

Increasing Teen Driver Safety

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.

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.

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.

There are several steps you can take to help make driving a safer experience for your teen. Check into graduate licensing programs that allow teens more responsibility in stages. As they move through each stage they gain confidence and experience that can help make them safer drivers.

It is also important to 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 15-1/2 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 include:

- 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 cell phone. No texting while driving.
- 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.
- 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.