

SCHOOL SAFETY: Make sure vehicle is road ready before handing keys to teen drivers

BOISE - Your back-to-school list: new laptop, new wardrobe, new tires?

Families routinely spend hundreds of dollars on back-to-school items — and more as students age and require newer and more sophisticated math calculators, clothes and supplies. But how much do they spend to ensure their teenager is traveling safely to and from school? A new school year is an exciting time. It means new clothes, new school supplies, a new schedule of classes. It's a great new start.

But they aren't of much value if students don't arrive at school.

Safe travel begins with a vehicle that is up to the challenge.

Families do their best to outfit their youth with the best, but few consider the safety of travel to and from school. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 5,000 teens (ages 16-20) are killed each year in passenger-vehicle crashes. Motor-vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among children.

The National Organizations for Youth Safety (NOYS) encourages families to include car, route and travel safety in back-to-school readiness.

"Parents are involved in so much of their teen's lives, everything from grades, to sports, to who they are hanging out with," says Sandy Spavone, NOYS executive director, "but what they don't know is that they have the opportunity to get involved and positively influence one of the most important and dangerous activities a teen will experience — driving."

Idaho's graduated driver's program for young drivers combines practical experience and expert instruction for teens en route to their first license. ITD and its highway safety partners also offer resources to improve safety for teenage drivers, including the Teen Driving website (idahoteendriving.org) and Parent's Supervised Driving Program.

Parents and teens must work together to prevent crashes and encourage back-to-school driver/travel safety. Many new teen drivers are driving to school for the first time, and it's possible that normal routes to school have been under construction during the summer months, so extra caution is needed during the back-to-school season. NOYS encourages parents to discuss and prepare their children for the safest route to school.

Check your vehicle

- Tire tread
- Tire pressure
- Windshield wipers and fluid
- Brakes

- Oil, brake and transmission fluid levels
- Headlights, tail lights and turn signals
- Travel route for safety

Critical reminders

- Using cell phones to send or retrieve messages electronically is illegal while driving in Idaho and violators face stiff consequences - the most serious is potential car crashes and possible loss of life.
- Teens should avoid using ear buds when listening to music and make sure the volume is low enough that outside noise – like sirens from emergency vehicles – is not drowned out.
- Avoid in-vehicle distractions, including use of stereos, eating and animated conversations, that take your focus off the road. Avoid excessive adjustments to radios or stereos.
- Idaho law also requires that all vehicle occupants use seatbelts. They remain the single most-effective tool in avoiding serious injury or death in a vehicle crash. Young children should be placed in approved car seats and have the installation professionally checked. Many fire departments check installation free.
- Obey all speed limits. Remember that posted limits might not be appropriate during adverse weather.
- Teens who drive on a graduated or provisional license should adhere to restrictions on the number of passengers to help avoid unnecessary distractions while driving. More young people in a car with a young driver significantly increases the chances of a crash.

According to the Journal of Adolescent Health, "Driver distraction is an important threat to the public health and safety of adolescent drivers, their passengers, and those with whom they share the public roadways."