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Opinion 

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Parents must play role in making roads safer for kids

A HIGHWAY SAFETY advocacy group has just offered a sobering reminder of how dangerous our highways are, along with a tool to help parents work with their children to keep them safe on the roads.

The Coalition to End Deaths on Our Roadways announced last week that South Carolina once again made its Fatal Fifteen — the 15 states where the largest portion of traffic fatalities were alcohol-related. Being on this list is no surprise. Although this particular ranking put us slightly lower than normal, South Carolina consistently ranks among the states with the highest proportion of fatalities caused by drunken drivers; that's particularly bad because we also consistently rank among the states with the most highway fatalities overall.

Part of the reason for the high alcohol-death rate is our inadequate laws, which earned us a grade of "D" in the latest Mothers Against Drunk Driving ranking, ahead of only three other states. But part of it is the lax attitude too many South Carolinians take toward drinking and driving — and toward driving in general.

That's something the physicians' group hopes to change, with a contract it is asking parents to sign along with their children: "Give Your Parents the Only Gift They Want This Holiday ... You, Safely Home."

The group urges parents to use the contract, which can be downloaded from www.EndNeedlessDeath.org, as a starting point for a conversation about highway safety. It spells out the responsibilities of teenagers to avoid drugs and alcohol, to stay out of cars with more than one other teenager or with anyone who is drinking and to use their seat belts. It also spells out the responsibilities of parents to help their children obey these rules, to suspend their children's driving privileges if they don't obey them, and to model good behavior themselves by their own responsible driving.

We can't rely entirely on individual responsibility to make our highways safer; having adequate laws is essential to deal with those who refuse to act responsibly. But neither can we rely entirely on tough laws — particularly since our Legislature remains unwilling to pass them. Whether parents take the formal step of having their children sign a contract or not, they need to have those conversations — and enforce their expectations. The lives they save may quite literally be their children's.

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