Children in the Backseat Are the Worst Distraction for Drivers

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From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

David Petrie’s articles on parenthood and education can be found in the *Huffington Post.*

Noisy kids in the back seat is one driving distraction that has not been addressed by government initiatives that address dangers of distracted driving. Many parents, trying to reign in quarreling siblings or fishing for dropped or thrown items, take their eyes off the road and endanger their families. While the focus on texting-while-driving is laudable, it has failed to address long-standing issues. Yet in both cases—an incoming call and a crying child—drivers should pull over and not attempt to multitask.

Experts at the United States Department of Transportation say there are three types of driver distractions:

- Visual distractions lead drivers to take their eyes off the road.
- Manual distractions lead drivers to take their hands off the wheel.
- Cognitive distractions lead drivers to take their minds off what they're doing.

According to these experts, texting is the most alarming driver activity because it involves all three types of distractions.

Have these experts ever driven in a car with an infant?

**Driving with Children Is Dangerous**

Driving alone in a car with an infant can be a nightmare. Take my oldest. To keep our house peaceful, we made sure she was completely addicted to Binkies two hours out of the womb. Still, a five-point babyseat harness would send her into such a tizzy that even pacifiers stopped working. When I had to drive her somewhere alone, I'd strap her in to her car seat, then I'd start the car, and then she'd start to wail. I'd give her a pacifier and she'd chuck it onto the floor. I'd drive a quarter mile, stop, retrieve the pacifier, and then repeat the process.

How did I clean the Binky? On good days I had coffee in the car. On bad days ... I'll save you from the details.

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I quickly learned to drive with multiple pacifiers, so as soon as she'd chuck one I'd reach back and pop another one into her mouth. She'd take a few sucks from that pacifier, chuck it, start to scream, and I'd reach back with another one.

While I drove and while my daughter chucked Binkies I dealt with all three types of driver distractions:
Visual distractions took my eyes off the road as I tried to see where the pacifier landed.

Manual distractions took my hands off the wheel as I reached behind my seat and fished around the floor.

Cognitive distractions took my mind off of the road as I asked myself why-oh-why had I ever thought having a child was a good idea.

The Focus on Texting-While-Driving Is Misguided

Distracted driving is a huge problem, but to limit a campaign to one source of distraction is unfortunate at best. One study showed that 60 percent of parents felt driving alone with an infant strapped in a rear-facing car seat in the back seat was "very distracting." Eighty percent feared it could cause an accident. In 2001 the American Automobile Association reported that young children in the car were one of the leading causes of driver-distraction crashes for people ages 20 to 29. Texting might be more widespread now, but the impact of a screaming child certainly hasn't changed.

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The fix to distracted driving hasn't changed. The Department of Transportation says, "The message is simple—Put it down!" I think they send the wrong message. People are putting their cell phones down—in their laps, so the police can't see them texting behind the wheel. Experts at the Institute for Highway Safety recently said this could increase the risk of accidents.

I think the message needs to be, "Pull over and stop."

When I'd finally lose patience with my daughter I'd pull over and get out. I'd lean against the back of my car, hazard lights flashing, and try to find some inner peace before climbing back behind the wheel. When I pulled over I presented zero risk for crashing. People would stop to ask if I needed help, but once they heard the screaming they'd simply nod and drive away. Out of gas? No problem. That noise? Good luck.

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One day my wife discovered a ribbon that came with clips on either end. One clip snapped to the handle of the pacifier and the other end clipped to the car seat. When my daughter chucked the pacifier I only needed to reach back and find the ribbon before reeling in the pacifier like a fish. I felt safer, but the screaming still drove me nuts.

The clip and ribbon weren't perfect. There were times my little girl would chuck her Binky so hard that it would swing around like a tether ball and smack her in the eye. When that happened I suffered from a different driver distraction: laughter.

No Alternatives to Pulling Over
"You don't want that Binky?" I'd snicker to myself. "It looks like that Binky doesn't want you, either."

My kids are all a lot older now, but I still need to pull over at times. Sometimes I do it so quickly that the shock quiets them before we come to a complete stop. I then turn and remind them of two things: I want to drive safely so that they'll live long and healthy lives, and if they don't want to help me drive safely then they can find some other way to get around.

What do you think the message should be? "Put it down," "Pull over and stop," or something else?

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**Further Readings**

**Books**

**Periodicals and Internet Sources**
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