

# Risky Business

## Teens as Beginning Drivers

### Why are teen drivers at high risk of being involved in crashes?

- They have little practice dealing with dangerous traffic and road conditions.
- They are impulsive and often do risky things behind the wheel.

### Helping Your Teenager be a Safer Driver

Most parents have mixed feelings when their teenagers start to drive. Young people gain freedom, but face real dangers on the road.

The youngest and newest teen drivers are most likely to have fatal crashes. Some state laws, such as graduated licensing and “zero tolerance” for teen drinking and driving, help prevent crashes. Parents play a big part in preventing these tragedies, too.

#### Did you know?

- Inexperience, poor judgment, and distraction by passengers are the main problems for teen drivers.
- Night driving, speeding, and driver errors are most likely to be related to new-driver crashes.
- Young, 16-year-old drivers are more likely than older drivers to cause the crashes they are in.
- Teen drivers are more likely to crash if other youths are in the car with them. This is especially true if several others are with them.
- Many teens are killed riding in cars driven by other teens. Younger brothers and sisters are also in danger riding with new teen drivers. A study found that the teen passengers of teen drivers are the least likely riders to buckle up.
- Teen drivers are more likely to crash when they are just driving around for fun.
- Seat belt use is much lower among teens than adults.
- Driving after drinking or using drugs is risky at any age. Older teens are more likely to have crashes involving alcohol than younger teens.



### Actions Parents Can Take

**You are a role model.** Your children learn by watching you. No matter what you say, they will speed, rush through yellow lights, use a cell phone, or drive without buckling their seat belt if they have seen you do so.

Studies show that when parents set clear rules in a supportive way and pay attention to where their child goes and with whom, teens are half as likely to be involved in a crash.

**Support a “graduated driver licensing” (GDL) law in your state.** This limits teen driving for the first year or more, while they gain experience. If your state has a GDL, follow it; if you ignore this law, your teen will feel that laws are optional.

**Remember: driving is a privilege.** Your teen may think it is a right, but you can set limits with love and concern. With or without a GDL law in your state, you can:

- Give your teen plenty of practice driving with you for a year or more.
- Do not allow your teen to drive with any teenage passengers at first. Later, limit to no more than one friend.
- Set a driving curfew with your teen; consider 10 or 11 pm.
- Take a clear, strong stand against alcohol use.
- Insist on seat belt use by everyone in the vehicle.
- Prohibit cell phone use while driving, including text messaging. Insist that all drivers in the family must stop in a safe area before using the phone.

**Talk frankly with your teen about the risks** of driving and the worries you have. Teens want to know you care about them, even if it does not always seem so.



## Practical Tips for Parents

- **Choose a safe car for your teen.** Keep in mind that a “cool” vehicle is not likely to be the safest.
  - Older SUVs and pickups are much more likely to roll over than newer ones with electronic stability control (ESC).
  - Heavier cars are generally safer than smaller, lighter ones. Avoid small, sporty models.
  - Air bags, anti-lock brakes, and stability control features are important. In general, newer cars have features that make them much safer than older cars.
- **Expect your teen to pay** all (or a share) of the insurance for the car he drives. Some auto insurance companies give discounts to teens who participate in a defensive driving course. Check with your insurer.
- **Insist on seat belt use.** Make sure your teen knows how to PROPERLY buckle up. Make buckling up part of the driving privilege. Seat belt use is necessary, even if the car has air bags. Passengers in the back seat also need to use seat belts, even if it’s not a law in your state. An unbuckled person can be thrown around in the car during a crash and could hurt others.
- If driving younger children, make sure your teen knows how to PROPERLY use car seats and boosters.
- **Give your teen plenty of practice driving** with you or another adult, even after he gets his license. Driver education courses alone do not make safe drivers. The more hours of supervised practice your teen has, the better. Make sure your teen has practice driving day and night, on different kinds of roads, and under different weather conditions.
- **Set up your own “graduated license” system** if your state does not have one. At first, limit driving to trips during daylight. Wait until your teen has driven at least 1,000 miles and 6 months before allowing friends in the car. Let your teen earn more freedom as she gains experience and drives safely.
- **Limit your teen’s rides with young friends** if no adult is in the car. Research shows that the risk of having a fatal car crash increases by up to five times when a teen driver has teen passengers in the car. Your chauffeuring days are not quite over!
- **Give your teen a curfew.** Teens have far fewer crashes in places with nighttime curfews. Talk with other parents to set similar rules, if possible.
- **Explain and enforce no-drinking-and-driving rules.** Make sure your teen knows to avoid riding with a driver who has been drinking. If your teen drinks despite your rule, make sure she has options other than driving. In either case, tell her she can call you or another adult, take a taxi, or stay with a friend.
- **Don’t allow motorcycle riding.** The death rate for teen motorcycle riders is much higher than that for teenage car drivers. A helmet and protective clothing reduce the risk of serious injury or death, but do not eliminate it.
- **Make an agreement for safe driving.** You and your teen should create and sign it together. Agree on safe behavior and what will happen (consequences) if rules are broken (see Resources, below).
- **Follow through with consequences if rules are broken.** Be willing to take away the keys for a while, even if it means you have to drive more. Your teen needs to know you are serious about the rules and that safety is a priority.
- **Praise your teen when he follows the rules.** Teens still need to hear “I’m proud of you.” Research shows teens form good habits based on praise they receive.

## Resources

- Safe Kids’s Countdown2Drive:** A website that helps pre-drivers and parents prepare, [www.countdown2drive.org](http://www.countdown2drive.org)
- Driving Skills For Life:** Parents’ guide, educator lesson plans, driving tips and challenge games for teens, [www.drivingskillsforlife.com](http://www.drivingskillsforlife.com)
- Highway Safety Reserch Center, University of North Carolina:** Graduated licensing, sample parent-teen driving agreement; [www.hsrc.unc.edu/safety\\_info/young\\_drivers/index.cfm](http://www.hsrc.unc.edu/safety_info/young_drivers/index.cfm)
- Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS):** “Beginning Teenage Drivers” ([www.iihs.org/brochures/pdf/beginning\\_drivers.pdf](http://www.iihs.org/brochures/pdf/beginning_drivers.pdf)), “Young Drivers: The High Risk Years” video; 703-247-1536, [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org)
- I Promise Program:** Sample parent-teen contract, [www.ipromiseprogram.com](http://www.ipromiseprogram.com)
- TeenDriverSource.org:** Websites for parents and educators, [www.teendriversource.org](http://www.teendriversource.org)
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:** 888-327-4236, [www.safercar.gov](http://www.safercar.gov)
- National Organizations for Youth Safety:** [www.noys.org](http://www.noys.org)
- National Teen Driver Safety Campaign:** [www.ridelikeafriend.com](http://www.ridelikeafriend.com)
- Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD):** 877-723-3462, [www.sadd.org](http://www.sadd.org)
- Your state’s Office of Highway Safety, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, AAA clubs, and other groups.**