

Take Time to Teach Teens to Drive

By Cindy Genau
Extension Educator, Community Traffic Safety
University of Delaware

I love looking out my kitchen window for signs of spring. My mind wanders as I see the buds on my magnolia begin to bubble, and the green tips of perennial leaves peek through the barren mulch. While many adults may feel day-dreamy in spring, teens are even more affected by this change in season. And, for 16-year-olds who are getting new driver's license permits may lack concentration. Good driving behaviors go out the window. Turning in the radio and riding with the top down get priority over safety.

Police officers report that citations for speeding and reckless driving pick up for every age group this time of year. Crashes also increase, primarily because the driver's attention is not on driving.

Delaware teens now get Graduated Driver's License Permits. The reason? Teens are more likely to have car crashes than any other demographic. In 1998, before the Graduated Driver's License (GDL) law was in effect, 1,001 16-year-olds were involved in crashes statewide. Since 2000, after the GDL law was enacted, that number has been cut in half. Teens tend to be inattentive, they speed and they are inexperienced. When teens lose control of the car, they do not have the skills to correct their error. Instead, they tend to overcompensate, which often ends in a crash.

Practice equates to experience, and experience means better judgment behind the wheel. The GDL gives teen drivers the time to get experience. An adult sponsor must supervise the teen in practicing on-road driving skills. Driver's Education classes provide the foundation for good driving, but there is never enough time for adequate road experience. This is where the parent comes in, serving as a role model and demonstrating safe driving techniques, such as obeying traffic laws, observing speed limits, wearing seatbelts and not drinking and driving. A responsible parent also assesses whether the teen is ready to earn the privilege of driving.

Teens must practice some skills in real-life circumstances before qualifying for a license. These include driving in inclement weather, dealing with sun glare, maintaining a safe speed for the conditions, negotiating a curve, breaking suddenly without losing control of the car, making

proper turns across lanes of traffic, changing lanes safely, negotiating ramps to the interstate and passing.

State Farm Insurance sponsors a parent-teen driving contract and driving log for new GDL drivers. For more information on the GDL law or the State Farm Driving log, contact the Office of Highway Safety at 302-744-2740.