

A Model Contract: Parenting the Teen Driver

Dale Wisely, Ph.D. www.parentingteendrivers.com

Please review the materials at www.parentingteendrivers.com for helpful information on the use of this contract. THE CONTRACT IS REVISED ON A REGULAR BASIS. Check the website for updates.

Why do a driving contract?

- If your child dies during the teenage years, the most likely cause will be an auto accident.
- Your teenage driver is in danger of killing or injuring himself or herself or other innocent people.
- If you don't do a contract, you will likely be vague in your rules and directions about driving.
- If you don't do a contract, you can count on a lot of subsequent arguments based on "I thought you said...or "I thought you meant..."
- The contract signals the teenager that driving is a serious and potentially deadly activity.

Establish with the teenager, in advance, your firm insistence on a written agreement prior to their driving. You must be willing to state (and mean) that you will not allow the teen to drive until an agreement is reached and signed and then followed.

If possible, if two parents are involved, parents should reach an agreement about the contract before it discussed with the teenager.

Use this contract as a model. **Edit it and personalize it to your family's situation.**

Sign it and provide a copy to the teenager. **DO NOT ALLOW A TEENAGER TO DRIVE INDEPENDENTLY UNTIL THE AGREEMENT IS NEGOTIATED, WRITTEN, REVISED, AND SIGNED!**

START WITH A STRICT CONTRACT, intended to apply to the first 4-6 weeks of driving. Commit to revisit and revise it after a few weeks. It is essential to keep an updated, revised contract in place for at least the first 2 years of driving. Set a date to revise it after a period of time during which the teen drives. Schedule the review date and put it on the calendar. On this review date, go through it and change the agreement a little (or a lot) based on experience. Make it stricter if the teen's behavior with the car warrants that. Make it a bit more lenient, perhaps, if the teen is doing well.

IMPORTANT: Don't do a contract and then put it away. The contracting process should be ongoing, starting with a strict one and modifying it over the course of the first year or two of driving. The contract you start with will be too strict for a driver who drives without incident for 6 months. A contract you would have for a more experienced teen driver will likely be inappropriate for a beginning driver. REVISE ON A REGULAR BASIS.

Driving Agreement

General Principles

The new driver must initial each point to show it is read and understood:

___ Permission to drive is **not** a legal right. It is granted to me by my parents, who are under no obligation to do so, and who may withdraw the privilege at any time. I understand that I will only be allowed to drive when I am willing to abide by the rules established by my parents.

I recognize that driving a car is an extremely serious matter. I recognize that...

___ Automobile accidents are the **leading cause of death** of people 16-20 years old.

___ While I am a teenager and young adult, I am **more likely to die** in an auto accident than from any other cause.

___ Recklessness or errors that I make while driving **could kill or hurt me**, passengers in the car I drive, and/ people in other cars and pedestrians. Among those that could be victims of my driving mistakes are: Infants, children, my friends, my family members, parents of children, and many others.

___ I will abide by laws regulating driving. I will observe and abide by posted speed limits. I will abide by rules established by my parents. I recognize these are for my protection and the protection of others.

___ I understand that the car I drive is **property of my parents**. Even a car that is a "gift" to me is still, legally, the property of my parents. I drive the car **only with permission**.

___ I understand that my parents and I must be able to reach a **written agreement** in order for me to be permitted to drive. I understand that the terms of this agreement may be changed based on how I handle the freedom and responsibility of driving. The rules will get stricter if my parents judge that I am not doing well. It will get somewhat less strict if my parents judge that I am doing well.

___ I must study and be aware of the terms of this contract. "Forgetting" any part of the contract is not an excuse.

THREE CRITICAL RULES

- ___ **If my parents deny me permission to drive, for whatever reason, I will abide by this and give them my keys immediately with no argument or debate.** I may ask to meet with my parent(s) no *earlier* than 24 hours later to talk about it. If I drive in defiance of my parents' order not to drive, my parents may call the police.
- ___ **If I drive in defiance of my parents' order not to drive, this contract is cancelled and no driving will be permitted for at least one year.**
- ___ **I will not leave the scene of an accident, no matter how minor, without the permission of police officers and/or my parents.**

RULES-Category A

These rules, if violated, will lead to suspension of independent driving privileges. (I will not be able to drive without a parent in the car with me.) I understand that I may lose my independent driving privileges **indefinitely** if any one of these is violated even once. My parents will determine the length of my suspension.

- **No alcohol use/abuse.** (See endnote #1). As a minor, it is illegal for me to drink alcohol. I understand that my parents do not permit me to drink. However, if I do drink, I will not drive for 24 hours after my last use of alcohol in ANY amount.
- **No drug use/abuse.** I will not drive for 48 hours after my last use of any "substance." "Substance" means any drug or chemical (including but not limited to marijuana, pills, inhalants, and other drugs) which would be expected *by my parents* to alter my ability to drive. **There is no acceptable amount of any substance of this kind.** If I use any substances, I will not drive for 72 hours. This rule may include medications prescribed to me or over-the-counter medications. In the cases of legal medications, I will inform my parents of any such medications I have taken so that they can judge whether taking these medications will interfere with my driving ability. Furthermore:
 - **No riding with others who have used alcohol or drugs.** I will not ride as a passenger with any driver who I know or have reason to suspect may have used alcohol or any substance as defined above.
 - **Alternatives to riding with others who have used alcohol or drugs.** If I find myself in a situation as described above, I will contact my parents or another designated adult to arrange for transportation. I understand that my parents will appreciate that behavior and will make every effort to avoid asking me a lot of questions about it.
 - **No alcohol or drugs in car.** I will not allow alcohol or illegal drugs in the car. This includes over the counter medications (cough medicines, etc.) when I have reason to believe someone has them in their possession for purposes of abuse. My parents will hold me responsible for any alcohol or drugs in the car, even if they don't belong to me or it is the fault of someone riding in my car.
- **No thrill-seeking/stunts.** I will not engage in any thrill-seeking behavior while driving. I will not drive for recreation. Driving too fast, racing/speeding, and any kind of "stunt" involving a car is NOT ALLOWED. Driving is for transportation ONLY.
- **Seatbelts.** (See endnote #2) I will wear my seatbelt at all times and require all passengers to wear them. **No driving with passengers who are not wearing seatbelts.** This includes ANY driving of any distance with more passengers than the vehicle is designed to carry.
- **Informing parents about accidents & police encounters.** I will inform my parents about any and all tickets, accidents, and encounters with police (including warnings.)
- **No firearms** or other weapons. I will not drive with any guns or other deadly weapons in the vehicle.

No driving with passengers who are not wearing seatbelts. This includes ANY driving any distance with more passengers than the vehicle is designed to carry.

RULES-Category B

First violations may result in a warning. Subsequent violations will lead to suspension of driving privileges. (I will not be able to drive without a parent in the car with me.) I understand that I may lose my independent driving privileges **indefinitely** if any one of these is violated even once. My parents will determine the length of my suspension.

- **Permission to Drive.** I must ask permission to drive each time I drive. (This will not be a permanent rule.) Exceptions to this rule will be given for regularly scheduled transportation to school, work, regular meetings, etc. I will ask permission to drive to specific locations and will discuss the route planned. I will be certain that my parents know where I am. I will not make unscheduled stops or side trips. (Note: This is one of the stricter aspects of this contract and so parents should consider renegotiating this at the first review of the contract, which we recommend occur after 4 to 6 weeks of driving.)
- **Curfew.** (see endnote #3) I may not drive after 10:00 p.m. This curfew will be reviewed and possibly revised when I meet with my parents on _____ (scheduled date to revise contract).
- **Limit on passengers.** (see endnote #4)
 - **Phase 1.** During the first _____ of driving, I will not be allowed to have any passengers without specific permission.
 - **Phase 2. After this period, and for the first year,** I may not have more than one passenger. I must ask for specific permission for exceptions.
 - **After one year, this will be revisited.**
- **Off-Limit Areas.** I will not drive on streets, highways, or in areas that are designated as off-limits. I understand that greater flexibility in these matters will come as I gain experience and show that I am honoring the agreement. For the time being, the following roads and areas are to be avoided:

- **No one else drives vehicle.** I will not permit any other person to drive the car without my parents' specific permission for each specific case.
- **Car audio system.** (see endnote #5) For the first month I drive, I will not have the car stereo on. After the first two months, after clearing this with my parents, I will be allowed to have the stereo on but will make no adjustments to it other than changing the volume while driving. Under no circumstances will I change a CD or cassette while driving. I will change these only when stopped or pulled over.
- **TEXTING, CELL PHONES, MP3 Players, GPS System.** I will not use cell phones, iPods or other MP3 players, or any other electronic device while driving. I will pull over for other operations of cell phones and electronic equipment.

**No texting while driving. No reading,
writing, or sending text messages.
No use of cell phones while in
motion. No adjustment of iPod or
other MP3 player when driving!**

- **Weather/road conditions.** I will respect weather and road conditions, slowing down as needed for safety. I will contact my parents to discuss weather or poor road conditions when I am out driving.
- **Emotional upset.** Knowing that judgment and driving skills are altered by emotions, I will not drive when I am upset or angry. If upset, I will contact my parents for transportation and I reserve the right to maintain my privacy regarding personal matters. My parents agree not to ask a lot of unnecessary questions.
- **Taking care of vehicle.** It is my responsibility to protect the car I drive. I will keep it reasonably clean and maintained. I have some specific responsibilities regarding the maintenance of the car as noted below:
 - **Passenger behavior.** I will not allow my passengers to behave in such a way as to distract me while driving.
 - **Friends ride only with their parents' permission.** When transporting my friends, I will be reasonably sure that they have their parents' permission to ride with me.
 - **Thank You For Not Smoking.** I will not allow smoking in the car. I will not smoke in the car.
 - **No eating & driving.** I will not eat while driving.
 - **No rushing.** Accidents are more likely to happen when I rush. I am more likely to rush when I leave late. Therefore, my parents reserve the right to not allow me to drive unless I leave by a time they specify. For example, if my parents tell me that I must allow 20 minutes to get to something that starts at 7:00, ***I may not leave later than that.*** In such cases, my parents will attempt to provide alternative transportation, to whatever extent possible.
 - **Attention to driving.** I will not do things while driving that distracts me from the road. No applying makeup, getting things in and out of a purse or back-pack, etc.

SPECIAL ITEMS:

- **Tickets and moving violations** will result in suspension of my driving privileges for a period to be determined by my parents. My parents have no obligation to pay my fines for driving-related tickets.
- **Financial.** I will make certain financial contributions to the purchase of the car, maintenance of the car, and/or insurance. My contributions are currently as follows:

- **Family obligations.** I agree to provide transportation to family members at the directive of my parents. Fulfilling these obligations is a condition of my use of a car. Sometimes these responsibilities will override my own desires and interests in using the car.
- **Changes in this agreement.** I understand that this contract will be made more strict at any time my parents believe that is the best thing to do. I understand that if I consistently abide by these rules that my parents will work with me to make the contract less strict as I gain experience. However, I understand that--bottom line--it is my parents' choice and responsibility to change or not change the contract. **We will review this agreement and perhaps make changes to it on _____(date) or earlier if my parents or I wish to do so.**

Summary: I agree to abide by the rules in this contract and I accept the consequences and penalties if I do not. I recognize my parents' authority in deciding if I may drive. That authority is final until I am an adult living independent of my parents.

Signatures

DRIVER _____ (date)

PARENT(s)/Guardian(s) _____ (date)

Notes on contract.

Remember that this contract covers the first days or weeks that the young driver is driving. Keep that in mind when considering how strict to be. You should plan to revise the contract after a month or so.

1. **Alcohol and drug use.** Some parents read this as a kind of acknowledgement that their child will drink alcohol or do drugs. This is a fair objection, but it is also true that many teenagers drink and do drugs. Research data released in 2005 indicate that 21% of young people between 16 and 20 admit to drinking and/or using drugs AND DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE. Because this is so critical, I believe it is important to address it in the contract. You may want to consider changing the rule to allow you to suspend driving privileges if your young person drinks or does drugs *at all*. Or, if you keep the rule something like it is in this contract, you can tell your teenager that you do not approve of drinking or drugs at any time.
2. **Seatbelts and no excess passengers.** I strengthened this rule in the current version, adding it to Category A and emphasizing it more, in response to a series of especially tragic accidents, all involving deaths of multiple teenagers, in single vehicles. In these accidents, excess passengers piled into the vehicle, riding on each other's laps, evidently, and without seat belts.

3. **Curfew.** Some parents believe this is overly strict and unrealistic. I added this to the contract after research established that a 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew on driving reduces the risk of accidents. You may, of course, alter this requirement if you feel it is unrealistic in your child's situation. However, remember that this contract is intended to be reviewed and revised regularly. In its present form, it is intended to cover the first weeks of driving.
4. **Limits on Passengers.** This is an essential matter to deal with, although parents may differ in how much to restrict this and for how long. The bottom line, the presence of teenage passengers with a teenage driver is a MAJOR source of the added risk of teen driving accidents. Truthfully, for the first year or two of driving it would be safest if the young driver had no teenage passengers. Most of us will likely compromise on that because of the practical realities of teenage life. However, **we highly recommend an initial period during which no passengers are allowed.** This should be followed by a period during which only one passenger is allowed. We would certainly recommend serious limitations on passengers for the first full year of driving, and perhaps beyond.
5. **Cell phones, Car stereos and other electronics.** I recently strengthened this language in response to the "texting while driving" issue. This is a huge problem. Some would argue that this belongs in Category A, and I think a parent who chooses to put it there is being sensible. (Remember, however, that violation of Category B rules, in this model contract, allows the parent to suspend driving privileges for as long as appropriate. Consider starting with a strict policy: No stereo or personal electronics at all during the first weeks of driving. In a later revision of the contract, consider a rule that they may have the stereo on but they may not manipulate any controls while in motion. **USE OF CELL PHONES AND MP3 PLAYERS (iPods, etc.) WHILE DRIVING IS PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS and must be strongly discouraged.**

Other notes on this model contract

- Parents often correctly point out that some of these rules can be broken without your knowledge. I agree. In spite of this, I believe it is important to include the rules anyway. You MAY discover violations and, in any case, you have communicated to your teenager a rule you intend they follow. Be hopeful that, if not eliminating the behavior, it may at least reduce it.
- **"Getting it."** Recently, I've been thinking about a concern I have about contracts of this type: Teenagers may quickly sign it, without really "learning" the rules. Even if they do learn them, they may forget them. So, I encourage you to think of creative ways to assure that they have really understood and retained the rules. Some suggestions:
 - a. **Require your child to read the entire contract to you, aloud.**
 - b. **Require your child to sit while you read it to them.**
 - c. **Before signing, sit down together, read each item together, and discuss.**
 - d. **Occasionally ask questions. Ex: "What does the contract say about curfew?"**
- **Negotiating.** Consider this approach: Make a draft of the contract before you present it to your child and be sure to include some items you are willing to adjust, negotiate, or even give up. Instead of giving the child a finished contract, offer to go through it with him or her item-by-item and invite the teenager to make a "counter-proposal." It's perfectly OK to make some rules non-negotiable.
For more information: <http://www.parentingteendrivers.com>

Finally, an important note about suspending driving privileges and the strictness of the contract.

It is important to seek a balance in deciding when and for how long to suspend driving privileges. Here is why: On the one hand, many of these rules are so serious, drinking and driving is perhaps the clearest example, that violations ought to result in suspension of driving privileges.

On the other hand, research shows us that the way an inexperienced driver gets better and safer is to gain more experience driving. When a teenager is not allowed to drive, *the bad news is that he or she is not getting that valuable experience.*

Here is how a parent might respond to this dilemma. First, it IS possible to be TOO strict and too punitive with this kind of contract. Safety is our concern, and your concern. Your teenager is not becoming a safer driver when he or she is not driving. For minor violations, give a warning. For repeated and more serious violations, suspend them from driving, but don't go overboard in your response. Seek consultation from other parents you respect. Take time to think it over.

If your teenager's driving is suspended, especially for more than a week or so, allow them to drive—ENCOURAGE, even REQUIRE them to drive, but be in the car with them. This is still punishment, of course, but the teen is getting some experience during this period.

That said, here's an unpleasant aspect of the research. After awhile, teenagers do not continue to improve as drivers when their parents are in the car supervising their driving. Research indicates that, after awhile, driving alone is how teenage drivers get better. So, this is another argument for not being excessive in taking your young driver off the road.

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