

An open letter to every teen getting a driver's license

by Timothy S. Hollister

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My son Reid (pictured on the left, at right) would have turned 25 this month. I say would because he died, the driver in a one-car crash, at age 17, just 11 months after getting his driver's license.

My son's death devastated our family and our community. After seven years, we don't cry as much as we used to, but we are left with painful wonder: what would Reid have been doing today if he had lived?

I start with my tragedy only to introduce myself as more interested in safe teen driving than the average parent. If my opening has made you roll your eyes, I ask you to give me a few hundred words of your time, based on my promise that the rest of this is about you, not me.

You may have heard of the famous prayer asking for the ability to accept what we cannot change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Safe teen driving is similar. Let me explain.

In the past ten years or so, scientists scanning the human brain have shown that its ability to function is not complete until we reach about age 25, and the last parts that develop are judgment and restraint – the ability to perceive danger and take action to reduce or avoid risk.

This differs from intelligence, personality, or character; it just means that until our brains finish growing, we don't fully detect the danger in a situation, or we underestimate it. This is, by the way, relatively new science, not anything your parents learned in high school or college, so don't expect them to automatically appreciate this new perspective, much less apply it to your driving.



So, brain development is one of those things we can't change. Another is the time it takes to become an "experienced" driver. The experts say three to five years. Though Driver's Ed is crucial and every bit of practice helps, twenty, fifty, or one hundred hours do not expose us to the wide variety of judgment calls in complex situations that drivers must be able to make. Learning how to react takes thousands of hours. There are no shortcuts.

What do these unchangeable characteristics mean for you as a new driver? Here's a concrete example. You're on a two lane road, with the opposite lane's traffic coming toward you. You are running late. Directly ahead of you is a delivery van that is moving more slowly than you'd like. In the distance, in the oncoming lane, is a big truck. You quickly consider whether you can pull into the opposite lane, pass the van, and get back into your lane in time to avoid that truck.

Here's the difference between a new teen driver and a mid-20's driver with several years of experience: when a young driver makes this snap decision, the brain does not signal, or at least doesn't send an urgent warning, about the danger of not getting back into lane.

On top of this, a new driver's ability to evaluate the relative speeds of the three vehicles is shaky at best and guesswork at worst, because this is not a situation that can be taught or practiced in Driver's Ed – it's too risky.

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The teen driver pulls into the left lane and guns the engine, trying to stay in lane while also reevaluating, second by second, the relative positions and speeds of the van, the truck, and the car. It either works or a serious crash results, all because of what the new teen driver doesn't have and can't summon on demand, judgment and experience. Teen drivers are safe until they aren't. Numbers that demonstrate the problem include, on average, 14 teen deaths and more than 100 serious injuries every day in the United States. Nothing kills or injures more teens than driving.

In fact, in my home state of Connecticut in 2007, a 17 year old driver trying to pass and get back into the right lane misjudged and killed himself, his sister, and his sister's friend, driving after school. Their crash led to our state strengthening its teen driver laws. What you cannot change, if not understood and factored into your driving, can injure or kill you.

What about your driving can you control? There are five big dangers that present a choice every time you get behind the wheel. A way to remember them is P-A-C-T-S: passengers, alcohol and drugs, curfews (night driving and fatigue), texting/electronic devices, and seatbelts.

Every teen passenger in your car increases the risk of peer pressure to drive recklessly. Alcohol, drugs, and anything that slows or eliminates reaction time, coordination, or judgment make an already dangerous situation worse. The later you are on the road at night, or the sleepier you are (which could be any time of day), the bigger the risk of a crash. Texting or using any electronic device to text, type, read, make a phone call, or watch a video is driving blindfolded. And an astonishing 50 percent of the 3,000 to 4,000 teens who die each year in crashes in the US are not wearing seatbelts.

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Wisdom for teen drivers, then, is 1) recognizing the baseline dangers you can't avoid; and 2) taking on the PACTS dangers as an ingrained habit, by limiting passengers, avoiding alcohol and drugs, getting off the road early or when you are tired, using electronics only when you have pulled over or stopped, and demanding seat belts of yourself and everyone in your car.

It's important to remember that as a driver you have responsibilities, but you also have rights. If a parent or supervising adult pushes you to drive when you're not ready, push back. Don't let adults put you in an uncomfortable position – chauffeur, for instance – for their convenience. If someone tells you, or assumes that because you've taken Driver's Ed and passed the state's tests, that "you're a safe driver now," don't be lulled into believing it.

Anyone can drive a car. Neglecting the PACTS dangers is easy. Breaking traffic safety and teen driver laws can be a momentary thrill. The best way you can show others that you are on your way to becoming a responsible adult is to take the risks of driving seriously. While you're at it, remember to respect parents and supervising adults, law enforcement, school officials, and others whose job

it is to keep you safe by limiting your driving until those brain development and experience issues are behind you.

In a very real way, teen driving laws and the work of so many people who try to keep new drivers safe have one goal: to help you understand what you can and can't change about driving, and apply this wisdom through your teens and early twenties. My hope for every teen getting a driver's license is



that driving won't leave your family and friends with grief and wonder, and that you will be able to show them the promise of your young life.

Timothy Hollister is an attorney and teen safety advocate in Connecticut. Author of Not So Fast: Parenting Your Teen Through Dangers of Driving, he has been a rational voice promoting better teen driving education and increased awareness of parents' role in keeping their children safe behind the wheel.