

As important as college

Tips for picking a driver's education program for your teen driver

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SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- From preschool to college, parents spend an inordinate amount of time finding the finest schools for their children. But there's one moment when many parents fall down on that job: choosing a driver's education program.

As budget constraints force some high schools to cut back on their drivers' ed programs, parents are faced with an array of for-profit schools from which to choose. But all too often parents rely on a school that's cheap and close to home.

Given that car crashes are the leading cause of death among teenagers that could be a dangerous mistake.

"Parents tend to look at cost, they look at how long the program takes, they look at how close is the driving school ... but the one factor that has traditionally not been as important in parents' mind is quality," says William Van Tassel, manager of driver-training operations at AAA, the Automobile Association.

"The risk of driving is so great that parents really should maximize the chances of their teens becoming safe drivers. It's the riskiest thing that teens do in terms of the potential for injury and death," Van Tassel said. A poor-quality driving school might use old, unsafe cars, cram too much information into a short time span or teach outdated safety rules.

Schools vary in price, generally from \$180 up to \$600, depending on where you live and the school's curriculum.

Public-school driving courses are usually free or very cheap, but since some schools now contract their drivers' program through a private company, be sure to investigate the high-school program as carefully as any other school.

"You definitely get what you pay for in this industry. There's no way I could put gas into the car and have a safe car if I didn't charge accordingly," says Bud Chauncy, owner of First Class Driving School in Bossier, La., and president-elect of the Driving School Association of the Americas.

Drivers' ed, and much more

Even as you research schools, don't rely solely on a drivers' education program to teach your teen how to drive.

"The reason teens are more likely to get involved in crashes than other drivers has to do not with their knowledge of the rules of the road [but] with their inexperience and their tendency to take risks," says Anne McCartt, vice president for research at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit research group funded by insurers.

That's where parents come in. "We think it's important for teens to get as much experience as possible in a supervised setting," McCartt said. "It's unrealistic to expect driver's ed classes to accomplish that."

States' graduated licensing programs, which limit teens' unsupervised driving time, appear to reduce teen crashes, McCartt said, so no matter what your state laws are, consider enforcing your own graduated licensing program. See this IIHS brochure for more information (PDF). Also, see this IIHS page for details on states' licensing laws for young drivers.

Tips for vetting a school

After checking your state's requirements for licensing young drivers, follow these tips for finding a good school.

Visit the school. "Talk with the receptionist, try to catch an instructor. You can get a subjective feel," for the school's professionalism, Van Tassel said, based on those conversations and how clean and up to date the school looks. Make sure the cars look well-maintained and are not more than about four years old.

Look at the curriculum. "You don't want something that has a 1975 car on the cover," Chauncy said. The school should use a state-approved curriculum, and perhaps supplementary materials, as some state guidelines are a few years old and don't have the latest safety information, he said.

Ask how much behind-the-wheel driving time the school offers. At a minimum, that time should meet state requirements, but you may want to pay for additional supervised driving time.

Ask how much classroom time is offered. A program that concentrates the material into a short amount of time may be less effective than one that works with students over a longer period, Van Tassel said. "Instead of cramming the information at once, you space it out, maybe 50 minutes a day or a few times a week. That matches up with a sounder approach to learning."

Find out whether the instructor is available to answer parents' questions. "The instructor should be able to spend a couple of minutes to give the parent an update and make some suggestions" as to what skills the student needs to focus on, Van Tassel said.

Vet the company. Check with the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org) to see whether any complaints have been lodged against the company, and ask whether the company belongs to a trade association. That helps assure the school gets regular updates on the latest instructional techniques and safety guidelines.

Separately, consider getting supplementary course materials, such as the Governors Highway Safety Program's materials at DrivingSkillsforLife.com. Your local AAA office will have materials on choosing a school, plus a guide to help parents teach their kids how to drive.