness to get behind the wheel
• Deciding who should teach the teen to drive

This research was undertaken to inform a community coalition in its efforts to enhance teen driving safety. As a result of this research, a “Parent Decision Guide” was developed.

Methodology:

Four focus groups were conducted, consisting of parents of teens between 15 and 19. Criteria for participation in the focus groups included:

• Parenting a teenager who is preparing for licensure
• Residing in Lehigh or Northampton counties in Pennsylvania
• Having not experienced a death or serious injury among family/friends due to a car crash.

Focus group participants were asked to respond to 13 questions exploring how they approached the task of preparing their teens to be licensed drivers. Focus group questions included:

• How do you decide when your teenager is ready to apply for a permit?
• How do you decide who will teach your teen to drive?
• What factors will you use to decide whether your teen is ready to take the road test?
• Do you have driving rules for your teenager? How were these rules negotiated?
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Demographic information identified parental age, education, socioeconomic status, and type of residence (rural/suburban/urban).

Results:

Five primary themes emerged from the focus group discussions:

• Developmental Issues
• Safety Issues
• Teaching Teens to Drive
• Financial Considerations
• Parental Control Strategies

Developmental Issues:

Parent’s views on licensing teen drivers were shaped by their perspectives on the role of the car in a young adult’s life. These views appear to be based for about a decade on perspectives that driving was a rite of passage and an opportunity for independence. Lower income parents considered licensing for more pragmatic reasons (e.g., School, work). The focus was on achieving the license, and the decision was made prior to the license being obtained. Parents also noted that the lack of access to the vehicle and more often to public transportation, was viewed as a mechanism for further opportunities for maturity. Many parents reported that their teens were not given enough responsibility, and driving was viewed as a mechanism for demonstrating maturity. This research explored how parents make decisions regarding their teen and driving.

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