

Q & A: My teen wants a learner's driving permit!
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Question: My daughter will be turning 15 in about a month and she's already leaning on me to get her learner's permit, which is allowed in my state at that age. I'm less than thrilled with this idea, and yet I know that there's a lot of peer pressure to get her permit because many of her friends have received theirs. What's the best way to deal with the driving issue and should I even let my child get her permit at such a young age?

Answer: First, folks should know that rules about learner's permits (including the age at which they can be obtained) vary from state to state, with some insisting on formalized driver education and others allowing parents to teach their children without an official driver's education course taken.

In terms of your situation, I can't tell you *specifically* what to do in terms of allowing her to get her permit or not. I believe that has to do with your personal family situation, whether older siblings have been allowed to receive their permits on their fifteenth birthdays as well as your daughter's personal responsibility and maturity level in school as well as at home. Obviously, a child who isn't interested in classes or coming in on time for curfews is a poor risk for placing behind the wheel of a lethal weapon—your car!

However, if you do decide to allow her to get her learner's permit soon, I believe that it's best to give her as much training, driving education and practice as possible before she turns 16 and is eligible for the "real" license, and to drive without a parent present in the car.

Think of the year between her fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays as the time when you will have the greatest influence on her driving education and experience. Once she has her actual license at 16 (if she's proven herself responsible enough to receive it), you will have much less control over how she drives when you are not with her, and therefore you should take advantage of this "learner's" year to get in as much supervising, training and lecturing as possible. If you wait until a few months before her 16th birthday and then allow her to get her license and drive alone she has only had a few months of supervised driving before she's out there on the road with your car and only a small amount of experience under her belt. That's not much time for her to profit from your own years of driving experience and tutelage and for her to begin to understand the focus that is necessary to be a safe and defensive driver.

Second, if you're a bit queasy about getting behind the wheel with a novice driver, consider arranging for private driving lessons for your child so she can learn the basics before *you* begin driving with her. This should improve your comfort level before taking that inevitable "first drive" down the street. Also, professional instruction can teach her

the latest, best driving techniques, laws and regulations — things that you may not know or you may have forgotten.

Third, driver's education classes in high school are often available, and I would definitely encourage your child to take such a course. The class covers many issues that surround driving, not just the mechanics of operating the car. These include irresponsible driving, driving under the influence of substances and the legal and medical consequences of irresponsibility behind the wheel. (Another possible benefit is that you may receive a break on your auto insurance if your child completes the driver's education class at school or at a private driving facility.)

Finally, once she has her driver's license, be sure to set up firm driving rules to give you some peace of mind when she's on the road. These rules should include mandatory wearing of seat belts, calling when she gets to her destination, and allowing a passenger in the car only after a month or so of driving, and during daylight hours only. As she proves her driving ability and good judgment, you can lengthen the amount of time that she can take out the car, and the number of passengers allowed. Please remember that the more kids in the car, the more distractions. Loud music is also a distraction, as is cell phone usage. I would discourage passengers, music and cell phones while the car is moving.

Dr. Peters' Bottom Line: Like any good parent, I'm sure you'll worry about your child getting behind the wheel, but getting driver education and experience for as long as possible will at least give you the comfort of knowing that you've prepared her to the best of your ability.