

BayAreaParent

FOR PARENTS

# teen focus

## Acting Up!

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## First Wheels

Getting a Car for Your New Driver

## Bored Teen?

Great Activities for Spring & Summer

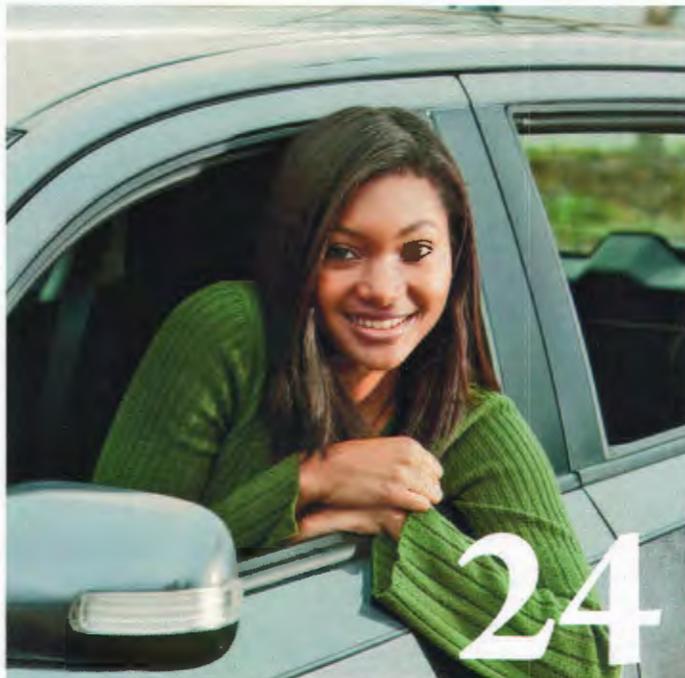


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# When to Get Your Teen a Car

## *Smart Buys and Rules for Young Drivers*

By Risa C. Doherty

Remember the MTV series *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, which ran from 2005 to 2008? Each episode climaxed with a sparkling new car in the driveway, the parents' "surprise" gift to their princess. My teen accused me of watching it to validate my "superior" parenting skills. He was probably right, as I indeed thought, "No matter what, I won't be doing that!"

Why do parents feel the need to get their teen a car as soon as they obtain a license, or even before they learn to drive? Is it ever advisable for a parent to get a teen a car?

Cynthia Harris, AAA media relations spokesperson for Northern California, says, "the most common procedure is to teach your teen to drive the family car first" because it enables parents to monitor their child's skill, maturity and limitations. Eventually, though, some parents see a benefit to getting their teen his or her own car, as is attested by the high school parking lots full of new luxury sedans, jeeps and SUVs.

Judy Ann Lundblad, owner of Ann's Driving School in San Francisco, thinks that getting a teen a car can be a motivator for a student to maintain good grades. Vicki Abeles, an education advocate and Lafayette mother of three, notes that driving fosters independence in teens. Other parents may obtain a car for their teen because they want to dispose of their chauffeur's hat and make their own busy lives a little easier.

However, no rule dictates that a teen is entitled to a car, says Madeline Levine, noted

Marin County clinical psychologist and author of *The Price of Privilege*. She doesn't favor parents getting their teens cars as a right of passage, no strings attached.

"Parents need to stop and think about what's to be gained and what's to be lost with this acquisition," she says. "They react to peer pressure, as if they would not be as good a parent otherwise."

Levine tells parents that this is "a good place for them to take a stand," noting that these young people did not acquire their sense of entitlement overnight, but years before.

Levine was proud that her three boys drove an old Volvo station wagon and worked to pay for gas and maintenance. She supports teen participation in caring for and funding the car, warning that without it, "parents are sending a strong message to their teens that the outside world will (always) take care of their needs."

If we want teens to learn to take care of themselves, Levine advises parents to give them "lessons in shared responsibility so they can develop internal coping skills."

### Driver Readiness

Lundblad stresses that in addition to a license, teens first and foremost "need to have a respect for driving as a valuable skill." Readiness for vehicle ownership includes having solid driving skills and sufficient experience behind the wheel.

She says that insurance companies estimate that it takes three years to be



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experienced at the full gamut of driving conditions. AAA recommends that teens double the 50 supervised driving hours required for them to get a license and complete 100 hours before they drive solo.

Other ways to sharpen the new driver's skills include workshops where teens drive in challenging, real-life conditions or online driving programs like AAA's Driver-Zed and InGear.

If your teen has adequately honed his skills, he may be ready for his own auto, but it's up to the parents to judge. Levine tells parents who are unsure to think about how their teens handle other freedoms: Do they take good care of their current possessions and follow house rules? Do they break rules when unsupervised? Teens don't become responsible by getting a car; they should be responsible before getting one.

### Safety First

Even though TV characters Greg Brady and Ritchie Cunningham bought old jalopies, gone are the days when teens can realistically save their pennies to buy a car. Today's parents are safety-savvy, and even if they require their teen to pitch in, parents typically need to contribute if they want to buy a safe vehicle. The Governors Highway Safety Association reports that early 2012 was marked by a 19 percent increase in teen driver deaths, validating parents' concerns.

"(Although) the most important safety device is 'hands on the wheel,' parents should still look for cars with the most advanced safety features, the most airbags and the most sophisticated crumple zone," Karen Polan, community affairs manager at Toyota Sales USA, advises.

Newer cars are better designed for crashes than cars of 10 years ago, AAA states. A newer, mid-size car with airbags is a better choice than an older, larger car without airbags. Small, older cars perform worst in crash tests.

Models often cited as safe for teens include the Toyota Camry, Mazda 3i, Honda Accord, Hyundai Sonata, Chevrolet Malibu and Volkswagen Golf. Check out the car safety websites listed at the end of this article for the latest ratings on specific models.

Selecting the right car depends on personal preference as well as budget, the car's miles per gallon rating, re-sale value and type of driving to be done.

Teens need to understand that the cost of the

car is not just the price and gas, but registration, maintenance and insurance, for which companies offer "good grade discounts." AAA provides parents resources to help them calculate these costs.

Kerry Rivera, marketing and advertising manager for Toyota Financial Services, advises parents to consider whether a 24- or 36- month lease would make sense, especially if the teen will soon be leaving for college without the car.

Some families prefer a pre-certified used vehicle, since they expect a few dings along the way, Lundblad says. Still, pre-owned models may lack up-to-date safety features, and buyers should be aware of unaddressed recalls and check on warranty status.

Teens should not get "something too high-powered or extravagant," notes Harris. Expensive does not mean safer, and inexperienced drivers might not be able to manage high-powered cars. Parents should prioritize safety features over all else.

Lafayette resident Ariana Fort got her 16-year-old daughter a used Ford Escort to help carpool her son to and from school. Fort is confident in her daughter's driving abilities and pleased with her grades and has no plans to restrict her privileges. Her daughter keeps the car clean, pays attention to dashboard warning lights and checks mileage for oil changes.

Fort says, "It's a cooperative process, and she contributes toward costs when she is able and it makes sense."

### Continued Communication

The AAA Guide to Teen Driver Safety urges parents to maintain an ongoing dialogue with their teens even after they have a license, inquiring where they are going, for how long and with whom (keeping in mind that, for a year after they get a license, Californians under 18 can't drive passengers under age 20.) Families should schedule weekly "summit meetings," evaluating adherence to family rules and asking precise questions about driving plans and experiences.

"Parental involvement and restrictions significantly reduce risky behavior during a driver's first 12 to 18 months behind the wheel," the guide states.

Those parents who acquiesced years earlier to pleas for a puppy and ended up its sole caretaker may want to give this latest acquisition more thought,

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**"Parental involvement and restrictions significantly reduce risky behavior during a driver's first 12 to 18 months behind the wheel."**

– AAA Guide to Teen Driver Safety

since teens need to integrate the car's care into their busy schedules. To ensure that your teen will do his part, parents can personalize online parent-teen driving contracts, setting forth everyone's expectations.

Contracts can list cost distribution, rules, curfews, responsibilities and consequences of violating rules. Parents can designate who will take the car in for service and repairs, wash it, check tires and fluids, and pay for insurance and gas. Polan suggests that a contract "empower parents to take a leadership role again and collaborate with their teen," and Harris stresses "the need to set boundaries."

A license shouldn't amount to "laissez faire," says Harris, and she encourages parents to ride along periodically, even after a teen gains some independence.

Twirling their brand new car keys on their finger, some teens automatically assume they are headed for school break in Tahoe. But many aren't ready for long-distance driving. Total freedom to drive should happen in increments, according to Levine, who let her sons first drive locally, then over the Golden Gate bridge, then to San Jose, and after a lot of practice, to Tahoe.

Young drivers often get lost, so make sure they take a paper map along when possible. Harris warns parents about "drowsy driving" on long-distance trips, saying "fatigue is a factor that new, young



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Experts advise teens start out driving close to home before taking longer trips, such as over the Golden Gate Bridge.

drivers are unfamiliar with." Lundblad says new drivers need to take a break after one hour of driving, noting "they get bored." As an education advocate who sounded the alarm over stressed-out teens in her film *Race to Nowhere*, Abeles hopes that more driving courses will recognize sleep deprivation as a byproduct of teens' hectic lifestyles and warn against it alongside concerns like drunk driving, texting and cell phone use.

Although teens going away to college often clamor for a car, many colleges ban freshmen's cars on campus. Both Levine and Abeles suggest that if you let your teen bring a car to college, he first learn to care for it at home over a period of time.

Even if their teen is ready for car ownership, it can be hard for parents to offer this springboard to independence. Many parents who feel as if they just taught their tot to look both ways before crossing, now find themselves in a car dealership with that very same kid.

One way to mitigate the fear is to remember that letting go is a process parents must grapple with at every stage, Levine says. Once your teen has proven himself, relax and let him take this next step toward independence and adulthood. ■

Risa C. Doherty is a freelance writer who raised two teen drivers and survived. To read more, go to [www.risadoherty.com](http://www.risadoherty.com).

## Resources

- **AAA Teen Brochure** – [autoclubsouth.aaa.com](http://autoclubsouth.aaa.com)
- **Sample Teen Driving Agreements** – [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov); [aaa-calif.com](http://aaa-calif.com)
- **Adding up the numbers** – [toyotafinancial.com](http://toyotafinancial.com)
- **Safety ratings** – [newsroom.aaa.com](http://newsroom.aaa.com); [nhtsa.gov](http://nhtsa.gov); [iihs.org](http://iihs.org)
- **Cost, reliability and safety** – [kbb.com](http://kbb.com); [edmunds.com](http://edmunds.com); [jdpower.com](http://jdpower.com)
- **Supplementary Driver's Ed** – [toyotadrivingexpectations.com](http://toyotadrivingexpectations.com); [driverzed.org](http://driverzed.org); [AAA.com/InGear](http://AAA.com/InGear)

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