

Learning to Drive as a Parent

Learning to drive is often seen as one of the most important rites of passage to adulthood. It is expensive, stressful and scary – much like life in general as a grown-up. Passing the dreaded driving test marks the ominous transition to the phase in our lives where we start to shoulder responsibility for ourselves as well as our fellow humans, whether they are friends and family getting a lift in our car or strangers travelling in the opposite direction. However far we are going, we are taking our lives and those of others in our hands as soon as we turn the key in the ignition.

I was 34 when I finally learned to drive. We had moved out of the city into a small village where getting around on an hourly bus was fine if you were on your own but far more difficult with children. I finally took the plunge. Yet it was very scary. As we get older we understand better our own capacity for mistakes and the likelihood of others making errors. We know that roads can be dark dangerous places where people lose their lives and we have responsibilities – children, partners, jobs. We know what we have to lose should anything bad happen.

With this in mind, just as I was embarking upon my lessons, the age at which it was legal to drive was making the news. A report commissioned by the government revealed that 20% of the deaths on Britain's roads involved 17-24-year-olds, despite them making up just 5% of the traffic. It recommended that probationary licenses were in future issued from the age of 18. The proposals also included a 12-month "learner stage" during which drivers would have to undertake 100 hours of daytime driving practice under supervision, and 20 hours at night¹. Some commentators were comparing letting a 17 year old drive to giving them a loaded gun.

The question of an optimum age for learning to drive is a complex one. At 17 are we too carefree, too fearless, too broke, too self-absorbed, in short, too young to learn? Yet, sometimes we have to just get on and do it whatever age we are. A 17 year old friend of mine was forced to learn to drive to take her mother to the hospital every day for chemotherapy. A neighbour learnt to drive at 54 after her husband had passed away. We all have different goals to achieve to which learning to drive can contribute.

At the same time as the government report came out there was also news coverage of a different kind about driving. Human Rights Watch reported on the Women2Drive campaign in Saudi Arabia where women are banned from, amongst other things, driving. This campaign saw several women take to the wheel on one day at the risk of violence or other state punishment. It brought home to me what a huge privilege learning to drive is. I had formerly seen it as essential and burdensome with safety, environmental concerns as well as the increasing cost of buying and running a car to think about. However the difference being able to drive has made in my life and the lives of all those whatever their age that pass their test is incredible. It can be a beautiful thing – the beginnings of greater freedom and independence and all the opportunities that can bring. All I need to do is remember all I've learnt in those lessons and try not to start worrying just yet about when my own children turn 17 and want to undertake that rite of passage themselves!

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249282/novice-driver-research-findings.pdf