

# Virtual tragedies get teens' attention behind the wheel

March 15, 2010

Posted: 08:55 AM ET

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Sometimes a single choice can change a life forever. It's especially true with new teen drivers. A new program called One Simple Decision, available later this month to schools and law enforcement agencies across the country, drives home the risks of being distracted or impaired when you're behind the wheel - without putting anyone in danger.

Students sit at a computer screen and control a small steering wheel on a simulated drive, adjusting speed with a gas pedal. The program uses videotaped scenes with real police officers and a judge to help teens experience a mock arrest, booking and sentencing for mistakes they make behind the wheel.

Per mile driven, teenagers have about four times the risk of other people of being in a car accident, according to the Injury Free Coalition for Kids, a community-based education and advocacy group. And the first 18 months when new drivers are gaining experience is the most dangerous time. Experts say about 4,000 teens die each year in car accidents, and being distracted or impaired is often a contributing factor.

"So you take inexperience, add on hand-held electronic devices distracting teenagers and you have a fatal combination," says Dr. Brendan Campbell of Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford. "It's almost like an addiction that teens are not able to recognize the risk that hand held devices pose and they can't resist the urge to use them," says Campbell.

Drivers of all ages are four times more likely to be in an accident when using a cell phone and at least eight times more likely while texting, according to the National Safety Council.

But unlike adults, teens' brains are not fully developed, especially in the areas affecting judgment and decision-making.

"They think that they are invincible and that they're bulletproof and that bad things aren't ever going to happen to them," says Campbell.

On his One Simple Decision drive, Henry Sewell, 17, rear-ended a car while using his cell phone. High school junior Kaley Markham crashed into a fire hydrant while driving under the influence.

Would those lessons apply to their real lives? "I do text sometimes in my car and I occasionally do talk on the phone," says Henry. For Kaley too: "I change the song, I text occasionally and usually my GPS I use when I'm stopped, but sometimes I have to fix it while I'm driving." But watching scenes through the eyes of an arrested driver who is booked in a real police station and then taken before the judge for sentencing was unsettling for Kaley and Henry.

"One minor rear ending while you're texting or calling could end up being jail time," says Henry. Kaley fatally struck a pedestrian during her second driving simulation. "I was actually scared when I saw the video of what you get charged for when you hit people," says Kaley.

But will this virtual driving experience change their driving behaviors? Henry says he'll wait until he's at a stop before calling people and is rethinking his texting habits.

"I'll definitely prohibit myself from texting as often as I do," explains Henry.

Campbell says he's encouraged by the possibilities new virtual driving tools offer but advises teen and parents alike to also remember the low-tech fundamentals.

"The most important thing you can do as a parent is to drive with your teenager," he says.

