

Driving 101 – Back to School with Teenage Drivers

September means that students are back to school, and many families debate the pros and cons of whether their teenagers should be driving to get there. Teen driving is a huge concern for most parents everywhere. For many teens driving to and from school is the first extended opportunity to drive without direct parental supervision.

A teenager's readiness for such a responsibility should be determined by the parent – not by a birthday or completion of a driver education program. Successful completion of a state-approved driver education program does not imply that your child is an experienced driver.

Whether this is the first year for your teen to drive to school or part of the routine for a senior, remind your teenage about his or her responsibility as a safe driver. Parents should be familiar with Virginia's laws concerning teen drivers. However, you may want to consider what a group of parents from a Maryland suburb recently suggested as specific guidelines for their driving teens:

- A teen driver must log at least 1,000 miles or 60 hours of driving with parents before driving alone.
- No riding with someone who has had his or her license for less than six months.
- No teen passengers for the first six months.
- After the initial six-month period, no more than one passenger for another six months.
- Driving must be with specific permission: destination, time, route, and passengers must all be pre-approved.
- Call home if any plans change.

FEW MORE TIPS . . .

As teenagers move through the teen years, they need increasing amounts of sleep. Teens need nine hours of sleep each night to avoid behaviors associated with sleep deprivation. Teen sleep deprivation is associated with: information processing and memory deficits; increased irritability, anxiety, and depression; and decreased creativity and ability to handle complex tasks. Twenty percent of all high school students fall asleep in school.

- Night driving is limited.
- All persons in the car must wear seatbelts at all times.
- Be home at a pre-agreed time. Call if running late. An 11:30 p.m. curfew avoids the midnight rush of kids trying to get home on time.
- Call home upon arrival at destination. Then call again when starting for home. The teen driver's cell phone must always be on.
- Without exception, pull over to use the cell phone.
- No driving on major highways for the first six months without specific permission.
- The teen driver pays for any tickets.
- Do not leave the gas tank empty. (*Define policies about paying for gas.*)
- Do not allow others to drive the car, and do not drive someone else's car without a parent's permission.
- Severe, long-term, non-negotiable consequences for any drinking or drug use and driving will be imposed.
- Remember, parents have the right to request that a child's license be revoked.

Driving to school is a statement of freedom for our teens. With this freedom comes the duty of driving safely and responsibly.

(This information is provided thanks to "A Family Guide to Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy & Drug Free," a public education Web site developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at <http://family.samhsa.gov/main/about.aspx>.)

Over half of students report being most alert after 3 p.m. Additional weekend sleep does not offset the effects of sleep deprivation. The adolescent's circadian rhythm means he or she will feel awake later into the evening (through midnight) and unable to fall asleep. (Even if they go to bed at 9:30 p.m., they are not likely to fall asleep till after 11 p.m.)