

Parent-Teen Driving Agreement

One of the biggest challenges of parenthood occurs when children become novice drivers. There are many ways for parents to play an active role in this teenage milestone, and developing a Parent-Teen Driving Agreement is just one of the ways. With motor vehicle crashes being the leading cause of death in people ages 3 to 34 and with an estimated 5,000 teenagers dying in automobile crashes every year, developing a Parent-Teen Driving Agreement may make the difference between life and death. But what is a Parent-Teen Driving Agreement?

A Parent-Teen Driving Agreement is an agreement between teens and their parents, regarding driving privileges and the use of motor vehicles. These agreements typically set forth the rules and regulations as well as the agreed consequences of violating the agreement. Not only the teen must commit to this agreement, but the parents must as well. It is important to establish that both parent and teen are entering into a contract together and that both have a voice in the contract. More importantly, the parents must also follow certain rules and regulations in order for the contract to work to its full potential. Leading by example is the foundation of such a contract and parents must commit to this leadership role. It is the goal of this series of articles to discuss the roles that both the parent and teen play in the contract and to identify what they must do in order for it to be successful.

This article will focus on what components are related to the teen driver and how feedback provided during scheduled meetings between parents and teen(s) can enhance driver performance. Two main components will be presented and further broken down into areas of responsibility: driver behavior and vehicle maintenance. Additionally, consequences for vehicle misuse and negative behaviors are presented since the teen and parent must agree to the terms and conditions for violating the contractual agreement.

Important Teen Behaviors

It is important to identify what types of behaviors are expected of the teen related to safe vehicle operation. The teen is responsible for following the behaviors identified by the contract and fully understanding what is expected of him or her. Operating a motor vehicle demands respect and the teen must be held accountable for his/her behavior at all times.

There are many behaviors that a teen should display while driving and some of the critical behaviors are:

- using safety belts;
- obeying traffic laws;
- and reducing distractions.

While most teen drivers have completed some sort of driver's education program, it is still important to make sure that the behaviors learned in class are continually assessed, and the Parent-Teen Agreement is a good way to do this. The contract can target the behaviors that are most critical to safe driving and continually assess teen driver performance through periodic meetings between the parent and teen. The behaviors listed above are just some of the ones that are critical to maintaining safe and responsible teen driving. These behaviors are examined in greater detail.

Use Safety Belts

The U.S. Department of Transportation reported that in 2003, safety belts saved more than 14,903 American lives. However, during that same year, nearly two-thirds (60 percent) of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were not wearing a safety belt. Driving research has shown that lap/shoulder belts, when used properly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 60 percent and moderate-to-critical injury by 65 percent. These are some powerful reasons as to the importance of safety belt use. It is up to the teen to follow the safety belt policy outlined in the Parent-Teen Agreement and make the right choice to mandate that s/he and all passengers will wear safety belts at all times to reduce risk.

Obey Speed Limits and Traffic Laws

Road engineers know the road better than anyone else and they recommend speed limits based on a variety of complex factors. It is best practice to follow and respect posted speed limits. However, it's also important for the teen to understand that they must not only obey speed limits, but also be aware of factors that affect their speed. Visibility, surface conditions and traffic are just three factors that a teen should keep in mind when driving at all times. Being aware of the factors that affect speed and effectively adjusting speed are critical to reducing risk.

Furthermore, the teen is responsible for obeying all traffic laws and to demonstrate that they know and respect the rules of the road. Not obeying traffic laws can have serious consequences and it's important that the teen be aware of how illegal or irresponsible behavior can result in devastating life-changing consequences. By stressing in the Parent- Teen Agreement the consequences associated with violating the law, teens will be cognizant of how important it is to maintain and demonstrate safe driving behaviors.

Reduce Distractions

While it may be impossible to control what is going on outside the vehicle, it is important to know that making certain decisions inside the vehicle can help reduce risk. By managing distractions inside the vehicle perception and judgment will be able to function optimally and attend to the most important task at hand, driving. In the contract, the teen will agree to avoid distractions inside the vehicle, and not participate in behaviors like:

- eating or drink in the car;
- using a cell phone while driving;
- or changing CDs.

Avoid Impaired Driving

Alcohol is the single largest cause of motor vehicles crashes, injuries and fatalities each year. Approximately 40 percent of all fatal crashes involve alcohol. That is why it's important to commit to not drive under the influence or ride with an impaired driver under any circumstance. It is important that the Parent-Teen Agreement stress the consequences of driving under the influence of alcohol, but also stress that other drugs, both legal (prescription and over-the-counter) and illegal (marijuana, ecstasy, or cocaine) can negatively affect driving behavior as well. By issuing a "zero-tolerance" rule in the contract stating that vehicle privileges will be taken away immediately should this rule be violated, teens will be more likely to avoid such dangerous behavior.

Other Behaviors

Additionally, the behaviors exhibited by the teen outside the vehicle play a critical role in being able to operate a sophisticated piece of machinery. It is important to incorporate into the contract behaviors that may not be directly related to driving a vehicle, but still affect the privilege of being able to do so. Some of the behaviors to incorporate into the Parent-Teen Agreement include, but are not limited to:

- school achievement;
- obeying driving curfew;
- maintaining open communication with parent for driving assistance and advice;
- and avoiding falling prey to peer pressure.

Make the Grade

As a new driver, it is easy to become distracted with the excitement of being able to drive. However, being able to drive should also be dependent on being able to maintain focus on education. If the contract states that driving privileges may be affected by school performance, it's then critical for the teen to maintain that performance. The Parent-Teen Agreement should state that strong academic performance yields additional driving privileges. Conversely, teens should be aware that poor academic performance yields a reduction or loss of driving privileges. This way the teen driver will work for what they want and maintain or in some cases improve their behavior in order to drive.

Obey Driving Curfew

It is up to the teen to choose to exhibit the behaviors that will yield positive results. Setting a driving curfew is a way for the teen to demonstrate responsibility and respect for the driving privilege and Parent-Teen Agreement. The teen should be home at the time specified by the contract. However, should something come up, it is the responsibility of the teen to call his or her parents and explain the situation. The teen should fully understand the repercussions for failing to call and or missing curfew.

Maintain Open Communication

The teen should never be afraid to ask for driving advice or help. The contract should include that if the teen is in a difficult situation, that s/he will be able to rely on the support of the parent. Being able to ask parents for advice or help should never be intimidating or stressful. Therefore, no matter how difficult it may be, it is important to know and demonstrate responsible behaviors by seeking assistance when necessary.

Avoid Peer Pressure

Peer pressure may be one the greatest issues faced by teen drivers. However, it is important for the teen to exhibit strong resistance to peer pressure, especially when being pressured to perform risky driving behaviors. It is imperative that teen drivers exhibit maturity in decision making and avoid risk taking. The key is to always stay focused on driving safely and ensure the safety of all passengers, other drivers, and pedestrians. The Parent-Teen Agreement should act as a powerful reminder to the teen as to why it's important to avoid peer pressure. By being aware of the consequences of vehicle misuse, teens will be more likely to resist peer pressure and choose responsibility over recklessness.

Vehicle Responsibility

Besides demonstrating positive behaviors that influence driving, it's also important to know the responsibilities that come along with vehicle ownership. The Parent-Teen Agreement may set regulations and requirements that are centered on the vehicle itself. Some of these topics may include:

- which vehicles can be driven;
- vehicle maintenance;
- and financial responsibility.

Which Vehicles can be Driven?

The teen driver should know what vehicle(s) they are permitted to drive. For example, the Parent-Teen Agreement may specify that the teen driver can only operate vehicles with airbags. Additionally, it should specify which family vehicle(s) the teen is allowed to drive and which vehicles are off limits. It is the responsibility of the teen to follow the rules and regulations set forth by the contract and only drive the vehicle(s) the contract permits them to drive.

Vehicle Maintenance

Driving comes with great responsibility. However, it is important that the teen not only be aware of the liability and health risk associated, but the financial responsibilities as well. The teen should know what they are responsible for and how to go about the process of caring for the vehicle. Two things that may be included in the Parent-Teen Agreement are engine maintenance and interior/exterior cleanliness.

Financial Responsibility

Besides the financial responsibility associated with car care, there are other costs a teen should be aware of. Such costs include insurance, gas, vehicle registration, and parking decals. Most states require car insurance and it is the responsibility of the teen driver to understand their insurance and the importance of such a service and be prepared to contribute to this expense. Depending on the contract, some teens may be responsible for some or all of the costs mentioned above. The contract may use these additional costs as a way to teach teen drivers about the financial responsibility associated with vehicle ownership and operation.

Consequences

Should the teen violate the agreement set forth by the Parent-Teen Agreement, the teen should be aware of all consequences. For example, if the teen violates a rule or regulation, they may be faced with losing driving privileges for a certain amount of days, weeks, or even months. Another possible repercussion may be that the amount of miles a teen is allowed to drive weekly be decreased or the teen may face restrictions in the number of passengers they are allowed to have or they may have to pick up some extra household chores.

Should the teen not be responsible for their own insurance or gas, another repercussion to violating the contract may be taking over one, or both of the financial responsibilities. If a teen receives a ticket, s/he must be aware of both the legal consequences, financial consequences and the Parent-Teen consequences. However, the contract may also reward good behavior. Teens who exhibit strong, mature and respectful driving performance may receive positive feedback in the form of an increase in driving privileges. Feedback is the best way to reinforce behavior and is especially important when learning the complex task of driving.

Hopefully, this article has provided useful information regarding the role of the teen in the Parent-Teen Agreement. The goal of the contractual agreement isn't to make teen driving life difficult, but to help reinforce that driving is a dangerous and risky privilege and it must be respected and treated with maturity.

Signatures and Endorsements

Students Name:

PRINTED _____

SIGNED _____

DATE _____

Parent/Guardians' Name:

PRINTED _____

SIGNED _____

DATE _____