

Choosing a safe car for teenagers

If your teenager has just gotten a driver's license, it may be hard to imagine handing over the keys to your brand new car, but that may be the smartest vehicle to choose.

The first years teenagers spend as drivers are very risky. In fact, teen drivers have the highest death rates of any age group. In 1997 alone, more than 5,700 teenagers died in motor vehicle crashes, and many more were left severely and permanently injured by crashes.

While getting a driver's license is an exciting rite-of- passage for teens, it can be enough to make a parent frantic. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) and the Insurance Information Institute (I.I.I.) say there's something worried parents can do to protect their teens — choose a safe vehicle.

- **Avoid vehicles that encourage reckless driving.**
Teen drivers not only lack experience, but may also lack maturity. As a result, speeding and reckless driving is common.

Sports cars and other vehicles with high performance features, such as turbocharging, are likely to encourage speeding. Choosing a vehicle with a more sedate image reduces the chances your teen will be in a speed-related crash.
- **Don't let your teen drive an unstable vehicle.**
Sport utility vehicles, especially the smaller ones, are inherently less stable than cars because of their higher centers of gravity. Abrupt steering maneuvers - the kind that can occur when teens are fooling around or over-correcting a driver error - can cause rollovers in these less stable vehicles. A more stable car would, at worst, skid or spin out.
- **Pick a vehicle that offers good crash protection.**
Teenagers should drive vehicles that offer state-of-the-art protection in case they do crash.
- **Don't let your teen drive a small vehicle.**
Small vehicles offer much less protection in crashes than larger ones. However, this doesn't mean you should put your child in the largest vehicle you can find. Many mid- and full-size cars offer more than adequate crash protection. Check out the safety ratings for mid-size and larger cars.
- **Avoid older vehicles.**
Most of today's cars are better designed for crash protection than cars of six to ten years ago. For example, a newer, mid-size car with airbags would be a better choice than an older, larger car without airbags. Before you make a final choice on the car your teenager will drive, consult the U.S. Department of Transportation (<http://www.dot.gov>) or the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (<http://www.iihs.org>).

Tips provided by the Insurance Information Institute, Inc. (<http://www.insurance.info>)