

Defensive driving

Get the facts

For young drivers, nothing beats practice on the road while supervised by an experienced driver who cares about them.

The best way to become a better driver is many hours of careful driving in real conditions with an experienced driver.

Many parents are also keen for their young drivers to complete a driver training, or 'defensive driving' course. There are several types of courses available. Some are designed specifically to help young drivers become safer drivers, but some aren't, so it's important to choose carefully.

The facts

Courses promoting advanced vehicle handling and manoeuvring, conducted away from real roads are of limited value to young drivers and can even have negative effects. They can create a false sense of their ability – especially among young men who can become overconfident and prone to taking risks on real roads.

Another potential problem with intensive courses is that quickly learned skills are easily forgotten if they aren't practised regularly. Crashes happen relatively rarely, so any skills gained will most likely fade through lack of use.

However, there are some worthwhile courses available to younger drivers. Those that work on recognising hazards ahead of time, what to do in certain situations, being confident without being risky, and staying safe while driving despite pressures, are all good things to look for when choosing driver training course.

Look for courses which cover topics such as:

- **How our brains perceive hazards** – this is about recognising potential hazards before they happen. For example, when driving around a corner the driver notices a group of children ahead running and playing with a ball on the footpath. Courses can encourage them to think ahead: “those children are very young and wouldn’t have much experience around the road, they may hit the ball onto the road and chase after it, so I will slow down in case they run out suddenly on the road.”
- **Reducing overconfidence** – it’s important drivers are confident when they first start driving so they can put into action everything they’ve learnt to get their licence. However, sometimes the combination of getting a licence, greater independence and a propensity for risk-taking can be dangerous. The road isn’t an opportunity to put those computer games into action and treat it like a race track. Getting the adrenalin pumping by putting the foot down and trying stunts seen in the movies may sound far-fetched, but research shows courses that teach intensive manoeuvres off-road mixed with overconfidence can result in increased risk taking on real roads. A dose of reality with real life stories, and a person’s reflections on their former risky behaviours are a great way to show that the 2-second thrill can have life-long consequences.
- **Situational awareness** – this means being aware of the surroundings. For example, when driving on the highway, the driver sees lots of red brake lights suddenly come on and hears a siren in the distance. These are all clues that there may be a crash ahead so the driver starts to slow down, turns their radio down and starts checking mirrors to see where an ambulance may be coming from, in anticipation of making way.
- **Developing risk avoidance strategies** – this means learning to be patient, calm and clear-headed, knowing that unexpected things can happen, and what to do in those situations to avoid making things worse or having a crash. It also means being mindful that there will be risky drivers on the road (e.g. using their phone, weaving in traffic, speeding, forgetting to indicate correctly around a roundabout or failing to follow the road rules). Learning how to respond safely may mean making a potentially dangerous situation incident-free.
- **Building resilience to peer pressure** – young people and their parents make a huge investment in getting licensed which all can be thrown away when mates encourage a new driver to bend the rules a little. The graduated licensing system in Queensland is rigorous for a purpose – to build skills and experience so a new driver is able to be safe on the road.



Good questions to ask when considering a driver training course are:

- Has this course been specifically designed for young people? It’s important to avoid courses designed for professional or experienced drivers whose experience and skills will be more advanced.
- Has the course been developed with input from road safety experts in the area of driver education, psychology and road safety research?
- Was the course designed with the objective of helping young drivers become safe drivers?



Courses focusing primarily on vehicle handling and emergency manoeuvres should be avoided. They may be more appealing to young drivers (who think they look like fun), but they offer less safety benefits than courses addressing attitudes and behaviour.

After your young driver has completed their course, ask what they learned about themselves and their driving. How do they plan to apply that knowledge?