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## AGES & STAGES

# Behind the Wheel: Helping Teens Become Safe Drivers

There is no underestimating the significance of a driver's license to teenagers (/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/default.aspx). The arrival of that laminated card opens up a world of possibilities, symbolizing freedom and a growing independence from adults.

As far as boys and girls are concerned, the day they pass their road test can't come too soon. But from a developmental standpoint, the license may indeed come too soon. Hence the disproportionately high rates of automobile-related injuries and fatalities among this age group. Youngsters aged sixteen through nineteen make up just one in twenty motorists, yet they are behind the wheel in one in seven accidents that kill either the driver or passengers. Sixteen-year-old drivers are more than *twenty* times as likely to have a car crash than other motorists; seventeen-year-olds, more than six times as likely.



The chief reason for adolescents' poor safety record is their lack of experience in handling a car and sizing up and reacting appropriately to hazardous circumstances like merging onto a highway, making a left-hand turn at a crowded intersection or driving in poor weather conditions.

Inexperience aside, teenagers may lack some of the motor coordination and judgment needed to perform many of the complex physical maneuvers of ordinary driving. According to Dr. Richard Schieber, a child-injury specialist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, "Teens are relatively clumsy compared to how they will be as adults. Driving may be one of the first skills where they have to coordinate their eyes, hands and feet. They're also more likely to miscalculate a traffic situation and are more easily distracted than older drivers." Immaturity and the adolescent propensity for taking risks—by speeding, tailgating, text messaging while driving (/English/ages-stages/teen/safety/pages/Text-Messaging-Safety.aspx), cutting off other cars and so forth—frequently endanger lives as well.

## What You Can Do

**Give your youngster extra practice behind the wheel.** School driver's-ed programs and private driving instruction typically provide a total of six hours on-the-road training when the number actually needed to become reasonably proficient is closer to fifty hours, however—or about two hours a week spread over six months.

Once a teen acquires a *learner's permit*, by passing a vision test and taking a written exam, she may drive when accompanied by a licensed driver aged twenty-one or older. "Parents should give kids as much time in the driver's seat as possible," advises Dr. Schieber, "in as many situations as possible. You start with basic skills, then introduce other scenarios," such as driving at night, on country roads, in bumper-to-bumper traffic, on freeways, at dusk, in rainy weather and so on. It's a good idea to ask your youngster's driver's-ed instructor which areas have been mastered and which ones need work. In addition, get into the habit of handing your teen the car keys when you're out running errands together. There is no substitute for experience.

**Institute a graduated licensing program.** Although many states allow boys and girls as young as sixteen to obtain a license, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that youngsters not receive an unrestricted license until age eighteen or until they have been driving under adult supervision for at least two years.

A number of states have added a middle step as part of a graduated licensing system. Passing the road test gains novice drivers aged sixteen or older (the minimum age varies according to state, as do the restrictions) a *provisional license*. For the next year, they may take the wheel independently during the day. But after dark, they must have one licensed adult in the vehicle with them. At the end of their probationary period, they are awarded a full license, provided that their record is free of moving violations and car crashes.

Florida was the first state to adopt a graduated system for motorists under eighteen, in 1996. The following year, its rate of automobile injuries and fatalities among fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-olds dipped by 9 percent. Other states that have joined this growing movement have reported similar reductions.

You don't need to wait for your state to pass a graduated-licensing law to institute a program of your own devising. Perhaps you will choose to set the probation period at six months instead of twelve; or, conversely, you could prolong the learner's-permit stage from the usual period of six months to twelve months, as Georgia and North Carolina have done. Extend driving privileges at a pace that you feel your teenager can handle.

**Spend an afternoon teaching your youngster how to perform routine car maintenance** such as checking the air pressure in the tires, the water level in the battery, oil and transmission fluid and the windshield-wiper fluid. Also show her how to change a flat tire. *If you can afford it, consider enrolling in an automobile club that provides road service.*

**See to it that your adolescent's car meets all safety standards.** While it's an admirable goal for a teenager to want to save up to buy his own car, newer models with modern safety features are beyond most young people's budgets.

Ideally, youngsters should be driving midsize or full-size cars equipped with air bags. In fact, a big ol' clunker is preferable to a spanking-new compact, because it offers more crash protection. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety suggests avoiding sleek, high-performance vehicles, which may tempt teens to speed. Sport utility vehicles are generally frowned upon for teens as well; their higher centers of gravity make them less stable and more likely to roll over. Having a heavy-duty roll bar installed will greatly enhance their safety.

**Set a good example for your kids. As a parent, you are a powerful role model.** No speeding, no weaving in and out of traffic, no drinking and driving (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Drug-Abuse-Prevention-Starts-with-Parents.aspx>), no texting, no fiddling about for a compact disk to put in the CD player, no chatting on the cell phone, no fits of road rage because the car in front of us is poking along, and seat belts (</English/news/Pages/Minority-Children-Less-Likely-to-Wear-a-Car-Seatbelt,-Putting-Them-at-Greater-Risk-of-Severe-Injury.aspx>) at all times.

## Teaching A Teen To Drive (Without Driving The Two of You Crazy)

The Allstate Insurance Company suggests these valuable tips for productive driving lessons:

1. Before getting started, discuss the route you'll be taking and the skills you'll be practicing.
2. In an even tone of voice (please, no barking like a drill sergeant), give clear, simple instructions: "Turn right at this corner." "Brake." "Pull over to the curb."
3. If your teen makes a mistake, ask him to pull over, then calmly discuss what he did wrong.
4. Encourage your teen to talk aloud about what he's observing while driving.
5. After each session, ask, "How do you think you drove today?" Let him point out any lapses in judgment or other gaffes. Then evaluate his progress together. Be sure to offer praise where appropriate.
6. Keep a log in which you enter the route taken and your critique of each skill practiced.

## Rules of the Road

Even after a young person receives her license, she's still in the process of learning how to drive. A number of clear safety guidelines and appropriate penalties should be developed with her input before she starts to drive. These "rules of the road" can include:

- No driving or riding with others under the influence of alcohol (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/pages/Alcohol-The-Most-Popular-Choice.aspx>) or other drugs (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Helping-Teens-Resist-Pressure-to-Try-Drugs.aspx>).
- Because teens are easily distracted, insist that they have no more than two friends in the car at a time. Consider implementing a no-friends rule for the first few months of licensed driving.
- No eating or drinking while driving.
- Music must be kept at low to moderate volume.
- Everyone in the vehicle must wear a seat belt at all times. Failure to use seat belts more than triples the risk of injury in a serious crash.
- No nighttime driving. Driving when it's dark is inherently more demanding, especially for adolescents, who are four times as likely to die in a car crash at night than during daylight hours. In cities that have instituted curfews for young people, the teenage fatality rate has gone down by one-fourth.
- No driving when tired or upset.
- No driving beyond a certain distance from home. If your youngster wants to travel beyond the boundaries you've established, he must ask permission.
- No talking on a cell phone (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Media-Time-Family-Pledge.aspx>) when the vehicle is in motion.
- No texting on a cell phone when the vehicle is in motion.

- No picking up hitchhikers, unless it is someone they know well, and no hitchhiking themselves.

Breaking any of these rules constitutes grounds for some form of penalty. Minor offenses call for a stern warning. Repeated violations and serious infractions will cost him the keys. For how long is up to you.

“Teens need to understand that driving the family car is a privilege not a birthright,” says Dr. Schieber, a pediatrician since 1981. He encourages parents to stand firm on issues of automobile safety. “If it means that a kid has to take the bus ([/English/safety-prevention/on-the-go/Pages/Where-We-Stand-Seat-Belts-on-the-School-Bus.aspx](#)) to school or can’t borrow the car for a date, maybe he’ll think twice about committing the infraction in the future. Parents have the obligation *and the liability* to help their child grow, in this case by stepping in and teaching them responsibility when driving.”

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