

Ten safety tips for first-time drivers  
Car crashes are leading cause of death for U.S. teens  
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To keep your kids as safe as possible behind the wheel, experts advise that you think back to other firsts of their childhood: Closely monitor them until they've demonstrated they can handle the road and don't let go of the back of the bike too soon, so to speak.

Car crashes are the leading cause of death for teens in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drivers 16 to 19 years of age are four times more likely than older ones to crash, says the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Part of the problem is teens' inexperience, combined with their natural tendency to live life on the edge. "Risk-taking is a normal part of being a teenager, and that can have pretty horrible consequences," says Chuck Hurley, CEO of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

### **Get involved**

Too few parents know their state's driver-education laws well enough to enforce them at home; they're also not as active as they should be in teaching their kids how to drive, experts say.

"Parents are waiting for someone to tell them what they're supposed to know," says Pam Fischer, director of the N.J. Division of Highway Traffic Safety. "But as parents, it's our job to know."

Every state has some form of graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws: rules which restrict how much, with whom, and when a learner can drive. Typical restrictions include bans on nighttime driving and limits on how many passengers teens can carry in their cars. Cell phone use, even in states where it's not prohibited for all drivers, is also usually forbidden for beginning drivers.

In New Jersey, for example, teens can't use cell phones in the car, and a novice driver needs to be supervised by an experienced driver in the front seat for at least six months. The newest drivers can't be on the road from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m., and can carry only one other passenger besides family members to limit distractions.

Adding even one peer in a car where a teen is driving raises the risk of a crash by 50 percent, Fischer says. And talking on a cell phone when driving is "the equivalent of a 0.08 percent alcohol level," says Timothy Smith, a driving instructor and author of "Crashproof Your Kids: Make Your Teen a Safer, Smarter Driver."

So, before you hand over the keys, make sure your instructions are in sync with the law: Don't let your child use a cell phone, pick up friends when your state's rules prohibit it, or drive past the curfew. Check your state's Department of Motor Vehicles Web site for details.

### **State the obvious**

A ban on driving while intoxicated goes without saying — but you still need to say it to your kids.

It's imperative to be a good role model, Fischer says. "The bottom line is, the most dangerous time in a teen's life is that first couple of years of driving," she says. So when you're at the wheel, be aware of your own actions, and make sure that you're always demonstrating safe driving.

A good driver's education course at school, or from an outside vendor, can be helpful, but don't rely on it. Kids need at least 50 hours of driving with a parent, experts say, and that should include practice in dangerous conditions like rain, fog, or snow.

"Driving schools will give a good foundation, but there's no substitute for experience," Fischer says. "In that permit phase: practice, practice, practice."

Choosing a safe, steady car for your kids to drive is also critical. When teens finally get their licenses, they naturally want the fastest, fanciest model available to them, but it's folly to give in, experts say.

"We're talking about young people," says James Wasser, superintendent of regional high schools in Freehold, N.J., whose six schools and 12,000 students constitute the largest high-school district by population in the state. "They're going through a difficult time in their life, and automobiles aren't made like they were back in 1968. Some of these new cars are like rocket ships," he says — combining teenage angst and horsepower is "a recipe for disaster."

### **Dodging tragedy**

With its large population and old-fashioned country roads, Wasser's district has seen more than its share of tragic accidents, including one in January 2007, where three high school students and an adult driver were killed.

At the time of the accident, a 17-year old driver carrying two other students was going at least 20 miles per hour over the speed limit, police estimate, when he apparently lost control of his vehicle and veered into oncoming traffic, hitting a Dodge Caravan. The driver of the Caravan, and all three students in the speeding Cadillac CTS were killed.

Another teen who was speeding and who had passed the Cadillac moments before the crash was charged with reckless driving and for violating the terms of his provisional license. He was carrying three student passengers at the time.

“I never thought I would be attending wakes and funerals and services for young people killed in car crashes,” Wasser says. “When you pass by a casket, and you’re standing next to the grandfather of someone who died, that’s not supposed to happen.”

Wasser urges parents to buy their kids less powerful cars. “Why do you need to get them a souped-up sports car?” he says. “They don’t have to have fast cars. We can’t control it, but we ask [parents] to think about it.”

MADD’s Hurley, who has worked in traffic safety for more than 30 years, gave his own three children, now in their thirties, a “big and slow” full-size Buick station wagon to use. “The only downside was it could hold too many teenagers,” he says. Although the law didn’t limit additional passengers at the time, he placed restrictions on how many people could ride in the car, limiting it at first to just himself or his wife.

Though experts clearly place the onus on parents, public awareness of the issues is growing. In October, Congress made the third week of every October “Teen Driving Safety Week,” and there are many resources that offer help.

Programs such as the National Safety Council’s “Alive at 25,” Ford’s “Driving Skills for Life,” Tire Rack’s “Street Survival,” American Automobile Association’s “Dare to Prepare” program, and private companies such as Roadwise America, Inc., in Duluth, Ga., are all geared toward helping kids learn safe driving.

Automakers and insurance companies often have resources and tutorials on their Web sites, and driving schools are plentiful.

The Freehold high school district, which even before the tragedy in January was considering bringing in an outside program for teens, sped up the process this year. Now, all juniors who want to drive to school next year are required to take “Alive at 25,” and their parents are required to complete their part of the course, too.

The website of one of the organizations mentioned above could be a good starting place to get some ideas, like writing and signing a contract between you and your teen, which experts say is important.

This document should outline expectations and the consequences for violating them. It’s a good idea for kids’ friends and their parents to sign the same exact thing, Fischer says, so that everyone can follow the same rules.

For teens who slip up, or who have already demonstrated risky behaviors, it might be a good idea to use one of the several GPS gadgets on the market that lets a parent see where a teen is in the car, and how fast they’re going.

“To have a device and a set of eyes when you’re not there is not such a bad idea,” Smith says, but adds that they are not in and of themselves the answer. They “definitely are not going to have an impact on the skill sets that make teens smarter, safer drivers,” he says.

MADD's Hurley said GPS devices can be helpful to parents, and that in serious drinking and driving cases, teens should be required to have an alcohol ignition interlock on the car. "But they're not a silver bullet," Hurley says.

For more insight on helping your kids stay safe behind the wheel, see the "slide show" link above for ten tips culled from experts.

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