

Accident Prep 101: Have someone else handle the after-wreck effects

By DOUGLAS FLINT



Surviving on Richmond Highway means you have to be flexible, and you have to have some experience with carnival bumper-car rides. I see a fair share of cars that have been through accidents that only the young could survive, and that only their doting parents would pick up the tab to repair. We're not talking about restoring an Acura NSX to factory specs. More like patching up Junior's passed-down Honda Accord to get him to school and back and looking respectable enough to park in front of the house. But two cars were towed in this week that made me realize that no one had prepped these kids on what to do in the event of an accident, and it probably wasn't being taught in Driver's Ed. So here it comes.

Blowing your cool
Mr. Friedman called me to let me know his college-age daughter was having her Subaru towed in. I

knew the car, a nice Outback Wagon. Evidently she had been involved in a hit-and-run accident. The hood had been buckled pretty severely and the front lights were broken, but for some reason she decided it was okay to keep driving. I don't mean to the nearest parking lot or gas station to call the police or call for help. I mean she thought she could keep driving to whatever her destination was. After 35 miles or so the check engine light came on and the engine cut off. Evidently the force of the accident had popped the radiator cap off.

Somehow she hadn't seen the steam that must have been pouring out, she had not noticed the temperature gauge going up, or the obvious clatter of protest the engine must have made before it finally stopped. Now, along with the three to four thousand dollars of body damage, the condition of the engine was quite uncertain, with blown head gaskets at the least, and possibly cracked heads. There would be a minimum of fifteen hundred dollars on top of the bodywork, but possibly (and more likely) twenty-five hundred to three thousand dollars more, pushing the repairs

over the replacement value of the car. I know this girl is pretty smart, so why would she do this? Because after a major accident you are in shock and not capable of making rational decisions. That's why you need to have a plan and teach your kids to have a plan too.

Dazed and confused Ms. Robinson called the same week. Her son had dozed off at the wheel of her Windstar van and jumped a curb. Could I check the car and find out why there was so much oil underneath it at the crash site? The first tip-off should have been the tow or "recovery bill." Eight hundred and sixty-three dollars to winch it back up out of the gully and perform the environmental clean-up" (which evidently involves putting down the same kitty litter used since the 1950s to soak up oil, but if you do it with enough feeling it's worth several hundred dollars).

The van is of course totaled. The left front wheel was bent, underneath the thick steel frame that cradles the engine was bent six inches, the bottom of the oil pan was torn off, probably damaging the crankshaft of the engine. The rear wheels were

bent in opposite directions, and I swear Junior had not even noticed that his airbag had deployed. My first reaction was, I don't know what he's on but I gotta get me some! But once again, it was probably just the shock he was in that caused him not to realize he had been walloped in the head by an airbag. Thankfully, in the dark of the night and probably because no other vehicles were involved, the police failed to notice that the plates on the vehicle had expired in October 2005 and the status of Junior's driving permit was in question.

Plan 9 from Alexandria (to prepare for and navigate those inevitable accidents)

Rule 1: Have all your Is dotted and your Ts crossed. Accidents are going to happen, particularly when young people are involved. Make sure that every sticker the car is required to have is up-to-date and that the registration and insurance card are with the vehicle.

Rule 2: Have two tow-truck companies preselected and a repair shop to tow it to - with the registration info in the glove box - and make sure your kids know about it. Otherwise you are at the mercy of the towing and impound people the police use. You will pay double for towing plus environmental

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cleanup, and your car will be at a storage lot at \$75 a day while you try to decide what to do. That \$869 recovery bill would have been \$350 if I had handled it. Sometimes the police can be pretty adamant about calling their preferred tow people to clear the road quickly. I don't expect a shocked teenager to be able to stand up to a grimacing police sergeant, but at least insist it be towed to your preselected shop.

Rule 3: Anything more than a parking lot door ding and you wait there. Pull off to the side of the road, but don't leave the scene. You call the police, then you call the preselected tow company to take it to the preselected shop. You call a family member or friend to rescue you but you do not drive. You are in shock. You are not capable of rational decisions and that includes the ones necessary to drive. You may be hurt. Sometimes in battle a soldier's buddy has to tell him he has a bullet hole because he hasn't noticed.

Rule 4: Don't attempt to drive the vehicle. Your

car is in shock also. Even if it looks okay, it has been jarred pretty hard. A fuel line, brake line, or cooling line may be leaking, resulting in further damage or a fire. This is no joke. A teenager speeding one night plowed into my neighbor's car and fled. His father, either for moral reasons or because of legal ramifications, made his son drive back to the accident scene, where the teenager's car promptly caught fire. Luckily the emergency vehicles were already there.

A likely scenario is that the car might seem okay, but when the steering wheel is turned, the tire comes into contact with the body frame or front-end component, causing it to blow or wedge in a manner where it won't roll. Same for the steering. It may seem fine until a tight turn jams it in a 90-degree turn.

Rule 5: Survival instincts cancel all other rules. In broad daylight this is rarely an issue, but at night use extreme caution. You might get out of your car to face an angry gang of teenagers whose night has now been ruined, and who may not

even have proper license or insurance. I was once a passenger in a car that was hit. I got out to check on the other car and the driver decked me twice before patrons of a local bar pulled him away. Call 911. Report that there are possible injuries in the other car, whether you know it to be the case or not. That will get the authorities there more quickly.

Rule 6: Have AAA membership for the sake of your wife and kids (I'm signing up today). You, as a manly man, may feel capable of handling anything, but you might not always be available. AAA will always be available to answer the phone and send a tow truck anywhere, any time.

I know too many rules are confusing, so I will stop at Number 6. Let me just add that police and insurance companies will determine fault, so avoid roadside confessions at all cost. The middle of a busy thoroughfare is no place to discuss anything and secondary accidents often occur. So get off the road!

And as someone who nearly totaled my dad's car on my first day as a new driver, don't be too hard on them – they feel bad enough already, and there are things that only hard-earned experience can teach them.

