

Teen Drivers: GDL, Yes; Cell Phones, No

"Injury from motor vehicle crashes is the number one cause of death among teenagers in the United States." -- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, from the new 'Beta' Web site at scholar.google.com

"You know, somebody actually complimented me on my driving today. They left a little note on my windshield, it said 'Parking Fine.' So that was nice."
-- Tommy Cooper, British comedian and magician (1921-1984)

In 2001, Tennessee passed a Graduated Driver License ("GDL") law. Here are some key details that are important to know.

Q. What is the "Graduated Driver License" law?

This is a law that places certain restrictions on teenagers under 18. The word "graduated" in this case does not mean "finished high school." It means that a teen driver is supposed to make gradual progress by having more supervised driving experience. This law helps drivers make progress toward full, unrestricted driving. The goal is more saved lives and fewer tragic injuries.

The GDL law requires teen drivers to succeed in 'gradual' stages:

- learner permit, then
- intermediate restricted license, then
- intermediate unrestricted license, then
- regular driver license (marked 'under age 21').

Q. What are the restrictions for a learner permit?

Learner permit drivers:

- Must be at least 15 years old;
- Must hold a learner permit for at least 180 days;
- May drive only with a licensed driver age 21 or older in the front seat; and
- May not drive between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

Q. What are the restrictions for an intermediate restricted license?

Intermediate restricted drivers:

- Must be at least 16 years old and pass the driving test; and
- Must have had at least 50 hours of behind-the-wheel driving experience, including 10 hours of night driving.

Q. What are the restrictions for the intermediate unrestricted license?

Intermediate unrestricted drivers:

- Must be at least 17 years old;
- Must have had an intermediate restricted license for at least 1 year;
- Cannot have accumulated 6 or more points on their driving record;
- Cannot have had a traffic accident that was their fault; and
- Cannot have had 2 seat belt violations.

Both types of intermediate drivers:

- May only have one passenger, unless one or more passengers are 21 or older,
- May carry multiple brothers and sisters as additional passengers with a parent's or guardian's written note;
- May not drive between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., except with a parent, guardian, or licensed driver age 21 or older designated by the parent or guardian;
- May drive after 11:00 or before 6:00 a.m. to or from specific school events or jobs if the driver is holding specific written permission from a parent or guardian; and
- May drive to or from hunting or fishing between 4:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. with a valid hunting or fishing license.

Q. Is it true the law says no cell phones for teen drivers?

Yes. Teen drivers who have a learner permit or intermediate driver license are prohibited from operating a motor vehicle in motion while using a handheld cellular telephone or other mobile telephone (except to speak to parents, or in an emergency).

Breaking this law is a Class C misdemeanor with a \$50 fine, plus a 90 day additional delay for the next intermediate license or the unrestricted license at age 18. Bottom line: "If you dial, don't drive."

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Note: This column is not intended to take the place of legal advice. All cases are different and need individual attention. Consult with a private attorney of your choice to review the facts and law specific to your case.

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