

Your Teenage Driver

So, your teenage son or daughter wants to drive. In fact, they can hardly wait! Scary, isn't it? Driving has become one of the most important things in your child's life.

You've heard the statistics about teenage driving -- the traffic violations and fines; accidents and property damage; disabilities and deaths. Try telling those to a teenager, who thinks, "It'll never happen to me."

Suddenly, you become a "wet blanket." "You don't trust me," he or she claims. "You never let me have any fun."

How do you prepare your teenager for the responsibilities of driving? There's no magic formula. But there are some things you can do to make this step in the transition to adulthood less painful -- for both of you.

Putting things in perspective

Teenagers' interest in driving may seem sudden and unusually intense, but it isn't. We all have helped "program" them for this day since their earliest childhood. Their first "wheels" were a baby buggy or stroller, then a walker to help them learn to walk.

And, what about the tricycles, bicycles, in-line skates, scooters, skateboards and go-carts they've enjoyed? We've taught them that wheels are more than a way to get from here to there -- they're a way of life, and they're fun!

Now, your teen is interested in more adult things, and what's more "adult" than a car? Cars are transportation and status symbols. They make a statement about who we are. We look for our own brand of power, speed and style.

TV shows and movies featuring exotic cars and chase scenes add other dimensions to the allure. As your son or daughter will quickly point out, all the "older kids", including brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, drive. So, why shouldn't they? They can hardly wait to "go cruisin'!"

Your teen has been thoroughly indoctrinated in the American love affair with the automobile; driver education and a learner's permit are just ahead. It's important that you be a major influence on his or her driving skills and attitudes.

Setting a good example

Children learn by imitating their parents -- from tying their shoes to cutting the grass. Youngsters also adopt parents' attitudes. The old adage to "Do as I say, not as I do" just doesn't work.

If you talk to your teen about obeying the speed limit and then rely on your radar detector to keep from being caught, you're telling them it's okay to speed if you don't get caught.

The same goes for rolling through stop signs and accelerating on a yellow light or refusing to yield the right of way to a car or pedestrian. And face it: you're never going to get kids to use seat belts if you don't buckle up!

Attitude is as important as specific driving skills. Maybe you can beat the odds while you ignore good driving habits, but your son or daughter has neither your experience nor judgment. Ignoring the rules of safe driving is never acceptable behavior. Don't just pay lip service to good driving; set the example.

Test your reaction time

Touch each of the numbered squares below in numerical order as fast as you can. Average reaction time is about six seconds. More than 10 seconds is slow, and if your reaction time as a driver were of comparable speed, you could be in trouble. Quick reflexes are no substitute, however, for experience and good judgment.

Being involved

Driver education courses focus on specific driving skills and knowledge, but they're no substitute for maturity and experience.

You can give your young driver the benefit of both if you communicate and stay involved in the learning process. Avoid lecturing. Be alert to opportunities for discussion. Ask questions to stimulate self-discovery, and listen to his or her responses.

Discuss what's happening in the driver training course. Review text material with your student to reinforce learning and to refresh your memory. Being involved shows you care about what he or she is learning and you take it seriously. Use every opportunity, including trips in the family car, to reinforce learning.

After your young driver has earned the learner's permit, take frequent practice drives. If you're patient and attentive, your teenager will gain experience and confidence, ask questions and learn from mistakes under your supervision. Continue supervised drives in all kinds of weather and traffic conditions.

Your teenager will make many mistakes in the first few practice sessions. Some of those mistakes may reflect lack of a specific skill, in which case additional practice will help. Others may be the result of attitude: carelessness, inattentiveness or lack of judgment or concern. Focus on such things as concentration, courtesy, judgment and responsibility. Stress that anger, aggressiveness, arrogance and other negative attitudes are leading causes of accidents.

The National Safety Council's 10 important tips for you and your passengers:

1. Don't leave the driveway without securing each passenger in the car. Safety belts save thousands of lives each year!
2. Remember that driving too fast or too slow can increase the likelihood of collisions.
3. Be alert! If you notice a car straddling the center line, weaving, making wide turns, stopping abruptly or responding slowly to traffic signals, the driver may be impaired.
4. Avoid an impaired driver by slowing down, letting the driver pass, pulling onto the shoulder or turning right at the nearest corner. If it appears that an oncoming car is crossing into your lane, pull over to the roadside, sound the horn and flash your lights.
5. Notify the police immediately after seeing a motorist who is driving suspiciously.
6. Follow the rules of the road. Don't contest the "right of way" or try to race another car during a merge.
7. Don't stop in the road to talk with pedestrians or other drivers.
8. Avoid eye contact or making obscene gestures with/at an aggressive driver.
9. Don't tailgate.
10. Remember, while driving to always be cautious, aware and responsible.

Talking Facts

All drivers assume a number of responsibilities. Because of their lack of experience, teenage drivers especially need to be aware of the facts.

They should understand that your car insurance premium will increase significantly when they are added to the policy; statistically, teen drivers have more accidents than adults, and those accidents are more severe. In addition, many companies impose a surcharge after a specified number of accidents.

Teens need to be aware of the effects of moving traffic violations -- tickets. Tickets are expensive **and** they may result in an increase in insurance premiums. Research shows people who have moving violations are more likely to have an accident than people who don't.

Too many tickets may result in the loss of both insurance and the driver's license. As a part of the driver's record, tickets can even have an impact on future employment.

Your teen **must** understand that driving is a privilege, not a right, and that failure to observe the rules of safe driving can have serious financial consequences for mom and dad **and** the young driver.

And, financial losses are only part of the picture. A car can destroy property and kill or maim people. These functions may not seem important to the teenager who's excited about driving. So, how do you get the message through to your kids?

What to do if you're in an accident: Earning a driver's license will be a big day in your child's life. If you've done your part to ensure good driving skills and attitudes, it can be a positive experience for you, too. But, it's the first of many more days to come -- days when your youngster will be behind the wheel without adult supervision or counsel.

Now's the time to make those days as safe as possible by establishing some ground rules. Remember that 16-year-olds are commonly in crashes involving high speeds, and high vehicle occupancy. They also have the highest number of single vehicle crashes. Setting limitations is not treating your teen like a child; it's providing an opportunity to demonstrate maturity by showing he or she can accept responsibility.

Rules may differ from one family to another, but here are some basics you might want to consider:

- If anyone is injured, immediately contact the appropriate authorities (i.e., Rescue Service, etc.)
- Notify the police and obtain names of the officers and their badge numbers.

- Underage drivers should call their parents.
- Obtain the names and addresses of all persons involved and all witnesses. If witnesses won't cooperate, write down their license numbers and car descriptions.
- Don't admit liability and do not discuss the claim with anybody, except your agent or the police.

Setting some ground rules

- Insist that your teen control speed. High speeds cut down on reaction time and increase the severity of crashes. A crash at 78 miles per hour is twice as violent as one at 55 mph.*
- Require your teen to observe curfews. This is going to be one of your biggest challenges. However, it may be a life saver - 53 percent of all teenage motor vehicle deaths occur on Friday, Saturday and Sunday; 43 percent of these accidents occur between 9 o'clock p.m. and 6 o'clock a.m.*
- Prohibit your teen from drinking and driving. Nearly 50 percent of traffic deaths are alcohol related. More than half of alcohol related deaths involve 16-to-20 year olds.# (24 percent of 16-to-20-year-olds killed in passenger vehicles deaths had blood alcohol contents greater than or equal to .10 percent*).
- Know your teenager's friends and their driving habits. Discourage your teenager from loaning his or her vehicle to friends and from "joyriding." Newly licensed drivers should not have other teenage passengers. (63 percent of teenage passenger deaths in 1996 occurred in crashes where another teenager was driving*). Traffic Injuries are the leading cause of all deaths for people ages 6 to 27.*
- Radio/cassette/disc players can be tremendous distractions. Request that your teen keep the volume low. Other distractions include eating while driving, combing their hair or applying make-up, etc. They **must** keep both eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel! *Another tough one, but important!*
- Teach your teen to use seat belts. They reduce the risk of death to front seat passengers by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to crucial injury by 50 percent. (If you're buying a new car for yourself or your teen, insist on one equipped with air bags. They reduce injuries and fatalities even further!)

Talk to your teenager **now** about what you expect -- and what the consequences will be if he or she fails to meet your expectations.

Re-emphasize that driving is a privilege and that failure to live up to safe driving responsibilities will result in loss of that privilege.

Acquiring mature driving skills should be an exciting and rewarding experience for your teenager. With your involvement, it can also be a safe experience.

- A 30-mile trip at 55 miles per hour takes 33 minutes. The same trip at 70 miles per hour takes 26 minutes. Increase your speed by 15 miles per hour and you "save" only seven minutes.
- Signals that a driver may be intoxicated include: abrupt starts and stops; running over curbs; turning into the wrong lane; weaving from side to side of the road; overshooting stop signs; excessive speed and extremely slow speeds.

* Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

National Safety Council

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