

Parents turn to Uber to shuttle kids, even though it's not allowed

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Teenager Emily Lieber needed a ride home from the bus stop, so she did what her parents might do: She called Uber.

When the driver showed up, he told the Hollywood, Fla., teen, then 13, that she was too young to ride. So she called another Uber. And off she went.

Emily is one of many teens who are turning to ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft to help them meet their busy schedules, particularly as school starts back up. Some parents even use the services to get their children to school.

It's against company policy - but it is not illegal - for drivers to pick up anyone under 18 unless they have an adult with them, but many drivers do it anyway and many parents don't know it violates the rules.

Teens who violate Uber's under-18 rule risk losing their account, said company spokeswoman Jodi Page. She said some underage riders have been removed from the app, but she declined to say how many.

Uber officials would neither explain the reason for the under-18 rule nor answer questions about how they are enforcing it. They also declined to say what happens to drivers who transport underage riders.

"Our terms and conditions and community guidelines specifically state that an account holder needs to be an adult (18 or older) to have an

account," Page said via email. "If not, a parent or guardian must be with them at all times. When riders sign up they agree to follow this policy."

But some say Uber is well aware of the growing trend that bucks their own policy.

"They know what's happening and are looking the other way," said Harry Campbell, a Los Angeles-based blogger at The Rideshare Guy. "It's kind of a mess for drivers because they're getting tons of requests for rides from teens and Uber is not doing anything (to enforce its own rule)."

Lyft officials declined to answer any questions for this story.

Critics say parents who let their kids take Uber and Lyft are taking a risk because their drivers aren't put through the same rigorous background checks applied to cab drivers.

"Just because an app makes it easy, doesn't mean it's safe - or wise," said Dave Sutton, spokesman for WhosDrivingYou.org, a taxi industry group that is pushing for stricter screening rules for Uber and Lyft drivers.

"It's important to screen out a bad driver ahead of time," Sutton said. "Once you're in the car, it's too late."

Yellow Cab President John Camillo says his company requires intensive background checks conducted by law enforcement.

"Every driver is fingerprinted," he said. "If my driver does not use the proper name, you can't fool the fingerprints. They are sent to the FBI and they do a national search. I think our background checks are infinitely better."

All Uber drivers undergo a background check that includes a review of

their driving record and criminal history, Page said. The screening is done by a background check service accredited by the National Association of Professional Background Screeners. Uber also provides live GPS tracking and a "Share My Trip" feature that lets customers share trip details in real time with family and friends, she said.

Still, some Uber drivers have been accused of crimes against their passengers, critics note.

A year ago, a Boca Raton, Fla., man working as an Uber driver was arrested after three women accused him of rape in three separate incidents. And in May, an Uber driver in Kissimmee, Fla., was accused of raping a 14-year-old customer traveling alone who had requested a ride to her aunt's house.

South Florida mom Rhonda Tescher has seen the headlines, but lets her 15-year-old daughter take Uber as long as she has two friends along.

"I never let her take it by herself," she said.

Allyson Tomchin, Emily's mom, had no clue about Uber's "no unaccompanied minors" policy and neither did her children, who range in age from 13 to 17.

Tomchin says her kids started using Uber a couple of years ago because it's convenient and cheap. To catch a ride, customers just download a free app and pay for rides using their smartphones.

Tomchin's stepdaughter Emily, now 14, has taken Uber dozens of times and was denied a ride for being underage only that one time.

"It doesn't surprise me the company has that rule, but it's definitely not being enforced," Tomchin said.

She said Uber has been a godsend for her and her husband, Rand Lieber.

"We have super busy schedules and so do the kids," she said. "We're all doing different things at different times. Uber helps us accommodate everyone's schedule."

She also thinks her kids will be safe as long as they Uber together.

"I know the name of the driver, the license plate and the route they're driving," she said.

But not every parent is a fan.

Jennifer Rosinski, a Cooper City, Fla., mom with four kids, says she would never send any of them off on their own with an Uber driver.

"I don't think it's safe," she said. "I'm just not comfortable putting my child in a car with someone I don't know."

Boca Raton dad Bruce Gipson says his 17-year-old daughter has taken Uber a few times to get to and from work - without his knowledge.

"I didn't know she'd used it until I asked her how she got home," he said. "I'm not real thrilled about it because you don't know who's picking you up."

Gipson, a retired Miami Beach firefighter, says he had no idea about Uber's ban on transporting minors.

Now, he said, he longer has to worry about it.

"I bought her a car in December," he said.

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