

Passage A: Don't young people want to drive anymore?

This website article explores the issues around learning to drive for young people.

My eldest daughter turns 17 in a couple of weeks and I keep waiting for her to open negotiations about getting her provisional driving licence – who pays for her lessons, the insurance and all that. For months before my own seventeenth birthday, there was no other kind of conversation around the dinner table. My parents could have demanded almost anything – improved school grades, babysitting my little brother, mowing the lawn, anything – and I would have caved in immediately. That licence was my passport to the adult world, to a liberated life beyond the confines of my house, my street and my very dull little home town.

There's plenty of evidence that many young people still aspire to be fully fledged drivers while still in their teens. One of the local high schools in that same town has recently extended its car park to accommodate the number of Year 12 and 13 students who drive to school every day. Drivers in school uniform are not uncommon, especially in more affluent areas and where schools are not on their pupils' doorsteps as they used to be. Greta, the parent of one of those young drivers, told me she'd persuaded her son to learn to drive with the promise of a car if he just signed up for lessons. 'It's cheaper than public transport,' she said, 'and I need the flexibility it gives us as a family. It saves me an extra stressful journey every morning and I don't have to choose between working late to better my career or picking up my younger child from after-school club.' Greta doesn't allow her son to drive further afield because she needs him around to help out with all the ferrying about it takes to run a family and a job these days. While there are more teenage drivers than there were in my day, getting that licence maybe doesn't mean what it used to.

However, driving schools say that the average age of their learners has risen in the last few years to 25. 25? I'd got eight years of driving experience under my belt by then, in all weathers and on many unfamiliar roads. I'd learned what it took to keep a car on the road, all the forms you have to fill in, the laws you have to know about and the money you have to make to pay for it all. I think I can safely say that learning to drive and getting my licence taught me as much as several years of formal education. I learned other valuable lessons too – that I could achieve things if I was really motivated (my driving test was one of the few exams I passed first time with flying colours!), and that respect for others on the road was what kept you safe.

My daughter probably already has a lot of the freedoms we sought as teenagers, but I hope she opens negotiations soon. Learning to drive can still help kids grow into adults – a proper rite of passage.

Passage B: Is driving a luxury young people can no longer afford?

This article explores the costs of learning to drive.

In the mid-1990s, more than half of UK males between the ages of 17 and 20 had a driving licence or were learning to drive, and young women weren't far behind. Since then, teenagers are increasingly turning their backs on what used to be a rite of passage, with many still having never had their hands on the wheel by their mid-twenties.

Many motoring organisations and driving instructors think this is no bad thing. Many have been calling for measures to address the appalling accident statistics for young drivers for years, such as restrictions on where and when newly licensed people are allowed to drive and the number of passengers they can carry. One recently called for a one-year minimum learning period to ensure that young drivers experience different conditions on the roads before they pass their tests. Young drivers are three times more likely to die in a road accident than other groups, and cause more accidents too. Despite having only recently learned the rules of the road, novice drivers break them more often than older drivers.

Of course, teenagers are unlikely to be put off by these grim statistics, although it may give their parents pause for thought. It's probably the rising cost of learning to drive that keeps them riding the bus. It takes about 50 hours of lessons, plus time driving private cars, to pass the driving test. At an average cost of £25 per lesson it's well beyond the scope of many families these days. And since the cost of insurance is based on those horrendous accident statistics, many young people know they won't have access to a car for years even after they've passed their test. They're just not in a rush to get their hands on that first driving licence anymore when there are other, more important pressures on their time and money.

Many parents of 17-year-olds now have to weigh up the cost of driving lessons against paying for their child's university education, and they have to consider just how necessary it is to learn to drive while still at school. It depends on where young people live as well as family finances. In a big city, getting around on public transport or by bike is much easier than driving a car, but in a rural village, miles from anywhere, with a sporadic bus service, driving lessons might be an investment in a young person's future.

In previous generations, to own a car was a key aspiration for young people of all backgrounds. Nowadays, many aren't so bothered. Teenagers have grown up aware and educated about the damage inflicted on the environment by that aspiration and they're not so eager to add to the gridlock in cities and on motorways. There's no 'lure of the open road' anymore when a daily commute by car can take twice as long as the train. While young people may have been priced out of driving by the high costs of learning, perhaps they're not adding to the cost paid by the planet.

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