

Parents, Teens and the Learner Stage of Graduated Licensing – What Driving School Programs and Instructors Should Know and Do

★ ★ ★ ★ Teen Driver Safety

Fact Sheet

The Situation:

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers in the United States.
- Over 800,000 young drivers ages 15 – 18 were involved in police-reported crashes in 2008.
 - An estimated 350,000 people were injured in these crashes, and 3,431 people were killed.
 - Among those killed were 1,368 drivers ages 15-18, 977 of their passengers, and 1,155 other people.
- To date, there has been almost no research on the nature and quality of parental supervision during the learner stage of graduated licensing.

The Study:

- In-depth study of 50 families with novice teenage drivers (with learners permits) in North Carolina:
 - Interviewed parents ten times over the year long learner period.
 - Installed cameras in families' vehicles for a 4-month period shortly after teens obtained a learner permit.
 - Compiled and analyzed more than 2,000 video clips of interaction between teens and their parents while the teens were practicing driving.
 - Examined the type, frequency, and duration of practice, variation in driving conditions (e.g., traffic, weather, type of road, time of day), and problems or challenges that teens or parents encountered along the way.

Key Findings:

- At the outset of the learner stage, most parents had given at least some thought to plans for supervising their teen; however, only about one in four parents (24%) were planning to have their teen practice in a wide variety of situations or conditions (e.g., different types of roads, traffic conditions, etc.). Only four of the 50 parents (8%) reported receiving materials that offer guidance or advice for parents of beginning drivers.
- According to both parent reports and video clips, much of the teens' driving occurred on "routine trips" under relatively benign conditions. Teens drove less frequently under

Teens have the highest crash rate of any group in the United States.



more challenging settings such as highways, inclement weather, darkness, heavy traffic or country roads.

- There was substantial variability in the average amount of time that parents reported their teens spent driving each week, ranging from just 20 minutes to almost 5 hours. In the typical family, teens drove about 3 days and 1 ½ hours each week.
- Parents generally were attentive to the roadway during practice sessions. Potential distractions such as operating a cell phone, reading, eating, etc. were observed in less than 5% of video clips. Seat belt use was nearly universal among both parents and teens. Music was barely audible or absent in three-quarters (74%) of all clips.
- The most common form of parental instruction during video clips involved vehicle handling or operation (e.g., “you need to slow down”), which was found in 54% of clips. By contrast, higher order instruction such as visual scanning, hazard perception or anticipating the behavior of other drivers was found in just 5% of clips.
- At the end of one year—at which time teens were eligible to obtain their license—nearly half of parents (47%) reported there was at least one condition in which they still were not comfortable allowing their teen to drive unsupervised, most commonly in heavy traffic, on highways or in the rain.
- The wide variety in the amount and types of practice driving and in parental oversight suggests that individually tailored instruction is desirable.

Recommendations:

- Driving instructors should try to focus more time on driving situations that are potentially challenging but relatively uncommon (e.g., inclement weather, rush hour, nighttime).
- Driving instructors should try to focus more time on higher level insights and skills, and how to make good decisions.
- Driving schools and instructors should emphasize to students and parents the need for a greater variety of practice driving.
- At the outset of the learner’s permit stage, parents could potentially benefit from guidance provided by driving schools and instructors, especially concerning how to communicate effectively with teens and provide higher level driving instruction.