



Mott Poll Report

March 16, 2026
Volume 49
Issue 1

Driving Habits of Teens and Young Adults

Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death among teens and young adults, and driving habits are closely related to the risk of getting in a crash. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of teens and young adults 16-25 years about their children's driving habits.

Most parents (83%) report their teen or young adult child drives, either as a fully licensed driver (68%) or a driver in training (12%); two-thirds (64%) say their child drives almost every day. One-quarter of parents (25%) say they have observed their teen or young adult child engaging in distracted driving, such as texting (17%) or multitasking (19%). Seventeen percent of parents have observed their child driving when impaired, such as driving while sleepy (10%), when emotionally upset (9%), or after drinking alcohol (2%), or using marijuana (2%). Nearly half of parents (44%) have witnessed their child exhibit aggressive driving behaviors, such as speeding (41%), tailgating (12%), or showing "road rage" (6%). Over half (51%) have witnessed at least one type of unsafe driving behavior, and 8% have witnessed all three. Parents of young adults 21-25 are more likely than parents of youth 16-20 to report distracted or impaired driving; however, parent report of aggressive driving does not differ by age group.

Parents rate their child's driving ability as about average (53%) or better (43%) than other teens or young adults; 4% rate their child as worse. Parents who have observed their teen or young adult child engage in distracted or impaired driving give similar ratings of driving ability than parents who do not report witnessing those behaviors. Moreover, parents who have witnessed their teen or young adult driving aggressively are less likely to rate them as worse than peers. One-third of parents (33%) are worried that their teen or young adult child's driving behavior may cause an accident. The level of worry is higher among parents who rate their child's driving ability as worse than other teens or young adults, and higher among parents who have observed their child exhibit distracted, impaired or aggressive driving behavior.

One-quarter of parents (24%) have taken steps to address their child's driving behavior, such as using a monitoring device (13%), taking away driving privileges (6%), refusing the use of their car (8%), or threatening to stop paying for car insurance (6%). Such actions are more common for parents who have observed distracted, impaired or aggressive driving by their child.

Unsafe driving behaviors of teens and young adults

% of parents observing the following driving patterns of their teens and young adults age 16-25 years

Aggressive driving



44%

- Speeding
- Tailgating
- Road rage

Distracted driving



25%

- Texting
- Multitasking

Impaired driving



17%

- Sleepy
- Emotionally upset
- After drinking alcohol/
using marijuana



Report Highlights

Nearly all parents think their teen or young adult child's driving ability is better than other teens and young adults.

1 in 3 parents worry their teen or young adult driver will cause an accident.

1 in 4 parents have taken steps to address their child's driving behavior.

Witnessing risky driving behavior does not affect parents' rating of their teen or young adult child's driving ability.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in February 2026 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 13-25 years living in their household (n=2,101). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 69% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,780 parents with at least one child age 16-25. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 3 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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Implications

Parenting challenges do not end when a child reaches the legal age of adulthood; this is especially true for areas like driving, where skills and habits are still developing. Driver's education requirements and formats have shifted in recent years; while many states still require completion of a state-approved driver's education course, some permit online instruction or do not require formal driver's education at all. As a result, parents often play a larger role in teaching their children the nuances of driving and instilling safe driving habits.

Over half of parents in this Mott Poll observed their child engaging in distracted, impaired, or aggressive driving. While parents who observed these behaviors expressed more worry that their child might cause an accident, they did not give lower ratings of their child's driving ability. Moreover, while half of parents had observed their teen or young adult child engage in risky driving behaviors, only one in three worried about their child causing an accident. This suggests that parents may underestimate the risks posed by distracted, impaired, or aggressive driving.

Distracted driving is a major cause of crashes, and a factor in accidents that injure pedestrians. Most laws focus on distractions posed by cell phones. More than half of US states have enacted "hands-free" laws that ban handheld cell phone use while driving, and nearly all states prohibit text messaging behind the wheel. However, these laws do not encompass other common distractions, such as eating, drinking, talking with passengers, or personal grooming. These actions are so commonplace that many teens, young adults, and parents may not appreciate the risk they pose.

One in seven parents have witnessed their teen or adult child drive when in a state that could be described as impaired. All states prohibit driving with a blood alcohol concentration above 0.08 and maintain restrictions on other substances. Public service announcements highlight the dangers of driving while under the influence of alcohol or other substances, pointing to strategies such as designated drivers and ride-share services to avoid impaired driving. However, some forms of impairment are less widely recognized. Fatigue and strong emotions, such as anger or distress, also can impair reaction time and decision-making at a level similar to alcohol consumption. Parents should help their teen and young adult children appreciate the risks of all kinds of impairment, and can help by suggesting alternate strategies.

Nearly half of parents have observed their teen or adult child engage in aggressive driving – most often speeding, but also tailgating or exhibiting road rage. A surprising finding from this Mott Poll is that parents reported similar levels of aggressive driving for teens as for young adults; this suggests that speeding, tailgating, and other types of aggressive driving may be perceived as normal.

Relatively few parents in this Mott Poll said they imposed consequences for their teen or young adult child's driving behaviors. However, consequences can be an effective tool for changing behavior. For young drivers, using a monitoring device provides objective evidence that parents can use to point out how often they engage in aggressive driving. Restricting driving privileges reminds teens and young adults of the importance of safe driving.

In trying to address their child's driving behaviors, parents may be confronted with their own driving habits. It may be tempting for parents to argue that they have enough driving experience. While experience is helpful in many driving situations, it does not ameliorate the very real risks of distracted, impaired or aggressive driving.