

Making the case for teen driving reparations

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I'm on a mission to make teen driver reparations standard practice in every American household.

For too long, driving has become an assumed entitlement of teens because one has reached some state-determined age and passed a road test. Immediately after, parents feel pressure to provide a car to their teen simply because they now have a license. But for many years prior, parents have driven them to school, playdates, practice, music lessons, dance class, parties and every other activity in their overscheduled lives.

Is the memory of the many painful years of chauffeuring immediately erased by some embossed piece of paper? When they finally get a license, what do we get out of the deal?

It's time to flip the American teen driving experience from entitlement to earned privilege.

When my daughter recently turned 17 and got her learner's permit, I came up with a better idea: driving reparations. Yes, I will help you learn to drive. Yes, I will pay for a driver's education course. Yes, I will begrudgingly fork over the 80 percent increase in my annual insurance rates. However, there is one important caveat. After you become a licensed driver, you will have to first pay driving reparations by chauffeuring me around before you can use the car for your own purposes. This seems more than fair.

By definition, a reparation is the "making of amends for a wrong that has been done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged." And when I calculated how many miles I have driven, carpooled, schlepped and chauffeured of late, the wrong is abundantly clear.

I'm no "Mommie Dearest" -- so I'm not demanding reparations for all of the years of driving, but I think the last three years is a reasonable window. In fact, I created a highly complicated Driving Reparations Algorithm (DRA for short) to figure out how much reparation is needed. For my 17-year-old, I've made a modest estimation that I've driven on average 480 miles per month over the past three years. I will cut that in half to 240 miles and add a modest 5 percent premium for time, gas and my frustration, which brings me to 252 miles per month, or about 60 miles per week. I will settle that debt for 50 percent on the mile which brings me to modest pay back of 30 miles of driving per week. In some suburban areas, that is only three trips to the mall.

The DRA has been designed to be flexible and can also be developed with an hourly framework. You can decide whether you want your reparations up front or in installments. Teen credit is iffy, so my daughter will have to pay hers upfront. I'll be using a hybrid model, which means she will repay me first with 30 miles of exclusive reparation driving per week for three months. Anytime she is behind the wheel during this period, it will be to serve my needs. After the first three months of reparation-only driving, we'll have a step down program of 20 miles, then 10 miles per week through her first year of licensed driving, during which time she can also drive the car for her own purposes.

I plan to use my reparations by running the errands I hate. On Friday evening, when each child wants a different takeout dinner, I will be in the passenger seat playing license plate games. She will drive me to the nail salon and doctor appointments and wait in the car (check emails or bring your laptop as I have done while waiting for you many times, my darling). I may even spend my reparation driving time sitting in the back seat talking about my day. Oh, the possibilities!

Yes, parents, we deserve driving reparations. But even more important: We will also likely improve teen driver safety in the process.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, teen driver fatalities per mile driven for 16- to 19-year-olds is nearly three times the rate for drivers ages 20 and over. The risk is highest at ages 16 and 17. The fatal crash rate per mile driven is almost twice as high for 16- to 17-year-olds as it is for 18- to 19-year-olds, according to IIHS data.

Even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is looking to parents to exert their influence to improve teen driver safety as evidenced by their latest campaign called, Parents Are The Key to Safe Teen Drivers.

"Parents are the primary enforcers of any teen's driving rules. It is the parent that can control access to the car," said Ruth Shults, a senior epidemiologist on the transportation safety team at the CDC, in an interview. "That's a pretty big hammer."

Agreed. And it's high time that we start swinging it.

Perhaps parents are so exhausted from driving their overscheduled kids, that we hand over the keys with a sigh of relief and resort to monitoring apps, prayer and constant check ins. But this may be one area where we need to put in more time, not less.

In fact, one key way to improve teen safety, Shults said, is by parents driving more with their teen -- which fits in with my reparations plan. She recommends parents drive with their teen in various road conditions including at night and in rainy weather, and warns that learning the mechanics of driving such as turns and steering is different from learning how to think like a driver and anticipate the activity of others. This learning happens when more experienced adults spend time driving with their teens, Shults said. That time also allows you to witness their cellphone habits.

"The cellphone is the modern day plague on the road," said Catherine Chase, vice president for governmental affairs at the D.C.-based Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

All states and the District of Columbia have already adopted a three-stage Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) system, to make sure teens gradually build up their experience, which may, for example, limit nighttime driving, restrict the number of teen passengers allowed in the car or mandate certain hours of supervised practice. (See how your state law compares [here](#)).

Graduated licensing has reduced teen crashes 10 to 30 percent on average, according to the IIHS. But state laws vary, and parents need to step up, Chase noted. We can do more -- going beyond the letter of the law to make sure that our teens not only learn driving skills, but also gain important character-building traits that ultimately make them better young adults.

Who's with me?

Kimberly Seals Allers is a New York-based journalist and author who writes frequently about motherhood and parenting. A former writer at Fortune, she's the author of *The Big Letdown -- How Medicine, Big Business and Feminism Undermine Breastfeeding*. Follow her on Twitter @IamKSealsAllers.

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