Teen Drivers with LD and/or AD/HD
A Parent's Guide
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Our E-ssential Guide to Teen Drivers with LD and/or AD/HD is a collection of articles that provides expert information on the risks faced by teenage drivers with LD and/or AD/HD and advice for ensuring a safer driving experience for your teen — both while she is learning to drive and after she has her license. You’ll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

This guide includes:

Articles

- **On the Right Track:**
  Teaching Your Teen to Manage Travel and Transportation
  By Arlyn Roffman, Ph.D.

- **Teen Drivers with AD/HD: Realities and Risk Factors**
  By Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.

- **When Teens with AD/HD are Learning to Drive: Parent Strategies**
  By Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.

- **Learner's Permit Driving Contract: Points to Cover**

- **Keeping Licensed Teenage Drivers with AD/HD Safe: Parent Strategies**
  By Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.

- **Teenage Driver's License Contract: Points to Cover**

- **Teaching Kids with LD to Drive: A Complex Family Matter**
  By Melinda Sacks

Resources & References

- **Books, Articles, and Websites**

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Originally created by Schwab Learning, formerly a program of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation.
People with learning disabilities (LD) and/or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) often have difficulty getting from one location to another. They frequently lose their way, have trouble using public transportation, and struggle with driving-related issues. Contributing factors may include poor time management, problems with spatial and visual perception, and difficulties with eye-hand coordination. Diane Swonk, a successful economist who has dyslexia, admits, “Every time I get off the elevator in the place that I’ve worked for 17 years, I’m still lost. I still can’t get on the right train going home from work unless I try really hard. Going from Point A to Point B is just not easy for me.”

This article will explain many of the challenges individuals with LD and AD/HD face in travel and transportation. It will offer a variety of strategies for teaching your teenager how to get around effectively, which will further prepare him to function independently as a young adult.

The table below illustrates how various characteristics of LD and AD/HD can result in challenges to getting around.

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Driving Presents Special Challenges

As I explain in my book, *Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood*, driving presents its own set of challenges:

With all of its complexities, driving can be of particular concern to individuals with LD and AD/HD. Difficulties vary and can develop for a multitude of reasons. For example, people may find it difficult to train their right foot to recognize the difference between the accelerator and the brake and, on standard [manual] transmission vehicles, to train their left foot to simultaneously work the clutch. They may find it challenging to develop a working understanding of the reactivity of the steering wheel, which must turn only so much to pass another car but must turn even more when it is time to round a corner. They may struggle to interpret what they are seeing in the rearview mirror. On cars with manual [standard] transmission, they may have difficulty moving from one gear to another, particularly to reverse, which generally requires an additional thrust. Further, they may have considerable difficulty learning how to parallel park. Indeed, many find it difficult to meld the many separate aspects of car handling into one coordinated driving experience. (*Roffman*, 2000, p. 191)

Tips for Teaching Your Teen to Manage Travel and Transportation

The following strategies may be used during your child’s middle and high school years to help him learn to get around safely and on track:

Planning Your Trip

- **Practice reading maps with your child.** Start by discussing simple routes; gradually make the hypothetical journey more complex. Teach him how to use online mapping tools, such as Mapquest.com, which offer written directions as well as maps between any two addresses. When he understands how to read a map, have him plan a short trip or two, first with your supervision and then on his own.

- **Teach your teen how to read transportation schedules.** If you live in a town with a local bus route, review the schedule together, pointing out the departure and arrival columns, the weekday versus weekend schedules, and any other pertinent information. If there’s a map of the route, suggest marking the way from one location to another with a colored marker. Ask him travel-related questions until it’s clear that he understands how to use the schedule. Send him on a short trip that requires him to practice both his ability to read transit schedules as well as his newly acquired map reading skills.

- **Discuss how to estimate the travel time between two places.** Many factors can cause delays, including traffic jams and mass transit problems. For important appointments, such as job interviews, encourage him to take a “dry run,” to travel there beforehand in order to gauge how much travel time to set aside on the actual day. Suggest that he build in at least a 10-minute cushion of time for unexpected travel delays.

- **Teach strategies that will help your child avoid getting lost.** Many people who are prone to disorientation in new places write down simple directions (e.g., how to get from the front door of the medical building to his doctor’s office or, when traveling, how to go from the elevator to the family’s hotel room). Use a “think-aloud” to demonstrate taking note of where you’ve left the car when you go to a crowded parking lot (e.g., “Okay, we’re in row 19, right in line with the main entrance to the mall”).

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- If your teen carries a cell phone, help him program frequently called phone numbers (e.g., parents, friends, emergency roadside assistance) into his phone’s directory. If he finds himself lost or in an emergency situation, he may be nervous, so being able to call for assistance at the touch of a button will be a tremendous help.

On the Way to Your Destination

- **Explain how to read Departure and Arrival boards** in train stations and airports. By the time your child is in upper elementary school, you can teach lessons during your family trips, talking through the steps of traveling from door to door. For example, you might explain, “Now that we’re at this busy airport, we’re going to hold on tight to our bags and wallets. The first step is to check in. We’re flying on X Airlines. You tell me where the check-in counters are for our airline.” Talk your way through checking the Departure board for your gate, going through security, etc. Point out who your resources are (e.g., employees behind the counters, people in airline uniforms). If you don’t travel regularly, take your teen on a “field trip” to the airport.

- **Model tying a colorful item to the handle of your suitcase when you check your baggage on family trips**, and explain that practicing this strategy will make it easy for him to spot his own luggage in the baggage claim area when he travels on his own.

- **Discuss the importance of identifying appropriate resources in certain situations.** “Think alouds” will help him understand your thought process. For example, you might say, “Okay, we aren’t sure where the train station is. There’s a policeman; I’ll ask him if we’re headed in the right direction.” Explain to your teen that we all get lost or disoriented at times, and that asking for help is a sign of resourcefulness rather than weakness. If he has memory problems, suggest that he repeat the directions back or, better yet, carry a notepad and pen so he can write down the directions he hears.

- **Review safe pedestrian habits**, particularly if your child has a problem with depth perception and may not be able to judge the speed of oncoming vehicles. Remind him that it’s safest to use crosswalks and obey traffic signals to get from one side of a street to the other.

Special Advice for Drivers

- **If your child would like to learn to drive but you’re afraid that he might not be able to master the necessary skills due to the severity of his LD or AD/HD, contact a large hospital rehabilitation center in your area for an assessment.** By using simulators to test his reaction time, depth perception, and other related skills, professionals there can determine whether the disability is severe enough to prohibit him from getting his license. If he is found to have the potential to become a safe driver but in need of extra support as he learns, the rehabilitation center should be able to recommend a local driving school attuned to the needs of those who would benefit from special instruction due to disabilities.

- If your teen does get a driver’s license, teach him that there are both low tech and high tech ways to avoid problems. One high-tech item, a Geographical Positioning System.
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(GPS), can help him avoid getting lost while on the road. A colorful cloth tied to the car's radio antenna is a low-tech aide that can help him locate a parked car.

- **Explain the importance of concentrating fully on driving at all times.** Talking on cell phones or changing CDs while driving are dangerous risks and illegal activities in an increasing number of states. Model safe behavior by pulling over when you need to talk on your cell phone or when you want to find a particular CD.

- **Keeping a directions file in the car is very useful,** particularly if directions both to and from the destination are explicitly spelled out. A folder of directions can be stored in the glove compartment.

**On the Road to Independence**

Perhaps no one activity more clearly represents independence than being able to travel around on one’s own. Although there are many complex skills involved in travel and transportation, most teens with learning disabilities and AD/HD are able to learn them if they’re given explicit training and support.

**AD/HD by Other Names and Acronyms**

While Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is the official term and acronym used by today’s mental health care professionals, it is sometimes referred to by other names and abbreviations. For example, it is sometimes called:

- ADHD (without the “slash” in the middle)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
- Attention Disorder

**About the Author**

Arlyn Roffman, Ph.D., an expert on transition issues in special education, is a Professor at Lesley University, where she served as founding director of Threshold, a transition program for young adults with learning disabilities, from 1981 to 1996. She has served on the professional advisory boards of several national LD organizations and maintains a private practice in psychology.
Automobile crashes are the leading cause of serious injury and death among American teenagers. From national statistics, we know that two out of five deaths among teens in the United States result from motor vehicle crashes. The risk for motor vehicle crashes is higher among 16- to 19-year-olds than any other age group. In fact, per mile driven, drivers in this age group are four times more likely than older drivers to crash (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2003).

The figures for teenage drivers with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) are even more sobering. In this first of three articles, we will examine the factors that contribute to these statistics — for teenagers in general as well as for teens with AD/HD.

**Teenage Drivers: Inexperienced, Immature, and “Invincible”**

Lack of driving experience, immature judgment, and the characteristic teenage “risk taking” attitude are obstacles to safe driving that all parents of teenagers should be concerned about. Driving safely is a complicated skill that takes time and practice for any teen to master. At the same time, the common teenage attitude that “nothing will happen to me” creates a situation where teens are more likely than older, more experienced drivers to underestimate the dangers in hazardous situations. For example, even though most teenagers understand that wearing seatbelts is important for safety, only 33 percent of high school students report they always wear seat belts when riding with someone else (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001).

**AD/HD Increases Driving Risk**

While all parents should be concerned with the statistics on teenage drivers, parents whose teens have AD/HD need to understand how the disorder increases driving risk for their teenagers. Studies indicate that young people diagnosed with AD/HD, who often find it difficult to sustain their attention and control their impulses, have abnormally high rates of traffic violations, accidents, and instances of driving without a license. One study 1, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, published in July, 2002, reported that of 105 people with AD/HD who were studied, about 20 percent had had their license suspended or revoked — the same number who had received 12 or more traffic citations or had caused more than $6,000 in damage in their first crash. Those figures are two to four times the norm for young adult drivers.

Several research studies have shown that, compared to other teens, teenage drivers with AD/HD:

- are more likely to have received repeated traffic citations, most notably for speeding.
- sustain three times as many car crash injuries as teens without AD/HD.
- are less likely to be practicing sound driving habits in their current driving performance, as reported by their parents.
- are nearly four times more likely to have had an accident while they were the driver of a vehicle.
- are found to be at fault for car crashes 4 times more often than peers without AD/HD.
Teen Drivers with AD/HD: Realities and Risk Factors

- are 6 to 8 times more likely to have their license suspended or revoked for poor driving behavior.
- are more likely to have driven an automobile without adult supervision prior to becoming licensed drivers.

When you’re helping your own teenager with AD/HD become a safe and experienced driver, these startling statistics suddenly become personal and can motivate you to do more to protect your own teenager from becoming another statistic! Becoming educated about the issues that put young drivers at risk and the impact AD/HD has on driving skills is the first step to helping your teen become a safe driver.

Traits of Teenage Drivers with AD/HD

If your teenager has AD/HD, you and he must understand that the core symptoms of inattention and impulsivity (the inability to inhibit behavior) have serious implications for driving safety. It takes only one occasion of inattention or impulsivity while driving a motor vehicle to have devastating consequences. Teens with AD/HD are often less mature than their peers, which can affect their ability to drive safely. Let’s take a look at these traits in more detail.

Inattentive Driving

Two of the most common traffic violations for individuals with AD/HD are speeding and failure to yield. When teens are inattentive (e.g., they “space out” or daydream, or are distracted), they’re more likely to exceed the speed limit or miss a stop sign. Many teens with AD/HD lose track of time and are often late. Mistakenly, they think they can make up the time by driving faster, which can cause them to lose control of their vehicles. Teenager drivers are also prone to lapses in attention while they change CD discs or the radio station.

Impulsive Driving

Being impulsive means that one acts first and thinks about it later — or perhaps not at all. So even if your teen knows the rules, he may take the chance that he can get by anyway. An example of impulsive driving is cutting around another car stopped at a stop sign — even driving up on the curb to avoid waiting. Another example would be using the car for thrills or showing off — such as drag racing or towing a friend on a skateboard — perhaps on a dare.

Delayed Maturity

It is well known that many teens with AD/HD are immature in their ability to inhibit their behavior that is inappropriate to the task at hand. Dr. Russell Barkley often cautions parents that youth with AD/HD may be as much as one-third their chronological age behind their peers. This means that a 15-year-old may be more comparable to a 10-year-old in terms of ability to control his impulses. As a parent, you need to assess your teenager’s maturity level honestly and perhaps delay his application for a driver’s license until he is more mature. Having your teen drive with a learner’s permit for a longer time — or with a graduated licensing system — will allow you more opportunities to observe his driving behaviors and help with problem areas.

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Medication and Teen Drivers with AD/HD

For many individuals with AD/HD, taking appropriate medications can help improve their behavior. Daniel Cox, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Psychiatric Medicine, University of Virginia Health System, has been conducting specific research on the impact of medication on the driving ability of young adults with AD/HD. Since methylphenidate (e.g., Ritalin® and Concerta®) is the most commonly prescribed medication for AD/HD, he questioned if those medication benefits would carry over to improve driving skills. He conducted three small but groundbreaking studies, which are summarized below.

In the first study Ritalin was compared to a sugar pill (placebo). Driving skills of college students with and without AD/HD were tested on a sophisticated driving simulator. On placebo, males with AD/HD drove five times worse than those without AD/HD. Ritalin significantly improved the driving of those with AD/HD, but not the control group drivers (those individuals without AD/HD). While on Ritalin the drivers with AD/HD drove with skills equivalent to drivers without AD/HD.

A second study compared the effects of Ritalin taken three times a day (at 8 a.m., noon, and 4 p.m.) and methylphenidate when delivered in a sustained-release Concerta capsule once a day (at 8 a.m.). Male high school drivers with AD/HD were tested on two days, once on Ritalin and once on Concerta. The interesting thing in this study was that driving ability was tested at 2 p.m., 5 p.m., 8 p.m., and 11 p.m. Overall, driving performance was significantly better when the drivers were taking Concerta once a day compared to Ritalin three times a day. More specifically, driving performance on Concerta and Ritalin was similar at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., but performance was significantly worse on Ritalin at 8 p.m., and these negative differences continued to 11 p.m. Most notable was that teens at 8 p.m. when taking Ritalin were making driving errors similar to errors made by men 80+ years of age. At the same time, participants on Concerta demonstrated driving skills comparable to men between the ages of 55-59 years of age, a much lower driving crash risk group.

A third study compared male teenagers with AD/HD driving on a road course involving rural, highway, and city driving. They drove the course on two separate days, at the same time of day under similar weather conditions. On one occasion they drove after taking Concerta and on the other occasion after taking no AD/HD medication that day. A rater, who did not know if the driver had or had not taken medication, sat in the back seat and rated the occurrence of driving errors. On average, inattentive driving errors occurred 7.5 times per driver when not on medication. By contrast, inattentive driving errors were significantly reduced (an average of 4.2 errors per driver) after subjects had taken Concerta. An interesting finding in this study was that the higher dose the driver had taken the greater the reduction in inattentive driving errors.

These studies demonstrate that, in the subjects tested:

- Driving performance was worse among drivers with AD/HD not taking medication, compared to drivers who don’t have AD/HD.
- Medications appear to differ in their effectiveness in improving driving skills during the evening hours (both on a simulator and when driving real cars).

You need to assess your teenager’s maturity level honestly and perhaps delay his application for a driver’s license until he is more mature.
Additional research is underway to assess the effect of medication on the driving ability of teenagers with AD/HD. Regardless of research results, as a parent you would be wise to observe and document the effect of medication on your teenager’s driving ability while you ride with him at various times of the day and evening.

Proactive Parenting: A Driving Force in Teen Safety

There is much more to learn about the impact of AD/HD upon driving skills. The bottom line is that individuals with AD/HD need to pay particular attention to their driving ability and take advantage of appropriate treatments to improve their driving behaviors. As a parent, you will need to become educated about AD/HD treatments and risk factors in driving to be able to guide your teen in becoming a safe driver.

Youth with AD/HD can become safe drivers, but extra training and thought must go into the process! My next two articles on teenage drivers with AD/HD will offer strategies to help you maintain your teenager’s driving safety while he is learning to drive and after he has earned his driver’s license.
When Teens with AD/HD are Learning to Drive: Parent Strategies

Most parents of teens with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) are not surprised to see evidence of higher driving risks associated with having AD/HD. If your teenager has AD/HD, you have probably observed lapses in attention, persistence, activity regulation, gross motor control, reaction time, and rule-following behaviors in your child from an early age. Many youth with AD/HD are described as “accident prone.” Others seem “spacey” and mentally wander off as they engage in activities. This does not mean that all teens with AD/HD are doomed to have poor driving records, nor are they destined to become driving failures. In fact, the difference between unsafe and safe teen drivers has more to do with the parents’ behavior than you may think!

The fact is that there are many teens with AD/HD who are skilled, safe drivers. These are the teens whose parents set firm limits and carefully considered all the issues involved in the AD/HD diagnosis in conjunction with teen driving concerns before putting their teens with AD/HD behind the wheel. In this article, I will present specific steps you can take to help your teenager with AD/HD achieve skill and safety as a driver-in-training.

Parent Preparation

Even before you allow your teenager with AD/HD to get behind the wheel of a car, you will want to consider and address several factors, including:

- The possible impact of AD/HD and any co-existing conditions your teen has
- Medications your teenager takes while operating a vehicle
- Your teenager’s maturity level and driving readiness
- State driving laws
- Automobile insurance coverage
- Formal driver training
- Supervised driving practice, including your expectations of your teen

In my book, *AD/HD & Driving: A Guide for Parents of Teens with AD/HD*, I outline “20 Steps for Parents to Promote Safe Driving Behaviors.” Each step is discussed in depth and includes activities for parents and teens to do together. For this article, I recommend 10 steps to get you started:

1. **Model safe driving behaviors.** Children are natural mimics and learn by example. Knowing this, ask yourself these questions:
   - Are you a good role model?
   - Are you an informed and courteous driver?
   - Do you use your cell phone while driving?
   - Do you push or exceed the speed limit?
   - Would you be comfortable watching your teen drive as you do?
2. Address AD/HD and any co-existing conditions or behavior problems your teen has that may impact his ability to drive safely. When learning to drive is compromised by mental health conditions (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, anxiety disorders, or depression) parents and teens must make an effort to understand these complications, and work to minimize the risks involved. If your teen is involved in alcohol or substance abuse, obtaining a learner’s permit should be delayed until your teen has successfully completed a treatment program.

3. Determine your teenager’s maturity and driving readiness. Young people with AD/HD are often emotionally and functionally immature when compared to their peers. Teenagers with AD/HD may take significantly longer to develop good judgment and a mature attitude toward driving. Teenagers who have explosive tempers, or are irresponsible or uncooperative, are not ready to drive. Parents must sign for a learner’s permit to be issued to their child. Grant permission to obtain the learner’s permit only when you and your teen are ready to assume the responsibilities involved.

Graduated licensing is one strategy that allows for young drivers to develop safe driving skills while minimizing risk of injury. With graduated licensing, a young and/or inexperienced driver receives a provisional license to drive with specific restrictions; these restrictions are lifted systematically as the driver gains experience and demonstrates competence. For a thorough discussion of graduated licensing, go to http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/newdriver/saveteens.

4. Become familiar with state laws regarding teen drivers. To be a safe driver, your teenager needs to know the rules of the road and understand why he is expected to obey them.

5. Select the vehicle your teen will be allowed to use while he learns to drive. Be aware that research has shown that when teens own their own cars, their grades go down and automobile injuries go up. Consider carefully the pros and cons of the car your teen is allowed to drive.

A Word about Medication
As I explained in a previous article, research studies have shown that medications to treat AD/HD help drivers with the condition to be more attentive and in control of driving situations. Consider these medication tips:

- If your teen benefits from medication, make sure he is taking the medication during the times of day or night he is likely to be driving.

- Keep a letter from the prescribing physician to document your teen’s need for the medication, and keep the letter in the glove box of the car. Because psychostimulants taken for AD/HD are categorized as controlled substances, your teen may need to produce medical documentation if ever stopped by a police officer while driving. This would apply if your teen is carrying the medication with him, or, in extreme cases, if he is subjected to a urinalysis which would reveal the medication in his system.

- If your teen takes additional medications for other chronic disorders or occasional illness (e.g., allergies), be sure they won’t make him inattentive or sleepy while driving.
When Teens with AD/HD are Learning to Drive: Parent Strategies

6. Obtain automobile insurance coverage for your teenager. Select (or stay with) a reputable insurance company. With your teenager present, discuss coverage with your agent. Discuss all aspects of liability and collision insurance, considering your total family needs. Teens need to understand that citations for driving errors will increase insurance premiums. It is not in your best interest to cover these increased costs for your teen; he must learn the consequences of his driving behavior.

Obtaining ample coverage is of utmost importance in protecting yourself and your teen from financial liability for property damage and injuries to others caused by your vehicle. All parents of teenagers, but especially parents of teens with AD/HD, should consider the addition of an umbrella policy for liability. Be sure that the amount of liability insurance is adequate to protect family assets in case your teen causes an accident resulting in enormous property damage or bodily injury or death of another person.

7. Discuss safe driving expectations with your teen. Talk to him about driving every time you get a chance. Be very clear about your expectations for safe driving behavior. Create a driving contract that sets out clear expectations for your teen’s driving behavior as well as the consequences if he doesn’t live up to the agreement. Teens want to be treated as adults and are usually willing to enter into a written driving contract with parents. (If you are not willing to enforce consequences laid out in the contract, you should not draft the written document.) A written contract eliminates arguments over rules and past agreements. If your teen refuses to abide by the contract, or argues about agreements or consequences, this is a sign of immaturity and a breech of contract! Suspend driving privileges until he is ready to honor the contract. Whether or not you have a written driving contract in place, be aware all parents can have the learner’s permit cancelled if they request the state to do so. For some tips to help you draw up a learner’s permit driving contract see page 13.

8. Do not abdicate parental responsibility to a driver’s education class for teaching your teen how to drive safely. Teaching your teen to drive can be a very rewarding experience. Driver education courses in public schools (if they are offered) and commercial driving schools are a great way for teens to learn the rules of the road and discuss the importance of safety, but rarely do courses allow enough driving practice time for teens to develop consistency in skills. Allow your child to practice with you as often as possible, for 20 minutes or more per outing. Youth with AD/HD often take longer to learn safe driving skills than teens without AD/HD. Some states require documentation of at least 50 hours of practice driving time to apply for a license. That number is a minimum suggestion and has nothing to do with personal mastery of safe driving skills. Your teenager should plan to spend two or three times as many hours driving on a learner’s permit.

Use the practice driving time as an opportunity to discuss the special challenges facing drivers with AD/HD. Ask your teenage driver, “Where are you focusing your attention?” and “Were you distracted just then? If so, by what?” Ask him to process the experience with you. This will help him become aware of his individual driving challenges and the need for concentration.

9. Establish an incentive system for practice driving time. Similar to other behavior incentive systems used with kids who have AD/HD, this system allows teens to earn extra practice driving time for every increment of appropriate behavior at home. Teens should be warned that if they argue or become oppositional during driving instruction with you, they will lose any driving privilege that they had earned for that day.
10. Prepare your teen for possible driving emergencies. Role-play emergency situations with him. Discuss various scenarios and tell him how you expect him to respond. For example, ask your teenager:

What should you do when a fire truck or an ambulance is either in front of you or behind you?

What if you are involved in a personal injury accident? What are the risks of moving an injured person? Stress the importance of remaining calm and still if they are the person injured.

Be sure your teen understands the importance of staying at an accident scene whether he is directly involved or a witness to a vehicle crash. Talk about the basic instinct to flee unpleasant situations and why all drivers involved in an accident must stay at the accident scene. Stress that the penalties for “hit and run” driving apply to teens as well as adults.

Role-play the scenario that your teen is stopped by a police officer for a speeding violation. Ask your teen to produce his learner’s permit, vehicle registration, and insurance papers. Be sure he knows how to respond appropriately. Arguing with or showing disrespect to an officer can be costly. Emergency phone numbers, parents’ home and office phone numbers, and coins for emergency phone calls should be placed in an envelope in the glove compartment.

Looking Ahead: The Driver’s License

While your teenager with AD/HD is learning to drive, you need to be actively involved in setting limits and teaching him how to become a safe and responsible driver. The next article in this series will focus on issues you should consider once your teen with AD/HD has learned the basics and is ready to apply for the driver’s license.

About the Author

Marlene Snyder, Ph.D. is an international conference speaker, author, trainer, and consultant for educational, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies as well as community and parent education organizations. She’s an expert on AD/HD, academic success, rural violence, and crime prevention.
A learner’s permit driving contract between you and your teenager with AD/HD might include the following points. (Note: Unless otherwise noted, all tips are aimed directly at the teenager.)

**Ground Rules:**

- **Abide by the rules established for use of the family car.** Set strict penalties for driving the car without permission. A teenager with AD/HD may need to be reminded that the learner’s permit requires a licensed adult to be with him at all times. (The adults with whom he is allowed to drive should be listed in the contract).

- **You must comply with your medication schedule** in order to be allowed to drive.

- **No passengers except parents will be allowed for at least the first three to six months.** A study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association shows that the risk of fatal injury for a 16- or 17-year-old driver increases significantly with the number of passengers who are under age 30.

- **Keep a driving log and check in after each trip.** You should note where you drove, how long it took, and what difficulties and distractions you encountered. (You and he can then discuss the log and come up with ways to improve his concentration and avoid problems in the future. Your teen is more likely to learn from his experiences and mistakes if you check in with him.)

**While You are Behind the Wheel:**

- **You will respect and immediately obey all directions given by the supervising adult.** Any disrespect, swearing, arguing, or disregard for directions will result in pulling the car to the side of the road and the driving lesson will be finished for that day.

- **Always wear a seatbelt.** Lap/shoulder safety belts have been proven effective in reducing serious injury and saving lives. Seat belt use is required by law in every state in the country. Know and follow your state’s seat belt laws.

- **No cellular phone use while driving.** If you carry a cell phone keep it turned off to stop incoming calls, and restrict phone use to emergencies. Pull over whenever making a call. Studies show that talking on cell phones reduces attentiveness and increases risk of accident equal to that of intoxicated drivers.

- **Never read maps or take notes while driving.** Pull over to a safe place at the side of the road to perform these tasks.

- **No eating or drinking (even non-alcoholic beverages) while driving.**

- **Limit music sources and choices.** Some drivers with AD/HD find music helps them concentrate. Others find it distracting. Whatever the case, choose a music source that limits distraction. Use only pre-set radio stations, and if using a tape or CD player, carry only one selection per trip to eliminate the temptation to search through the stack or play with operating controls on the sound system while driving.

*The above suggestions are based on the more comprehensive “Learner's Permit Driving Contract” (pp. 93-94) in the book *AD/HD & Driving: A Guide for Parents of Teens with AD/HD* by Marlene Snyder, Ph.D. Created 8/27/2004*
Teenagers who have AD/HD can learn to be safe drivers, even though research shows their risk is higher. If your teenager with AD/HD is preparing to become a licensed, independent driver, there are several measures you can take to ensure his safety — and your own sanity!

While driving with the learner’s permit, your teen was always under the supervision of an adult. Your teen is only ready to apply for a driver’s license when he is ready to assume the responsibility of driving safely without adult supervision. If you are uncomfortable with the thought of your teen driving “solo,” extend his driving practice period on the learner’s permit. A driver’s license is not something that must be earned on the birthday your state considers the “maturity date.” Driving maturity and safety have nothing to do with one’s chronological age!

Consider a Graduated Licensing System

One approach to extending the driver’s training period is to use a graduated licensing system. Graduated licensing is a strategy that allows young drivers to develop safe driving skills while minimizing risk of injury. With graduated licensing, a young and/or inexperienced driver receives a provisional license to drive with specific restrictions; these restrictions are systematically lifted as the driver gains experience and demonstrates competence. To learn about the specific graduated licensing requirements in your state, visit http://www.hwysafety.org/safety_facts/state_laws/grad_license.htm. If graduated licensing is not available in your state, establish a set of rules that make sense to you and enforce these life-saving restrictions yourself.

Preparing your Teen for the Driver’s License Exam

It’s a good idea to prepare your teen with AD/HD for the driver’s license examination well in advance. Start by outlining the process of completing forms and taking the vision, written, and driving tests. Role playing the process may be especially helpful for anxious teens with AD/HD who also have co-existing learning disabilities. Discuss appropriate behavior and social skills for all aspects of the testing process (i.e., meeting the officials at the licensing department, meeting the driving examiner, etc.)

If possible, obtain copies of the forms your teen will need to fill out before taking the test, and let him practice following the instructions and filling out the forms. If your teenager wants to practice taking the driver’s license exam, you can find several sample tests online.

Discuss and role-play how your teen should behave during the written driver’s license exam and during the “road test.” Be sure to discuss appropriate behavior in the event he should fail either portion of the test. Talk about the words that your teen should (and should not) use when communicating with the driver’s license examiner. An impulsive teen with AD/HD may be especially prone to blurting out an offensive response!

Driving is Serious Business

Talk openly with your teenager about the serious responsibilities involved in being a licensed driver. Be clear about how the death of another person involved in an accident where your teenage driver is at fault would impact him as well as your family, the victim’s family, and the community. If you have
examples of local teens who are in prison because of negligent driving in fatal crashes, point them out. Teens need to understand motor vehicle homicide laws and their implications. Some parents think this is too gruesome a topic to discuss with teenagers. But as a parent, you must realize that driving is an adult responsibility — and punishment for adult irresponsibility is often difficult to face.

Applying for the Driver’s License

The granting of a driver’s license is a memorable lifetime achievement. On the day of the test, make sure your teen is well-rested and well-groomed. Ask him what he would like to do to celebrate with the family after he passes the test — as well as what he will want to do if he fails the test. Assure your teenager that you will love him whether he passes or fails. You should accompany him but allow him to drive to the driver’s license examination. Your teen needs you to be present at this important event, so wait while the testing is taking place.

Plan to celebrate your teen’s successful attainment of the driver’s license immediately after the license is granted. It is not a good idea to allow a newly licensed teen driver to take off to celebrate his achievement with his peers. Sadly, newspaper stories commonly report the death of a teen driver who perished within hours of getting an unrestricted driver’s license. Newly licensed drivers often want to show their peers the symbol of their power and new independence. Help your teenager determine how to do this safely.

It is also a good idea to have a contingency plan for what you and your teen will do if his first attempt at passing the driver’s license examination is not successful. If he fails the test, talk about what happened in a non-judgmental way. Explain that many people fail their first test and that the examiners’ job is to be sure the people they license are safe drivers. Encourage your teen and offer to discuss the exam with him and jointly determine what went wrong. Identify specific problems he had with the written test and/or the driving test. Help him work on those skills so he will be more successful in his next attempt.

Securing Auto Insurance for your Licensed Teen Driver

Insurance companies often charge higher premiums for licensed teenagers than they do for student drivers. Be sure to notify your agent when your teenager becomes fully licensed. You and your teen should meet with the agent to discuss the additional costs of adding the teen to your insurance policy. Your insurance agent would probably prefer to meet your teen under pleasant circumstances than to meet him while working out an insurance claim!

With your teen present, have your agent compute the costs of insuring your teen if should have:

- One or two speeding tickets
- A ticket for negligent driving
- A fender-bender accident costing $2,000 to repair
- An accident involving a serious injury
- A couple of speeding tickets and an accident
- A conviction for minor in possession of alcohol
- An arrest for driving while under the influence of alcohol

“When your teen becomes a licensed driver, monitoring his driving is just as or more important than it was while he held a learner’s permit.”
Make it clear to your teen that if his poor driving behavior raises your insurance rates, he will be expected to pay the difference in premium. If he is unable or unwilling to shoulder that responsibility, or continues to drive negligently, he should forfeit the right to drive and surrender his driver's license to you until he is more mature.

**Draw up a Contract for Your Licensed Teen Driver**

Consider creating a driving contract that sets out clear expectations for your teen’s driving behavior. Establish rules that are important to you and your family. Be sure to include incentives and rewards for compliance with the contract. For some tips to help you draw up a teenage driver’s license contract see page 17.

Don’t be surprised if other parents whose teenagers do not have AD/HD question why you are using a driving contract with your teen. They may criticize you for being too strict and not developing trust in your teenager. As you probably know by now, parents whose children do not have AD/HD often criticize the parenting skills of parents of children with AD/HD. Just remember that you know your teen’s behavior patterns better than anyone. Because of the behaviors often associated with AD/HD and coexisting disorders, your teen requires continuing guidance, clear rules, monitoring, and consistent administration of consequences when needed. After all, your child’s safety is your responsibility.

**Remain Vigilant**

Just because your teen with AD/HD has an unrestricted driver’s license, your parental responsibility for his safe driving does not end! In fact, this is the very time when all parents should be most vigilant. Be aware that more teens are killed during the first year of driving alone than any other time.

When your teen becomes a licensed driver, monitoring his driving is just as or more important than it was while he held a learner’s permit. Continue to monitor his driving behavior, administer consequences, and enforce all contract agreements. Your teen with AD/HD needs you to set realistic expectations and offer consistent support as he gains experience and good judgment behind the wheel of a car.

**Stay Optimistic**

When raising a child with AD/HD, you face many challenges that parents of kids without the disorder do not. Sometimes those challenges seem overwhelming, but don’t get discouraged. Continue to seek new information that will help your child become a safe and happy individual. I hope you will experience the satisfaction of knowing you have helped your teenager with AD/HD develop safe driving habits that will serve him well all his life.

**About the Author**

**Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.** is an international conference speaker, author, trainer, and consultant for educational, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies as well as community and parent education organizations. She’s an expert on AD/HD, academic success, rural violence, and crime prevention.
A Parent’s Guide to Teen Drivers with LD and/or AD/HD

Teenage Driver’s License Contract: Points to Cover

Once your teenager with AD/HD has earned his driver's license, parental monitoring becomes even more critical! A driving contract between you and your teen can help maintain your control and authority over his driving activities. The contract should address your individual family’s concerns and might include the following points. (Note: Unless otherwise noted, all points are aimed at the teenage driver.)

**Ground Rules:**

- Abide by the rules established for use of the family car.
- Do not drive any vehicles you or your parents do not own.
- You must comply with your medication schedule if your parents determine you are a safer driver when your medication is in effect.
- Honor the curfews your parents have set for both weekday and weekend driving. (Parents: Agree on positive incentives for compliance as well as negative consequences for curfew violations.)
- If your academic performance or responsibilities at home suffer because of excessive driving time, your parents can reduce — or suspend — your driving privileges.
- Do your part to pay for gas and vehicle maintenance. As a young adult, you will be expected to pay for all (or a fair share) of the repairs and related expenses (e.g., increased insurance costs) when your poor driving behavior becomes a liability.
- If you receive any traffic or parking tickets, you are expected to handle them appropriately. This may include appearing in court. You will work to earn the money needed to cover any fines. Your parents will not “cover” for you.

**While You are Behind the Wheel:**

- Follow rules set by your parents regarding the places and the times of day you are allowed to drive.
- Keep your parents informed of your driving activities at all times.
- Always wear a seatbelt. Lap/shoulder safety belts have been proven effective in reducing serious injury and saving lives. Know and follow your state’s seat belt laws.
- No cellular phone use while driving. If you carry a cell phone, keep it turned off while driving. Pull over to the side of the road when calling your parents, friends, or reporting an emergency.
- Do not drink alcohol and drive! If your parents learn that you have violated this rule, you will be required to surrender your driver’s license to them.
- Do not carry teenage passengers (unless your parents have given you permission). And do not ride with another teen driver without your parents’ permission. Teens riding with other teenagers without adult supervision — increases the risk of accidents and delinquent behavior dramatically.
- Notify your parents immediately if you are involved in a car accident.

*These suggestions are based on the more comprehensive “Driver’s License Contract” (pp. 126-129) in the book *AD/HD & Driving: A Guide for Parents of Teens with AD/HD* by Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.*
All parents worry when their children reach driving age and blurt out the inevitable question, “When can I get my license?”

But for those of us whose children are distractible, hyperactive, impulsive, or learning disabled (LD), the question is much more complex. Not only is it worrisome to think of the impact of these qualities on mastering the driver’s education manual on the rules of the road, and the written test covering copious material that must be memorized, but the idea of a new driver with any sort of disability that impacts concentration taking to the road in a two-ton vehicle can be downright frightening.

This spring, we joined the ranks of concerned parents as our son Alex turned 16 and announced he wanted to learn to drive. As a fan of racing video games, and the owner of a life-sized steering wheel and gas pedal that attach to our home computer, our son figured he was ready to go. After all, he asked, how much harder could real driving be than his favorite game, “Crazy Taxi”? (The game’s name says a lot about our fears.)

For the months preceding Alex's 16th birthday we circumvented the question of driving by telling him he had to make the call to sign himself up for driver’s education at the local driving school. For whatever reason, he never seemed to get around to it. And we were secretly relieved.

But now that it's summer and his friends are taking driving classes, we can no longer dodge the issue.

Driver's Education isn't Easy for Teens with LD

While most kids find the driver’s education course to be long (six hours a day for four days in California), most don’t consider it particularly difficult. Not so for kids with LD, who like Alex, may find the in-class reading and frequent tests a significant struggle. And peer pressure, performance anxiety, and the group setting is, for many, far from ideal.

Thankfully an increasing number of programs are offering online driver’s education, which is a great solution if you have a child like ours who enjoys the computer, needs to take his time digesting material, and feels pressured and uncomfortable in big groups.

If you don't have a computer or don't want your child online, many of these programs offer printed booklets that contain the same content.

Beware, though, that the at-home course isn't always a complete solution. When I went online and searched for online driving schools, there were myriad choices but I had a hard time telling how they differed. Once I chose a course and registered Alex, he wanted to start right away. But within 20 minutes he had given up, discouraged by the first chapter, which was so text-heavy that he was exhausted after reading just a few pages of small print.

Shop Around Before Enrolling Your Teen in Driver's Education

Before you embark on the driver’s education road with your teen, be sure to check the requirements for the state where you live. Surprisingly, there is a fair amount of variation. Thirty-six states require teens to have a driving permit, 23 of them require the permit be held for at least six months before they can apply for a driver’s license. Graduated licenses — those that allow a new driver incremental privileges to drive alone or carry passengers under age 21 — are increasingly common and also differ from one state to another. Even the age at which you can obtain a permit or driver’s license differs across the country. Your local Department of Motor Vehicles can provide the specifics for where you live.
Driving schools also vary in approach and curriculum, although all are required to cover the same material in their final exams. Some courses, we found, are much more “friendly” to kids with LD, providing more interactive materials and experiences, including videos, computer simulations, and group work. Some contain just one final exam that encompasses the entire course curriculum, while others are broken into chapter tests.

You can also decide to conduct the driving lessons yourself, but we felt it was worth the cost to give Alex a professional introduction to driving.

**Know Your Child and Stay Involved**

As is true with many issues around parenting a child with LD, staying involved and applying what you know about your teen’s strengths and weaknesses factor heavily into how you can help him learn to drive.

Knowing our son loves video games that glorify speeding, and in some cases, even crashing, we had long ago embarked on a heavy campaign to talk about driver safety. The fact that I had been in a serious car accident before I was married gave us plenty of ammunition for our discussions. On the road, we tried to point out mistakes other drivers made, and potential hazards such as kids on bikes, dogs near the road, and cars running red lights. Real driving, we said over and over, bears no resemblance to a video game.

We also repeatedly recited one line from Alex’s driver education book describing driving a car: “Dangerous as a loaded gun if not operated properly.”

Because Alex is such a weak reader, we were also concerned about how much he would digest from the home study driver’s education booklet we chose. The 154-page soft cover book has fairly big print, which was a plus, but like all the home study books, it is quite text heavy.

Even though we knew it would take forever, we decided we would read the book aloud with Alex. Taking turns with the reading, then doing the chapter quizzes together, gave my husband and me a firsthand look at how well Alex understood the material. When he seemed to glaze over, we’d stop. We broke the lessons into small segments and did just a little at a time. We told stories about our own experiences as we read, hoping the real-life scenarios would help impress certain points upon him.

My brother, who has a dyslexic daughter, found that for her, an online course produced by www.penschool.com was ideal because there was no big final test, just small quizzes along the way. The 30-day completion policy requiring students to complete the course within 30 days of when they started was great incentive for her to finish.

At our house I was in no hurry to put Alex behind the wheel, so the fact that there was no time limit and we could go at our own pace was a huge plus.

**Getting Behind the Wheel — Of a Golf Cart**

No matter how long you stall, the day will come when your teen slides into the driver’s seat and you give up control of the car. This is a day I was not looking forward to, so I was delighted when we happened upon an interim solution that eased the way.

It turns out that starting out in a golf cart is a great way to give a new driver the feeling of operating a moving vehicle with two pedals. It is a relief to introduce the challenges of negotiating parking spaces, tight turns and oncoming traffic in a small, battery-powered vehicle that won’t exceed 5-10 miles an hour.

With Alex behind the wheel of the little electric golf cart we borrowed, we set off on paved paths that were mostly unpopulated for our practice.

At first, his driving was jerky, and my non-stop instructions punctuated every second of our short trips, leaving us both exhausted.
“You’re too close to the curb!”
“Slow down!”
“Watch out for that bump!”
“Stay on your side of the road!”
And, “Do you see that bicycle?”

But little by little, Alex learned to watch for obstacles, smoothed his acceleration and braking, figured out how to make a three-cornered turn, and even parallel parked. Thankfully it was all done at about 5 mph.

It turns out that behind the wheel, Alex is far more conservative than I expected, and he is in fact overly concerned with kids, pedestrians and other cars, often stopping to wait for them when they were far, far away.

But You Didn’t Make My Sister Wait!

One problem we didn’t anticipate was the sibling rivalry that occurred when Alex realized we were stalling letting him drive, something we had not done with his older sister (who does not have LD). No amount of explanation or justification seemed to satisfy him.

The only approach we could take was to be honest. We revisited our reasons for taking it slow, and offered to drive him anywhere he needed to go. He wasn’t pleased when it involved outings such as going to the movies with a girl, but we pointed out numerous times that due to our graduated licensing laws, even if he had his license, he wouldn’t be allowed to drive other teens for six months.

Practice, Practice, Practice

The fact that in our state parents are required by law to spend 50 hours with their teen driving was a plus for our family. We figured the more time Alex spent practicing driving in a very controlled situation, the better.

I decided long ago that teaching our kids to drive was my husband’s job, since he tends to be unflappable, a word that does not describe me. And while many parents let their new driver get behind the wheel with the entire family in the car, we did not go this route with Alex. The less distraction and the fewer people around, the better, so he and his dad are going to be spending a lot of quality time together.

It is still unclear when, exactly, Alex will be ready to get his license. But we are determined that by the time he goes to take the test, we will be sure he will not be a hazard on the road — to others or to himself.

Some things just can’t be hurried, and learning to drive is one of them.

Created: 08/10/2004

About the Author

Melinda Sacks is a journalist who specializes in writing on children, education, learning disabilities, and family issues. She has written for the San Jose Mercury News, the San Francisco Chronicle, Stanford Magazine, and many other Bay Area publications.
A Parent’s Guide to Teen Drivers with LD and/or AD/HD

Resources and References

Resources

Books
AD/HD & Driving: A Guide for Parents of Teens with AD/HD
By Marlene Snyder, Ph.D.

ADHD Safe Driving Program: A Graduated License Program
http://www.compactshopping.com/servlet/Detail?no=40
By Dr. Russell Barkley

Safe Young Driver
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0967519144/
By Phil Berardelli

Videos
Driver-ZED (Interactive DVD)
http://www.AAA.com/teensdrive

Websites
DMV.org
Driver Education Guide
http://www.dmv.org/driver-education.php

Teen Driving Course
http://www.teendrivingcourse.com

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Traffic Safety Facts — Young Drivers (pdf)

References

Citations for all studies are in Dr. Snyder’s book cited above, except for the following:

Teen Drivers with AD/HD: Realities and Risk Factors


When Teens with AD/HD are Learning to Drive: Parent Strategies

