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Why parents put faith in Uber, Lyft

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The smartphone has spawned a world in which we depend on convenience and put trust in technology, which could explain why parents are so willing to let their kids use apps that hire strangers to pick them up.

Parents like Beth Miller say ride-sharing services save time and can be a lifeline.

"I have three kids, 11, 14 and 16, and I use Uber when I am in a bind. If I have to get one kid somewhere and another at the same time, I use it," Miller said. "It is controlled by me. I can see where they are going. I don't let them call an Uber without me."

Miller uses UberTaxi for her older kids instead of ordering a regular Uber because the drivers are vetted, licensed and every car contains a camera. She said she wouldn't let her 11-year-old ride in an Uber without an adult.

Lyft and Curb also include a vetting and licensing process as well as automatic payment for driver and passenger safety.

For first-time riders, Uber includes safety tips on its website and explains the process that drivers go through to be employed by the company.

"I think one of the advantages that ride sharing has over taxis is that ride sharing makes the experience safer for the driver and rider," said Cato Institute policy analyst Matthew Feeney, who has researched the safety of ride-sharing services such as Uber and wrote a report that evaluated them for riders and drivers.

"With Uber, payment is automatic, and I think you would have to want to be caught committing a crime in an Uber car because anyone investigating the scene will have a plethora of information rather than an investigation taking place in a cab," Feeney said.

When it comes to the safety of children, Feeney says parents should not allow their kids to use ride-sharing services without an adult.

"I would personally advise against letting anyone under the age of 18 travel in an Uber car under their account. I can understand why it is tempting to do so, having to deal with many

commitments, but that doesn't detract from the fact that it violates policy that is probably best avoided for safety reasons on both ends."

According to Uber and Lyft's policies, minors are not allowed to call their own rides and must be accompanied by the adult who made the ride request. Three out of the four Chicago Uber drivers interviewed said they drove minors to destinations but wished to remain anonymous since they were breaking Uber's policy.

An Uber representative declined to comment.

"Children (17 and under) are not permitted to ride alone in a Lyft vehicle but are welcome to join parents in a ride," said Scott Coriell, a Lyft spokesman. "Safety is our top priority, and it is our goal to make every ride safe, comfortable and reliable. Since the beginning, we have worked hard to design policies and features that protect our community."

Coriell said that violation of these policies can result in deactivation from the Lyft platform.

Natalie Boscia, mother of two, uses Uber for her 17-year-old daughter a few times a month.

"I can't always pick them up from school, since I am working," Boscia said. "They both attend schools that don't offer bus services, so they rely on carpools, parents or public transportation, and the routes are really convoluted from our location."

She said she relies on the service on hectic days, especially when sports schedules are involved.

"Lily, my 17-year-old does (use Uber) so she isn't taking buses late, especially in the fall when it gets darker faster," Boscia said. "For emergencies and sports, it is easy, and she doesn't need to have money on her. She can get in and get out, which is a plus for me."

Boscia and Miller say they know other parents who use ride-sharing services for their children.

"Almost all of my friends in the city use Uber for their kids. I even have a friend who found an Uber, and that person picks her kids up a few times a week," Miller said.

Dr. Richard Rende, developmental psychologist and author of "Raising Can-Do Kids: Giving Children the Tools to Thrive in a Fast-Changing World," says the question shouldn't be about the safety of driving services; it should be about the maturity level a child needs to ride in the first place.

"On one side, you have freewheeling parents who let kids do whatever they want, and then on the other side of the spectrum, you see helicopter parents who need to know exactly where their children are," Rende said. "Personally, I can't say is it safe, is it unsafe. To me, this conversation is no different than a lot of other decisions parents make: What age do you let your kids go to the mall by themselves or the movies themselves? Can they handle it?"

Rende suggests that, instead of weighing the pros and cons of taking an Uber or Lyft, parents should be giving necessary tools to children so they are ready to take a ride-sharing service if need be.

"Go through a series of questions, have a dialogue with your kids, so they can navigate the unknown on their own," Rende said.