

Five Common Myths About Teen Driving

MYTH: Parents have little influence over their teens' driving habits.

REALITY: On the contrary, parents have the **greatest** influence over their teens' driving habits, behaviors, and skills. According to a 1999 status report from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), teens whose parents have three or more crashes on their records are 22% more likely to crash at least once, compared to teenagers whose parents have had no crashes.

Even though it may seem that your teenage son or daughter ignores your behavior and advice most of the time, keep in mind that your kids learn from watching you. When you're driving with your teen, model the behavior that you would like them to practice when they are behind the wheel: buckle up, slow down, and focus on the road.

MYTH: New SUVs are the safest cars for teen drivers.

REALITY: Although it's true that larger cars are safer for teen drivers, SUVs are not necessarily the safest. SUVs tend to have performance features - such as four-wheel drive and larger engines - which may give teens and parents alike a false sense of security. Roll-over rates are also higher for SUVs than for mid- to full-size cars. When choosing a car for your teen, think late-model, large, and solid. Ideal choices include either station wagons or full-size sedans with small engines and air bags. And be sure to check the vehicle history to ensure that it's safe and reliable.

MYTH: Teens who are above-average students will be safe drivers.

REALITY: Studies have shown that there is no relationship between a teen's report card and driving behavior. Driving requires a unique set of cognitive and motor skills that can't be measured by academic performance.

MYTH: At 16, a teenager is developmentally ready to handle the risks and responsibilities of driving.

REALITY: Teens' neural, physiological, and psychological development lags behind their physical development. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology reveals that teens' brains lack the emotional, mental, and physical abilities of an adult. Specifically, the prefrontal cortex in teens' brains is not as developed as in adults. This area of the brain manages judgment and ability to organize multiple tasks and sensory input, all requirements for safe driving. Additionally, myelination of nerves - the process of coating of the nerves to transmit electrochemical signals between muscles and the brain - is not complete until the early 20s. Some of these developing nerves connect to parts of the brain that regulate judgment and impulse control. This incomplete neurological development causes teens to underestimate risky situations while driving.

MYTH: Most teen-related car crashes and fatalities are caused by driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

REALITY: There's no doubt that alcohol can be a deadly factor in car crashes involving teens; young drivers are less likely than adults to drive under the influence but their crash risk is substantially higher when they do. Just one drink can lead to fatal consequences when combined with a teen's relative inexperience behind the wheel. Drugs and alcohol also lower inhibitions and makes teens more likely to engage in risky behavior. Additionally, teens who drink and drive are less likely to buckle up.

However, in spite of these facts, driving while intoxicated is not the leading cause of crashes involving teens. According to the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, in FY2003, most vehicular fatalities among teens were caused by excessive speed (32%). Driver inattention accounted for 15% of all crashes, followed by driving on the wrong side of the road (11%). Alcohol use accounted for 10% of all fatalities.