

Are Teenagers Mature Enough to Drive?

by Erin Huskey

1 Over the past few years, both state and federal government agencies have been reviewing their policies on driver education and licensing. The main reason for the review is the alarmingly high rate of accidents among drivers 15-20 years old. These accidents often result in injuries and sometimes in fatalities. In an effort to discover how to promote safe driving habits among new drivers, these agencies have researched the cognitive¹ development of teenagers as it applies to driving.

2 Both the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) have expressed concerns about driving safety among teenagers. In 2003, the NTSB sponsored a conference that called for an information campaign that would make people aware of the problems in driver education. Some of the problems they identified included differences in training programs across the United States and poor quality of driver instruction. The NHTSA has sponsored research that would help determine the factors involved in driving and how traffic safety programs could be improved. What both of these agencies discovered is that the factors involved in driving behaviors are related to age and cognitive development.

Statistics

- ⇒ Each day in the U.S. an average of 10 young drivers are killed.
- ⇒ An average of 887 young drivers is injured every day.
- ⇒ Sixty-seven percent of teenage passenger deaths occur when a teenager is driving.
- ⇒ In Michigan, 14% of drunk driving violations are committed by drivers under the age of 21; these drivers make up 8% of the driving population.

3 Driving behaviors consist of a driver's emotions, rationality and understanding, and sensory and motor responses. There is much more to driving than just knowing driving rules. Not only do drivers have to process information that their eyes and ears take in, but also they have to decide on how to react to that information with their bodies and their emotions. In addition, drivers have to keep in mind traffic laws and social rules, such as manners and politeness. There are many decisions a driver has to make in a very short time.

4 Researchers have found that the following are factors in driving decisions: memory, attention, learning, reasoning, motivation, the development of risk perception,

¹ **cognitive:** how thought processes are developed through reasoning, intuition, and perception

the development of problem solving and decision making, social cognition², attitude formation and change, verbal ability, and moral development. All of the factors listed above develop in different people at different rates. What seems to be the case most times is that when teenagers begin driver education or training programs, some of these abilities have not fully developed.

5 For instance, attention, or the ability to focus on necessary information, continues to develop up to about seventeen to twenty years of age. Attention is necessary for good driving behavior. Drivers of all ages need to focus on the road and other activity around them instead of the radio, food, or a cell phone conversation. But many younger drivers have not yet developed the ability to decide which activities (other cars, pedestrians, traffic signals, emergency vehicles) going on around them demand their attention first.

Skill

Emotional	Cognitive	Physical (Sensorimotor)
I need to pay attention and be a careful driver.	That driver's turn signal is on. I think he needs to get in this lane.	(Smiles and gestures) Waves the driver over.

Error

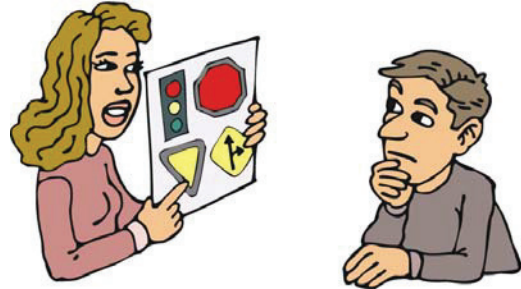
Emotional	Cognitive	Physical (Sensorimotor)
I should tell that driver off!	Some people shouldn't be allowed to drive.	(Yells) "Watch where you're going!"

6 Risk perception can also be a problem for teens. Young people are typically less likely to see the risk in a situation. Also, they are less skilled than older drivers at identifying driving hazards. The ability to perceive, or see, risk does not just develop with age. It also develops with experience. The development of cognition also increases with age. Safe driving behaviors require speed in processing information, memory capacity, attention or the ability to focus, sound decision making skills, and a general knowledge of the world. There are several different theories about cognitive development. Although they do not all say the same things, scientist do agree that reasoning, intuition, and perception are things that develop with age and experience. The way for young drivers to develop these skills is through time, practice, and experience.

7 Most states require a driver's education course before issuing a license to a teenager. In recent years, many schools have had to cut their driver's education programs because of funding constraints. This action often places the burden for driver's education on the parents of teenagers. Private driving lessons can cost between \$250

² **Social cognition:** the thought processes that are behind understanding and dealing with people

and \$500. In addition to high cost of driver education, parents also have to worry about whether or not the private program will adequately prepare their teens to be safe drivers. Experts recommend that parents look for the following points in a program:



- 1) The program should be state licensed or certified. The teacher should also be certified and have at least 40 hours of training.
- 2) The program should include thirty hours of classroom instruction and six hours of road training. This instruction should be spaced out over several weeks.
- 3) The road training part of the program should focus on judging speeds, distance, and the amount of space between vehicles.
- 4) Parents should look for extras, such as defensive-driving techniques, handling a vehicle in bad weather, and “driving under the influence” consequences.

8 Because there are so many concerns about teen driver safety, parents need to make sure that the private programs they pay for are going to help their children learn and develop the skills to be safe drivers.

9 Many states have decided to put graduated driver’s licensing programs into place. These programs have considered both the research on cognitive development and the idea that safe driving behaviors are learned through practice. Forty-eight states currently have these types of programs which usually consist of a three-stage licensing program. In the first stage, teens get more on-the-road driving practice with a parent. During the next stage, there are often restrictions on night driving and passengers. The goals of these programs include giving teens more road driving experience with a licensed driver and reducing the risk of driving accidents. Parent involvement is required in these programs.

10 Some states have tried to get parents even more involved in the driving training process. Texas has put parent-taught programs into place. In Prince William County, Virginia the schools and the community work together to improve driver education and safety. One thing the county does is to hold the student’s temporary license until parents participate in a mandatory meeting. Parents are also required to help their teens complete the driving hours’ requirement for the course. This prerequisite includes two

hours of driving before the range instruction starts and a forty hour driving log that must include ten hours of night driving.



11 Many teens are mature enough to drive if they receive enough training over an extended period of time. These newer traffic safety programs and graduated licensing programs stress knowledge, practice, and experience. The agencies in charge of developing the programs and policies for granting driving licenses to teens are keeping in mind that the brain needs time and experience to develop. The goal is to develop safer teen drivers – not keep teenagers off the road.