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It's after dark. Your car breaks down. Is your teen prepared?

Let's face it, cars, being what they are, do run into trouble. A flat tire, broken fan belt or dead battery is enough to keep anyone in their place at any time. As we all know, these things happen when we least expect it and when we are least prepared.

This issue prompted Gary Direnfeld, executive director of the "I Promise Program" – teen safe driving initiative, to figure out just what safety items are most recommended in the event of a breakdown or emergency. He surveyed police and driving instructors across North America by email, "These are the people who understand driver and traffic issues and are in the best position to advise," says Direnfeld. "It's so easy to throw some of these things into a container in the trunk and if we do, our young drivers may be in a safer position."

Direnfeld was prompted to concentrate on teen driver safety after years of providing brain injury rehabilitation to young drivers who acquired their brain injuries in car crashes. As his own teen came of driving age he sought to develop a program to reduce the risk of teen car crashes. Teen car crashes are the single greatest cause of injury and death in adolescence. His research led to the development of the "I Promise Program" (www.ipromiseprogram.com) that is slowly being popularized with parents across North America. "I just felt that if parents could be given another tool with which to promote the safety of their son or daughter they would appreciate it as I did. I know I'm not the only parent who cares about his kid", says Direnfeld. Direnfeld's son has been driving independently for two years without incident.

His question to police and driving instructors was simple, "What safety items would you suggest parents carry in their car, especially considering teen drivers?"

The results poured in and he tabulated the results. Seventy-eight separate items were recommended and given the controversy on the first item, it came as a bit of a surprise. Cell phone was the number one ranked item being recommended the most number of times in responses. The responders were quick to point out though that cell phones should not be used while driving. "We were told that many cell phones will still connect to 911, whether or not it is activated. This makes it truly a significant safety item," says Direnfeld. He suggests parents check with their cell phone carrier to make sure this is true in their area.

In addition to safety items, several of the responders indicated that the parent's first responsibility is to make sure the car is in good mechanical order. This hits home to Richard (Dick) Raines, president of CARFAX and father of three teenagers, who spearheaded and champions the CARFAX Safe Teen Drivers Program (www.carfax.com/teen).

"We believe a mechanically sound vehicle is the first step to safer teen driving--for teenagers, and that first car will likely be a used vehicle," says Raines. "CARFAX helps parents uncover problems in a vehicle's past, which can affect the safety and value of the vehicle." By visiting www.carfax.com or by asking their car dealer, parents can obtain a detailed CARFAX Vehicle History Report, as well as a Safety and Reliability Report, on virtually any used car. "Our

CARFAX Safe Teen Drivers Program goes a step beyond assisting parents in locating safe cars by helping them become better driving coaches and by introducing them to resources such as the I Promise Program."

The top 5 items most recommended by police and driving instructors are:

Cell phone
First aid kit
Flashlight
Ice scraper
Blanket

To find out the other 73 items on the list, go to the "I Promise Program website at www.ipromiseprogram.com. Enter the site and take the "Survey Reports" link. While visiting the site, remember to register your teen driver for the program.

This survey was conducted by the I Promise Program – a teen safe driving initiative that promotes parents as role models by entering into a mutual safe driving contract with their teen. To provide accountability, a rear window decal is then affixed to the vehicle. The decal display a toll free number and the question, "Am I driving safely?" Calls are received by a call center and responses are sent by letter only back to the family. Youth, parents, community members, police and interested stakeholders in traffic safety have participated in developing this program. Data from the South Carolina State Police comparing Lancaster County to Greenwood County show a reduction in crashes in Lancaster County where the program has been active versus an increase in Greenwood County where the program has not been active. No negative reports on driving behavior have yet been received – May 22, 2003.

See: www.ipromiseprogram.com

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker and expert on matters concerning family life. He is in private practice, writes and provides workshops and is the developer of the "I Promise Program - teen safe driving initiative. Search his name on GOOGLE.COM to view his many articles and feel free to call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters.