

The hidden influence behind the wheel



Dr Elizabeth Box explains why parents hold the key to young driver safety

IMAGINE THIS: you're sitting in the passenger seat as your teenager takes the wheel. You're calm (mostly), offering gentle reminders about checking mirrors and sticking to the speed limit. But guess what - your most powerful influence on their driving happened before they even touched the steering wheel.

Surprised? Research shows that the way parents drive, talk about driving, and supervise practice sessions has a lasting impact on young drivers. In fact, your influence can mean the difference between your teen becoming a cautious, competent driver - or picking up risky habits.

As someone who has spent years researching road safety, I've recently explored the role of parents and guardians in shaping how young people drive. And the evidence is clear: you're not just along for the ride - you're the co-pilot, engineer, and role model all rolled into one.

The power of perception

One of the most surprising findings? It's not just what you do - it's what your teen thinks you do. Teenagers are incredibly perceptive. If they think you text while driving, even if you don't, they're more likely to believe it's acceptable - and follow suit. This means that your own behaviour behind the wheel (and how they perceive it) is one of the strongest predictors of their future driving style. Every time you glance at your phone or comment that "everyone speeds a little on this road," you're unintentionally teaching a lesson. The flip side is just as powerful. When teens believe their parents are careful, law-abiding drivers, they're more likely to adopt the same habits.

Beyond the basics

Most parents provide some level of supervised practice before the driving test. But here's where it gets interesting: how you supervise matters just as much as how much supervision you provide. In reviewing research in this area, I've found that many parents

focus solely on getting their teens comfortable with basic car control - steering, braking, parking. Important, yes - but safety comes from helping young drivers learn to anticipate risks, read the road environment, and make smart decisions under pressure.

One study found that parents often missed opportunities to talk about hazards or explain why certain choices matter. For example, instead of saying "slow down," a more powerful prompt might be: "What do you think the pedestrian might do next?" These kinds of conversations develop the hazard perception and situational awareness that novice drivers need.

Action beats information

It's tempting to think that giving your teen a copy of the Highway Code or signing them up for a course is enough. But here's a hard truth: information alone doesn't change behaviour.

The most effective interventions get parents actively involved. That might mean setting goals together, having structured discussions about driving, or creating a parent-teen driving agreement - a written plan that sets out clear expectations, responsibilities and boundaries for independent driving beyond the test. This might include rules about seatbelt use, when driving takes place, at what point friends can become passengers in the car, mobile phone use, or what happens if they get a speeding ticket.

These agreements aren't about laying down the law - they're about building mutual expectations and opening up conversation. And they work. Studies show that teens whose parents are actively engaged are significantly less likely to engage in risky behaviours, like speeding or driving distracted.

Little things, big difference

Want to make a real impact on your teen's driving? Try these small but powerful actions:

■ Be a role model - always wear your seatbelt, stick to speed limits, and never use your phone while driving.

■ Start conversations early - talk about driving decisions during everyday journeys, even before your child starts learning to drive.

■ Create a learning plan - don't leave practice to chance. The more time they spend behind the wheel, the better. In some countries, learner drivers are required to complete more than 100 hours of supervised practice before taking their test. Aim for plenty of driving experience across a wide range of conditions - including night-time, rain, motorways, and busy town centres.

■ Focus on decision-making - use real-life driving situations to talk through the "why" behind safe choices.

■ Support the first six months after the driving test - this is the highest-risk period for young drivers, when crash rates are at their peak.

Although we don't have a formal graduated licensing system in the UK, you can still help by setting some sensible boundaries. One of the most effective steps is to avoid letting them carry friends of a similar age in the first few months - peer passengers can be distracting and increase risky behaviour. Keep the conversation going, check in regularly, and continue to guide their decisions as they build confidence behind the wheel.

More powerful than you think

If you're the parent, guardian, grandparent or mentor of a young driver, you may feel nervous about letting them loose on the road - and rightly so. Young drivers are at the highest risk of crashes in their first year on the road. But that risk isn't set in stone. The choices you make - how you drive, how you teach, and how you talk - can bend the curve toward safety.

So the next time you find yourself in the passenger seat - or even driving them to school - remember: your influence lasts far beyond the lesson. You might just be the most important driving instructor they'll ever have. ■ Dr Elizabeth Box is research director at the RAC Foundation.