

Parents, would you let your kid ride an Uber or Lyft by themselves?

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May 1—Having grown up riding the New York City subways by herself at age 11 or 12, suburban New Jersey mom Kasia Bardi was fine the first time her 12-year old boy Fabrizio rode an Uber alone to an "important soccer game."

Bardi ordered and monitored the 5-minute drive, and it probably didn't hurt that her son, even at that age, was 6-feet tall and looked older than he was.

Now, 15 and 6' 4", Bardi's son rides in an Uber without an adult three to four times a year, though always as a "last resort," mom says.

"A comfy monitored ride has got to be way safer than the subway in the '80s, right?" Bardi asks, while also conceding that her neighbors, and for that matter her husband, aren't quite as comfortable with the idea as she is.

As it turns out, neither is Uber or Lyft.

Uber explicitly states that anyone under 18 must be accompanied by an adult to ride and that drivers report when a passenger riding alone is clearly underage. The driver can ask a passenger who looks too young for an ID and is instructed to cancel a trip if that turns out to be the case. (Refusing a trip will not impact a driver's rating, the company says.)

Rival Lyft takes a similar stance.

Uber and Lyft account holders who let unaccompanied minors ride risk losing their accounts.

Not playing by the rules

The reality, though, is that some parents are willing to break the rules of the ride-sharing services themselves. They'll let their underage kids ride with Uber or Lyft—typically if sharing that ride with friends—but sometimes even when they're traveling alone. And given how many younger teens are also riding solo, some drivers are obviously looking the other way, too.

Parents may feel they have no better alternatives. Sure, they worry about safety, but they find themselves balancing their concerns against certain realities. They're stuck at work, say, and need the kids to get dropped off or picked up at school or some other activity. And with no obvious place to go, they turn to Uber or Lyft, or perhaps to one of the companies popping up around the country that offer ridesharing services specifically catered at transporting [younger children](#), typically at a higher cost.

Schools themselves are grappling with this conundrum and may prevent Uber-Lyft drop-offs on school grounds, for safety and sometimes traffic reasons.

A model policy in place by the New Jersey School Boards Association summarizes the requirements for the supervision of students at dismissal time.

"Most examples of the documentation process...include the district requiring the names and contact information of the individuals authorized to pickup a student," the NJSBA wrote. "Under such a policy or procedure, authorizing a ride-sharing service for students would not

be consistent with the board policy."

Travel as a pack

As a [single mother](#) living in Mission, Texas, Jamie Goodwin Barnett sees the benefit of Uber and Lyft for kids. "It's hard to juggle activities and a teenager's schedule," she says.

But Barnett says living so close to the Mexican border makes her nervous and she'd only consider allowing her 14-year-old daughter to ride with friends. "Alone, no," she says.

In Round Rock, Texas, Lilian R Coutinho Castro, did let her daughter ride alone at 17. But mother and daughter took precautions.

"She always sends me a screenshot of the driver information, and I track her by the Life360 (app that lets parents know where the kids are at all times) during the ride," Castro says. Mom also told her daughter to make sure that the Uber or Lyft driver is the same person in the picture registered in the app.

In Sacramento, Tracey Donlan's 16-year old daughter and 15-year old son rode together after mom got stuck at home while a refrigerator was being installed. Both teens have black belts in taekwondo and still Donlan instructed them to walk to a nearby Starbucks so that the Uber-Lyft driver would not know where they went to high school.

"I would let them ride together again in an urgent situation but I don't plan to make it a habit," Donlan says.

Some parents take a harder line.

"I don't see how letting a child in a vehicle with a stranger is more

important than a game or practice or anything else," says, Susie Kinniard, a Louisville, Kentucky, mother of four. Kinniard says if another parent she knew was unable to pick up the kids if she couldn't, then, "we'd just miss the game."

The recent tragic murder of a college student in South Carolina has some parents concerned, even though the circumstances were somewhat different—the victim was 21 and she entered a car that was not an Uber.

Melody Harrison Bergman, a mother of three and self-defense instructor in Richmond, Virginia, worries about predators posing as Uber drivers. "Personally, I don't think it's wise to let minors ride unaccompanied—especially not alone. As we like to say in our self-defense classes: 'Three is the new two.' It's always safer for kids to travel together as a pack."

Lyft recently went public, and Uber is planning its own IPO. Mike Weiss, a Fort Collins, Colorado, father of an 8-month-old boy, says "the best thing that could happen to the safety of our children is Lyft and Uber going public because investors won't stand for horror stories in the media. Safety (hopefully not at the expense of cost) will be an even bigger priority moving forward for this vertical market that's really just beginning to flourish."

Rideshares for kids

Parents do run into difficult circumstances—work crises, car breakdowns—where they find they cannot suddenly drive their kids somewhere and can't arrange a last-minute carpool or back up.

In the last couple of years, startups such as HopSkipDrive, Kango, Zemcar, Zum, and Bubbl have stepped in to try and fill the void by offering supposedly "safe" transportation services that have been

compared to "Ubers for Kids."

At Bubbl, for example, which is expanding beyond its Dallas-area base to communities in other parts of Texas as well as in Connecticut and Florida, hires active or retired police officers firefighters, military, nurses or other first responders, all of whom become company employees. Bubbl's vetting process includes in-person interviews, criminal background checks, drug tests, and a motor vehicle review.

The minimum rider age is 8.

Police or other drivers with a license to carry a gun must keep the weapon concealed and on their body. And there are cameras in the car that are meant to protect the driver and passenger, though some parents may fret about privacy and may be concerned about a video of their kids being recorded.

The company says videos are deleted after the ride and there is no live viewing either (though a parent can otherwise track a car's route through the app).

Uber's own policy on the use of video cameras is left up to the driver's discretion; the driver is responsible for complying with applicable local and state privacy laws, the company says.

Cars used by Bubbl drivers must be 2015 or newer. They can't be dirty or smell of smoke. And to avoid any possibility that a kid may get into the wrong vehicle, the cars have a blue Bubbl on top and Bubbl branding on the side.

These rides don't come cheap. The cost of a ride starts at \$17, and the average trip is \$28, says co-founder Pam Adams. Escort door-to-door service—which may involve signing a kid out of school—costs \$8 extra.

(Bubbl will also transport seniors or passengers with special needs.)

Cars almost always must be ordered at least four hours in advance, Adams says, adding that Bubbl is typically booked between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. daily.

For all the precautions, some parents remain understandably adamant against letting underage kids ride without supervision from an adult they know and trust.

Tamra Duran, a mother in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, sums up the view of many: "That blows my mind that some people find that to be OK."

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