

# FAMILY CONVERSATIONS TO SUPPORT ENGAGED DRIVING

As a parent, or someone in a parenting role, you play an important role in keeping your teen safe. Often, the key to your teen's safety is finding ways to have conversations with them. Conversations about distracted and engaged driving are crucial.

Distracted driving is anything that takes a driver's eyes off the road, hands off the wheel, or mind off driving. Distracted driving significantly contributes to motor vehicle crashes, especially among young and inexperienced drivers.<sup>1,2</sup> Engaged driving keeps a driver's full attention on the task of driving.

As a parent, it's easy to tell your teen what to do, lecture, or give advice. Instead, try inviting them to participate in a conversation to explore distracted and engaged driving by "talking with" as opposed to "talking to" them.

These conversations can occur at almost any age, even before your teen has their driver's license.

This dialogue engages the logical part of their brain, gets them thinking, and can strengthen your relationship. It is more than just asking for your teen's opinion. It is about truly hearing and valuing what they are saying.

---

## **DISTRACTED DRIVING INCLUDES:**

- using a cell phone to send a text message, talk, browse the internet or social media, or view photos or videos
- using a navigation system
- eating or drinking
- grooming tasks like applying makeup or brushing your teeth
- talking to passengers
- adjusting music
- reaching for objects
- focusing on people or pets in your vehicle

## **ENGAGED DRIVING INCLUDES:**

- putting a cell phone down or out of reach
  - setting your navigation system or checking maps or directions before you begin driving, or pulling over when you do so
  - avoiding eating, drinking, or grooming tasks
  - asking passengers to limit their conversations to help you remain focused
  - assuring your radio/entertainment devices are set before driving
  - pulling over before tending to another person or pet in the vehicle
-

Your teen may not know exactly what to say, and that's okay. Conversations take time and don't need to happen in one sitting. Be patient and give them time to process, reflect, and respond.

Here are four steps you can follow to have a conversation that supports engaged driving.

## STEP 1. EXPLORE DISTRACTED AND ENGAGED DRIVING

Start by asking open-ended questions to better understand your teen's thoughts, feelings, and challenges related to distracted and engaged driving.

You could say:

- *“There is a lot of talk about distracted driving. What do you think that means?”*
- *“What are some ways drivers can be distracted?”*
- *“What distractions challenge you (or will challenge you) as a driver?”*
- *“Why is understanding these challenges important?”*
- *“What would it be like (or is it like) to ride with a driver who is distracted?”*
- *“What does it mean or what would it look like for a driver to be engaged in the task of driving?”*

Your teen may respond to you with a question. Instead of answering immediately, give them time to think.

You could say:

- *“That’s a great question. What do you think?”*
- *“How would you answer that?”*

---

### CONVERSATION TIPS

- Avoid interrupting, judging (*“That’s a bad idea.”*), giving advice (*“I think you should...”*) or answering for them.
  - Pay attention to your body language when you are talking and when you are listening (e.g., turn toward your teen, nod, make eye contact when appropriate).
  - If you do not quite understand what your teen is saying or you need more information, you could say:
    - *“Tell me more about...”*
    - *“Help me understand...”*
    - *“Let me be sure I got everything you are saying...”*
    - *“Why is that?”*
  - Allow yourself to be in the conversation with them. After they've answered, you could say:
    - *“For me, I can find that...”*
    - *“I feel like...”*
    - *“I think that...”*
-

## STEP 2. ESTABLISH RULES TOGETHER

From what you have learned, continue the conversation to establish rules together about distracted and engaged driving. Start by discussing what is valued within your family. You could say:

- *“When we think about driving and safety, what things are truly important to us as a family?”*
- *“What kind of drivers do we want (or would we want) to be?”*
- *“How do we want (or how would we want) passengers to feel when we are driving?”*
- *“How important is it that we take steps to avoid distracted driving?”*

Next, talk about ways to stay engaged while driving and to what you and your teen would be willing to commit. You could say:

- *“What are ways to stay engaged while driving?”*
- *“What could each of us commit to in order to stay engaged while driving?”*
- *“Let’s be specific. What rules could we create together to stay engaged while driving?”*
  - For example: *“Could you agree to put cell phones out of reach before driving or to avoid eating in the vehicle?”*

Talk about how you could share the rules you’ve created with friends and family. You could say:

- *“How may we tell our friends and family that we’ve agreed we won’t ...”*
- *“How could we take the rules we’ve created together and make them family rules?”*
  - Consider a conversation about family rules where everyone gets a say.

Set the expectation that it is okay to remind one another about the rules. Discuss how you will remind each other about the rules and what happens if the rules are violated. Will there be consequences for violating the rules? Consequences should not be just for your teen. You could say:

- *“What role do we have if one of us is engaging in an unsafe behavior while driving?”*
- *“How do we draw attention to the rule?”*
  - *“How do the tone or words we use matter?”*
  - *“What are some things we could say?”*
    - Here are some ideas:
      - *“I noticed you answered your cell phone calls when you were driving. I am concerned that if we were in a crash you would be hurt. Would you mind putting your cell phone on silent?”*
      - *“I was upset when I saw that you had your phone in your hand when you were driving. I was worried about your safety and the safety of your friends. Would you please leave your phone in your bag when you are driving?”*
- *“Are there consequences for violating the rules? Why or why not?”*
- *“What would logical consequences be for violating the rules?”*
  - Rather than punishment, a logical consequence is about supporting the learning process and strengthening decision-making skills. Logical consequences should come soon after an unsafe behavior and need to be provided in a way that maintains a healthy relationship. For example: limiting driving, limiting passengers, loss of phone, etc.

## STEP 3. PRACTICE AND SUPPORT THE RULES

It takes time to establish habits (and to break bad habits). Trying out the new engaged driving rules you've established together and supporting the positive engaged driving behaviors you want to see are important parts of the learning process. Ongoing conversations to support your teen are opportunities for engagement and connection.

Follow the rules you have created together. Model the positive behaviors you want to see. Modeling is an important teaching tool.

Check in to see how it is going. Discuss any challenges your teen may have and how to manage those challenges. You could say:

- *“How are the rules we’ve established? Do they still work for you? Are you struggling at all?”*
- *“What are ways we can remember the rules?”*

Apply logical consequences when needed. With your feelings in check, invite your teen into a discussion about the expectations you established about engaged driving. Logical consequence should be applied as a teachable moment.

## STEP 4. RECOGNIZE EFFORT

Your recognition can go a long way in promoting positive behaviors. Your praise and encouragement can make a big difference. Recognize effort, quality, and small successes. You could say:

- *“I appreciated when you chose not to answer your phone when I called and you were driving.”*
- *“I was glad to see you choosing not to reach for something while you were driving.”*
- *“I noticed you put your phone away before you started driving. Great job!”*

## CLOSING

Keeping your teen safe doesn't happen by chance. Having conversations about distracted and engaged driving and creating rules together play an important role. You have a strong influence on your teen's decisions, and your efforts to have conversations about engaged driving can improve safety for your family.

## REFERENCES

1. National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2019, April). *Distracted driving in fatal crashes, 2017*. (Traffic Safety Facts Research Note. Report No. DOT HS 812 700). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
2. Klauser, G., Guo, F., Simons-Morton, B., Ouimet, C., Lee, S., & Dingus, T. (2014). Distracted driving and risk of road crashes among novice and experienced drivers. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 370, 54-59.



**Prepared by:**  
Center for Health and Safety Culture  
Montana State University  
P.O. Box 170548  
Bozeman, MT, 59717-0548



**Prepared for:**  
Montana Department of Transportation  
2701 Prospect Avenue  
P.O. Box 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001

August 2021

---

**Disclaimer** This document is disseminated under the sponsorship of the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) in the interest of information exchange. The State of Montana and the United States assume no liability for the use or misuse of its contents. The contents of this document reflect the views of the authors, who are solely responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views or official policies of MDT or the USDOT. The State of Montana and the United States do not endorse products of manufacturers. This document does not constitute a standard, specification, policy or regulation.

**Printing** This document is printed at state expense. Information on the cost of producing this publication may be obtained by contacting the Department of Administration.

**Alternative Format** MDT attempts to provide accommodations for any known disability that may interfere with a person participating in any service, program, or activity of the Department. Alternative accessible formats of this information will be provided upon request. For further information, call 406/444.7693, TTY 800/335.7592, or Montana Relay at 711.

**Other Sponsoring Agencies** California DOT, Connecticut DOT, Georgia DOT, Idaho Transportation Department, Illinois DOT, Indiana DOT, Iowa DOT, Kansas DOT, Kentucky DOT, Louisiana DOT and Development, Michigan DOT, Minnesota DOT, Mississippi DOT, Nevada DOT, Texas DOT, Utah DOT, Vermont Agency of Transportation, and Washington State DOT

**Recommended Citation:** Finley, K., McMahill, A., Otto, J. (2021). *Family Conversations to Support Engaged Driving*. Bozeman, MT: Center for Health and Safety Culture, Montana State University.