

Grandparent drivers keep kids safer in crashes, study finds

Surprise: Children had half the risk of injury as those riding with their parents

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Overprotective parents, hand over the car keys: A new study finds that kids may be safer when their grandparents drive than when mom and dad are behind the wheel.

That's the surprising conclusion of research published today in the journal *Pediatrics*, which found that children involved in car crashes with grandparent drivers had half the risk of being injured as kids riding with their parents.

"Isn't this interesting? Maybe we're not so bad after all," said lead study researcher and two-time grandfather Dr. Fred M. Henretig, a pediatrician and emergency room physician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Grandparents made up 9.5 percent of drivers in crashes involving kids between 2003 and 2007, but they were associated with only 6.6 percent of injuries, Henretig found. In addition, grandparents were just as safe as parents when it came to markers of crash type and severity, such as posted speed limits, the direction of impact and whether wrecks resulted in rollovers or tows.

'You can't let anything bad happen'

Henretig decided to study the safety of grandparents as drivers in part after the arrival of Violet, 2 ½, and Brett, 1, made him realize how nervous he was with the babies on board.

"You can't let anything bad happen," he said. "You think, 'My son or my daughter would kill me if I get into an accident while I'm driving.'"

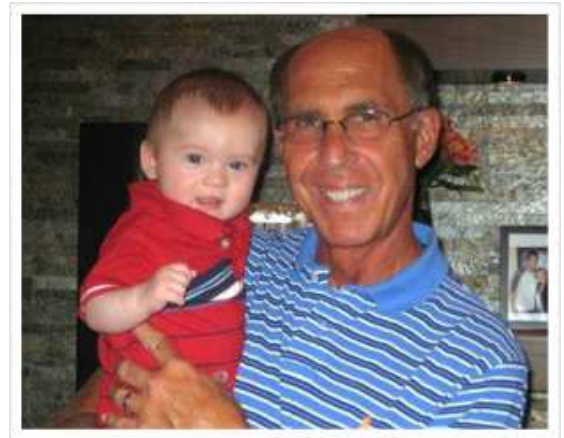
Henretig admits he thought grandparents would fare poorly in the analysis of nearly 12,000 motor vehicle accidents involving children under age 15 reported for insurance claims. Data came from the Partners for Child Passenger Safety Study. Using weighted figures, that represents more than 240,000 kids involved in crashes, including more than 2,400 who were injured.

"My hypothesis setting out was that grandparents may be putting their grandchildren at higher risk in crashes," Henretig said, citing a range of factors from older cars and inadequately installed car seats to a general decline in driving ability.

But only about .7 percent of kids riding with grandparents were hurt, compared with 1.05 percent of kids riding with parents, a reduction of risk of about 33 percent. That rose to 50 percent when factors such as age, restraint use and crash characteristics were considered.

"Lo and behold, it turns out kids are only getting injured half as often," Henretig said.

It will take more research to tease out exactly why kids in crashes with grandparent drivers were safer than those riding with parents, Henretig said.



About the only key difference between grandparents and parents involved the proper use of car-safety seats. Nearly all children were restrained whether they rode with parents or grandparents. But about 25 percent of kids driving with grandparents weren't restrained according to optimal practices, compared with about 20 percent of kids driving with parents, the study showed.

Typically, that meant that a child was buckled into a seat belt instead of a toddler seat or booster seat appropriate for age.

But even accounting for that, the grandparent drivers were safer, perhaps because of what Henretig's study called "some unaccounted-for protective grandparent driving style characteristics."

Or, in plain speech, a case of the jitters.

"I think grandparents are made very nervous by having their precious grandchildren in the car with them," Henretig said.



'I have precious cargo'

None of that surprises Richard S. Victor, a lawyer and found of the Grandparents Rights Organization, a Michigan-based nonprofit support and advocacy group.

"I think grandparents are more protective of grandchildren than we were as parents," said Victor, 61, grandfather to Davis, 4, and Stirling, 1.

Age, experience and the passage of time make grandparents more aware than ever of potential dangers and, therefore, more cautious, said Victor.

"I have precious cargo in the back seat of my car," he said.

Older drivers tend to "self-regulate" added Nancy Thompson, a spokeswoman for the AARP, which teaches safety classes to its age 50-plus members. The grandparents in this study ranged in age from 43 to

77, with an average age of 58. Parents ranged from 22 to 51, with an average age of 36.

That means older drivers may avoid freeways and peak traffic times, avoid driving at night or in bad weather, all factors that reduce crashes, she said.

Of course, the findings from a single study may not quell of the fears of parents worried about Nana and Papa taking the kids for a spin. If that's the case, Thompson said, it might be time for a family conversation about more than car seats.

"If you're uncomfortable, that means you have hesitation about how safe as drivers your parents are," she said. "Adult children need to look for signs that their parents aren't as safe as they were."