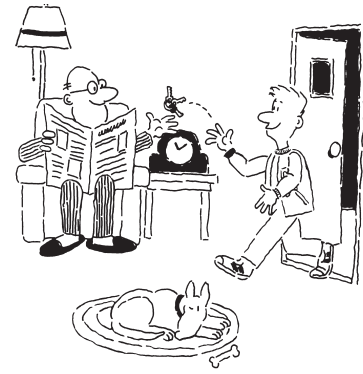


The Teen Driver

Guidelines for Parents



Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for teens and young adults. More than 5,000 young people die every year in car crashes and thousands more are injured. Drivers who are 16 years old are more than 20 times as likely to have a crash as are other drivers. State and local laws, safe driving programs, and driver's education classes all help keep teens safe on the roads. Parents can also play an important role in keeping young drivers safe. This information has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics to inform parents about the risks that teen drivers face and how parents can help keep them safe on the roads.

Why teens are at risk

There are two main reasons why teens are at a higher risk for being in a car crash: lack of driving experience and their tendency to take risks while driving.

- **Lack of experience.** Teens drive faster and do not control the car as well as more experienced drivers. Their judgment in traffic is often insufficient to avoid a crash. In addition, teens do most of their driving at night, which can be even more difficult. Standard driver's education classes include 30 hours of classroom teaching and 6 hours of behind-the-wheel training. This is not enough time to fully train a new driver.
- **Risk taking.** Teen drivers are more likely to be influenced by peers and other stresses and distractions. This can lead to reckless driving behaviors such as speeding, driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and not wearing safety belts.

Programs that help

Graduated licensing laws. Most teens get their driver's licenses in two stages: a learner's permit followed a few months later by a regular driver's license. The US Department of Transportation recommends "graduated licensing" so that learning to drive is spread over three stages. Each stage gives teens more driving privileges. Teen drivers have to meet certain restrictions for at least 6 months in each stage in order to move to the next stage. Driver's education classes would cover more and more complex decision-making and skills training during each stage. Twelve states have some form of graduated licensing laws.

Minimum drinking age and zero tolerance laws. Drunk and drugged driving are major problems for American teens. In one study, an estimated 6% to 14% of drivers younger than 21 years who were stopped at roadside sobriety checkpoints had been drinking. The misuse of alcohol and other drugs can severely hurt teenagers in many ways—especially on the road. A teen driver with a blood alcohol level (BAC) above 0.05% is more likely to be involved in a crash than is a sober teen driver.

Two types of laws exist to help lower the number of teens who drive after drinking alcohol. These are *minimum drinking age laws* and *zero tolerance laws*. Minimum drinking age laws prohibit the sale of alcohol to anyone under 21 years of age. These laws have helped reduce the number of alcohol-related crashes by 40%. But in some states, these laws have many loopholes and are hard to enforce. Many states have or will soon adopt zero tolerance laws that lower the allowable BAC limits for minors. Some states also require that licenses be suspended, sometimes for up to 1 year, after drivers younger than 21 years of age are arrested for driving drunk. These laws work. In Maryland, alcohol-related crashes decreased by at least 11% as a result of zero tolerance laws.

Safety belt laws. Even though all states have laws that require the use of safety belts, these laws may not apply to all passengers or all seats in a vehicle. In addition, studies show that teens do not use safety belts as often as older drivers do. Young people between 10 and 20 years old use safety belts only about 35% of the time—the lowest usage rate of any group. Strictly enforced safety belt laws, along with air bags, could greatly reduce the number of teens who are injured and killed in car crashes. In addition, teen drivers need to learn to take the responsibility of making sure all passengers are buckled up.

Curfew laws. Curfew laws ban teen driving during certain hours at night, such as midnight to 5 am. States with nighttime driving curfews for young drivers have lower crash rates than other states. The more strict the law, the fewer fatal crashes occur.

Educational efforts. Various state and national groups have programs to educate teens about unsafe driving practices, such as not wearing a safety belt and drunk driving. Pediatricians also play a role in such efforts.

There are several groups that encourage alternatives to drinking and driving by hosting social events for teens such as alcohol-free proms and parties. They also help teens and parents communicate. For example, SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk) encourages parents and teens to sign a contract in which both parties agree to avoid using alcohol or other drugs before driving and avoid riding with those who have. The contract also states that if a teen has been drinking he or she will call home for a ride. The group also encourages young people to help other teens change drinking habits and save lives on the roadways.

Safe ride programs. In some areas, “safe ride” programs help parents get involved by volunteering to drive to proms and other parties. Other programs give rides to teens who might otherwise have to drive home after drinking or ride with someone who has been drinking. A California program, for example, combines an educational program about alcohol abuse and an escort service for “stranded” teens on weekend nights. Teens can use this service in confidence. Teens volunteer to be drivers, but adults are also on-call in case questions or problems come up. Volunteer drivers stay in the car when they drop teens at home. They watch the teens enter their homes but do not talk with parents. Adults on-call handle any questions from parents.

How parents can help

Establish and discuss “house rules” about driving even before your teen gets a license. Remind your teen that these rules are in place because you care about his or her safety. If your teen complains about the rules, stand firm. You might say something like, “I don’t care what other parents are doing—I care about you and don’t want you to get in a crash.” Remember, you control the car keys. Don’t hesitate to take away driving privileges if your teen breaks any rules. Resist the urge to break the house rules yourself and let your teen drive because it is too much trouble for you to drive. Instead, try to arrange a car pool of parents and take turns driving.

You do not need to wait for graduated licensing laws to be passed in your state to adopt your own graduated driving rules. By slowly increasing driving privileges, you can help your teen get the experience needed to drive safely and responsibly. Here are some suggestions on how you can create a graduated licensing program for your teen driver. It may not be necessary to use all of the following restrictions; choose the ones that make the most sense for you and your teen.

Stage one

- teen must be at least 15½ years old or have a legal learner’s permit
- teen must drive with a licensed adult driver at all times, the parent if possible
- no driving between 10 pm and 5 am or no driving after sunset
- driver and all passengers must wear safety belts
- no use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs
- teen must remain ticket-free and crash-free for 6 months before moving up to the next stage

Stage two

- teen must be at least 16 years old or have driven with a learner’s permit for at least 6 months
- teen must drive with a licensed adult driver during nighttime hours, the parent if possible
- teen allowed to drive unsupervised during daytime hours
- passengers restricted to one nonfamily member during daytime hours

- no use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs
- driver and all passengers must wear safety belts
- teen must remain ticket-free and crash-free for 12 months before moving up to the next stage

Stage three

- teen must be at least 18 years old or have driven at least 2 years at the previous stage
- no restrictions on driving as long as the teen driver remains ticket-free and crash-free for 6 months
- no use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs
- all passengers must wear safety belts

Other ways parents can help:

- Require that your teen maintain good grades in school before he or she can drive. Check with your auto insurance company to see if any “good student” discounts are available.
- Set a good driving example (no use of alcohol or other drugs, no speeding, always wear your safety belt, and require that safety belts be worn by all passengers).
- Remind your teen how important it is to stay focused on driving, not getting distracted by excessively loud music or talking on a cellular phone.
- Let your teen know that driving after drinking or using other drugs will not be tolerated. Tell your teen to always call you or someone else for a ride any time he or she or any other driver has been drinking or using drugs. Let your teen know that you will pick him or her up. However, if you find he or she was drinking, it may be better to wait until the next day before you discuss the incident.
- Be alert to any signs that your teen has a drinking or other substance abuse problem. If you suspect a problem, urge your teen to talk with his or her pediatrician or school counselor. Such trusted adults can refer your teen for other help, if needed.
- Support efforts to protect teens. These might include “safe ride” programs or Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Encourage alcohol-free community events.
- Encourage schools to teach about the dangers of driving after drinking or using drugs.
- Support showing safety films in schools. Also support efforts to promote safety belt use in all vehicles that take children and teens to and from school.

Driving is a privilege and a big responsibility. Teen drivers, because of their age and inexperience, are at a higher risk for car crashes. Licensing programs, rules of the road, and safe ride programs are designed to help teen drivers stay safe. Along with support and encouragement from parents, these programs are the best way to help teens learn to become responsible drivers.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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