



Teaching Your Teen to Drive

Tips to Get Through Those Tense Moments

From the passenger's seat, Andrew B. Burkhardt had nothing to stop the car but his voice.

"Stop!" Burkhardt shouted on instinct, just as his 16-year-old son, Clark, pressed the brake.

The family's 1998 Nissan Maxima came to rest safely behind another car that had stopped in the road.

It was a tense moment in the long ordeal of building Clark's skills and honing his road judgment as he practiced driving on his learner's permit.

I'm sorry for yelling, Burkhardt told his son. I'm trying to let you make little mistakes, but that seemed like a big one coming.

No, Clark replied. I saw it right when you yelled.

Driving experts sympathize if parents find themselves slamming the invisible brake pedal on the passenger's side of the car -- what driving school teachers call "the air brake."

It's common for parents to "get a little anxious and excited when the student is coming up behind a car too fast," said Brad Hays, a veteran driving instructor at Kern Driving School, in Bakersfield, Calif. "They don't have a duel brake like we do" in a driving school car.

Burkhardt admits that practicing on the road with his son is at times "emotionally taxing" for both of them.

But few things a parent does are more important, insisted Bud Chauncy, the president of the Driving School Association of the Americas Inc.

"I don't think most parents realize that 15 to 18 teens die in car crashes every day," said Chauncy, also a driving instructor and the owner of First Class Driving School in Bossier City, La. "We wouldn't send our kids to a piano recital if they didn't have enough practice time."

"If your son or daughter is not prepared to drive, they won't be booed" for a bad performance -- they could be hurt or killed, Chauncy warned.

Practice Is Key

Yet surveys show that only 17 percent of parents in California, for example, complete the full 50 hours of road practice with their teens required by state law.

Fifty hours of practice with an adult in the car is the minimum, in addition to any professional instruction required by the laws of your state, the experts say.

One common problem is that many parents see their kids confidently controlling an automobile and assume they can drive. But the concern with teen drivers is mental, not physical, according to Chauncy.

"The vast majority of crashes [among teens] happen because of lack of experience and improper perception of risk," said Chauncy.

Burkhardt's insurance company told him as much: While his son has a learner's permit and is driving with an adult, the insurance rates don't go up.

But once his son gets his license?

"As soon as the adult judgment is removed from the car and 16-year-old judgment takes over, the rates soar," Burkhardt said.

To smooth out the bumps on the road to making your teen a safe driver, Chauncy and Hays offered some strategies and tips.

Tips for Starting Out

The Burkhardts started their practice the right way, according to the experts -- in empty parking lots near their home in Cranston, R.I., to allow Clark to develop a feel for how a car turns and brakes. From parking lots they graduated to cemeteries, where speed limits are 5 or 10 mph, and the residents don't complain about new drivers.

"Then we worked on the streets," said Burkhardt. "City driving in some ways is tougher than highway driving, but the consequences of a mistake are smaller. We haven't yet graduated to the highway."

Looming in a future lesson is a trip on the highway. At rush hour, nearby I-95 is a beast -- six lanes of high-speed chaos, exit ramps to the left and to the right, seemingly all designed to merge traffic at the worst possible locations. It's a challenge to be saved until a student is ready, the experts say.

"Never force a new driver to do something they're not comfortable with," said Chauncy.

He recommended beginning each practice session by going over maps together, choosing routes and deciding which skills to work on, such as changing lanes or merging. Several driving schools, including his, offer online lesson plans that parents can print out as a guide for practice sessions.

The first few on-road sessions should stick to familiar places -- the route to school or to the mall, said Hays, the California driving instructor.

If the teen makes a mistake, Hays recommended pulling over at a safe place and discussing it calmly. Sketching the situation on paper can be helpful.

"Most parents just sit there correcting mistakes, not teaching the teen," said Chauncy.

For a mistake in progress, teach by saying something like this: "What can we see up ahead that should have us slowing down by now?"

Don't say this: "Can't you see the light is red?"

Practice the technique of "running commentary" while you drive with your teen as a passenger. Tell your teen everything you're doing with your feet, your eyes and your mind. Running

commentary exposes hundreds of ways experienced drivers assess risk and compensate for it, often subconsciously. Do it like this:

"I'm slowing down because I see a garage door opening on the left, and I think a car might pull out of it ... now I'm checking my mirror to be sure the truck behind me sees I'm slowing down ... now I'm braking because a dog is trotting on the sidewalk, and it might run into the street..."

Then have the teen do the same thing from the passenger's seat.

Chauncy urges parents to keep the lesson on driving. Don't use the time to confront your teen about their irresponsible boyfriend or girlfriend; don't complain about piercings or the cell phone bill. Don't argue about the tattoo they'll never get so long as they're living under your roof.

"If they feel trapped in an intervention, next time they won't want to drive with you," said Chauncy.

Common Pitfalls

In 15 years as a driving instructor, Hays has found that tailgating is one of the most common bad habits of new drivers. "You have to bring them back, use the three-second rule," he said. It should take your car three seconds at city speeds to pass an object after the car in front of you has passed it.

Also, most teenagers don't start braking soon enough when approaching a stop sign or a red light. They'll assume they can brake when they get there.

Speeding is a problem, too.

"Some of them are leadfoots," Hays said.

Sixteen-year-old Clark Burkhardt said he appreciates his father's judgment in the car, though his father seems "a lot more emotional" than someone outside the family would be.

"I'm not ever too nervous unless my dad gets nervous," said Clark. "I don't blame my dad -- I'd be nervous, too. It seems more personal when he says I did something wrong than if someone I wasn't related to had said it."

For his father, seeing the son he had cradled as an infant in control of 3,000 pounds of rolling steel is sometimes scary, but not as bad as he'd feared.

"It's not as if I'm still seeing that infant sitting there," said Burkhardt. "He's responsible, better than I was at his age."

This rite of passage for teens is also one for parents, for once a child has wheels, he has one foot out of the nest.