

## Nation

# If parents play cops, teen drivers win

## Signed pacts offer windows into both risky, smart behavior

By Larry Copeland  
USA TODAY

As Toni Hafner's daughter, Chelsea, approached driving age, Hafner and her husband, Mike, fretted about her safety, the deluge of information headed her way and the many traffic laws she needed to learn.

"As a parent, you want to set boundaries," says Hafner, 46, a stay-at-home mom in Ovilla, Texas, near Dallas. "You want to have your child learn accountability. You want to make sure they make the right choices. We wanted to make sure Chelsea knew our expectations. Plus, there's a lot of fear out there.

There's a lot of crazy drivers."

So the Hafners used a sample contract provided by their insurer, State Farm, to draw up their own 1½-page compact that governs practically every aspect of Chelsea's driving: If she's late with a car payment, she pays a late fee. She doesn't let the gas fall below a quarter-tank. No drugs, alcohol, texting or cell-phone use while driving. She must meet a curfew and obey laws limiting passengers in the vehicle. If she gets a traffic citation, she has to pay for her own insurance.

Most critically: She has to maintain good grades to keep driving.

The family discussed it, and all three signed it.

### By the numbers

1

Rank of traffic crashes as a cause of death for 16- to 19-year-olds.

25%

Percentage of all 15- to 20-year-old drivers killed in crashes who were alcohol-impaired.

73%

Percentage of youth alcohol-impaired fatalities who were not wearing seat belts.

27,052

Estimated lives saved since 1975 as a result of raising the drinking age to 21.

350,000

Annual injuries from crashes for 15- to 19-year-olds.

Source: 2008 data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

By Dave Merrill, USA TODAY

The family discussed it, and all three signed it.

"By having a contract like this, there's no questions involved," Toni Hafner says. "We signed it a little over a year ago. She's abided by all of the rules."

Chelsea, 17, is a senior at Red Oak High School who works as a waitress and babysitter. She says she's fine with the agreement. "Everything is reasonable in there," she says. She says she doesn't know whether any of her friends have similar contracts, but they understand her restrictions: "I told them I have rules, and they respect that."



By Mei-Chun Jui for USA TODAY

"She's abided by all of the rules": Mike and Toni Hafner of Ovilla, Texas, drafted and signed a 1½-page contract with daughter Chelsea, a high school senior who works two jobs. Even her friends respect her rules.

The principles stressed by parent-teen contracts — parental involvement, clear-cut rules and well-defined consequences for violating those rules — were shown to help make teens safer drivers in a study last year by The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm.

The study found that teens with parents who set rules, monitored where they were going and with whom, and engaged them in a helpful, supportive way were half as likely to be involved in a crash and 71% less likely to drive drunk than teens with less-involved parents who didn't monitor their teen drivers.

"These things can work," says Despina Stavrinou, a researcher at the University of Alabama at Birmingham University Transportation Center. "One key component is teens playing an adequate role in developing the contract and brainstorming ideas."

Stavrinou says parents must monitor their teens to make sure they're following the rules, but trust is also involved. "If the rule is no texting behind the wheel, parents need to monitor that behavior in some way, but pulling cellphone records might be crossing the line," she says.

Experts such as Pam Fischer, director of the New Jersey Division of Traffic Safety, say children begin learning how to drive from their parents long before they get a learner's permit. She says that parent-teen contracts help teens stay focused and also can make parents more aware of what (parents) are doing behind the wheel.

"This whole driving aspect starts from the moment we bring our kids home from the hospital," Fischer says. "Our kids are learning from us from Day One.

We've got to think about what we're doing."

Fischer has a contract with her 15-year-old son, Zachary. "It encourages dialogue, and it really does create ground rules," she says.

Bob Kamm, an Austin attorney, signed an agreement with his son, Christian, 16, two months ago. "It's really sparked a lot of discussion between us," he says. "He'll ask me, 'What do I do in this situation or in that situation?'"

Christian says he had reservations at first. "I thought, here's more work along with all the driver's ed stuff I have to do," he says. "But I like it because it kind of allows for some trust between the driver and the parents. You can work on things to make the parents feel a bit more safe and comfortable with you behind the wheel."

A new study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, which used in-vehicle cameras to capture teen drivers and their parents during supervised driving, found that teens were not getting driving experience in challenging situations — at night, in bad weather or heavy city traffic, on busy interstates.

Parent-teen contracts can help address that deficit by requiring parents to spend a set amount of time supervising their children in the car — and holding them to it, says Peter Kissinger, president and CEO of the foundation.

Toni Hafner is a believer. After her experience with Chelsea, she says she's already planning contracts for her two younger children, Michael, 15, and Zachary, 10.

▶ Parent-teen driving contracts gain favor, 1A