

Driving with your teen: 5 important tips for an easier ride

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(Photo: Courtesy photo)

Sitting next to a budding car driver behind the wheel can be quite a nerve-wracking adventure for a parent. With 60 hours of practice required for a high schooler's license to drive, being their supervising driver may be your bravest parenting endeavor yet. But it doesn't have to drive you around the bend.

Here are five expert tips to get you through:

1. Stay calm (or fake it)

When Michelle Roberts' daughter was learning to drive, she scared Roberts "to death," because there was no safety brake like the one she now has in the car with the teens she teaches as a driver's ed instructor at North Buncombe High.

What Roberts has learned after teaching driver's ed for nearly 15 years is that "if you raise your voice," it makes both parent and child more nervous and prone to panic. Instead of criticizing, "if your child does something wrong, like jerking the wheel too far to the left, ask him/her why it might have happened, for example, ask, 'did you look away for a second,'" she says.

Teens are quick to pick up the slightest changes in vocal tone and are "sensitive to the slightest sense of (concern or) urgency" in a parent's demeanor, adds Arthur Goodwin, a senior research associate at the Highway Safety Research Center/UNC Chapel Hill, who has been studying driving safety and teenage drivers for two decades. Give gentle reminders rather than commands.

"Put yourself in your teen's shoes — reflect back on when you as a teen first learned to drive and remember how confusing, scary and overwhelming it might have been," Goodwin says. "Be patient with your child — experienced driving doesn't come automatically."

2. Slow down

Start gradually, perhaps in a driveway or parking lot, and stick to neighborhood streets before driving on a main road, says Roberts. Avoid busier traffic times or poor weather conditions until they've had lots of practice.

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Don't put new drivers in a situation you think they can't handle or that they aren't comfortable with, adds Lee Roy Ledford, owner of Mountain Professionals Driving School, which provides driver education instructors to nine public school systems in Western North Carolina. "Assure them that you won't let them get into trouble and reinforce their good driving in addition to pointing out any shortcomings," to build confidence.

Progress to more challenging driving scenarios when "you're not having to correct them all the time," Ledford adds. "If they're making obvious errors like not coming to complete stop and saying, 'well, there weren't any cars coming,' you'll know their basic skills and maturity need to improve."

Have them "take time in the beginning to make sure everything in the car is exactly right for them, like the mirrors and the seat," which can affect their ability to steer and accelerate, Roberts says.

3. Know who's behind the wheel

Pay attention to the personality of your child, says Ledford. Some teens are more cautious in nature, while others are stronger risk takers. Some are better at handling frustration than others.

Note body language, like if their arms look tense, says Roberts. If they seem super nervous, have them breathe and relax first and go extra slowly or postpone driving until they're more ready. Or, if your child seems overly confident and not driving responsibly -- repeatedly driving too fast or not paying close enough attention to what they're doing -- remember "you're ultimately in the driver's seat (and can delay the driving lessons,)" adds Goodwin.

4. Be the driving force

When it comes to your own driving, know that your child is watching your every move, says Roberts. Children pick up both your good and bad habits as a driver.

Most parents are good at reinforcing basic driving skills while their teen is driving, says Goodwin, but what they often forget is to point out their own knowledge, experiences and thought processes while driving.

"Teens often expect other drivers to follow the laws and do the right thing, but we know differently," he says. "They also tend to focus on the roadway just ahead of them without looking farther ahead, for example, to see that cars may have brake lights on, and they don't stop soon enough.

"It's important to help kids develop the kinds of higher order driving skills of expecting the unexpected and identifying situations that are potentially hazardous," says Goodwin.

Parents often don't think about and share the automatic things they do, learned over time from habit, like periodically checking the rear view mirror to be sure the car behind is not tailgating, slowing when approaching a pedestrian crosswalk and making judgments like how to turn left into oncoming traffic or merge on and off highways.

5. Drive like crazy

Teens often don't practice as much as they should and in enough diverse places or situations before they are set loose solo behind the wheel, says Goodwin. Be sure not to save highway driving until the last minute, for example, before getting their license.

Minimize distractions "inside the car," says Goodwin. Unless your child feels more relaxed with soft music in the background, for example, keep the radio off. Also, be particular about who is in the car while they're driving. In the last few years, research has shown that the biggest distraction for new drivers is the passengers who are riding with them, says Goodwin.

Also, consider the size of the car your teen is driving. "A medium-sized car is easier to maneuver than one that's bigger," she says. If possible, enlist the help of grandparents or another family member or friend, if their cars are a more suitable size.

Above all, it's important to acknowledge if you're not the best person to ride shotgun with your teen, particularly in the beginning - someone else may have the mental fortitude to do it and there's no shame in that.

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