



So Your Teen Wants a Car?

A Parent's Guide to Choosing a Vehicle



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Choosing Your Teen's First Vehicle

Buying a car is an important decision, especially for a teen-ager with limited driving experience and an even more limited budget. While liberation and personal mobility may be of primary interest to a young person, a knowledgeable parent can help with the practical considerations in choosing a first vehicle. What most new drivers need is affordable, safe and reliable transportation.

Affordability

A new car may be the most desirable option, but it also may exceed your budget. The solution, in most cases, is to purchase a previously owned model. Work with your teen to research the best investment.

- **Research insurance costs.** Before you buy, make sure insurance coverage is affordable. If you finance a vehicle, your lending institution may insist on comprehensive insurance. Full coverage for a young person can be expensive, but teens who complete a driver-training program may qualify for discounts.

- **Don't pay too much.** Investigate the market. Read local newspaper automotive classifieds. AAA clubs also can provide used-car or pre-owned vehicle pricing information by year, make and model. Some club Web sites may calculate the total price and monthly payments, while others may offer online financing packages.

- **Think twice about used cars.** Vehicles offered by older siblings or grandparents may be old, excessively worn and poorly maintained. Cheap transportation also may cost more in the long run. Vintage models get poor gas mileage and may require ongoing repairs. In addition, older vehicle models may not feature airbags or modern safety and restraint systems.

- **Consider a certified used car.** Many auto manufacturers now have certification programs that help take the uncertainty out of buying a used vehicle. These programs usually feature low-mileage vehicles coming off leases or from single-owner trade-ins. This option typically is more expensive, but it could pay off in the long run in reliability and safety.

Safety

The crash risk for novice drivers is about 30 percent higher when other young people are in the car. Driver and passenger safety should be a primary consideration when choosing a car.

- **Turn to the experts for advice.** AAA and The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration provide crash-test ratings and information at no charge. Ask your AAA office for the brochure *Buying a Safer Car* or request a copy of *AAA Auto Guide: Buying or Leasing a Car* available in fall 2001. For more details and helpful articles, visit www.aaa.com or www.nhtsa.gov.

- **Choose a vehicle designed to reduce serious injury.** A solidly built car can offer greater protection to drivers and front-seat passengers. Your teen's car should be large enough to provide crash protection, but easy to drive. Ensure pillars, window posts and other devices don't create visual blind spots, and make certain the car features outside rearview mirrors with a large field of view.

Select and maintain a reliable vehicle.



Also, select a vehicle with good handling characteristics, and avoid models that tend to understeer or oversteer. Choose a model with a relatively low center of gravity. According to NHTSA, the more “top-heavy” a vehicle, the more likely it is to roll over.

- **Consider a vehicle’s passenger capacity.**

Crowded passenger compartments can compound distractions. Choose a sedan, avoiding the very large models or the smaller compact cars or subcompacts. Avoid vans, sport utility vehicles and trucks with multiple rows of seats and large capacities.

- **Select a vehicle that speaks of responsibility.**

Avoid glitzy, expensive sports models or high-performance “muscle” cars that may tempt a teen to drive recklessly or too fast. Also, choose a coupe instead of a convertible. Ensure the vehicle has standard paint and detailing and is equipped with “street legal” tires, wheels, horn, exhaust system, window tinting and lights.

- **Choose a familiar model.** When driving an unfamiliar vehicle the risk of crashing goes up about 25 percent. It’s not a good idea to put young drivers into vehicles with unfamiliar handling characteristics. Consider a model similar to the type in which they learned how to drive, then ensure your teen-ager spends a lot of time practicing in that car before you let him or her drive alone.

- **Invest in a vehicle with modern safety features.** Ensure the vehicle is equipped with driver and front-passenger airbags and height-adjustable shoulder belts in the front and back seats. Also, ensure the car features adjustable and lockable head restraints. Anti-lock brakes and traction control also are desirable features. Avoid cars with manual seatbelts or passive (automatic) restraint systems.

- **Ensure the vehicle is equipped with a user manual and emergency kit.** The manufacturer’s operating manual often covers operation, maintenance, precautions and safety tips. Encourage your teen to read the booklet and understand how to follow instructions, from checking tire inflation to dealing with problems. It’s also a good idea to teach your teen what to do in case of an emergency. AAA offers free brochures on the subject such as *The AAA Guide to Trouble-Free Travel* and *What to Do When Your Vehicle Breaks Down*.

- **Minimize distractions.** While a good vehicle sound system is a nice option, remind your teen that it also can be a serious distraction. Loud noise can mask the sound of emergency sirens and other auditory signals. Educate your teen-ager about responsible driving practices that encourage paying attention to the road.

Reliability

Peace of mind is an important factor for a parent as well as a young driver. Selecting and maintaining a reliable vehicle from the outset can prevent most breakdowns.

- **Look for a warranty.** Select a vehicle with a remaining warranty or purchase an extended warranty. Have an independent mechanic inspect a used vehicle to verify its roadworthiness.

- **Check the history.** Review all maintenance and crash-repair histories. You can obtain a low-cost report based on a vehicle identification number through AAA’s Web site. Dealers must declare “lemons” or problem vehicles, such as those involved in natural disasters or floods.

- **Avoid excessive mileage.** A car driven beyond standard mileage for its age may indicate heavy or abusive driving that could lead to abnormal wear and tear on components.

- **Check technical service bulletins.** The NHTSA Web site features a “Problems and Issues” area that includes a searchable database of technical service bulletins, recalls, defect investigations and consumer complaints.

- **Conduct a pre-purchase inspection.** Have a certified inspection facility ensure the car is rust-free, mechanically sound with safety components that are operational. Contact your local AAA office for a list of approved facilities in your area.

Pre-Purchase Checklist

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seatbelts | <input type="checkbox"/> Airbags |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headrests | <input type="checkbox"/> Windshield wipers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency flashers | <input type="checkbox"/> Timing belt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water pump | <input type="checkbox"/> Alternator |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Battery | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooling system |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tires | <input type="checkbox"/> Engine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brakes | <input type="checkbox"/> Headlights/taillights |

• AAA memberships and your teen.

Whether a block away or attending school out of state, your teen can benefit from a AAA membership. From emergency road service to battery service, AAA is a trusted resource ready to help your young driver seven days a week, 24 hours a day. For membership information, contact your local AAA office or register online at www.aaa.com.

Driving is a Privilege

As a parent, you may wish to enter a contract with your teen that lists conditions under which he or she is allowed to drive. The agreement, which you both sign, should reinforce good behavior and safe driving practices. It should also list penalties for non-compliance.

The conditions might include use of seat belts at all times, no alcoholic beverages or illegal substances used or transported in the vehicle, no speeding, no fines, tickets or warnings. Also, no loud music or other distractions, no more than one passenger, restricted driving hours and a list of destinations, routes and mileage limits.

If your teen still goes to school, tie car privileges to good grades and attendance. If he or she works, tie the privilege to nominal reimbursements for financing or insurance costs.

Your teen should agree to report car problems and understand what car maintenance and general upkeep tasks he or she is expected to perform. Finally, review the insurance policy with your teen. Discuss who authorizes and pays for repairs.

Remember, if you choose to enter into such a contract, be prepared to enforce the rules.

Confidence Behind the Wheel

Affordability, safety and reliability are important considerations in vehicle selection. Equally important is preparing your teen to drive. The road ahead may be less worrisome if your teen driver has participated in a certified driver training program.

A good training program can reinforce the importance of good driving techniques and defensive driving practices. Many states offer instruction through local high schools. AAA's *Teaching Your Teens to Drive* is a common sense guide for parents. In addition, organizations such as AAA offer driver education programs in video and CD-ROM format, as well as information on travel safety and aggression prevention.

Most parents are anxious about watching their offspring drive away in his or her own car. The best way for BOTH of you to enjoy personal freedom and mobility is to help your teen be more responsible before he or she takes to the highway. Teens who have been trained properly are more confident behind the wheel.

If you would like to learn more about selecting your teen's first car or driver training programs available in your area, contact your nearest AAA office or visit AAA online at www.aaa.com.

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