

# Practice Doesn't Always Make Perfect, But It Can Help Teens Become Better Drivers

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By Corinne Fortenbacher



Teen driving is my passion. During the past year, in particular, I have become one of the prominent New Teen Driver safety proponents. The reason for this? I have three sons, and by the summer all three will be driving. I'd like to share some invaluable information I have learned, with parents who have new drivers or will have teens attending driver's education programs this coming year.

The problem of death due to teen driving accidents isn't a new problem — it has existed for a long time. I am convinced that the tragic loss of Pennsylvania college students in a car accident inspired Penn State Professor Amos Neyhart, "The Father of Driver Education," to develop the first driver education program.

Many people have tried to find the answer to this terrible tragedy, the No. 1 killer of teens – driving accidents. Driver education programs are working hard to make our young people competent and skillful drivers. Poor decision making, unskilled drivers and recklessness are not outcomes of the driver's training curriculum.

Our focus needs to be on the main issue: **effective and positive decision-making by teens and their parents.** The one area that is not being discussed is the same problem area that so much of our society is afraid to touch: the family institution. It is truly the parents of our teens who hold the key to their success as drivers.

The GDL (Graduated Driver's License) has been a positive step to prepare young people for the driving task but **all** of our new teen drivers need more than the six hours of behind-the-wheel instruction. Many states have passed laws requiring 50 hours of behind-the-wheel practice with a student and parent. Unfortunately, many new teen drivers are getting little or no practice at home. Many parents struggle with finding enough time to handle everyday life, let alone 50 additional hours of driving practice. However, without this invaluable driving practice, you are increasing the possibility of your teen being involved in a serious accident. The odds are great anyhow, but without supervised practice, your teen's chance of being involved in a serious accident are increased.

During this important practice time, it is important for all other drivers to be informed that the person operating your vehicle is a new driver. Considering all the impatient drivers on the road, your new teen driver needs them to see the reason why your vehicle is driving more cautiously. By using our "Rookie Driver" magnets, you make other drivers aware of your teen's new driver status. As a responsible parent, you need to insist that these safety products are used. Give your teen the choice of which style of magnet he or she prefers to use, but insist that they are used while your teen is acquiring their driving practice time and until they have developed the driving skills that are necessary for them to drive confidently and safely.

Sometimes parents are more concerned with getting a license and car for their teens so that they do not have to be inconvenienced by providing shuttle service to and from the various activities that teenagers are involved in. It is ultimately the parent's decision and responsibility to determine whether their son or daughter has had enough practice and is ready and deserving to drive. A parent who is in a hurry to get their child a license and vehicle, regardless of the reason, is taking a very big risk of increasing the chances for an accident.

Parents, you know what? Once they are licensed, if they are driving too fast or reckless and not doing things the way you feel they should, then you must take the steps necessary to stop that behavior. If red flags show up, such as tickets, bad grades, bad friends, bad attitudes, out past curfew, then **parents** are the only ones who can really make the decision to put a hold on things for a while. Parents must take an active role in the development of a prepared and competent driver.

You see it does take a village to raise a child. This is **our** problem that must be solved together but ultimately you, the parent, are in charge. Let's start putting teen driving at a higher priority. These are our kids who will be our future, so let's keep them safe.

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