

How To Choose a Car For Your Teenager

By Amy Kennedy

Getting a car is a rite of passage for teenagers. Before you allow your teen to get behind the wheel, help him or her select a vehicle that provides safe and reliable transportation without breaking your budget. While your first impulse may be to surprise your teen with a new vehicle, those with limited driving experience may be more comfortable starting off with a used car.

Before you begin shopping for a car, check with your auto insurance provider for a summary of rates on vehicles in your preferred price range. Ask if your teen will qualify for discounts on coverage by completing a driver-training course. Research vehicle prices in newspaper classifieds, online, and with AAA or other auto information services. Keep in mind that statistically the accident rate for teen drivers is higher. Study crash-test ratings from AAA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Some cars offer greater protection for both driver and passengers.

Look for previously owned cars that have been well maintained. If you can find one with low mileage, it's even better. Certified used cars are often more expensive, but the fact that they have been thoroughly inspected, repaired, and come with a warranty can provide you and your teen with peace of mind.

If the vehicle you are considering is not certified, have a mechanic inspect it to verify that it is in good shape. Check the maintenance and crash repair history. Ask a mechanic you trust for information about problem vehicles, recent recalls, and vehicles that are expensive to maintain and repair.

Make sure to check the condition of the tires as well as lights, brakes, exhaust, battery, heating, air conditioning, etc. Make sure the car has a useable spare tire and teach your teen how to use tools and change a flat tire.

Be careful about accepting older vehicles from relatives. If the car has excessive miles or has been poorly maintained, it could end up costing more in repair bills than it's worth. Older model cars also do not have many of the safety features later models offer.

Buying a later model car can help ensure your teen's safety. Airbags, height-adjustable shoulder belts, anti-lock brakes, adjustable head restraints, and traction control are safety features that help prevent serious injuries in an accident.

Don't choose a vehicle on looks alone. Have your teen test drive the car to gauge how well it handles and if he or she feels comfortable driving it. If a vehicle is difficult to park, or your teen feels uneasy backing it out

of the driveway, it might not be the best choice. Try to steer clear of vehicles that seem top-heavy. Models with a low center of gravity are less likely to roll over.

Think about how many passengers your teen's vehicle should carry. While a two-seater is sporty looking, it can be impractical if your teen drives brothers or sisters to school. Avoid buying large vans or SUVs with multiple seating. Teens are distracted easily enough without adding extra passengers to the vehicle. Avoid buying a high-performance model that may tempt your teen to drive too fast. Most safety experts recommend a mid-size sedan for teen drivers.

Try to find a car that is similar to the one used while learning to drive. Take the time to ride with your teen and let him practice handling the car in different situations before he is allowed to drive alone.

Discourage your child from installing a sound system that is excessively loud. Remind him that playing music too loud can be a distraction that prevents him from hearing emergency sirens, train whistles, and warnings from other passengers.

Consider enrolling your child in an auto club like AAA. If he or she becomes stranded with a flat tire or other car malfunction, emergency road service is available 24 hours a day to provide immediate assistance.

Remind your teen that car ownership comes with a set of rules and responsibilities. Make sure he understands that driving privileges can be taken away for speeding, excessive tickets, transporting alcohol and drugs, or driving recklessly. Depending on the age and maturity of your teen, you may need to enforce mileage, destination, curfew, and passenger limits.

Also consider gas mileage when selecting a car. If you live in a rural area and your teen will be driving significant distances to school and a part time job, a car that gets better gas mileage would be preferable.