

# Teaching a Teenager to Drive a Car

(compilation of articles posted at [www.gordon.daugherty.name/category/driving-instruction-2](http://www.gordon.daugherty.name/category/driving-instruction-2))

Some states now allow for parent-taught driver's education as an alternative to a traditional classroom setting followed by behind-the-wheel instruction from an agency. Having been through this now with three daughters, I have accumulated quite a nice checklist to follow. Even if you're teenager follows the traditional instruction method at a driving school, you'll almost certainly find yourself riding shotgun while your teenager has their learner's permit. Or maybe you want to double-check your kid's readiness before you buy their first car or loan them your keys to go out on their own. In any case, I'm hoping the checklists and ideas in this blog series will be helpful.

In addition to blog posts that follow a phased approach based on your kid's readiness, I also have a post that has nothing to do with safely driving the car but rather taking care of the car itself. This is a skill I'm afraid most of the current young generation isn't being taught by their parents. I've even got a "golden rules of safe driving" checklist and a contract you can execute with your new teen driver to help demonstrate the seriousness of the responsibility.

Here's the make-up of this blog post series:

- Before getting on the road
- Getting started
- Intermediate skill phase
- Ready for prime time
- Basic car maintenance
- Gordon's golden rules of safe driving
- Driving contract

## Driving Instruction – Before Getting on the Road

Cover the following checklist before ever setting the wheels in motion:

- Explain how to adjust the seat, steering wheel and mirrors
  - And a reminder that it's also important to do this when driving someone else's car
- Explain the various switches, buttons, indicator lights, hazard lights, etc
  - Then quiz them
- Explain the ignition switch and its various positions
  - Also explain the implications of forgetting the car is running and accidentally trying to start it again. The easy test if unsure is to just rev the engine while in Park to see if you can hear the engine running. I guess this won't work with an electric car.
- Explain the various gear shifting positions and what they mean
  - This is also an opportunity to explain how gears on a car are similar to gears on a 10-speed bike
- Demonstrate the blind spots
  - With your teenager in the driver's seat, stand in various places to the side of the car and ask if they can see you, either directly or from the side/rear mirrors. A related exercise involves standing somewhere near the car in which they can see you and then gradually move in one or more directions away from the car until you reach a blind spot. Explain how this relates to backing out of a parking spot, changing lanes or potentially not seeing someone that is crossing the street or riding a bicycle. This exercise also helps give justification to reject the idea of hanging decorative items from the rear view mirror or putting excessive amounts of decals on the back window.

- Explain proper hand position on the wheel
  - This should be how they place their hands throughout the entire training phase. They can migrate to one-handed steering once they have their license.
  - The traditional guidance for hand position was 10:00 and 2:00 but you should look at the course material provided to your teenager because the proliferation of air bags in the steering wheel has resulted in different guidelines.
- Explain the hand-over-hand method of turning
  - You can use make-believe practice by gliding your hands across the wheel while the car is stationary
- Explain the rules about the radio
  - My personal rule is that I control the volume of the radio during the instruction phase. Having said this, I gradually increase the volume as they get more and more hours behind the wheel. My theory is that by the time they reach the more advanced steps, I want them to be able to operate the car with the radio at some moderate or higher level because I know they're going to have it this loud, or louder, when they are on their own. So they may as well practice with the radio on.
- Explain the rules about advise versus orders during the driving instruction phase
  - I tell my kids it will be clear from my tone of voice and volume if I'm giving an order for safety reasons versus food-for-thought advice
- Show an example of how the rear wheels don't track along the exact same path as the front wheels while turning
  - A good example can be putting the car along the curb leading to your driveway. You can have the tires 12-18" away from the curb. With your teenager on the sidewalk watching both the front and rear tires, pull forward until the front tire has cleared the curb and is in front of the driveway. Turn sharply into the driveway, causing the rear tire hits the curb. The lesson is obvious. Later, when they take a turn a little too soon and jump the curb, you can remind them of the driveway exercise.

## Driving Instruction – Getting Started

You've completed the Before Getting on the Road checklist and your teenager is now ready to set the car in motion. Obviously, the setting should be some country road, neighborhood under construction, or somewhere with minimal traffic. Ask other parents with recent new drivers where they started out.

Here's the checklist for this phase:

- Staying in the proper position within your lane (left-to-right)
- Proper following distance
- Proper signaling for turns and lane changes
  - Not too far in advance but also not too late
  - Explain hand signals, if ever needed
- Always looking over both shoulders at blind spots when changing lanes – always, always, always
- Always turning into the proper lane – the nearest lane
- Always have an "out" on multi-lane roads
  - In other words, if you find yourself right next to someone in the adjacent lane, either pull ahead of them or let them drift in front of you so that you always have an escape route to the right
- Paying attention to the stripes in the road, and their meaning – white or yellow, solid or dashed. Their instruction book explains these so make sure to be consistent with what they've learned.
- Regularly scanning mirrors and the road ahead – both near and far ahead
- Paying attention to signs

- A good method is to randomly ask a question after passing signs of various importance. For example, 2-3 seconds after passing a speed zone sign, ask what the speed limit is. Or after passing a sign that says lanes will merge ahead, ask what's about to happen to the road. You can also say something like "We just passed a yellow sign. What did it say and what does it mean?"
- Managing yellow lights
  - Obviously, the key issue is when to stop and when to proceed through the intersection. I taught my teenagers to ask themselves if they can safely stop before the intersection after seeing the light change to yellow. Unfortunately, most people ask whether or not they can make it through the intersection before the light turns red.
  - After an example or two where you dictate the action, try to let your teenager make the decision rather than always telling them to stop or proceed.
- Right-on-red
- What to do when two lanes turn
  - Use the signs and road markings to determine if one or two lanes can turn
  - Pay close attention to the dashed line as you turn to make sure you're not encroaching on the other turn lane
- Proper stopping position at stop lights and stop signs. Make sure to be consistent with what their instruction book says for this.
- Being prepared when passing a car parked on the side of a neighborhood street – hidden kids can easily come out of nowhere
  - My teenagers and I used the code word "danger" for these situations. When we saw this scenario up ahead, one of us would say "danger, danger". After a few weeks of this it sinks in without having to say it.
- Being prepared when approaching a kid on their bike – same as above with parked cars
- Filling up with gas – really just the basics of how to do it, but let them do it

## Driving Instruction – Intermediate Skills

You've finished the Getting Started phase and your teenager is now ready to shift gears and move onto the next level. And even though your teenager already knows the basics, the concepts taught in this phase have a little more risk in them. As a result, reinforce the importance of safety and the need to listen closely to your instruction.

Here's the checklist for this phase:

- Backing out of the driveway
  - Repeatedly looking backwards over both shoulders, forwards, into all mirrors
- "What if" scenario for being tailgated.
  - At random times, pretend it's happening and make sure to give extra distance in front so you aren't suddenly forced to brake hard
- Using the center turn lane
  - Including being careful for others entering the lane from the opposite direction
- Parking – do lots of it and start in an empty church parking lot or shopping mall parking lot (on Sunday)
  - Straight in spaces and angled spaces
  - Pulling in and pulling out (incl instruction about how to back out 1-2 feet at a time when you can't really see)
  - Start by parking in spaces with empty adjacent spaces, then with one adjacent space filled and ultimately with both adjacent spaces filled. You might find that this evolution takes place over 10-15 driving sessions.

- Driving with the right or left wheels on the line
  - The idea is to better understand where the wheels are.
  - You can use a line with reflectors or sleep-preventing bumps to really make it easy to sense where the car is. Try to do this with both the left and right tires.
- 3-point turn – start on a wide road but eventually try to find a narrow road
- Driving on the shoulder past cars stopped at a light (dangerous if other cars still moving slowly and also illegal in many states)
- “Move Over” laws – most states require drivers to either slow down or move over 1 lane if a police car or emergency vehicle is stopped on the side of the road with lights on. Investigate and educate.
- Drive backwards
  - Find an empty parking lot and literally drive backwards, including making turns into different sections of the parking lot and everything. It’s a great practice to learn the different nuances when you drive backwards.
- What to do if a police car signals to pull you over
  - At random times and in completely different settings, pretend it just happened and ask where is a reasonable place to stop. Even practice it a time or two going through the full sequence of events. After stopping, put the window down and put your hands on the wheel where they can be seen.
- Controlling speed while going downhill
  - If you have a nice, steep hill, a good practice exercise is to dictate a 5 mph range and ask your teenager to stay within the range. Of course, it’s harder than they think.
- Navigated journey
  - Select a destination address, then have your teenager plot the best route to get there (at least once using a printed map, then possibly with a GPS).
  - The exercise also teaches them route planning. During the journey, it teaches to pay attention to signs and addresses.
  - The key is to not help at all with the navigation aspect of this journey – only the driving safety aspect. And remember that they will be looking at their map and the road. At times they might get lost or might need to pull into a parking lot to get their bearings with the map. No problem. Be patient.
  - Do this once during the day and once at night.

## Driving Instruction – Ready for Prime Time

You’ve completed the Intermediate Skills phase and your teenager is now ready to move to the most advanced phase. The following exercises and checklist items are important if you want to turn over the keys with confidence. Many of the items are best practiced or demonstrated on a country road at a time of day when there is very minimal traffic. And due to increased safety risks with the proposed exercises, don’t start with this phase until you really feel your teenager is ready.

Here’s the checklist for this phase:

- Driving on a narrow, curvy, country road
- U-turn at an intersection – including looking for signs to make sure it’s legal
- Driving at night
  - Including use of low/high beam lights
  - What to do if an oncoming car is blinding you with their lights (look a little towards the right side of the road, using the white stripe for guidance)
  - Try the navigated journey exercise (explained in the Intermediate Skills phase) one time, but at night
- Driving with one wheel on the shoulder, then recovering back to the road

- Good for a country road with minimal traffic. Do it first while driving 10 mph and then again at 30 mph.
- You want your teenager to learn not to panic but rather slow down a bit and find the right time/place to make a deliberate turn back onto the main road rather than a very gradual easing that could cause slippage. Doing this at 10 mph is different than 30 mph.
- Advanced parking
  - Parallel – Put a trash can in front and behind, near the curb. Start with them way far apart and move them 2' closer with each success. Might also need to put a box on top to make it easier to see over the hood and trunk. But usually the front hood of most cars isn't taller than a trash can. You might also be able to practice at the exact location where your teenager does their official driving test. This is ideal to do after they have the basics down.
  - Backing into a parking space. Check the space on both sides after finished. Start with an empty parking lot. Then do it next to one car (empty space on other side). Then do it with cars on both sides if you have the guts.
- Freeway driving
  - Proper speed for on-ramp entrances and off-ramp exits
  - Yielding rules for on/off ramps
  - Changing lanes – incl use of mirrors first, then looking over shoulder every time
  - Safe back-off distance from the car in front
  - Leaving “outs” (not putting yourself in a position where you're boxed in)
  - What to do if the police signal to pull you over
  - Driving 70-75 mph and noticing how much more sensitive steering is at this speed
- Passing on a 2-lane road – probably out in the country
  - Use proper signaling and pay attention to the road stripes to know when it's legal
- Driving in the rain (actually do it, if at all possible)
- Simulating loss of power while driving (running out of gas) – best on a country road with light traffic
  - Turn off the ignition, which will result in losing your power steering and power breaks. Come to a stop on the shoulder.
- Simulating loss of brakes
  - Glide as much as possible, downshift to lower gear, use emergency brake as last resort. After explaining this and trying the basic concepts, do an exercise where you tell your child “You just lost your brakes, navigate to a stop somehow”. Of course, do it on a country road or somewhere with minimal disruption to other drivers.
- Anti-lock brakes demonstration
  - You don't need to do this at 50 mph. But, at minimum, show how the brakes can be pushed all the way to the floor in the event of an emergency – maybe at 20-25 mph in your neighborhood. Your child needs to know they can push the brakes as hard as possible in the event of an emergency.

This phase concludes the actual driving instruction sequence.

## **Driving Instruction – Basic Car Maintenance**

I know that driving instruction should focus on the act of driving but I also feel like drivers and car owners should know how to basically take care of their car. When I was a kid this included actually learning how to work on the car (replace spark plugs, change the oil, replace belts, etc.). But those days are gone, mostly due to the computerized nature of cars. But there are still things that should be understood by every driver.

Some of these items should be done proactively and periodically as part of a maintenance routine while others are more for events of emergency. Also, after walking through these items, give a quiz that involves actually doing the activity or at least pointing and explaining the steps.

- Checking tire pressure and tire tread
  - For tire pressure, show the decal on the inside edge of the driver's door or the opposing car panel that explains the ideal tire pressure when cold
- Adding washer fluid
- Checking the battery terminals for corrosion if the car gets harder and harder to start
- Jump starting the battery
- Checking the oil level and adding oil
- What to do (and not to do) if the car overheats and the radiator is steaming (don't open the cap)
- Changing a tire
  - I strongly recommend having your teenager actually do this in the driveway (but not on a slope) while you verbally instruct
  - I also recommend marking the page in their owner's manual where it explains proper jack placement. There is almost always a picture of some sort to help explain this. Have your teenager write some explanatory notes on this page in their own words for future use.

Beyond this, explain the importance of paying attention to new noises, vibrations or increased difficulty starting the car. Obviously, these can be signs of something going wrong. Saying something about it as soon as it starts can avoid much more costly repairs if the issue were allowed to continue.

## **Gordon's Golden Rules of Safe Driving**

Below is my Top 10 list of things to drill over and over again throughout the duration of your teenager's behind-the-wheel education. I recommend literally pulling it out every fourth or fifth time and reviewing each item in the list.

1. Leave plenty of distance in between you and the car in front of you.  
blank line
2. When changing lanes or moving into a center turn lane, after checking your mirrors look over your left or right shoulder because of the blind spot.  
blank line
3. When driving in a neighborhood, assume there is an 80% chance of a little kid running out from behind any car parked on the street. Be prepared. Same idea for a kid riding their bike along the edge of the road near the gutter. Assume there is an 80% chance they will swerve out into the street.  
blank line
4. Don't talk on your cell phone unless absolutely necessary. If talking is necessary, do so using a hands-free device (earpiece or Bluetooth speakerphone). Absolutely, positively never text while driving (reading or responding). View the first 45 seconds of the following video clip with your new teenage driver to help this sink in. But be warned that some of the images in the video are pretty graphic. <http://bit.ly/TOx9eo>  
blank line
5. Don't crank up the radio full blast unless on an open highway in the middle of nowhere with minimal traffic and distractions.  
blank line
6. On multi-lane roads, leave yourself an "out" (don't put yourself right next to another car).  
blank line

7. When turning onto a multi-lane road, turn into the nearest lane. If you need to be in another lane, then make the lane change after a safe, successful turn.  
blank line
8. Don't run yellow lights. The question to ask yourself when suddenly presented with a yellow light is this: "Can I safely stop without sliding into the intersection?" The question is NOT "Can I make it through the intersection before the light turns red?".  
blank line
9. Be extra paranoid when backing out of a parking space – take your time and ease back 1-2 feet at a time until you can see the driving lane  
blank line
10. Be extra paranoid when driving in any parking lot. Anything can happen at a moment's notice.

## Driving Contract – For Your New Teenage Driver

Click [here](#) to download a template I've used with my three daughters to make it crystal clear what our obligations are as parents and what theirs are as new drivers. Since the document is editable, you can add signature lines, revise the terms or add more terms to make it match your standards and philosophies. About 6 months after putting this into effect, pull it out again and review it with your son/daughter as a reminder.

Driving Terms and Conditions for (teenager's name)	
The purpose of this document is to summarize the obligations related to owning, maintaining and driving a car.	
<b>Parents Agree To:</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Purchase a starter car. This starter car will remain officially owned by the parents, but will be used on a day-to-day basis by (teenager's name).</li><li>2. Provide regular, wear-and-tear maintenance on the car through the high school and college years.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This includes things like brake work, tires, oil changes, battery, radiator and transmission flushes, belts and hoses.</li></ul></li><li>3. Arrange for car insurance under the family's policy.</li></ol>	
<b>(Teenager's Name) Agrees To:</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Drive safely and in accordance with the law. In addition:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. (Teenager's name) will not drive faster than ____ mph on our neighborhood streets.</li><li>b. Once the law allows, (teenager's name) will not talk on the cell phone without a speakerphone. In addition, (teenager's name) will minimize as much as possible any talking on the cell phone while driving.</li><li>c. (teenager's name) will <u>not</u> engage in text messaging while driving.</li></ol></li><li>2. Drive in such a manner as to minimize wear-and-tear on the car. Suggestions include:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Gradual braking when approaching stop signs and stop lights.</li><li>b. Trading off with friends that also drive and have cars.</li><li>c. Listen and feel for anything "squeaky" so that repairs can be made before costs escalate even higher. Also pay attention to gauges (oil pressure, temperature, battery) and tire pressure.</li></ol></li><li>3. Never drive under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Also never allow another person to drive the car if they are under the influence.<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Pay for any increases in the cost of car insurance that are a result of an accident or a moving violation.</li></ol></li><li>4. Keep the car generally clean, both inside and out.</li><li>5. Not hang decorative items from the rear view mirror because they obstruct a full view.</li></ol>	
Failure on (teenager's name) part to comply with any of the items listed above may result in the car being taken away for some period of time, including permanently.	