

Before your teen grabs the car keys



Mi Ae Lipe
mlipe@roundel.org

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When you read this, autumn's crisp chill will be in the air, and genetic units will be back in school. But as I write this on a sweltering August day, the 100 Deadliest Days Of Summer is on my mind. We in the traffic-safety world know that "100 Deadliest Days" doesn't mean death by hot-dog poisonings and boating mishaps; it refers to the period between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when the number of teens aged sixteen and seventeen killed in vehicle crashes jumps 15%. It's important because I'd guess that more than a few of you reading this are parents of adolescent children who are newly behind the wheel or about to learn to drive.

Why am I thinking about this? Because literally an hour ago, I completed a project with the Washington State Department of Health to create social-media messaging for parents whose teens are about to embark on the single most dangerous period of their young lives: when they're learning to drive. And because a week ago an SUV with four teens rammed itself under a parked semi-tractor trailer a few miles from where I live, shearing off the roof and killing three of them. As I write, the cause is still under investigation, but the sixteen-year-old driver had sneaked out of his apartment late at night to go riding with friends.

A story like this is every parent's absolute worst nightmare. Every day in America, six teens die and 600 more are injured, according to the Centers For Disease Control's 2015 statistics. In fact, vehicle crashes kill more sixteen-to-nineteen-year-olds than any other cause. It doesn't have to be this way. Out of twenty comparable developed, wealthy countries, the U.S. ranks as the very worst in traffic fatalities per million people, especially compared to countries with far more rigorous learning-driver standards like the UK, Sweden, and Norway.

From our resistance to U.S. students getting significant professional behind-the-wheel training to our dismal driver-education curricula, plus the fact that driver training can be skipped altogether once you turn eighteen in at least 45 states, our cultural message is loud and clear: Get your license as quickly, cheaply, and conveniently as possible, regardless of whether or not you're qualified to pilot a two-ton vehicle at 70 mph.

In this less-than-progressive environment, then, what's an average parent or teen to do?

Parents need to take the risks to their children seriously. Granted, it's easy for danger to be totally abstract when you can drive sloppily every day and usually get away with it. Parents have experience, habits, and body-sense memory—but

new drivers don't. Parents shouldn't scrimp on driver education. Not all driving schools are alike; if there's more than one school in your area, shop around, ask questions, and don't be seduced by low prices. Many parents complain about the \$400 cost of driver ed while spending \$500 for prom night or \$100,000 for college. It's about priorities; what price tag can you put on life?

Consider not letting your children have their own cars until they have the proper maturity, judgment, and experience. For a young man, free access to his own vehicle can lead to more risky behavior, because he's less accountable and supervised than if he's driving the family car. Have your child drive the safest vehicle you can afford; the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) offers vehicle recommendations.

Be a parent, not a friend. Don't give in to social pressure just because it's convenient or everyone else is doing it—or because you're tired of your teen nagging you. You have the ultimate leverage: the car keys. Handing them over should be a ceremony; don't leave them out for your child to grab. Pilots have flight plans to ensure safety; you and your teen should have a drive-plan checklist that includes the destination, route, how many passengers, communication, and contingency arrangements. Draw up parent-teen driving agreements with your child (your state AAA website has good examples).

Many states have graduated driver's-license laws that impose restrictions on drivers under eighteen on night-time driving hours, the number of passengers, and the use of electronic devices. Know your state's laws and enforce them.

Many parents dread teaching their kids to drive—and for good reason. It's one thing to drive, but another thing to teach someone else how to do it. Praise is powerful, far more than negativity. You may also have bad driving habits; if your child criticizes you, don't get defensive—use it as a learning moment. Your child looks up to you, so be a good role model.

To navigate these challenges, I highly recommend John Cullington's Five Star Driver videos (www.5StarDriver.com) and his book *Cullington Driving Concepts* (www.cullingtondrivingconcepts.com); both empower parents to teach safe driving to their teens with less stress and superior driving technique. Tim Hollister wrote *Not So Fast* after his seventeen-year-old son Reid died in a single-vehicle car crash, and he realized that state laws and driver ed hadn't been enough to keep his son safe. His book tackles many hot-button issues around driving and parenting, and is a must-read (www.fromreidsdad.org/not-so-fast).