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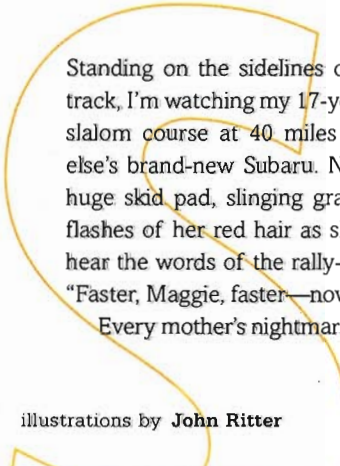
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DRIVER'S FED



Before handing over the car keys, steer your teen in the right direction. All it takes to put the brakes on risky decision making is a little planning, a lot of practice—and plenty of patience. BY SARAH MAHONEY



Standing on the sidelines of a wooded New England rally track, I'm watching my 17-year-old daughter barrel through a slalom course at 40 miles per hour, belted into someone else's brand-new Subaru. Next, she careens in circles on a huge skid pad, slinging gravel. Through the window I see flashes of her red hair as she negotiates each skid. Then, I hear the words of the rally-car driver in the passenger seat: "Faster, Maggie, faster—now hit the brakes!"

Every mother's nightmare? Nope—I've roped Maggie into

a full day at the Team O'Neil Rally School, a performance-driving program in Dalton, New Hampshire. I want her to learn from expert teachers and miles of private roads rather than unforgiving guardrails and oncoming traffic. And I can already see a change in her. When we showed up this morning she was a timid driver with a four-month-old license. But in just a few hours she's developed real skills, and her calm confidence shines as soon as she puts the key in the ignition to drive us home.





Fast-forward a few months. I am now in the car with Evan, my 15-year-old son, who is loving his new permit. Unlike Maggie, who started out cautiously, he accelerates like, well, a rally-car driver. Except he's not on a track, and we aren't even out of the driveway! By the time we reach the stop sign at the end of our street, my sweaty hands are braced against the dashboard. This dude doesn't need more confidence—he needs less.

While it may be hard to believe Maggie and Evan are related, experts say it's exactly these personality differences that parents should consider when tailoring instructions, rules and consequences to an individual's road-readiness. And the process takes years. "Parents need to be involved in every aspect of teen driving," says William E. Van Tassel, Ph.D., manager of driver training for the American Automobile Association (AAA). "They should allow kids to gain as much insight and experience as possible in low-risk situations." Keep your soon-to-be driver safe with our stage-by-age guide.

► **When your kid turns 12**, put down your cell phone if you're in the driver's seat. As soon as your child is old enough to ride up front (it's determined by age or weight, depending on state law), temper your bad habits. After all, you're giving a driving lesson

every time you get in the car. Parents are kids' number one role models, but a study from State Farm Insurance finds most adults are setting lousy examples: About 65% of parents use phones while driving, yet drivers on cell phones are four times as likely to cause a crash as other drivers. (This makes me cringe, since even though I try to do the right thing, I sometimes yak on my cell, drive too fast and play the radio too loud.) Explain your driving choices to your kids and point out hazards—let them learn from your good behavior.

► **By age 14, start researching driver's-education programs.** Today only about 56% of teens have participated in a formal driver's-ed course, says a joint report by Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm. And while instruction does not reduce crash rates, many parents feel safer when kids train with pros. Find out if your child's high school offers a driving class and how much it costs, then compare rates with those of private driving schools. Courses that include several weeks of classroom work followed by supervised driving sessions usually run between \$300 and \$500. (Check out online options for the classroom portion; they may be cheaper.) Then ask your insurance company about whether it offers driver's-ed discounts—you could recoup some of the cost.

AN R_x FOR OLDER DRIVERS

It's not just teens who are susceptible to engaging in risky road behavior. A survey of people ages 56 to 93 found that 69% use prescription medications that can potentially impair driving—yet only a fraction know how their meds might adversely affect them. To increase awareness of this hazard among the older drivers in your life, encourage them to talk to their doctors or pharmacists about the side effects of their medications. *Source: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety survey*

SAFETY CHECK

To help your teen become a more responsible driver, follow these tips during the permit phase.

► **Make lessons safe but challenging.** Once kids are comfortable with familiar routes, look for new ones—hills, curves, parking lots and odd traffic patterns. (Save traffic circles and highway merges for when traffic is light.) And as tempting as it is to stay home on a rainy night, parents should let kids drive in less-than-ideal conditions, says Dale Wisely of the nonprofit site Parenting Teen Drivers. If you're the nervous type, ask another adult to supervise instead. Without practice, kids won't learn how to adjust their speed for changing weather and traffic conditions.

► **Coach them through their weaknesses.** There are four main reasons teens crash, says Jim Graham of Ford's Driving Skills for Life program: speed, spacing, handling and hazards (distractions inside the car, like phones, friends and music). So when your kid's speed creeps up, for example, don't just tell her to slow down. "Help her judge how much space she needs by counting—when the car ahead passes an object, she should be able to count to three before passing it," he says. (Ford has found that teens follow so closely they can count only to one.)

► **Learn the law.** Most parents are clueless about specific restrictions; only 23% know their state's Graduated Driver's License laws. (See "What's the deal with GDLs?" page 80.) But parents who enforce GDL rules have a big impact: Fewer of their sons and daughters say they've been ticketed (15% vs. 23%) and fewer have come close to being in a collision (56% vs. 72%). Read up on the laws at ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/license_laws.html.

NO MAGIC NUMBER

Most parents look to state laws when determining the right time to let their teen get behind the wheel—kids can obtain a permit between ages 14 and 16, depending on where they live. But to some degree age doesn't matter—all new drivers, even if they are 40, are more likely to crash than experienced ones. That said, older teens are less impulsive than younger ones. Data shows that delaying practice-driving and licensure reduces crash risk, says Laurette Stiles, vice president of strategic resources at State Farm. States with the lowest crash rates are those that require a child to turn 17 before acquiring full privileges, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins. There is a bill in Congress that would nationally mandate that all kids be 16 before getting a permit.

WHAT TO ASK

Before letting your teen use the car, be sure to find out what he is up to. You're not prying, say experts.

➤ **Who else will be in the car?**

Cars carrying two teens are twice as likely to be involved in a fatal crash as those with just a driver, and cars with more than two teens have five times the crash rate.

➤ **Can I count on you not to use your phone while driving?** That means no texting either.

➤ **Can I trust you not to drink? And do you understand you can call me if you do?** In one recent survey half of all teens said they've seen other teens drive drunk.

➤ **What time will you be home?** Three-quarters of all teens say they've seen teens drive when fatigued.

➤ **Do you know how important it is to wear your seat belt?** While the majority of teens do buckle up, they are still the group least likely to wear safety restraints.



FC FACT
A 16-year-old driver is twice as likely to crash as an 18- to 19-year-old driver.

➤ **By age 15, create a contract.** If you plan to draft a contract with explicit rules for your teen to follow (and most experts recommend you do), explain why it's important—even before signing him up for driver's ed. (For links to contracts, see "Online Navigation," page 82.) While the jury is still out on whether contracts prevent accidents (in fact, one Canadian study found only 50% of teens could recall what the contract said six months after they'd signed it), they are very helpful in clarifying expectations for new drivers. And 75% of the teens in that study—and 85% of parents—called the contract a "useful communication tool."

➤ **Once your kid gets her permit, commit to a driving schedule.** Rejoice in your newfound popularity: Teens will want to spend a ton of time with you because every hour in the car takes them closer to that coveted license. "In fact, many clamor for more driving time," says Dale Wisely, Ph.D., a psychologist who operates the nonprofit site Parenting Teen Drivers. State requirements vary greatly in terms of how much driving experience a person needs before taking a road test. AAA suggests at least 50 hours, but many experts encourage even more. Kids should be held accountable for tracking their own hours, storing the log in the glove box with their permit. While our home state of Maine requires 35 hours, our family agreed on at least 60, which came to a doable 2.5 hours per week over the six-month permit phase.

➤ **After they're licensed, ask teens to plan ahead.** "Teens are more likely to go on spur-of-the-moment adventures because their brains are still developing impulse control," says Anthony Kontos, Ph.D., a professor of human performance at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, California, who has studied when and why kids make foolish decisions. Teens also

have inflated feelings of invulnerability and confidence; coupled with peer pressure, this too can exacerbate poor decision making. "Parents can eliminate impulsivity by making kids ask for the car a few days in advance," says Kontos. A kid who knows she has permission to borrow the car on Saturday, for example, is more likely to come up with a plan, rather than make a last-minute decision—and drive recklessly to get somewhere on time.

➤ **Accept the inevitable—teens take chances.**

All the best teaching methods can't change the fact that sometimes teens do stupid things—even when they know better. (To be fair, so do adults.) In one survey, 83% of teenagers admitted to talking on a cell phone while driving and 69% text—despite acknowledging that such behaviors are dangerous. In fact, researchers at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk found that teens in a driving simulator who texted while steering changed their speed and wove in and out of lanes—some even ran over virtual pedestrians! But if you catch your kid breaking the rules, don't yank all driving privileges—unless it's already been specified in your contract. "Sometimes a small fender-bender can be a good thing," Wisely says. "It may be just what an overconfident driver needs to become more inhibited." Consider temporarily

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH GDLs?

Graduated driver's licenses, or GDLs, have swept the nation since Florida introduced the first comprehensive program back in 1996. All states except North Dakota have implemented some form of these laws. The basic concept is three phases of learning: a permit period; a provisional period for newly licensed drivers that restricts night driving, carrying passengers and cell phone use; and eventually, full driving privileges. States with the most restrictions have seen sharper reductions in accidents, and overall, GDLs have reduced the rate of fatal crashes for 16-year-olds by 11%, and the rate of injury crashes by 19%. Congress is considering national standards for GDLs.



FC FACT

Boys crash at about 1.5 times the rate of girls. Girls, though, are more likely to text while driving (80% vs. 58%).



ONLINE NAVIGATION

Free resources for new drivers—and their nervous parents:

- **Drivingskillsforlife.com** Comprehensive site by Ford that teaches safety skills to newly licensed teens. There's also a Coaching Guide and other tools for moms and dads.
- **Keepthedrive.com** Cool community for teens, by teens, sponsored by Allstate.
- **Playstreetwise20.com** Simulated driving game from Chrysler Corp.
- **Wrecked Roadbook** Video of young people sharing scary driving stories: farmers.com/wrecked_roadbook.html.
- **AAA's Teen Drivers section** Downloadable materials for parents to help kids become more adept behind the wheel: aaaexchange.com.
- **Teendriving.com** Defensive-driving tips for teens, along with useful statistics and information.

DRIVING CONTRACTS Set aside time to talk to teens about your expectations.

- **Allstate** (allstateteendrivers.com)
- **Liberty Mutual** (libertymutualteendriving.com/parents)
- **AAA** (aaaexchange.com)

reverting to the same rules used during the permit phase: Your teen can drive, but only with you in the car. "Don't take him off the road as a punishment," Wisely says. "It deprives him of the experience he needs to become a better driver."

➤ **At age 20, exhale.** A person's risk of crashing declines the minute he exits that 15- to 19-year-old crowd. With several years of experience under his seat belt, there's a good chance he's a solid driver.

In our family, it's not quite time to relax. As Maggie's driving improves, Evan inches ever closer to his road test, leaving my husband and me to coach him. It is, Wisely reminds me, one of the most excruciating balancing acts of parenthood: "Too much focus on safety prevents kids from developing skills, while letting go too soon puts them in danger," he says. Have I found the right balance? Maybe not—and one day my kids will probably tease me for having been too strict or too trusting. But for now I'm trying to enjoy the ride. ●

TEEN-TRACKING TECHNOLOGY

Parents can use all kinds of tools to monitor their teen's driving, from basic in-dashboard systems to GPS devices and dash cams. "As long as your kid knows it's there and why you're using it, there's no erosion of trust," says Jill Weber, an adolescent psychologist in Chevy Chase, Maryland. When Ford first tested its MyKey concept (it allows parents to program a key that keeps the car below a certain speed limit, controls radio volume and more), 67% of teens didn't like the idea. "But negative reaction fell to 36% when kids realized it could mean being allowed to drive more often," says Jim Buczkowski, director of Ford's electronic systems engineering. And about 80% of teens who participated in studies about tracking technology said the devices made them more conscientious, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. The surprise, however, was parent behavior: While 98% said they'd use tracking devices, only a handful checked on the results. So before shelling out big bucks for high-tech tools, ask yourself how often you really intend to snoop.