Driving schools focus on dangers of distracted driving

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Teaching a teen to drive is no easy task, especially in this day and age. Rewind 20, or even 15, years ago, instructors never had to consider the dangers of using a cellphone while driving. But with distracted driving playing a large role in accidents locally and nationally these days, driving schools have made it a priority to educate students on the importance of putting away those devices and focusing on the road.

Steve Mochel, the owner of Fresh Green Light Driving School in Cos Cob, said distracted driving is a huge focus of their classes. He uses state-of-art simulators to give students a visual impact of what can happen in the heat of the moment.

"We use driving simulators and in one of the programs we require the kids to take out their phone while `driving' and they usually end up crashing and taken to the hospital or jail depending on the type of crash. It's not required by the state, but it's required at Fresh Green Light," Mochel, who is opening a Darien location on June 9, said.

"We use the One Simple Decision (driving simulator) program with every student who comes through our school. We believe it is a powerful way to demonstrate the dangers of distracted driving in a safe environment."

The problem is studies show teens know the dangers and end up doing it anyway. The Consumer Reports National Research Center just released survey results after questioning drivers around the world ages 16 through 21.

"Almost half of the respondents said they had talked on a handheld phone while driving in the previous 30 days. Close to 30 percent said they had texted in that time. And some had operated smartphone apps (8 percent) or used email or social media (7 percent) while behind the wheel," the report stated.

"Yet almost all of them considered texting, using smart-phone apps, or accessing the Internet to be dangerous while driving; about 80 percent thought it was very dangerous," according to the report. "Also, 63 percent of those surveyed saw talking on a handheld phone while driving as dangerous."

The survey also revealed the habits of their parents is something kids pay very close attention to. Of all the respondents, 48 percent said they saw their parents talking on the phone while driving and 15 percent said she saw them texting. Marie Trant, president of the Lewis School of Driving in New Canaan, said educating parents is just as important, if not more important, than educating the kids.
"We encourage parents to be a good role model for their children -- not to use their cellphones for texting or checking email even prior to their children being eligible to drive as it can be a positive reinforcement for when they are actually behind the wheel," Trant said. "Teen drivers emulate their parents' good and bad habits."

Mochel said his programs focus on the parents as well with the hopes they continue preaching the same thing to their kids.

"We also spend time talking about distracted driving in the two-hour parent class required by the state of Connecticut. Part of the problem is parents are just as guilty when it comes to distracted driving," Mochel said. "In the classroom we ask the kids how many of their parents text while driving and every hand goes up in the room. Parents seem to think they can get away with it, but it's a question of being good role models."

In addition to the simulators and parental discussions, both schools also used more conventional methods of teaching including videos and lectures. Trant said they show videos demonstrating time lapses that occur while being distracted in the car and it's not just limited to cellular distractions. Mochel said they show a 10-minute documentary called "The Last Text," produced by AT&T with four kids' real-life stories and their experiences with texting and driving. Mochel said awareness is key and the more educated the kids are about their responsibility, the safer they will be.

"The laws against texting and driving are not working, so we tell the students the most important thing is personal responsibility -- call your friends out when you see them texting and driving," Mochel said.

Trant echoed his statements and reaffirmed how difficult it is to learn driving to being with, let alone driving with distractions.

"We have discussions in class relating to distracted driving -- not just texting and driving as there are other distracted driving issues that affect people's ability to concentrate on the task of driving and being attentive enough to drive safely. The basic task of driving requires multi-tasking, which is difficult enough for an experienced driver, and when you add inexperience to the mix, the results can be catastrophic."

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