

# Parent Decision-Making About Teen Driving

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# Parent Decision-Making About Teen Driving

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## Introduction:

This research explored how parents make decisions regarding their teen and driving. The issues which were examined included:

- The decision to obtain a permit or license
- Assessing the teen's readiness to get behind the wheel
- Deciding who should teach the teen to drive
- Post-licensure supervision

This research was undertaken to inform a community coalition in its efforts to enhance teen driving safety. As a result of this research, a "Parent Decision Guide" was developed.

## Methodology:

Four focus groups were conducted, consisting of parents of teens between 15 and 19. Criteria for participation in the focus groups included:

- Parenting a teenager who is preparing for licensure.
- Residing in Lehigh or Northampton counties in Pennsylvania
- Having not experienced a death or serious injury among family/friends due to a car crash.

Focus group participants were asked to respond to 13 questions exploring how they approached the task of preparing their teens to be licensed drivers. Focus group questions included:

- How do you decide when your teenager is ready to apply for a permit?
- How do you decide who will teach your teen to drive?
- What factors will you use to decide whether your teen is ready to take the road test?
- Do you have driving rules for your teenager? How were these rules negotiated? How do you determine whether they are being followed?

Demographic information identified parental age, education, socioeconomic status, and type of residence (rural/suburban/urban).

## Results:

Five primary themes emerged from the focus group discussions:

- Developmental Issues,
- Safety Issues,
- Teaching Teens to Drive,
- Financial Considerations,
- Parental Control Strategies.

**Developmental Issues:** *Parent's views on licensing teen drivers were shaped by their perspectives on the role of the car in a young adult's life. These views appear to be based to a degree on socioeconomic considerations.*

Lower income parents considered licensing for more pragmatic reasons (School, Work). The teens had to help with the costs. Teens had less access to the vehicle and more often used it to perform chores or necessary travel. Decisions to allow licensing were based on family or personal need or on emerging opportunity for teen maturity (getting a job, commuting to school-college). The car was viewed as a mechanism to further opportunities for maturity.

Middle income parents reported that they were more likely to allow the family car to be used for leisure pursuits. Although initial use of the vehicle centered on chores or necessary travel, frequently teens were also allowed to use the car for social pursuits.

Families with means purchased cars for their teens, enabling greater access to the vehicle for social functions. Teen maturity and readiness to get a permit were assessed on the basis of less relevant behaviors (grades, behavior around the house, social skills, having a job). Additionally the use of the vehicle was viewed an opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and maturity

All parents were concerned about the costs associated with car ownership, but lower income parents were more likely to have only one car, so access to the car was more restricted. These parents stress responsibility to the family. The level of impact on the family was severe if the car was damaged, consequently lower income families allowed less leisure use, however still did not limit the number of passengers or times when their teen used the car.

**Safety:** *Once the decision to get a license was made, there were no agreed upon standards of competence for the taking the road test.*

The focus group discussion suggested that for these parents, there appears to be no definitive scale for deciding when their teens should take the road test. Parents differed on this point and although experience behind the wheel was important, there was no scale for assessing actual basic driving skills or demonstrated ability.

There also didn't appear to be clear tactical measures for parents to use when teaching driving skills, particularly as this pertains to risk situations. Some parents cited driving under adverse weather conditions or at night, driving on highways, driving in dangerous settings such as being blocked in by other cars and drivers, and some parents suggested learning to drive in all four seasons (weather conditions).

**Financial:** *All parents were concerned with the costs associated with driving.*

Many parents expressed concern over the costs associated with driving and most families used the opportunity to foster greater levels of maturity and responsibility with their teens.

To a greater or lesser degree many families shared the costs of insurance, car upkeep and travel with their teens.

In some instances these costs were prohibitive and teens were not able to readily proceed to licensed status.

**Teaching:** *Teaching teens to drive varied considerably across family circumstances, income levels, school districts and relationships.*

All parents agreed that driving skills were the most important topic to teach. These skills included car handling, road rules and basic maintenance. Beyond these basics there was little consensus as to the necessary skills. Parents did identify two distinct approaches to teaching. One stressed an awareness of possible outcomes and dangers the teen might face, the other approach stressed skill building & decision making.

Parents also recognized their own limitations in teaching and the possibility that they may also teach inappropriately through their own behavior. Additionally, the opportunity to teach often exacerbated some parent/child conflicts. In two parent homes the parent teacher was often selected by default, and in single parent homes extended family or friends were often enlisted to help.

Several families had children who attended schools with driver's education programs and several didn't. This inequity was commented on by all parents and many felt that driver's education was essential. Several parents felt that driver educations reinforced and extended what parents taught and some saw it as an alternative to parent teaching. Parents also reported wide variability in the quality of driver education in the schools.

**Parental Control Strategies:** *Families use a variety of strategies to guide their teen through the permit and licensing process.*

Many parents felt that age 16 was too young to get a license and that their teen was too immature to handle a car. In some instances their teen was in agreement with them and in no hurry to drive. In these instances parents allowed their teen to set the time when he/she was ready and neither encouraged nor dissuaded the teen.

Some parents stretched out the learning period by putting minimum behavioral tasks or financial obligations on the child prior to getting a permit. These parents expressed a desire to see their child be more mature before trusting them with a car, and used the opportunity to shape their teens behavior.

After their teen was licensed, many parents stressed seat belt use, safe driving (no speeding, avoid high traffic situations), and they initially limited the hours when their teen could drive. Few parents discussed limiting the number of passengers.

## Conclusions:

- Family considerations and finances appear to be prominent in shaping a teens perspective about driving. These two issues could potentially be integrated into strategies for post-licensure supervision both within the family and at a policy level (e.g. initially reducing access to cars for only necessary tasks).
- There appears to be a need for clear minimum standards for parents to use when they are teaching driving skills, and when they are ready to assess their teen's readiness to be licensed. Many families based their decision to license their teens on factors that suggest maturity like school performance or holding a job. Although these may be interpreted as measures of maturity they are typically not connected to actual driving skill, ability or judgment.
- Most parents are not teachers and often exhibit poor driving habits themselves. Improving their teaching skills and their driving abilities may yield benefits beyond reducing teen crashes.
- Parents would participate in workshops that offer instruction on how to teach teens to drive, cover what basic skills to teach, and to assist them in assessing their teen's readiness to be licensed.
- A prominent finding was the parents' wishes to have driver education uniformly implemented across all schools in the Commonwealth. Currently it is only offered in some schools and the cost and quality varies significantly across different localities.
- Post licensure parental controls appear to be weak and fade significantly in the months after a teen is licensed. Efforts need to be made to identify strategies that enhance parental control, and these strategies need to be supplemented by policy (e.g. number of teens allowed in car, additional penalties for the teen's failure to use a seat belt)

**Further Work:** *The findings from these focus groups are only preliminary and cannot be generalized to larger groups. These findings do suggest the need for more in-depth research on parental involvement in teen driving, and on policy development that furthers the influence of parents and enhances teen driving safety.*

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