



Score With the Right Language

The Language We Use

Crash vs. Accident

It is important to pay attention to vocabulary when preparing your educational activities. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, a crash is an event that produces injury and/or property damage, involves a motor vehicle in transport, and occurs on a traffic way or while the vehicle is still in motion after running off the traffic way. There are very few true “accidents” concerning motor vehicle travel so it is important to call these events by the correct term, crash. Too many motor vehicle crashes occur when motorists are in a hurry, speeding, tailgating, or ignoring stop signs and signals. Other crashes occur when adjusting radio settings, eating or drinking, using cell phones or when talking with passengers distracts the driver. Still, other crashes occur when people get in the driver’s seat while under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs. All of these situations can be avoided. As health and safety educators, let’s change the American vernacular and add responsibility to motor vehicle collisions.

Blood Alcohol Content (BAC)

The U.S. Department of Transportation defines BAC as the weight of alcohol in the blood (grams/deciliter). A positive BAC level (0.01 g/dl and higher) indicates that alcohol was consumed by the person tested. The national standard for impaired driving adopted by the U.S. Congress is BAC of 0.08 g/dl. (this is the level at which a person is considered to be legally intoxicated). All states have adopted 0.08 g/dl as the baseline mark of legal intoxication. In addition, all states have adopted laws that make it illegal for persons under the age of 21 to drive with any measurable amount of alcohol in their blood (a minimum of 0.01 – 0.02 g/dl depending on the state).

Alcohol Involvement

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines a fatal crash as alcohol related or alcohol-involved if either a driver or a non-occupant (usually a pedestrian) had a measurable or estimated blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.01 g/dl or above. NHTSA defines a non-fatal crash as alcohol-related or alcohol-involved if police indicate on the police report that there is evidence of alcohol present. This code does not necessarily mean that a driver or non-occupant was tested for alcohol.

Drunk vs. Impaired

Although common in everyday language, the phrase “drunk driving” only refers to part of the problem and does not include those that are intoxicated but do not exhibit visible, outward signs of drunkenness. Rather, the term “impaired driving” is used because it better describes the realities of drinking alcohol and driving. When an individual consumes alcohol, even at low levels, his or her ability to drive is impaired even though outward signs of impairment may not be evident.

Know Your State Laws

What is Zero Tolerance?

Zero Tolerance laws make it illegal for persons under the age of 21 to drive with any measurable amount of alcohol in their blood. States use a 0.01 or 0.02 BAC to define zero tolerance, rather than 0.00 BAC, to allow for variation in alcohol testing instruments. To be effective, a zero tolerance law allows a police officer to require a breath test from a driver under the age of 21 if the officer has probable cause to believe that the driver has been drinking. If the driver refuses the test or the test reveals any measurable level of alcohol, then the driver is subject to sanctions, including loss of his or her driver’s license. Zero tolerance laws exist in each state.

What Are Use-Lose Laws?

In some jurisdictions the use-lose laws make it illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to purchase, possess, transport, or consume alcohol. A person under the age of 21 cited or arrested for using or possessing alcohol may lose his or her driver’s license for a specified period (6 months to a year) and may be subject to other penalties through the motor vehicle administration, juvenile courts, or juvenile justice administration.

