

## SAFER TEEN DRIVERS - Helping Them Make It Home

*A RECIPE FOR DISASTER: To a vehicle, add 1 young, inexperienced driver and a few gregarious passengers. Add optional ingredients such as speed, darkness, alcohol or drugs, slippery roads or unexpected traffic situations. Stir with risk taking and inattention. Give plenty of opportunity to simmer, and a tragic crash is likely to result.*

A license to drive is a ticket to freedom for teens, and for their parents as well, who no longer have to chauffeur them around. But the price is steep:

31% of deaths of teens are caused by traffic crashes.

MONTANA HAS THE HIGHEST TEEN TRAFFIC FATALITY RATE IN THE NATION.

### THE GRIM STATISTICS

- On a miles-driven basis, first year drivers have 4 times as many crashes as adults.
  - In Montana, drivers between 15 and 20 years of age have twice as many crashes as any other age group.
  - New drivers involved in a crash are:
    - 25% more likely for driver error to be the cause.
    - 35% more likely to be involved in a single vehicle crash.
    - 38% more likely to be speeding.
    - 45% more likely to be in a fatal crash with 3 or more people in the car.
- Insurance Institute for Traffic Safety*

Reasons for this include:

- ☞ Inexperience - lack of skills
- ☞ Inattention - distractions
- ☞ Immaturity - a teen's propensity for risk taking.

Most teens see driving as recreational. They fail to realize that they are responsible for the lives of their passengers, and for the ton of metal and glass they are hurtling down the road.

### WHAT IS GRADUATED LICENSING?

It is a method for insuring that new drivers get lots of practice before they drive alone, at night, on long trips, or with other kids in the car. It is a period of time in which they must continue to be supervised while driving. Many states have laws mandating a gradual progression from student driver to full driving privileges. Montana does not have such laws, but parents can help their teens develop into more mature, competent drivers by implementing their own graduated licensing program. Some may perceive a graduated licensing system as restrictive---others see it as protective.

### WHY SHOULD PARENTS GET INVOLVED?

According to the Insurance Institute for Traffic Safety, it is not poor skills that cause traffic crashes for young people. It is usually their attitude. Peers influence them more than adults. Teens are slower than adults to perceive dangers. When they do, they often don't relate it to themselves. Teens think of themselves as immortal, therefore they don't use safety belts as often as older drivers, and deliberately seek thrills like driving at high speeds.

In 42 states, the minimum driver's licensing age is at least 16. In Montana it is 15. But just because a teen has reached the chronological age at which it is legal to drive does not mean he or she is emotionally mature enough to make wise decisions, not be distracted, pay close attention, use good judgment, etc. Evaluate your child's level of maturity in deciding when it is appropriate for him or her to receive that driver's license.

A Traffic Ed class teaches only the basics, it doesn't affect attitude and it only provides 4 hours of practice.

*more . . .*

**DEVELOP YOUR OWN GRADUATED DRIVER'S LICENSING PROGRAM**  
**Progressive Learning Under Controlled Conditions**

1. Require a minimum of 3-6 months of supervised driving practice:

The driving supervisor should have many years of experience.  
Keep a log of mileage driven under different road, weather and traffic conditions.  
Don't allow other kids in the car during practice sessions.  
No music during practice sessions. It is distracting.

2. After licensing:

That first winter, provide supervised practice on ice, snow, wet roads, etc. Perhaps orchestrate a practice session in a vacant parking lot.

3. For the first 6 months of having a license:

No nighttime driving without an adult.  
No teen passengers. (Your teen will drive differently with peers than with an adult.)  
No cruising.  
No smoking while driving - it is a distraction (not to mention, illegal under age 18).

4. Establish a contract to earn the driving privilege:

Require seat belt use for every trip, have a zero tolerance for alcohol or drug use, etc.

5. Choose a safe car for your teen, not a performance car.

The combination of high performance, inexperience and immaturity is deadly.

Driving is a far more complex task than most teens realize. Handling a car responsibly takes more than mastering skills. It takes the maturity that can only come with time and experience. It takes a long time to learn how to predict danger and make responsible, mature decisions while you're behind the wheel.

**SOME THINGS TO WORK ON WITH A NEW DRIVER**

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|---|---|
| ♦ techniques and skills                                       | ♦ response to emergency vehicles            |
| ♦ entering traffic  | ♦ turning                                   |
| ♦ freeway driving   | ♦ judgment                                  |
| ♦ safe following distance                                     | ♦ appropriate speed                         |
| ♦ traffic light etiquette                                     | ♦ night driving                             |
| ♦ adverse weather and road conditions                         | ♦ controlling irritation with other drivers |
| ♦ intersections: controlled, yield, 4-way stops, uncontrolled |   |

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