

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 76

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HELPING YOUR TEEN BECOME A SAFE DRIVER

A driver's license is one of the biggest status symbols among high school students. Getting a driver's license is not only a social asset but it makes the adolescent feel more independent than ever before. Parents no longer have to do the driving - the teen can get places on his or her own. Most teens count the hours and days until they can get their learners permit (usually age 16) and take their driving test to demonstrate driving competence. Some teens however, may be pushed to drive by peer or parental pressures before they feel ready. Parents often have many concerns and fear for their teen's safety on the road.

According to the American Automobile Association (AAA), teenage drivers account for only seven percent of the driving population but are involved in 14 percent of fatal crashes. Traffic crashes are the number one cause of death and injury for people ages 15-19. In 2004, more than 7,700 teens died in motor vehicle collisions. Problems which contribute to the high crash rate of young drivers include: driving inexperience, lack of adequate driving skills, risk taking, poor driving judgment and decision making, alcohol consumption and excessive driving during high risk hours (11PM-5AM).

Learning to Drive (Learner's Permit)

When a teenager obtains a learner's permit they can start learning to drive with an adult present in the car to supervise and teach. In most cases the best way for teens to learn to drive is through a driver's education class. These classes are often sponsored by schools. In many states, completing a driver's education course results in reduction of the teen's automobile insurance costs. Private driving instruction is another alternative. AAA offers a training program (available on video or CD-ROM) "Teaching Your Teens to Drive: A Partnership for Survival." One teenager has even developed a website specifically for teens learning to drive ("Teen New Driver Homepage" - www.teendriving.com). Parents are in a unique position to show their children proper driving skills and to teach proper driving choices. Teen drivers need to get as much driving experience as possible after they obtain their learner's permit. Lots of driving experience generally makes the teen a safer driver and eases the transition to driving independently. However, not all parents have the temperament to teach driving. Parents who find themselves yelling, making sarcastic remarks or being upsetting to the teen should ask their spouse, another relative or friend to help out.

The Driver's License (Driving Independently)

When teens pass the official driving test they receive their driver's license and can legally drive independently (some states have restrictions on 17 year old drivers). Parents, however, should not allow their teen to drive independently until the teen has sufficient experience and the parents are comfortable with the teen's level of driving skill. Parents should talk candidly with their teen about the dangers and risks of distractions such as music from radio/tape/CD player, passengers, eating food and using cell phones. Parents should also discuss and demonstrate the importance of controlling emotions while driving (e.g. "road rage," drag racing, etc.). Teens should also be taught about the importance of defensive driving. Inexperienced drivers often concentrate on driving correctly and fail to anticipate the actions and mistakes or errors of other drivers. If the teen is taking medications (prescription or over-the-counter) or has any medical illnesses, parents should check with their family physician about possible effects on the teen's driving ability.

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Parents should make sure that the vehicle their teen drives is in safe condition (brakes, tires, etc.) and working properly. The vehicle should have essential emergency equipment (flares, flashlight, jumper cables, etc.) and the teen should know how to use it. A cell phone is helpful for emergencies but parents must stress that it can be a dangerous distraction if it is used while driving.

Concern about the number of young people killed or injured in traffic crashes has prompted state legislation to reform the way teenagers are licensed to drive. A majority of states have adopted the Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) system with varying state requirements. Recommended by the AAA, the GDL has teens earn driving privileges in a three-stage process: learner’s permit at age 16, a probationary license after 6 months and an unrestricted driver’s license at age 18.

Even though the driver’s license allows the teen to drive independently, it is important that parents establish clear rules for safe and responsible driving and rules for the use of the car.

Rules for New Drivers

Rules for parents to consider when teens begin driving independently include:

- Parents should not allow young drivers unrestricted driving privileges until they have gained sufficient experience.
- Parents should limit their teen’s driving alone in adverse weather conditions (rain, snow, ice, fog, etc.) and at night until the teen has sufficient skills and experience.
- Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is illegal and dangerous and should be strictly prohibited.
- Parents should work out when and where the teen is allowed to drive the car (e.g. to and from part-time job, etc.).
- Everyone in the car must wear seat belts at all times.
- Parents should determine whether and when their teen can drive passengers. Some states have established a law that no passengers are allowed in the car until the teen has logged a defined period of safe independent driving
- Parents should determine what behavior or circumstances will result in loss of the teen’s driving privileges.
- Teens should not drive when fatigued or tired.
- Headphones should never be worn while driving.
- Helmets must be worn when riding a motorcycle.
- Teens should be encouraged to take an annual defensive driving course after obtaining their license.

Supervised behind-the-wheel driving experience is the key to developing necessary habits and skills for safe driving. Parents need to work with their teens to help them gain the needed experience and judgment.

Additional/related *Facts for Families*: #3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs, #66 Helping Teenagers with Stress, #58 Normal Adolescent Development

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