



Underage Driver Fact Sheet

Background

In recent years, there has been a concerning trend of underage drivers taking cars and attempting to drive them, often with disastrous consequences. One potential factor contributing to this phenomenon is the prevalence of car-based video games, which may give young people a false sense of confidence in their ability to operate a real vehicle. Additionally, we have seen an increase in the number of young teens and preteens stealing vehicles.

It is important to prioritize the safety and well-being of children by allowing them to engage in age-appropriate activities and gradually acquire the necessary skills and knowledge before they start driving.

Young Children Should Never Drive Vehicles

Children below the legal driving age are still in the early stages of physical and cognitive development. They do NOT have the physical coordination, strength, and reflexes required to operate a vehicle safely. Driving requires complex skills such as multitasking, decision-making, and spatial awareness, which is not be fully developed in younger children and takes a great deal of time and practice to develop.

Driving requires experience and knowledge of traffic rules, road signs, and driving techniques. Children under the legal driving age have limited exposure to these aspects of driving, which can increase the likelihood of accidents or mistakes on the road.

There are legal age restrictions for driving that differ slightly by state, which are put in place to ensure the safety of both the driver and others on the road. These restrictions are based on extensive research and statistics on traffic accidents and the capabilities of young drivers. Younger children are also more susceptible to injuries due to their smaller size and less developed bodies. In the event of a collision or accident, their physical vulnerability increases the risk of severe harm or fatality.

Children Recruited for Car Thefts

Kids and Car Safety has seen an upward trend on the number of juveniles stealing vehicles. Nefarious adults sometimes use underage drivers to steal vehicles because juveniles typically face less severe legal penalties compared to adult offenders and can get criminal offenses taken off of their permanent record. If caught, they may be subject to juvenile justice systems, which generally have more lenient punishments or focus more on rehabilitation rather than punishment. These young drivers may be coerced through gang affiliations or with promises of rewards, manipulation through peer pressure and are exploited due to their limited understanding of the consequences involved including injury or worse.

In some cases, underage drivers may have easy access to vehicles, such as family cars or those belonging to acquaintances. They may be familiar with where spare keys are kept, making it easier for them to gain access to the vehicle without attracting attention.

It is important to note that involving underage individuals in car theft is illegal and unethical. Efforts should be made to educate and guide young individuals on the importance of ethical behavior, the consequences of engaging in criminal acts, and the potentially fatal consequences associated with inexperienced driving. Additionally, implementing stronger security measures for vehicles, such as immobilizers and GPS tracking systems, can help deter and prevent car theft.

Effects of Video Games on Children

There is no denying that video games have become a ubiquitous part of modern life, particularly among younger generations. Games that feature driving, such as racing simulators and open-world titles like Grand Theft Auto, are especially popular among young people. These games can be incredibly immersive, featuring detailed depictions of cars and driving mechanics that mimic real-life experiences.

However, it is important to remember that driving in a video game is vastly different from driving a real car. In a video game, there are no real-world consequences for reckless behavior behind the wheel, and players can often get away with driving at high speeds and performing dangerous maneuvers without suffering any negative repercussions.

For very young children, the use of ride-on battery operated vehicles may also contribute to a child believing they are capable of operating a motor vehicle.

In contrast, driving a real car is a complex task that requires a high degree of skill and responsibility.

To address this issue, it is important for parents, educators, and other adults to educate young people about the differences between video game driving and real-life driving. All young people need to understand and appreciate that it is illegal for anyone without a driver's license to operate a vehicle. This can include emphasizing the importance of responsible driving habits, such as obeying traffic laws, wearing seat belts, and avoiding distractions like texting or talking on the phone while driving.

Additionally, it may be helpful to provide young people with opportunities to learn about real-life driving in a safe and controlled environment. This could include enrolling them in driving classes or allowing them to practice driving under adult supervision in a parking lot or other low-risk setting after they have a valid learner's permit.

Statistics

Since 2001, Kids and Car Safety has documented well over a 150 deadly incidents involving a driver under the legal driving age. Additionally, Kids and Car Safety has documented hundreds more non-fatal cases with varying degrees of injuries and property damage. Data on incidents involving child drivers does not appear to be given emphasis; yet this is a significant issue that deserves greater attention.

It is important to note that the above statistics should be considered a drastic undercount of the actual issue frequency. Kids and Car Safety documents cases primarily through online media reports due to the lack of an official data collection process for these cases. If an incident is not reported in the news, we are likely not to be able to document it. Given these cases involved juveniles, it is also likely that many cases are never publicly reported.

Prevention

Ensuring that children under the legal driving age are not allowed to drive vehicles is a critical step in preventing accidents and injuries on our roads. Here are some actions that can be taken to achieve this goal:

Education and awareness: One of the most important steps in preventing underage driving is to educate parents, caregivers, and children themselves about the dangers of driving before they are legally allowed to do so. Schools, community organizations, and law enforcement agencies can all play a role in promoting safe driving practices and discouraging underage driving.

Parental supervision: Parents and guardians have a responsibility to ensure that their children are not driving vehicles before they are legally allowed to do so. This can involve setting clear rules and expectations for behavior, monitoring their child's activities, and securing car keys where children and teens cannot access them.

Strict legal penalties: Law enforcement agencies can help prevent underage driving by enforcing strict legal penalties for those caught driving without a license or operating a vehicle illegally. This can include fines, license suspension or revocation, community service, and other consequences.

Technology-based solutions: Advances in technology are making it easier to prevent underage driving. For example, GPS tracking and ignition interlock devices can be installed in vehicles to prevent them from being driven by unauthorized individuals.

By taking a multi-pronged approach to preventing underage driving, we can help ensure the safety of our roads and communities, and prevent tragic accidents and injuries caused by inexperienced and unauthorized drivers.

For more information on how to keep children safe in and around vehicles visit www.KidsAndCarSafety.org