



HOW YOUNG SHOULD A YOUNG DRIVER BE?

What is the best age to learn to drive? This may seem like a simple question, but there is a surprising difference between the legal requirements in different countries, and a lot of disagreement on national levels.

Until 2011 in New Zealand, you only had to be 15 to be able to drive. Then the New Zealand government decided to raise the legal age to 16, suggesting that they might **toughen** this **up** in the not-too-distant future. (1) Unfortunately, the changes to the law did not **go down** well in rural areas where there is almost no public transport and parents have to chauffeur their kids around whenever they want to go anywhere. (2) Many New Zealanders who are against the raising of the legal age argue that the government needn't have done it. They say they shouldn't have **bothered**, since often the highest number of accidents will come in a driver's first year. (3) However, in the US, where you can begin driving at the age of 14 in some states, there has been a lot of research done into the question of age and how it affects the skills needed on the road. What they've discovered is that there is a part of the brain that helps to control **impulsive** behaviour and warn us of imminent danger. (4) Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that a lot of development happens between the ages of 16 and 18, and so a new 17- or 18-year-old driver will be safer than a new 16-year-old driver. This means there's a scientific basis to explain why teenagers sometimes have a tendency to be careless and rash, and this can obviously also have an influence on the way they behave when they fasten up their seat belts behind the steering wheel.

(5) Sadly, the statistics are clear. According to a 2017 US National Household Travel Survey, the chance of a 16-year-old driver having a crash is one-and-a-half times higher than for drivers aged between 17 and 19.

And there is also more chance a teenage driver will have an accident when they have someone else in the car with them. With two or more passengers, the fatal crash risk for 16- to 19-year-old drivers is more than five times what it is when driving alone. Why? Maybe it's simply because they become distracted by the presence of other people in the car. Or maybe it's because teenagers are more likely to take risks and break speed limits when driving with their friends since they want to **show off** and go fast. Whatever the reason, the discovery has led to some states **implementing** a system known as 'graduated-licensing' rules where 16-year-olds are not allowed to drive without parental supervision until they have driven a certain number of hours. (6)

Parents are seen as contributing to the **lowering** of standards amongst young UK drivers too. In the UK, you don't have to be 18 to start driving. You need to be 17 to get a provisional driving licence but you don't have to have a minimum number of lessons. In the past, British parents would accompany their teenage children on informal practice driving lessons so that, with these extra hours, they could become more confident and competent drivers. (7) However, a study shows that today's young motorists don't have enough hours of professional lessons before taking and passing their test. In addition, 27% of young drivers say they never went out once with their parents to gain extra driving experience, either. (8)

In many countries, then, there is some debate as to what the best age is to become a driver. In general, because of the worrying statistics, there is a growing feeling that the age should be made higher. With more and more young drivers on the road, the debate is clearly here to stay.