

## Attention-deficit Disorders and Teen Driving

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Approaching teen driving in a well-considered manner is an important part of parental responsibility. While all parents must consider the risks involved in teen driving, the problem faced by those whose teenagers have problems with attention and impulsiveness is often more anxiety-provoking. This article seeks to offer some suggestions for this important adolescent milestone.

Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a developmental disorder that is one of the most common childhood neurobehavioral disorders. It is characterized by difficulties in sitting still, paying attention, organizing, completing work, and impulsiveness.

While some of the motor restlessness sometimes resolves in adolescence or early adulthood, difficulties with attention, organizing and planning can persist. As adults, individuals with history of ADHD can have difficulties completing an education commensurate with their intelligence, change jobs more frequently, may experience marital difficulties, possible social skill difficulties and are more frequently involved in traffic accidents.

In general, the fatality rate for teen drivers is four times higher than for other drivers. This means that approximately 5500 teen drivers die in motor vehicle accidents in the US each year. The vast majority were found to be due to driver mistakes. Some researchers have found ADHD teens have five times the number of traffic tickets than non ADHD teens. As a group they were more than seven times more likely to be involved in more than one accident.

Snyder (2001) has argued that these problems are less of a skill deficit, than the teens not doing what they know how to do. This may sound familiar to parents who have spent time frustrated at seeing their children fail tests on material that they have clearly mastered.

Snyder feels that applying early and consistent consequences for inappropriate driving is critical. The importance of parental modeling of good driving behaviors is stressed. Do as I say not as I do, does not work for behavior in general, and certainly not for driving habits.

Snyder cautions that expectations need to be reasonable. Not only ADHD children will make mistakes. However, it is important to hold teens responsible for their errors. A motor vehicle and insurance are far more costly to repair than the accidentally broken glass that was knocked from the table. Teens must learn that the responsibility and costs of a vehicle are far in excess of any "toys" they have previously interacted with. Snyder suggested having teens pay off fines and providing consequences for inappropriate behavior in the car when with family. For ADHD children, it may be important to make the use of the car contingent upon properly taking medications.

It is difficult to monitor activities such as driving which occurs when you are not there. It is possible, however to monitor curfew times. Returning the car home when expected is one verifiable aspect of responsible vehicle use. Keeping track of mileage can also alert the parent to use that may be in excess or inappropriate of what has been expected or allowed. In some cases, it may be helpful to check with the parents of other teens about times and dates of activities. There are services that will allow other motorists to call about erratic driving if you put a sticker in the back of the car [www.4myteen.org](http://www.4myteen.org) or 1-800-469-8836.

Snyder listed several tips for parents:

Start Early - talk to them about driving and driving safety before their teen years. Model the appropriate driving behaviors. Talk about driving errors and how to avoid them.

Communicate with your child about driving. In the car, talk to them why its important to use seat belts when in the care, importance of coming to a complete stop, the importance of being patient at intersections, and yielding and being aware of pedestrians.

Talk about newspaper accounts of collisions. Discuss how they may have been avoided and how the families must feel.

Don't discourage their interests or questions. Encourage their questions. Listen to your child. Show that you are understanding how they feel, pay attention to appropriate and inappropriate statements they may make about driving.

Communicate your Values: Talk to them about the importance of safety, family/community responsibility, respect for driving rules and regulations.

Provide straightforward answers. Talk about it again. Repetition is important.

Set clear rules. With who? What activities are appropriate? Where they allowed to go? When can they go? When are they expected back?

Set limits about use of alcohol/drugs - clear consequences and restrictions.

Consistently enforce the rules.

Snyder Described 20 Steps Parents can take (paraphrased):

1. Model Safe Driving
2. Address ADHD and co-existing behaviors that impact on safe driving
3. Determine the maturity/driving readiness of your child
4. Familiarize yourself and your teen with the State driving rules.
5. Select appropriate drivers training and materials. Reinforce lessons
6. Consider medication issues and driving safety
7. Establish incentive system for earning time to practice driving

8. Discuss safe driving expectations, create a teen driving contract.
9. Select vehicle they will be allowed to use
10. Make insurance arrangements
11. Apply for permit only when you and your teen are ready for the responsibility
12. You control the permission about taking drivers education (don't defer to when it is offered by school.
13. Carry out and monitor drivers lessons
14. Evaluate your child's driving skills. Provide feedback
15. Expose to more complex driving situations only after basic skills mastered. Review how to deal with various emergencies
16. When instruction and evaluation are completed satisfactorily, prepare your teen for examination
17. Negotiate new contract for when teen is licensed
18. Contact insurance carrier when teen is actually licensed
19. Allow application for license only when consistent responsible and safe driving behaviors have been demonstrated to satisfaction.
20. After license issued, continue to monitor, administer consequences, and insist agreements be kept.

Drinking and driving are a very serious concern. While ADHD children in general do not have a greatly increased risk of alcohol or drug abuse, those who have displayed conduct problems or excessive risk-taking behaviors are likely at higher risk. Snyder has developed teen driving contracts that help address these and other issues. More general information on teens and drinking can be found through some of the links at: [www.cpancf.com/links.html](http://www.cpancf.com/links.html)

Overly aggressive driving may be a problem for children who are easily irritated or who have trouble with impulse and anger control. A useful exercise may be to check you and your teens level of hostility on the road: [www.aaafoundation.org/text/aggressive.cfm](http://www.aaafoundation.org/text/aggressive.cfm)

References: Snyder, J. M. AD/HD & Driving. Whitefish Consultants, Montana, 2001

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