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Promoting Teen Driver Safety: A Comprehensive Guide



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As a parent, the time eventually comes when you must entrust your children with the keys to the family car, marking the beginning of their journey as drivers. However, this transition can be fraught with apprehension and concern. Teen drivers are more prone to accidents due to their relative inexperience, immaturity, and propensity for risky behavior, such as speeding and distractions, particularly when friends are along for the ride. To help your teen driver become a responsible and safe conductor, you can leverage various strategies, and it starts with understanding the risks and implementing preventive measures.



Understanding the Risks

Teens often view obtaining a driver's license as a ticket to freedom, but it's crucial to recognize that they may not be fully prepared for the road. Research indicates that teen drivers face higher fatality rates compared to adults. This is largely attributed to their inexperience and inadequate skills. To address this issue, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have implemented a three-stage graduated driver licensing (GDL) system, which substantially reduces the risk of accidents for new drivers by up to 50%.

Car crashes are leading the fatalities involving teenagers in the US. In 2020, approximately 2,800 teens aged 13–19 were killed in crashes, with about 227,000 more sustaining injuries. The economic toll of these accidents amounted to a staggering \$40.7 billion in medical costs and estimates of lost lives.

Preventing Teen Driver Crashes

To protect your teen and reduce their crash risk, there are several key steps you can take:

1. **Familiarize Yourself with GDL Laws:** Understand your state's GDL laws and any restrictions they impose on your teen's license. This knowledge will help you enforce these laws more effectively.
2. **Establish Ground Rules:** Set clear guidelines for your teen driver, including restrictions on nighttime driving, passenger limits, and the prohibition of phone use while driving. Emphasize the importance of seat belt use at all times.
3. **Educate About Drug and Alcohol Dangers:** Make sure your teen comprehends the risks of drug and alcohol use, including the legal consequences of drinking under the age of 21 and the dangers of drinking and driving.
4. **Lead by Example:** Be a responsible driver yourself, as your teen often looks to you as a role model. Spend time with your teen in practice driving sessions to help improve their skills.

5. **Complement Driver's Education:** Don't rely solely on a driver's education class to teach your teen to drive. Driver's education should be just one part of the GDL system.

Identifying High-Risk Factors

Teenagers aged 16–19 face a substantially higher risk of motor vehicle crashes compared to any other age group. Factors that increase this risk include:

- **Gender:** Males in this age group have a significantly higher crash death rate compared to females.
- **Teen Passengers:** The presence of teen or young adult passengers elevates the risk for unsupervised teen drivers.
- **Newly Licensed Teens:** The first months of driving after obtaining a license are particularly risky, with 16-year-olds experiencing higher crash rates.

Addressing Distracted Driving

Teen inexperience behind the wheel makes them more susceptible to distractions. A significant number of teens admit to texting while driving, which dramatically increases their risk of accidents. Dialing a phone number while driving raises the risk sixfold while texting multiplies it by 23. Distracted driving can take various forms, including eating, applying makeup, and changing radio stations. Even the presence of passengers can be a dangerous distraction.

Factors That Put Teen at Risk

Inexperience, nighttime and weekend driving, failure to use seat belts, and various distractions significantly contribute to the elevated risk faced by teen drivers. It is important to understand these risk factors and educate your teen on safe driving practices.

Promoting Safe Driving

Talk to your teen about the rules and responsibilities of driving, emphasizing that it requires their full attention. Familiarize yourself with your state's GDL laws and its policies on distracted driving.

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Establish clear consequences for violations and consistently enforce them. Lead by example, keeping your focus on the road at all times.

Preventing Accidents

Key prevention strategies include the use of seat belts, primary enforcement of seat belt laws, avoiding drinking and driving, and implementing Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) systems.

- **Seat Belts Save Lives:** Emphasize the importance of seat belt use, as it significantly reduces the risk of severe injuries and fatalities in crashes.
- **Primary Enforcement of Seat Belt Laws:** Advocate for primary enforcement of seat belt laws, which allow police officers to ticket drivers or passengers solely for not wearing seat belts.
- **Avoiding Drinking and Driving:** Enforce minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) laws and zero tolerance laws for drivers under 21 to prevent drinking and driving among young drivers.
- **Graduated Driver Licensing Systems:** GDL systems help new drivers gain experience under lower-risk conditions. It involves a learner's permit, an intermediate/provisional license, and full licensure.

Choosing a Safe Vehicle

When selecting a car for your teen, prioritize safety features over aesthetics or performance. Newer cars often come equipped with advanced safety technologies, which can be instrumental in preventing accidents and safeguarding teens.

As a parent, your involvement, guidance, and education can significantly contribute to your teen's safety on the road. By addressing the risks, implementing preventive measures, and setting a positive example, you can help your teenager become a responsible and safe driver.

Seat Belts

Regrettably, the usage of seat belts is alarmingly low among teenage drivers. Shockingly, a majority of teenagers involved in fatal accidents choose not to buckle up. In 2021, a staggering 51% of teen drivers who lost their lives in accidents were found to be unbuckled. Even more distressing is the fact that when a teen driver involved in a fatal crash was not wearing their seat belt, a startling nine out of 10 passengers who lost their lives were also found to be unbuckled.

Teenagers, as they begin to embrace their newfound freedom of driving, don't always make the wisest decisions when it comes to their safety. They might harbor the false belief that they are invulnerable, that they don't need to wear seat belts, or that they have the right to choose whether or not to buckle up.

What Can You Do?

1. Let them know: Inform your teen that buckling up isn't just a good practice; it's the law and one of the simplest and most effective measures to reduce the risk of injury and death in an accident. Stress the crucial role seat belts play in preventing ejection from a vehicle. Emphasize that seat belts must be worn in the front and back seats, on every trip, without exception. Educate them about the seat belt laws in your state and the potential consequences of not wearing one, such as fines, loss of driving privileges, and, most gravely, injury or death in a crash.

2. Set the example: Lead by example as a parent and role model. Always wear your seat belt when you're in the car, demonstrating the importance of this safety measure. Children who grow up witnessing their parents consistently buckle up are more likely to do the same when they start driving. Before driving, make sure that all passengers in your car are properly buckled in, further underscoring the significance of this practice to your teen.

3. Remind Them: Safety is an ongoing conversation. Continue to talk to your teen about seat belt use, offering gentle reminders as needed. Visual cues like a sticky note in the car can serve as helpful reminders. Emphasize that seat belts should be fastened on every trip – whether they're the driver or a passenger, in the front seat or back.

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Key Points: Buckling up takes just a few seconds, but it could make a life-saving difference.

Drowsy Driving

In today's fast-paced world, teenagers are often juggling a multitude of responsibilities – from studying and participating in extracurricular activities to part-time jobs and spending time with friends. Unfortunately, sleep often gets compromised, paving the way for drowsy driving. In 2021, drowsy driving was responsible for 684 fatalities, and some studies even suggest that drowsiness may have played a role in over 10-20% of fatal or injury-causing accidents.

Drowsy driving encompasses more than merely falling asleep at the wheel. It significantly impairs a driver's alertness, attention, reaction time, judgment, and decision-making abilities. Those at a higher risk of being involved in drowsy driving-related accidents include drivers aged 17-23, those who get less than six hours of sleep a night, those driving on rural roads, and those who drive between midnight and 6 a.m.

What Can You Do?

To combat drowsy driving, parents should ensure their teens get adequate sleep at night by establishing and enforcing a consistent bedtime. Limiting the use of electronic devices before bedtime can contribute to better sleep quality. Many teenagers consistently don't get enough sleep, which can not only affect their driving but also their performance in school and other activities.

Key Points: Guarantee that your child gets the sleep they need to drive safely.

Setting Ground Rules

While the number of teen driver fatalities has decreased over the years, motor vehicle accidents continue to be the primary cause of teen deaths. A study by Liberty Mutual and SADD revealed that parents often set a poor example by engaging in unsafe driving behaviors like texting and driving. Alarming, 41% of teenagers report that their parents continue these unsafe behaviors even after their teens have asked them to stop.

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Moreover, 28% of teens claim their parents justify these unsafe actions.

As a parent, your influence is paramount when it comes to your teen's safety on the road. Surveys have shown that teens whose parents impose driving restrictions and set a good example are less likely to engage in risky driving behaviors and are involved in fewer accidents.

Here's how you can start shaping your teen into a safe and responsible driver

1. Start the Conversation Early: Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 18-year-olds. Begin discussing safe driving with your teens early and continue these conversations frequently, well before they reach driving age. It's also valuable to talk to the parents of your teen's friends to align on safety measures.

2. Set the Standard: Talk is crucial, but actions speak louder. Demonstrate safe driving behavior whenever you drive your teens, even before they start driving. Ensure you put your cell phone away and fasten your seat belt before you start the car.

3. Get It In Writing: When your teenager starts driving, consider setting ground rules and specifying the consequences for breaking them using a parent-teen contract. Having a visual reminder of the rules can be highly effective.

4. Spell Out the Rules: Make it clear that certain rules must be followed, such as no cell phone use, no passengers, no speeding, no alcohol, no driving when fatigued, and always buckling up. These rules can be lifesaving for your teen.

Making Smart Decisions

While the prospect of driving and gaining more independence is exciting, teenagers need to understand that driving is a lifelong learning process. The initial years are critical for building a strong foundation of safe driving habits. For those aged 15 to 18, car accidents are a leading cause of death, with specific dangers including alcohol use, inconsistent seat belt use, speeding, and distracted driving. Additionally, having too many passengers can be a significant distraction.

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Despite its potential for seeming mundane, adhering to the rules is crucial. Listening to your parents, learning and following the rules, and educating yourself on safe driving habits can save lives – your own, your passengers', and others on the road.

Remember these rules

- Don't drive while impaired.
- Buckle up, and ensure your passengers do the same.
- Keep your focus on driving.
- Keep your hands on the wheel.
- Adhere to the posted speed limits.
- Limit the number of passengers in your vehicle.

Novice teen drivers are twice as likely as adult drivers to be involved in fatal crashes. Between 2012 and 2021, there was a 13% increase in passenger vehicle driver fatalities among those aged 15-18.

Research indicates that immaturity and inexperience are the primary factors contributing to these fatal accidents. These factors lead to high-risk behaviors while driving, such as nighttime driving, driving after consuming any amount of alcohol, and driving while distracted by passengers and electronic devices.

To address these issues, all states and the District of Columbia have implemented Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws. These laws provide teen drivers with more time to learn complex driving skills under less risky circumstances.

How Does the GDL System Work?

GDL laws differ from state to state, but they all consist of three stages, each marked by specific license types, provisions, and restrictions. Novice drivers aged 15 to 18 must demonstrate responsible driving behavior in each licensing stage before progressing to the next level.

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Provisions and restrictions for each GDL stage:

Stage 1: Learner's Permit

- Minimum age
- Minimum duration
- Required supervised driving hours

Stage 2: Intermediate (Provisional) License

- Minimum age
- Nighttime driving restriction
- Passenger restriction (except for family, unless otherwise noted)

Stage 3: Full Licensure

- Minimum age

Since GDL laws vary, it's crucial to familiarize yourself with your state's specific GDL regulations. In many states, parents are required to confirm that their teenagers have completed a specific number of supervised driving hours, usually 40 to 50 hours before they qualify for an intermediate license. Other states may impose a 6- to 12-month waiting period. Keeping a daily log of your teen's driving activities is advisable.

What Can I Do to Ensure My Teen Driver Follows GDL Laws?

Although GDL laws have proven effective, enforcement can be challenging. It can be difficult for law enforcement to discern your teen driver's age from a distance, especially after 9 p.m. This underscores the importance of your active involvement. Establish driving ground rules with your teen, and clearly outline the consequences for breaking them. Most importantly, make sure to enforce these rules.

In Summary

- Get familiar with your state's GDL laws.
- Check your state's licensing agency website for the driver manual your teen is using and a parent guide to supervised driving.
- Maintain a daily log of your teen's driving activities.
- Establish driving ground rules with your teen, explain the consequences, put them in writing, and consistently enforce them.

The Benefits of Driver's Education Programs

Teen drivers are not typically involved in accidents because they lack knowledge of basic road rules or safe driving practices. Studies have shown that accidents involving teen drivers often result from inexperience and a propensity for taking risks.

Teenagers, particularly those aged 16-17, have higher fatal accident rates due to their immaturity and limited driving experience, which can lead to risky behavior on the road. Peer pressure, especially when driving with other teenage passengers, exacerbates this risk.

In a recent study, teens were two-and-a-half times more likely to engage in potentially risky behavior when driving with their teenage peers compared to when driving alone. This likelihood increased to three times when multiple passengers were present.

Driver's education programs are designed to teach teen drivers the rules of the road and to help them become safe and skilled drivers, enabling them to acquire the necessary driving skills for passing the road test and obtaining a driver's license. These programs are available in nearly every jurisdiction in the United States and are designed to align with state-specific driving requirements to ensure that novice drivers receive relevant information.

The Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) system, which identifies driver education as a vital component, offers novice drivers supervised practice and protection, gradually exposing them to more complex driving situations to reduce the risk of accidents.

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Multiple studies have demonstrated that GDL systems effectively reduce the number of teen crashes. However, as a parent, your active role is crucial in ensuring your teen's safety during their early driving years.