



# Learning to Drive

*A Guide for Parents*



## ***What's involved for you, the parent***

Learning to drive is a major turning point in the lives of teenagers and their parents.

Getting a driver's license is one of the important rites of passage to adulthood for the young, new driver – and it's certainly a dangerous one. A wise parent will seek the help of reliable professionals in preparing the teen for the complex world of the automobile and traffic. It's not enough for today's teenagers to learn like their parents did. The driving world they enter is far too intense to tackle without serious preparation.

The cost of driving, the risks, the pressures all speak to the need for a well-trained and educated driver. It's not enough just to get by any more. Driving is not something to learn by trial and error. It involves skill, knowledge, and above all, habits that need to be carefully shaped.

As a parent, you are the one who cares the most about your teenager's driving ability and safety. This booklet is designed to help you participate in the process of educating your teenager behind the wheel. It will give you insights into the skills and knowledge that the best professional instructors have accumulated over years of teaching. It will inform you about the pitfalls lying in wait for the amateur instructor during the early stages of learning, about the defensive strategies taught in modern driving courses, and about the need to follow up after licensing and ensure that your teen continues to develop defensive driving skills and safe habits.

Remember, getting a driver's license is *not* the end of learning to drive. The first six months after licensing are critical to the shaping of safe habits, and these, along with attitudes, are far more important than a high degree of knowledge or skill.



## **Going on the road**

Many a tragic accident has resulted from parents unwittingly allowing their teens to get into driving situations for which they were not properly prepared.

Often, the beginner appears confident and in control but in reality is simply getting by – as long as nothing unusual happens. A sudden change in conditions could easily cause panic. The skilled professional driving instructor learns to anticipate such problems and knows how to deal with them. An inexperienced co-driver such as a parent or a friend can easily be caught unawares, with potentially disastrous consequences.

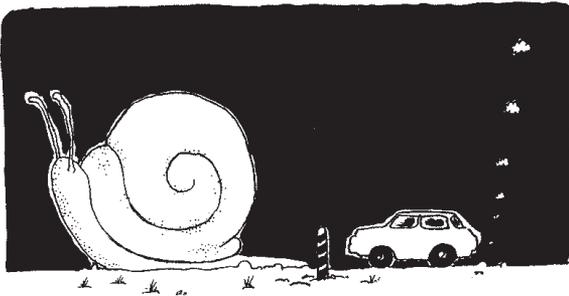
If possible, leave your teen’s first on-the-road experience to the care of a professional. Experience, know-how and dual controls make a big difference, and it’s nice to get off to a good start.

## **Passing the driving test**

Driver examiners want license applicants to show that they know the rules, have reasonable control over the car, and can follow the correct procedures when carrying out basic maneuvers such as turns, lane changes, and parking.

They don’t expect perfect performance, and they know that beginners will be nervous, but they do expect them to be able to “read” the roadway environment (signs, signals, and pavement markings) and relate to traffic.

Remember, the government road test only covers basic driving situations. Passing it doesn’t make a driver safe or competent in dealing with all the different driving situations he or she will meet in a lifetime of driving.



## **Defensive driving techniques**

Being a good defensive driver means more than just being cautious. And mere experience isn't enough either. The good defensive driver has to WORK at developing good driving techniques. The following is a summary of the defensive driving concepts commonly covered in driver education courses. *You can read more about these techniques in your teen's driver education textbook.*

### **Managing Space and Time**

This concept is critical to defensive driving. The driver must have space to maneuver and time to react. The following time rules help the novice to compensate for inexperience and are invaluable in reducing risk in traffic.

#### *The 2-second rule*

This provides safe spacing when following another car at any speed. By noting when a car ahead of you passes a fixed point and counting your time to reach that point, you can determine whether your spacing is safe. Two seconds (count "one thousand and one, one thousand and two") is the minimum safe space. This should be practiced from the passenger seat! The beginner will then develop a "sense" of what a safe space is at different speeds.

#### *The 4-second stopping rule*

This is an approximate guide to stopping distance at speeds over 40 mph. Choose a fixed point on the roadway ahead and count the seconds until you get there. If you count four seconds, that point indicated your minimum stopping distance.

#### *The 12-second visual lead time*

Ideally, the defensive driver is anticipating traffic movements and potential hazards as far away as the point the car will reach in twelve seconds. Within this distance, the driver should scan the scene, including the sidewalks, and make adjustments to speed and position as necessary.

## The Smith System

The Smith System provides five rules for training the eyes to see what is important in driving. They are:

1. Aim high (*to steer accurately and anticipate problems*)
2. Keep your eyes moving (*avoid fixed stare, stay alert*)
3. Get the big picture (*don't allow your eyes to be drawn to one area*)
4. Leave yourself an "out" (*practice the "what if" game*)
5. Make sure they see you (*when there's conflict for space, make eye contact with the other driver*).

These rules sound simple but it takes considerable practice to develop the habit of using them at all times in traffic.

Using the Smith System, the driver always tries to keep "space for the car and visibility for the driver". These two strategies allow the driver to use the five rules most effectively, always having time to scan the scene around the car and adjust speed and position to minimize hazards.

## The I.P.D.E. System (Identify, Predict, Decide, Execute)

Some programs use this 4-step process to help drivers organize their thinking when making decisions in traffic. With it go the concepts of:

<i>Isolating</i>	Keeping space between your car and potential problems
<i>Stabilizing</i>	Avoiding sudden changes in speed or direction
<i>Separating</i>	Avoiding having to deal with many problems at once
<i>Compromising</i>	Reducing conflicts for space and avoiding "pressure" in traffic situations.

## The Ground Viewing Habit

Drivers judge the speed and direction of other vehicles by relating to the ground around them. If the car ahead in the lane next to you, for example, begins to move over into your lane, you will detect this movement earlier by glancing or using your peripheral vision to relate its movement to the lane markings. The ground viewing habit is also useful in detecting the feet of pedestrians behind parked cars.

## Road Commentary Driving

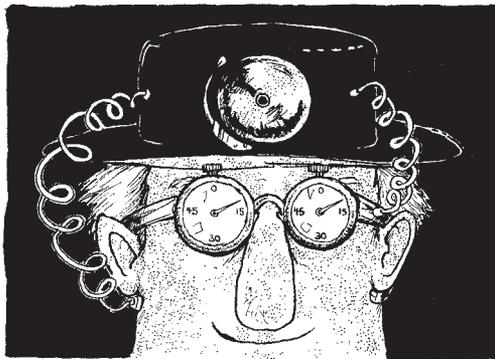
This technique is used with more advanced drivers. The driver is asked to do a running commentary on what hazards or factors he or she is taking into account while driving. (“Car turning left ahead”, “approaching crosswalk”, “car overtaking in the left lane”, etc.)

This is an excellent technique for improving seeing habits and making drivers more aware of how much they can see if they work at improving visual habits. However, it takes practice to apply this technique effectively. It’s best to start off with one or two items such as crosswalks or speed limit signs.

## Attitude

Attitude determines how knowledge and skills will be used. It determines whether a driver will be cooperative or competitive in traffic, whether he or she will accept a high level of risk or put into practice the concepts taught on defensive driving courses. It is the single most important element in defensive driving and the most difficult one to influence.

Some driver education programs use the concept of Parent, Child, and Adult attitude states to help drivers identify and control attitudes that affect their driving behavior. These attitude states are expressions of personality. The ‘parent’ state is caring, protective, but also critical and punishing. It imitates how parents relate to children. The ‘child’ attitude state is freely expressive, impulsive, and reacts to events in a naive way. The ‘adult’ state is the thinking, reasoning one that asks questions and tries to select the best behavior.



## Conducting Practice Sessions

### Planning

It's important to plan practice sessions, particularly the early ones. Decide where to go and what you are going to do before setting out. Take some care in selecting a suitable area.

The introduction to the car might be done in the driveway. This should be thorough. Don't assume anything. First attempts at controlling the car should be made in an area where the learner can concentrate on the response of the machine to the controls without having to worry about traffic or obstacles. A large deserted parking lot is ideal.

Emphasize the coordination of hands and feet in these parking lot sessions. The beginner driver tends to forget the hands while using the feet and the feet while using the hands. This can lead to serious problems on the street. For example, the driver may freeze on the gas pedal while struggling to steer around a turn.

Once the beginner can comfortably control the speed and direction of the car, practice should be moved to the street. The next stage of learning to drive is *developing good street sense*.

Accurate lane driving and positioning for turns are important for communication as well as traffic flow. Beginners often feel that they are in the center of their lane when they are not and frequently position badly for turns. Skilled feedback helps enormously in building these street sense skills early. It's important to help them realize that changes in speed and direction are interpreted by other drivers and that they are just as much a means of communication as the turn signals.



For early practice in using street space, try to find quiet streets with rectangular blocks. Curves, parked cars, and traffic distract the learner from the main task of judging speed and position. Later, these can be gradually introduced and the beginner can be shown how to deal with the hidden spaces behind parked cars, oncoming cars, pedestrians, and so on.

Random driving can lead to problems where beginner drivers are concerned. It's all too easy for the inexperienced beginner to get into a situation that he or she can't handle. A tense beginner, suddenly surrounded by traffic, for example, may freeze up and be unable to function at all.

*The keynote here is awareness.* The beginner must be made aware of *all* the factors involved in these basic roadway situations.

### **Signalling**

Timing is important when using the turn signals. Remember, the other driver (or whoever) has to see the signal and interpret what it means. For turns, the signal should be initiated a few seconds before any change in speed or direction. Timing is more important than distance from the turn when using turn signals.

### **Equipment**

One of the most valuable pieces of equipment that driving instructors install in their cars is a second rear-view mirror. As co-driver you can use this to monitor traffic behind. This makes practice sessions much more relaxing. Learning to judge space and timing when using the rear-view mirror takes considerable practice and the beginner can do this while sitting in the passenger seat. A good mirror with hinged adjustment can be purchased quite cheaply at auto accessory stores and it's certainly a worthwhile investment. However, remember that this second mirror creates an extra blind spot so be careful where you place it on the windshield.

An experienced instructor with dual controls might handle such a situation easily, but for a parent – inexperienced in such matters – it could lead to an accident!

It's a good idea to give beginner drivers as much accompanied driving time as possible, both before and after licensing. But don't use them randomly as chauffeurs to drive to shops, school, or on summer trips, until they are competent in all the basic traffic situations they are likely to meet.

Make an effort to evaluate your teenager's abilities before going out on the public street to practice. Some will have acquired considerable driving-related skills from other activities – for example, riding a bicycle, operating 'go-carts', or even from video games that require hand-eye coordination and attention-dividing skills. Others may need to start at the very basics.

And remember, some beginners may give the impression of being confident and in control but may, in fact, be totally unprepared to deal with any sudden change in conditions and will be very reliant on you, the co-driver, for guidance and even assistance in control.

## Practice Hints

- *Decide what you're going to do* and where you're going to do it before each practice session. This will help avoid the complications of getting caught up in situations you hadn't planned on or prepared for.
- *Communicate clearly*: Give directions well in advance and try to always use the same terms (don't say "accelerator" one time and "gas pedal" the next, for example). It's difficult to drive a car if you don't have a clear idea of where you're going or what's next.
- *Don't hit the beginner with everything at once*: a simple right turn, for example, involves several steps – checking mirrors, signaling, checking blind areas, braking, positioning, checking for traffic before the turn, steering, and recovery. To expect a beginner to follow all of these correctly during the early sessions is asking too much. Concentrate on braking and steering first and then work in the rest.

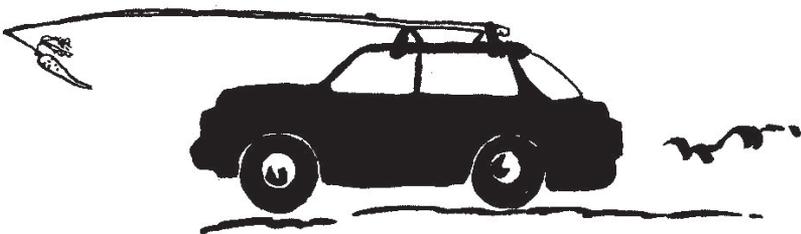


- **Keep the risk level low:** Try to anticipate problems and avoid awkward situations. Choosing the right location for practice sessions is an important factor here.
- **Be ready to give timely assistance.** Cueing the beginner to brake or steer before he or she gets into trouble may prevent an accident. Last-second warnings can lead to panic.
- **Don't get excited during practice sessions.** This communicates itself quickly to the driver and can make performance difficult.
- **Don't overload:** A big part of being an instructor or co-driver is reminding the driver to check traffic and to signal and to bring attention to potential hazards. But once again, remember that everything you say is also a distraction for the driver. Be sparing in your comments and, above all, try to avoid letting the beginner get into situations he or she can't handle.
- **Be positive:** Compliment the learner driver on doing things well. Comments such as "good turn", "good steering", or "good speed", give the beginner assurance and reinforce this behavior. It's easy to fall into the trap of making a constant stream of negative comments. This makes for a very poor learning situation and can badly undermine confidence. It's important here that the co-driver making the comments has a good sense of space and timing in traffic and is capable of evaluating skills. Otherwise, it's all too easy to reinforce poor driving behavior.

- **Stop and discuss:** When your teen makes a mistake, he or she may not be clear as to what went wrong. Explaining and discussing while on the move is not very effective. The beginner is too busy driving! Stop as soon as you can, while the mistake is still fresh in the memory, and sort out the problem. Don't jump on every mistake, however, and make a big thing of it. This will affect the beginner's confidence and concentration on the driving task.
- **Don't clash** with what the professional driving instructor teaches. If your teen is doing something that you think is incorrect and maintains that the driving instructor teaches this way, talk to the driving instructor. Student drivers often misunderstand or wrongly interpret their instructor's directions.
- **Don't present yourself as the complete expert on driving.** Driving is a complex task with many aspects to it and, as an amateur, your attitude should be one of willingness to learn. This will be a good example to your teenager.

## After licensing

Many novice drivers are left to themselves once they obtain their license. *This is a big mistake.* The newly licensed driver is still a novice with only basic skills. Many young people equate skill with the car with driving skill. Leaving them to learn from the driving environment may often seem to work *but the environment can be a very harsh teacher.* Without some advice and supervision, the typical beginner will be a mass of bad habits after the first year. And the beginner won't get away with bad habits as easily as the experienced parent.



The best answer to this is to help the novice to continue working on safe driving techniques and strategies during the first year and longer.

The first year of driving is a high-risk period for the beginner. Inexperience, combined with lack of skill, means that one in five male 16-year-olds and about one in ten females will have an accident during their first year of driving.

Statistics show another risk peak after eighteen months to two years, when increasing skill and experience may lead to overconfidence. By this time, habits are accumulating and the driver is devoting less and less conscious attention to the task of driving. Some of the habits accumulated will be good ones but others will be potentially dangerous, needing only the right (or wrong!) circumstances to become the cause of an accident.

Some supervision during these early driving experiences will help enormously in making the teenage driver safer.

The newly licensed driver needs help in learning to handle the great variety of roadway and traffic situations that every driver faces today. Timely hints and reminders will be invaluable.

It's also a good idea to keep track of the kinds of driving situations your teen has experienced and to gradually work in new ones (for example, night driving, rain, snow, freeways, heavy traffic, passing on the open highway, and so on).

## **Bad habits to watch for**

These are habits that begin to creep in immediately after licensing, and if allowed to accumulate, they become like time bombs that, sooner or later, lead to accidents.

- Forgetting to signal.
- Sloppy turns (especially left turns) that cut across other drivers' traffic lanes.
- Omitting the head check or blind area check when changing lanes.
- Following too closely.
- Forgetting to reduce speed when approaching potential hazards. (This is a primary cause of accidents.)

- Sudden changes in speed or direction that can catch other drivers by surprise.
- Backing up without turning the head and checking thoroughly behind.
- Accelerating through amber lights.
- Continuing through changing traffic lights later and later.
- Allowing attention to wander more and more from the driving task.
- Increasing laxity in obeying speed limits, stop signs, and other traffic rules.
- Sloppy pre-driving habits (remember, pre-driving habits set the “tone” for driving and are important psychologically).
- Disregard for other drivers’ problems on the highway (for example, the driver who needs to change lanes or pull into traffic).

## **Warning!**

Safe driving is very much a matter of seeing what needs to be seen and making good decisions. An extensive Indiana University study cited improper lookout and inattention as being the most commonly identified causes of traffic accidents. In the case of improper lookout, the driver very often had “looked but did not see”. The majority of these errors occurred at intersections. The most common event that drivers failed to attend to was “traffic stopped or slowing ahead”.

The driving environment holds many traps for the inattentive driver. It can play tricks on the eyes. Roadway illusions are the cause of many accidents, safety experts suspect, especially at nighttime. Curves look easier than they really are, red lights look farther away, and lighting plays tricks.

The driver with just a year or two of experience may be particularly susceptible to these traps. This will be especially true if the alertness of the eyes, and the ability to judge, are impaired by fatigue or drugs such as alcohol and some medications.

*Hang in there with your teenagers as they run  
this gauntlet during their first years of driving!*



