

## Who Are Better Drivers: Teens or Parents?

As parents are increasingly charged with the task of teaching their kids to drive, the question of whether experience and judgment trump good eye-hand coordination and fast reaction time is put to the test.



For teens, getting a driver's license is the first step to establishing independence. It's also the start of what could be a very dangerous journey.

Learning to drive is a rite of passage for teenagers. It symbolizes freedom. It's also one of the most important skills they will learn in their entire lives — and one of the most dangerous. New drivers ages 16 to 19 are far more at risk than any other age group on the road.

Let's look at the numbers from the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#). For each mile driven, teen drivers are about four times more likely than other drivers to be involved in a metal-to-metal mishap. When driver fatality rates are calculated on the basis of estimated annual travel, teen drivers are involved in four times more fatal accidents than drivers 25 through 69 years old. Teenagers are about 10 percent of the U.S. population but account for 12 percent of all fatal car crashes. And finally, drivers under age 24 account for 30 percent of the total costs of car accidents in the U.S.

### The Training Gap

These figures are frightening. But the lackadaisical attitude that we as a society take toward driver education is absolutely terrifying. "It takes more training to be certified to cut hair or clean teeth than it does to teach new drivers," says Charles Butler, director of safety services for [AAA](#). And funding for so-called "certified" driver-education courses is increasingly being slashed from budgets across the nation. As a result, the job of creating responsible young drivers is falling to people who have no certification at all: parents. And they aren't setting a good example for the next generation of motorists.

According to a recent study by [State Farm Insurance](#), 65 percent of parents surveyed talk on the phone while driving, even though 94 percent of them forbid their teenagers from doing so. The majority of parents also drive while tired and when they're in a hurry. Statistics do show that adults are, in fact, better-equipped to handle the complexities of the road – and even to multitask while driving. But their kids are not. A Ford-sponsored study revealed that teen drivers are four times more distracted by cell phone use than adults. This combination of being more easily distracted, along with having less-developed judgment and emulating parent-teachers who employ a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do attitude doesn't bode well for young drivers – or those who share the road with them.

*Discuss:* **What bad driving habits are you afraid of passing on to your teenager?**

Most states acknowledge the discrepancies between young and older drivers by passing laws aimed specifically at teens. Thirteen states and the District of Columbia have laws on the books banning teens from using electronic devices while driving, and an additional 15 are considering bills that do the same. California's pending law would even prohibit teens from using hands-free devices, which their parents were required to start using this past summer.

“The thing about driving is that a lot of it is pure experience,” says Rick Roso, motor-sports manager of Connecticut-based [Skip Barber Racing School](#). “If you're 17 years old and you've been driving for eight months, how much experience do you have?” Given the harrowing statistics on teen driving fatalities, the answer to that question is, not enough. According to the NHTSA, 3,108 teen drivers died in accidents last year, making motor-vehicle crashes the leading cause of death for that demographic.

#### **A Different Drivers Ed**

About a decade ago, David Thompson, realizing that parent-child consistency is key, started the Florida-based [New Driver Car Control Clinic](#), a program that teenagers and their parents attend together. “We don't have any way of knowing what a child has been exposed to when they arrive on our scene,” Thompson says. “We decided to eliminate the problem by having the parent there.” At Thompson's clinic, parents and teens spend four hours in the car together with an instructor, both of them learning a skill set that goes well beyond the traditional drivers-education curriculum of parallel parking and three-point turns to include replicating real on-road scenarios that precede car crashes. Students practice collision avoidance maneuvers while going 25 mph, for instance. Florida's Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles confirms that graduates of the New Driver Car Control Clinic have a 77 percent lower crash rate than the general population of Florida teens.

The Skip Barber Driving School also has a program designed specifically for new drivers, and often parents opt to accompany their kids, which Roso agrees is a bonus. “The fact that mom and dad and Jimmy are all at the school in the same learning atmosphere has an obvious benefit,” he says. “Everyone's more on the same page.”

On the more extreme end of the parental-supervision spectrum are new GPS monitoring devices that allow mom and dad to keep tabs on their kids' driving without actually being a passenger in the car. **Ford** and **Mazda** are both experimenting with technology that allows parents to remotely limit a car's top speed and audio volume, and encourage seat belt use. Ford's **MyKey** equipment will come standard on all 2010 **Focus** models, and Mazda's **Auto-Search GPS** (which also allows parents to track the car's location and disable the engine) is available now as an add-on option.

But does control without hands-on guidance and teaching create safer drivers? "At first glance that seems terrific," says Roso. "I can plug it in so that little Jimmy can only go 36 mph, or I can sit down at my computer and see exactly where he is." Roso suspects these kinds of safety products will be popular – despite his own misgivings about how Orwellian they are. "There's going to be a whole bunch of moms and dads saying, 'Absolutely, I want that.' But if they think about it, it's like wait a minute, what are you teaching these kids?"

Obviously, parents are more roadworthy than their kids. But facts show they aren't setting a very good example on the road by multitasking rather than simply driving. This must change if the next generation of motorists and those who share the road with them are going to travel from point A to point B safely.

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Teen drivers are about four times more likely than other drivers to be involved in a metal to metal mishap.



Teen drivers are also four times more distracted by cell phone use than adults. Parents, remember that next time you reach for your cell from behind the wheel.



Traditional drivers-education curriculums of parallel parking and three-point turns are simply not enough these days. Adding real on-road scenarios that precede car crashes, such as collision avoidance maneuvers, would help greatly.



For parents looking for an Orwellian approach to supervision, there are a host of new GPS monitoring devices that allow mom or dad to keep tabs on their kids' driving without actually being a passenger in the car.



Statistically, parents are more roadworthy than their kids. But parents need to spend more time teaching their children good driving behaviors than promoting bad ones.