

POLICY STATEMENT

GRADUATED DRIVER LICENSING

Summary

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers. Comprehensive graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs have been shown to substantially reduce teens' fatal crash rates. GDL programs protect teens by requiring a longer learning period and limiting new drivers' exposure to proven high-risk situations, including driving at night and transporting teen passengers. In the United States, nearly all states and the District of Columbia have implemented some type of graduated driver licensing. However, no state currently meets all the minimum requirements of an optimal GDL program. More work is needed to research teen driving risk; educate teens, their parents and advocates; enforce existing GDL provisions; and to press for GDL programs that provide optimal protection for the nation's novice drivers.

Overview

National traffic safety experts first saw the need for graduated driver licensing (GDL) in the mid 70s. Since the first GDL law was adopted by Florida in 1996, all states and the District of Columbia have implemented some form of GDL. At its most basic level, GDL is a three-phased licensing system that includes an extended learner's period (driving with adult supervision), a restricted license period (limits on late night driving and/or driving with young passengers), and full licensure. All but three states have a three-phase GDL program.

GDL provisions are based on evidence that teens' crash risk is highest during the first six months of independent driving and remains elevated compared to older drivers until age 25. This risk is increased by factors such as driving unsupervised at night and carrying passengers under age 21, as well as using cell phones and other wireless communications devices while driving. Numerous studies of GDL provisions in the U.S. and other countries have shown such programs substantially reduce teen crash rates. For example, researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers dropped 20% in states that implemented comprehensive GDL programs.

Growing awareness of GDL and its benefits has prompted states to take steps to enact laws that strengthen and improve their GDL programs. For example, eight states and the District of Columbia now delay the learner phase to age 16; 45 states and D.C. restrict nighttime driving; 40 states and D.C. restrict the number of passengers, and 17 states and D.C. restrict the use of wireless communications devices.

Optimal GDL Provisions

Although much progress has been made in graduated driver licensing, state program provisions vary widely. For example, while most states have passenger restrictions for novice drivers, these limits can allow as many as three passengers. Meanwhile, studies have confirmed the connection between teen drivers transporting peer passengers and increased risk of fatal crashes. The presence of one passenger doubles the fatal crash risk for a teen driver (ages 16-17) and the risk increases with each additional passenger. Three or more peer passengers increase fatal crash risk by four to five times. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimate that 275 teen lives could be saved each year if all teen drivers had no peer passengers.

Currently, no state program contains all the requirements of an optimal GDL program. The minimum requirements of an optimal GDL program are detailed below.

Minimum Requirements of Optimal GDL Program

Learner’s Permit	Provisional License	Full License
Must be at least 16 years old	May not transport passengers under age 21 for the first 6 months	Restricted use of wireless communications devices while driving
Must hold permit at least 6 months	No more than one passenger under age 21 for the second 6 months	
Minimum of 50 hours supervised driving with an adult age 21 or older	May not drive between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. unless supervised by an adult age 21 or older	
Restricted use of wireless communications devices while driving	Restricted use of wireless communications devices while driving	

Recommendations

Graduated driver licensing is an effective method of reducing teen crash risk. Since the first GDL law was enacted a little more than a decade ago, great strides have been made to implement programs that lower the risk for novice drivers as they gain experience on the road. However, much work remains to be done. Enforcement is needed to ensure that current GDL provisions are effective. Parents, policy makers, educators and other teen advocates need to continue to press for optimal GDL requirements such as delaying the learner phase until age 16; requiring a longer learning period with at least 50 hours of supervised driving practice; and restricting exposure to high-risk conditions, including nighttime driving, transporting child and teen passengers, and using wireless communications devices while driving.

For more information, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Brief on Teen Drivers and Graduated Driver Licensing at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/118/6/2570>

LAST UPDATED: AUGUST 2008

Sources

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