



Best practices for graduated driver licensing in Canada



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Best Practices for Graduated Driver Licensing in Canada

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Executive Summary

This report describes best practices for graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs for new drivers in Canada. It is intended to set the standards for the development of new programs in Canada and for enhancing the effectiveness of those already in place. The report contains: a detailed description of current GDL programs in Canada; a comparison of these programs to GDL programs elsewhere; a description of the safety benefits of GDL, including the features that have been shown to contribute to their effectiveness; and, based on these findings, a description of best practices for GDL programs.

A central and fundamental issue is whether GDL should apply to all novices or just those who are young. Certainly, both groups are at risk because they are inexperienced; young beginners are at even greater risk owing to the additional influence of age-related factors, such as peer pressure and thrill seeking. Accordingly, jurisdictions in Canada that have already adopted GDL programs have applied it to all beginners – this practice is to be encouraged, especially since evaluations have shown that the collision reductions from these GDL programs extend to novice drivers of all ages. For the same reasons, New Zealand, whose GDL program originally applied only to drivers under the age of 25, has extended its program to all novice drivers, regardless of age.

GDL is by definition multi-staged, and research has clearly demonstrated the safety value of this approach over more conventional ones. Accordingly, most GDL programs include a multi-stage system that has, at a minimum, a learner stage and an intermediate stage before graduation to a full licence.

The report describes best practices for the structure and content of these two stages.

Learner Stage

The recommended best practices for the learner stage are described briefly below.

- ❑ **Minimum entry age.** The minimum entry age should be 16, which is already the case in most GDL programs in Canada.
- ❑ **Entry requirements.** To enter the GDL program, beginners should pass a vision test and a knowledge test on the rules of the road and safe driving practices. Parental consent should be required for beginners under age 19.
- ❑ **Minimum duration.** The minimum duration should be 12 months, which is presently the case in only a few jurisdictions in Canada.
- ❑ **Maximum holding period.** The maximum holding period should be 24 months at which time the learner should be given a choice of remaining on the learner stage and being re-tested for knowledge, or advancing to the intermediate stage with appropriate testing.



- ❑ **Supervisory driver.** Driving should be permitted only under the supervision of a driver: who has been fully licensed for one year, is at least 25 years old, and is seated in the front seat.
- ❑ **Supervised driving.** During this critical “learning” stage, the novice should be required to have a minimum of 50 hours of practice, including 10 at night and 10 different hours in winter conditions, certified by their supervisor and/or parent.
- ❑ **Driver education and training.** Driver education and training should be available on a voluntary basis and encouraged because it appears to be the most efficient way to acquire basic operating skills as well as motivations and attitudes. Such programs also provide a means to practice and gain needed driving experience in low risk situations, under the supervision of a qualified instructor. However, until research has demonstrated the crash reduction benefits of driver education and training, it should not receive special status, such as being allowed to substitute for time in the system. Successful completion of driver education and training should not be recognized through a “time discount”, because this practice has been shown to have negative safety consequences.
- ❑ **BAC.** A zero BAC limit should apply. The supervisor should also be restricted to a low or zero BAC.
- ❑ **Night restriction.** Driving should be prohibited at night, particularly during the high risk hours of midnight to 6:00 a.m.
- ❑ **Passenger restriction.** No passengers, with the exception of the supervisor.
- ❑ **“L” sign/Plate.** The beginner should be required to display an “L” sign/plate in/on the vehicle to alert other road users of their learner status and to assist police in enforcing GDL conditions.
- ❑ **Minimum exit age.** Given that the minimum entry age is 16 and the minimum duration of this stage is 12 months, the minimum exit age should be 17.
- ❑ **Other features.** GDL programs in Canada already apply penalties, such as fines, demerit points, and suspensions/prohibitions for violations of GDL conditions, and this practice should be continued. During both the learner and intermediate stages, learners should also be subject to lower demerit point thresholds than fully licensed drivers. When licence suspensions or driving prohibitions are applied, novices should have to begin the stage again and/or the stage should be extended by the duration of the suspension to ensure that the learner has the full amount of driving experience before progressing to the next stage. A crash- and violation-free record should be requirements for the duration of the stage to encourage learners to drive safely.

The list of recommended best practices is extensive and it is unlikely that any jurisdiction will adopt all of them. At a minimum, however, jurisdictions should adopt the following priority recommendations for the Learner Stage:

- ❑ A minimum duration of at least 12 months.
- ❑ A mandatory requirement for certified supervised practice of at least 50 hours.
- ❑ Eliminate the “time discount” for driver education.

Intermediate Stage

The best practices for the intermediate stage are described briefly as follows.



- ❑ **Minimum entry age.** The minimum entry age should be 17.
- ❑ **Entry requirements.** Performance-based, “entry” test(s), including a road test, and testing in hazard perception should be used to ensure the novice has achieved the minimum standards of safe driving and serve as incentives for them to acquire the skills and experience needed to pass these tests.
- ❑ **Minimum duration.** This stage should last a minimum of 12 months and preferably 24 months, which is already the case in a few jurisdictions in Canada.
- ❑ **Maximum holding period.** The maximum holding period should be 24 months at which time the novice would be given a choice of remaining in the intermediate stage and re-doing the road test, or advancing to the full licence stage with appropriate testing.
- ❑ **BAC.** The zero BAC limit should continue in this stage. As well, when the novice is driving under supervision (e.g., during the restricted night hours), the supervisor should also have a low or zero BAC.
- ❑ **Night restriction.** Unsupervised driving would be permitted but not during riskier night hours – e.g., from 9:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. Driving to/from home and work or school or school events, and other approved purposes, could be exempt.
- ❑ **Passenger restriction.** During the first six to 12 months, for novice drivers under 20, teen passengers would not be allowed when the driver is unsupervised. After the first 6 to 12 months, teen passengers could be allowed during unsupervised driving. Immediate family members could be exempt from these restrictions.
- ❑ **“N” sign/plate.** The novice should be required to display an “N” sign/plate on/in the vehicle.
- ❑ **Driver education.** Integrating driver education and training could potentially enhance the effectiveness of GDL – e.g., basic skill-oriented course in the learner stage and a more advanced safety-oriented course in the intermediate stage. However, efforts should be made to improve the form and content of existing education and training programs because their safety benefits remain unproven.
- ❑ **Exit requirements.** Passing more advanced on-road and/or computerized exit tests that focus on higher-order skills such as hazard perception should be required to graduate to a full licence. In this regard, three jurisdictions in Canada already have an on-road exit test.
- ❑ **Minimum exit age.** The recommended minimum exit age is 19 and this is based on a minimum entry age into GDL of 16 and minimum durations of 12 months in the learner stage and 24 months in the intermediate stage.
- ❑ **Other features.** Similar to the learner stage, novices should be subject to penalties for breaching GDL conditions, a lower demit point threshold, licence suspensions/driving prohibitions followed by a return to the start of the stage, and/or an extension of the stage by the duration of the suspension/prohibition. As well, the novice should be required to maintain a crash- and violation-free record to graduate to a full licence.

Among the above best practices for the intermediate stage are the following priority recommendations that should be adopted, at a minimum, to enhance the potential safety benefits of GDL:

- ❑ No unsupervised night driving from 9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. (exemptions for home to work or school or school events, and other approved purposes).



- ❑ No teen passengers when driving unsupervised (for novice drivers under 20 years of age) during the first 6-months to 12-months (immediate family members exempt).

Summary

Despite the well-documented success of GDL across North America, significant numbers of novice drivers, particularly young ones, who are protected by the program, still crash. This situation can be remedied in part by implementing the best practices highlighted in this report, and at a minimum, putting in place the priority recommendations.

Although some of the best practices are already in place in a few GDL programs in Canada, none include all the priority recommendations. The research reviewed in this report clearly suggests that implementing or enhancing GDL programs with these best practices can result in further safety benefits.

