While Caution is Warranted, Child Passengers Are Safer When Teen Driver Is Their Sibling

Study has implications for “family exemption” to graduated driver licensing laws

PHILADELPHIA, June 14 — A study released this week from The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and State Farm® found that while children driven by teens are twice as likely to suffer crash injury as those driven by adults, their risk is 40 percent lower if the teenaged driver is their older brother or sister.

The research, published this week in the journal Injury Prevention, may offer insights for parents, as well as for state lawmakers involved in setting standards for graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws for young drivers.

Previous findings from the ongoing research alliance between CHOP and State Farm have proven that young children riding with newly licensed teenagers are at a much higher risk for injury in a crash than they are with adult drivers. This and other studies have led lawmakers in many states to impose restrictions on the number of passengers young drivers are allowed to carry without adult supervision. However, many states allow exceptions for family members.

Until now, the injury risk to sibling versus non-sibling passengers has not been explored.

“Our goal was to determine whether allowing an exception for teenaged drivers to carry family members as passengers makes sense from an injury prevention standpoint, and not just as a matter of convenience,” explains Flaura Winston, M.D., Ph.D., Scientific Director of the Center for Injury Research and Prevention at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. “We found that children are safer and more likely to be restrained when riding with a teenaged sibling than with a non-related teenager, but they’re safest when they’re riding with a driver older than 25.”

The study, conducted as part of the Partners for Child Passenger Safety project, included accident and injury data on 16,233 children below age 16, who were riding with 15-19 year-old drivers in 16 states and Washington, D.C. These crashes were reported to State Farm from December 2000 through December 2005.
“Busy parents have come to rely on their older children helping with shuttling siblings to various commitments,” says Dr. Winston. “By allowing family member exceptions, passenger restrictions may be readily accepted by both parents and policymakers.” Researchers say this may be an important first step for states which currently have no passenger restrictions for young drivers.

Rather than restrict sibling passengers, Dr. Winston recommends GDL programs provide appropriate education and disincentives, such as postponement of full-driving privileges if all child passengers are not properly restrained.

The researchers also caution parents to make sure there is a specific destination involved with the trip. Crash risk increases dramatically among teen drivers when there is no predetermined destination. Dr. Winston offers this advice to parents who are deciding whether to allow their teens to drive younger brothers and sisters: “Parents should pay attention to their children’s risk-taking tendencies before allowing them to ride together without an adult. In some cases, siblings can have a negative influence on one another’s risk-taking behaviors that can be stronger than parental or peer influence.”

For the latest research and information for parents about teen driving, visit www.chop.edu/youngdrivers. For more information about child passenger safety, visit www.chop.edu/carseat.

About Partners for Child Passenger Safety (PCPS)
Partners for Child Passenger Safety (PCPS) is a research initiative of The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm® and is the world’s largest study of children in crashes. As of Dec. 31, 2005, more than 455,000 State Farm customers, transporting 669,000 children, had participated in the study. The study includes 29,675 in-depth interviews and more than 800 crash investigations. PCPS is also conducting research to develop, test and disseminate interventions to improve safe driving among teen drivers.

About The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia was founded in 1855 as the nation's first pediatric hospital. Through its long-standing commitment to providing exceptional patient care, training new generations of pediatric healthcare professionals and pioneering major research initiatives, Children's Hospital has fostered many discoveries that have benefited children worldwide. Its pediatric research program is among the largest in the country, ranking third in National Institutes of Health funding. In addition, its unique family-centered care and public service programs have brought the 430-bed hospital recognition as a leading advocate for children and adolescents. For more information, visit http://www.chop.edu.

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