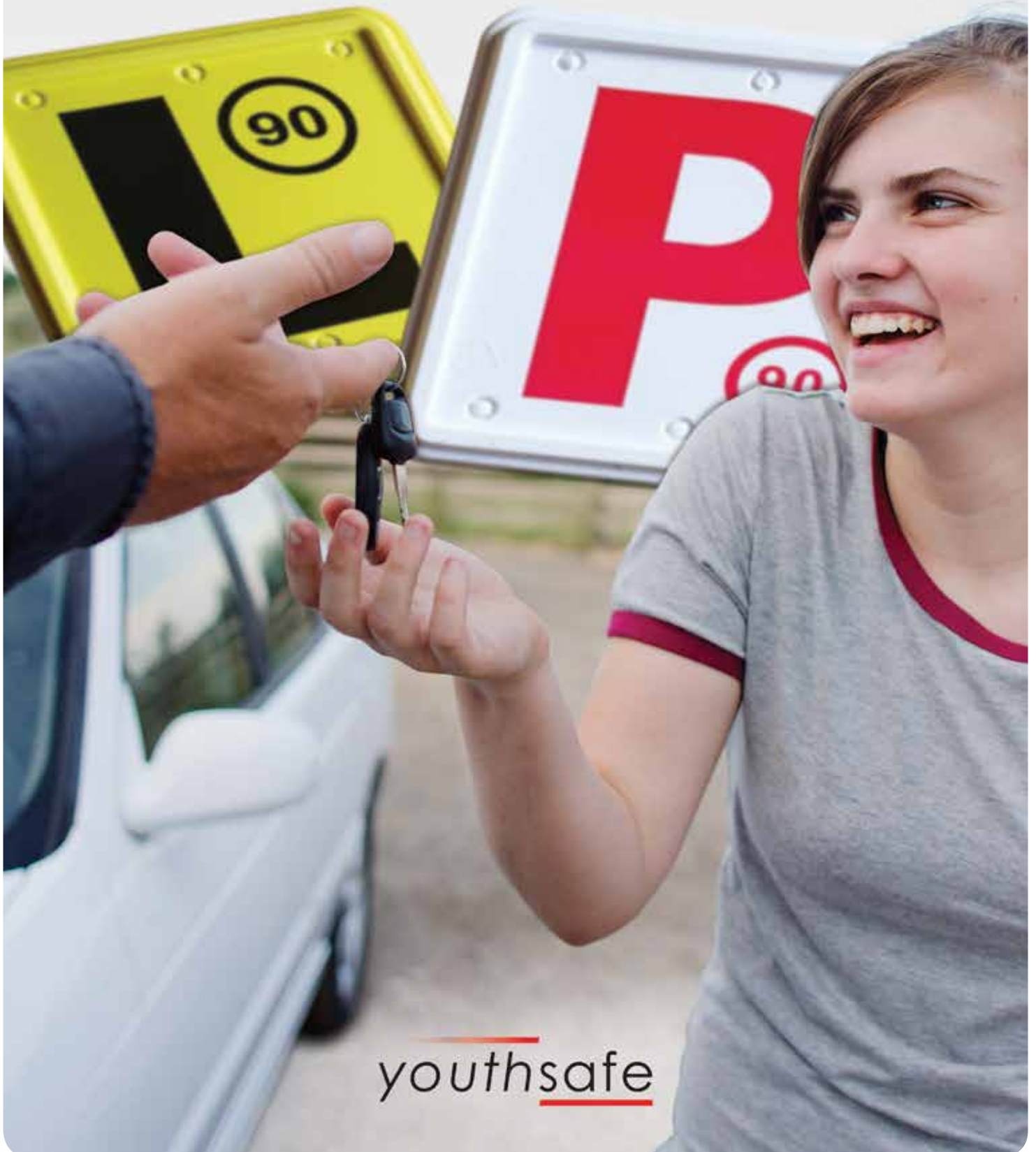


From Ls to Ps

TEACHING AUSSIE TEENS TO DRIVE

David Riches



youthsafe

Teaching Aussie Kids to Drive by David Riches is a great resource for those parents undertaking the important role of teaching a young person to drive. Full of useful information and tips that will help that learning process run smoother and be of greater benefit to our next generation of drivers. The driver training industry is often asked by parents where they can go for additional information and support and a resource such as this helps to fill that need. I have known David for many years through his engagement with supervising drivers at local workshops, and his passion for helping our young people to remain safe while developing important life skills, is ever present. This book is the result of years of gathering information and dealing with the most common concerns from supervising drivers, and combining that with the knowledge provided to David from professionals in the industry. This book is a must for all supervisors of learner drivers.

Anthony Cope

Driving Instructor and President of The NSW Driver Trainers Association

Supervisors of Learner drivers are always in desperate need of practical strategies to assist them in this complex driving journey with their teenagers. Youthsafe have finally filled the gap with this purposeful eBook. When used in parallel with the Learner Log Book, it provides supervisors with specific and constructive tools to utilise. I would highly recommend every supervisor read *Teaching Aussie Teens to Drive*; it will help make the process less daunting and more enjoyable!

Maria Russo

Road Safety Officer, Ku-Ring-Gai Council

David's book is probably the best "How to" guide for parents teaching their kids how to drive. I am currently supervising two teenagers of my own and David's stories, strategies and tips have been a godsend. David's considerable experience and his friendly way of writing make this book the easiest way for parents to get their head around the sometimes nerve-wracking experience of sitting in the passenger seat. This book should be required reading for supervising drivers – I thank David for sharing his wisdom and humour.

Mark Stuart

Road Safety Officer, Sutherland Shire Council & U-Turn the Wheel Coordinator, Sutherland

About the Author

David Riches is an Australian author and a recognised international expert in road safety and injury prevention for young people. He has worked professionally as a teacher, road user safety manager for road authorities in Australia, a lecturer and as a Director of Health Promotion for Health Departments. He is also Deputy Chairperson of Youthsafe in New South Wales. He is a well-known road safety consultant, specialising in programs to reduce the road toll for young people.

In his current consultancy role, David has worked professionally with around 15,000 parents and supervisors of learner drivers to assist the planning of effective practice sessions for new drivers to help to keep them safe on the roads.



From Ls to Ps

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Preface

I am a parent of teenagers. That qualifies me to understand what parents feel about keeping their kids safe. Like all of you I love my children and will do anything to ensure they have a long and happy life.

I was also a teenager once (my kids don't believe this!); I remember my own risk-taking behaviours, and I really don't want my kids to copy me. I also remember the friends who didn't survive.

In my professional life I work as a road safety consultant. Now this really scares me. On a daily basis I am confronted with crash data that proves it is very dangerous to be on the road as a young driver. Over more than a decade I have conducted planning workshops with over 15,000 parents and supervisors of learner drivers to help them understand the road safety benefits of increased driving practice.

So I can tell you with confidence that one of the greatest investments you will ever make is teaching your kids to drive. I don't just mean teaching them how to operate a motor vehicle and work the machinery. Sure, it is important that your kids know how to change gears, steer, use the instrumentation and pedals and you've got to do this first, but really this is the easy part. For most young people this will only take five to ten hours to achieve.

What I'm really talking about is teaching your kids to drive safely, with an emphasis on defensive driving and survival. This takes time and a whole lot of commitment and practice. Most licensing schemes in Australia now demand 100 or more hours of supervised driving practice (it can seem like forever) spent developing and refining skills so that learner drivers become safer drivers.

I've spoken to some parents who think this is an impost on their family time. I've spoken to many others who consider this to be an investment in the lives of their kids. The latter are right.

This is about an investment in the lives of your own children. We all know across Australia young drivers are over-represented in crashes and that too many young drivers are hurt and killed on our roads. This is reported every day in our papers and on the radio. However, for us it's always about it happening to someone else's kids. We believe that our own children are going to lead long and happy lives with a great future waiting for them. But this is not always the case.

Your investment now in road safety for your son or daughter will pay long-term safety dividends that will help to guarantee their future.

For many parents teaching kids to drive is not an easy task. It comes with a whole lot of stress. It's tough working with your own kids. They say things to us we don't always want to hear! We're all good drivers but that doesn't necessarily make us good teachers. This self-help book is about helping you to be an effective parent supervising driver, and affirming and strengthening your commitment and effort by working towards agreed goals and outcomes, by using some simple time-tested strategies and techniques to increase your confidence.

David Riches

How Do I Start?

Teaching your children to drive is a long-term project. It's probably going to take a year, and during that time you may spend up to and even more than 120 hours together. Like any project it's going to work better if there is a plan to work to.

Most parents I have spoken to believe that the project only starts when you jump into the car together for the first time. These people are really nature's true optimists. If you think that working with your 16, 17 or nearly twenty-year old will all be smooth sailing then start off this way. If you do this you truly believe that there will be no disagreements, misunderstandings or communication breakdown because you share a perfect relationship together and share a telepathic understanding.

Those of you who have already commenced taking your learner out for practice sessions may have noticed an increased heart rate, nausea, internal bowel movements and a tendency to grip the side of the door, activate the carpet brake or even take deep breaths for unexplained reasons.

There may have been disagreements, dirty looks, shouting and miscommunications. You may have entered the car good friends but left mortal enemies. It all got too much for one lady I worked with. During a practice session, she screamed at her son (after he screamed at her) to pull over. This was five kilometres from home. She made him get out, she drove home and he walked. They haven't talked since!

So how can you avoid an unproductive and uncomfortable session?

It really is simple. And it happens BEFORE the first practice session, even before your child gets a learner's licence.

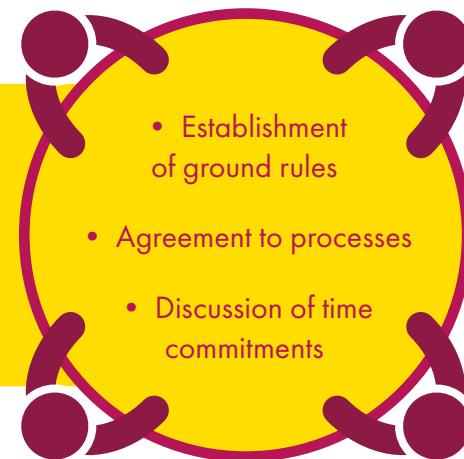
If you are going to work in partnership with your son or daughter, then it is important to establish that partnership up front. My advice is to initiate a formal beginning planning meeting (I call it a Roundtable Session) to set up the process first. I know this works because I have spoken to hundreds of parents who have done this, and they have established a way forward for their sessions. I have also spoken to hundreds who didn't, who really wish they had.

So, here's what you should do.

Set Up a Roundtable Session

Call a Roundtable Session prior to commencing practice sessions. Invite all supervising drivers, including Mum, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, friends who are helping. Invite your learner driver (make sure you have suitable bribery food!).

Set an informal agenda. The agenda should include:



Then Raise Any Concerns You May Have

This is your big opportunity as a supervising driver to bring up any concerns that you may have so that they don't become issues later on. For example, one concern I often hear from parents is that they are worried when their learner develops some skills, they may become overconfident, and exceed the speed limit.

If this or anything else is an issue, now is the time to raise it. For the potential speeder I would suggest saying in a positive manner something along the lines of, "I am really looking forward to helping you to become a P Plater" (you might have to exaggerate the truth slightly!).

"The reason I am doing this is because I want you to be a safe driver and to stay safe on the roads. I know you like to watch the races on TV and so I am a bit worried though that you might start to put your foot down. So before I start to teach you to drive I need you to agree that you will keep to the speed limit and obey the road rules. Is that OK with you?"

Watch carefully for any reaction. If they think you have just cracked a great joke I would suggest to you that you may need to make an executive decision about whether your child is mature enough to take on the responsibilities involved in being a driver. However, this doesn't often happen because they need you to help them get to the end point – that is to get their Ps. So most young people fall into line (some a little begrudgingly but that's OK.)

Other issues that may be important to you and your learner may include:

- Use of the car radio/music – do we keep it on or off (suggestion- negotiate off for the first fifty hours as you want your learner to listen to you and not music).
- Best times of the day and week for practice sessions, with an aim to balancing work, school and social commitments with the level of practice required.
- Driver and supervisor fatigue – reviewing how tiring our week has been for supervisor and/or learner driver and deciding is it safe to have a session.
- Deciding the rules around calling a practice session off – fatigue, medications, illness, unexpected happenings, car troubles and anything else that may affect availability.
- Use of all vehicle equipment – do we turn the GPS off? Best results are achieved if the learner is listening to the supervisor.
- Mobile phone rules, for supervisor and learner.
- Log book responsibilities – who looks after it and fills it in?
- Who will be the first supervising driver – is it Mum, Dad, relatives, friends or driving school?

Also Ask for Any Concerns Your Learner May Have

It's important that this meeting establishes a partnership approach and this won't happen unless your learner has an opportunity to express concerns that he or she feels are important and relevant. The one that I hear the most is about the number of weekly hours that can be committed to practice sessions.

Most learners are excited about starting out. In all States and Territories in Australia there are a high number of hours of on-road practice that needs to be achieved. For example, in NSW the requirement is for 120 hours over a 12 month period, including a minimum of 20 hours of night-time driving. That's a lot of hours. When you work it out it amounts to 10 hours a month. However, keen learners might have higher expectations of your time. You know what I mean – Mum can do five hours a week, Dad can do five and Grandpa can do seven because you guys haven't got anything else to do. Not so!

For most families, this many hours is not going to be practical. At the Roundtable Session make sure you negotiate a reasonable number of hours that your family can ALL commit to. Once you have made that agreement you need to stick to it though – so make sure you get it right. Otherwise your keen learner will justifiably argue the toss, and you are off to a bad start.

It's about establishing a partnership between all supervising drivers and your learner driver where agreements are reached and can be referred back to later if necessary.

The really good thing about having a successful Roundtable Session is that it becomes your insurance policy. So later on when your learner has a few kilometres under the belt, and starts to put their foot down, you have an out clause. "Remember we had our Roundtable Session some time back. We agreed to keep to the speed limit and obey the road rules. I need to know if that's still OK?"

Most learner drivers are back on track really quickly as they recall the agreement you made together, and they know there's no way out of the agreement.

Getting the Ls

The prerequisite to getting a learner's licence is study, study and some more study. The beginning of the graduated licensing scheme in Australian states involves passing a road rules test. It's essential that candidate learners sit down and learn the road rules so that they can pass this test. The aim is to pass the test first time because each time the test is attempted there is a charge.

I always advise parents who are used to digging deep for their kids to pay for only the first test. Many kids pass first time, but there are also a percentage who don't. So maybe the second, third or heaven forbid fourth time they have a go, don't agree to pay. I can promise you study habits improve enormously when young people have to pay their own way!

Practice tests across most Australian States and Territories are available online. Most of these tests ask for a multiple choice response. I think it's a great idea to practise online. This can be done at home in comfort, and the format that the test will be presented in becomes familiar and therefore less stressful when they hit that registry on test day. Just a word of caution though. I find that kids practise and practise and eventually learn all or most of the right answers. However, if the required response is multiple choice they often learn whether the right answer is a, b, or c. This means that they know the right answer, but perhaps not always the reason that it is the right answer!

It's best to obtain a hard copy of the road rules relevant to your State or Territory. There may be a small cost involved but it is worth it. Your kids can then read the rules, understand the reasoning behind the legislation and then reconfirm the understanding in the practice tests that they do.

Oh, and one quick question for you. How is your knowledge of the current road rules? Let's face it – we haven't had to think about road rule theory for a long time. Most of us have been driving for many years. I learnt my rules in miles per hour and feet and inches. So it's not a bad idea to work through the rules with your kids, to refresh your own memories. Or you can lock yourself away with the rules book and your computer and pretend you knew all the answers the whole time.

After the test has been passed keep the handbook in the glovebox so that you can look up the answer to any tricky question your learner may ask.



Teaching Teens - It's a Partnership

I grew up in the era of “command and control”, and not “mutual benefit”. Working and learning together was really a relatively foreign concept not enjoyed by most Baby Boomers and early Generation Xers.

Let's face it. Teaching teenagers is never going to be easy because being a teenager isn't easy. Teenagers have a host of priorities in their life – relationships with friends, new loves, body changes, fashion, what am I going to do with my life and lots of other things that we have forgotten were important to us when we were this age. So it's hard to relate sometimes, and this can make it hard to form an effective learning partnership.

There is no doubt that levels of maturity and attitude differ for all young people. But if you have accepted the challenge of teaching a teenager, then you are the teacher of a young and impressionable person and will need to try to be flexible and patient. The challenge for us as supervising drivers is to try to be calm, positive and flexible.

Here are a few facts to keep in mind about the way a teenager's mind works that will help when teaching teenagers to drive.

TEEN FACT 1 Listening

Teenagers can be very persistent and demanding and parents can feel worn down, uncertain and cranky at times. Teaching a teen to drive can involve tension and your teenager may sometimes feel that you “just aren't listening”.

Supervising parents need to know how to really listen, praise achievement and be willing to provide opportunities to try again after mistakes are made. Keep it positive!

TEEN FACT 2 Appraisal

Young people need to bounce ideas off others or test their opinions to work out what they really think. So don't always tell your learner what to do – rather ask what they thought of the experience they just had, and encourage feedback. Self-appraisal is a more effective learning tool. Ask:

- How did you feel?
- Did you feel alright about that?
- Was there anything you noticed about your drive that you need clarified?

TEEN FACT 3 Nagging

Many disagreements that occur when teenagers are learning to drive are caused by parents nagging. Most parents feel that one or two reminders are useful and should be helpful. However, teenagers interpret this as a message that the parent doesn't trust them to remember or wants to have total control. This often results in a cranky, sullen teenager who argues or resists your viewpoint, no matter how reasonable you may think it is. Rather, work together to decide what works and what doesn't. Have an agreement to communicate openly, perhaps after the lesson, to talk about issues that arose during the practice session.

TEEN FACT 4 Relationship Building

It would be no news to parents to discover that good relationships with kids are built over many years of love and trust. However, a demanding experience like teaching a learner to drive can test the solid foundations family relationships are often built on. Supervising parents need to remind themselves about the following principles and to reaffirm them periodically before driving lessons.

- Mutual respect
- Agreement to be patient
- Emphasis on listening instead of telling
- Negotiation

TEEN FACT 5 Setting Parameters

Don't confuse your teenager 'wanting their own way' with 'their rights'. It is still important to set parameters, as a teenager who has freedom to always choose sometimes makes mistakes. In a driving situation these mistakes can contribute to danger and an increased crash risk. Parameters are best set by mutual agreement (see “How Do I Start?”). However, at a safe time, still be prepared to insist that your learner pulls over so that you can remind them of the parameters that have been set to keep road safety high on the priority list.

TEEN FACT 6 Tell Them That You Are Proud of Them and That You Love Them!

Sure, you will need to pick the right time to do this. Don't embarrass them in front of their friends. Don't break teenage protocol! But even something as simple as leaving a note on their desk telling them that you are proud of them and you love them can do the trick. Kids will pretend they don't care – but they do! Linking an expression of love to the achievements they are experiencing as a learner may give them cause to reflect later that road safety and the strong family bond you share are inextricably linked.

Role Modelling

Remember, for most of your kids one of their most important role models is going to be you (I hope!).

So if you have developed a couple of bad driving habits over the years (and haven't we all?) then this is the time to have a think about them. Do you speed (it's not really OK to do 10km over the speed limit), provide several seconds signal intention (or not at all), park illegally (it's only for a couple of minutes), drive for long periods without a break (I can make it!) or get cranky with other drivers (giving another idiot driver the finger), or anything else then it's time to modify that behaviour.

If you keep doing these things then you are really telling your learner driver that it's OK to “do as I do”.

I always advise parents to own up to the bad habits they have developed over the years. Don't make the mistake of thinking your kids haven't noticed. The psychology of the teenager means that they will take particular notice of what you do wrong and not what you do right. Even though you may drive carefully and safely 99% of the time, your kids will have taken absolutely no notice. But flip someone “the bird” just once and the event is instilled forevermore, and will become family legend to be discussed at important future events where you can be easily embarrassed.

The best time to own up is right at the beginning – at the Roundtable Session. Simply say something like, “Look I know I've developed a few bad driving habits over the years. You've probably noticed. I want you to be a safe driver, so it's fair that I take this opportunity to have a look at my own driving too”. That's all you have to say. It's worth the effort as it is now less likely your learner will have a go at you later on when you ask them to drive in a way that you sometimes don't.

Getting Behind the Wheel

OK, so you now have a keen learner driver ready and raring to go. It's really important to get off to a good start. Preparation is everything and it's important your learner engages in some learning that increases awareness of your car's equipment and accessories.

You need to spend several hours in quiet areas in order to achieve this. Here are some tips that may help.

TIP 1 Off to a Good Start

Don't let your learner driver drive home from the Motor Registry. Most registries are located in busy urban areas, or in the busier parts of town. Your learner driver is not yet equipped to drive in these conditions and it can be downright unsafe. You might think that because your child has been sitting next to you in the passenger seat for many years that they have noticed some of the essential points, or absorbed some of your fine driving skills through some process like osmosis. WRONG!

The reality is they have been sitting next to you not noticing anything about how you drive. More likely they are SMSing, talking, listening to music, reading, sleeping – the only time they will notice what you are doing or how you are driving is when you do something wrong (and this they will file away for future use!)

TIP 2 Find a Nice Quiet Area

Spend the initial five to 10 hours practising in a nice quiet area, well away from traffic. If you live in a busy location you will need to drive your learner to a quiet spot. Industrial areas work well on Sundays. Local sporting complexes on off sport days can provide lots of quiet car park space. However, anywhere you can find that has an absence of traffic should work well.

TIP 3 Commence With the Basics

At this stage your aim is to teach your learner how to operate the motor vehicle. Concentrate on the basics. Things you should cover at this stage are:

- a) Ensure an understanding of adjustments to make within the vehicle to suit the driver. These include:
 - Adjustment of the seat position
 - Steering column position
 - Seatbelt location and fastening
 - Rear view and side mirror position
 - An understanding of vehicle limitations, such as blind-spots.
- b) Ensure your learner knows where all the vehicle controls, gauges and warning lights are located. These include:
 - Accelerator pedal
 - Brake pedal
 - Clutch for manual vehicles
 - Hand brake
 - Signals
 - Lights
 - Ignition
 - Wipers and washers
 - Bonnet and boot releases.

Most important! Show your learner where the fuel cap is so that they can help pay for the petrol!
Or at least know how to fill the car.

TIP 4 Time to Get Moving

OK, so far, so good. We can't sit on the side of the road forever, so let's keep it simple and start with the simplest manoeuvre – moving off from the kerb.

Before this occurs, it is important that your learner gets into the routine of checking the vehicle for readiness. Are the seats and mirrors adjusted to suit, is the seatbelt on?

Before moving off help your learner to check for blind spots and ensure that the vehicle indicator is on. At least five seconds' indication is a requirement in most Australian States and Territories.

Ensure that your learner moves from the kerb smoothly and double checks that there is a safe gap to move into. Make sure the indicator switches off.

You will need to talk your learner through this process. Never assume that your learner knows how to move onto the road safely at this stage – you need to double check the whole time.

TIP 5 Steering the Vehicle

Position hands in a relaxed fashion on the steering wheel at around the quarter to three or ten to two position with a slight bend in the elbow.

It is generally accepted that there are two appropriate methods of steering that need to be taught to a new driver. Colloquially, the methods are known as "hand over hand" and "pull/push". Both methods are acceptable and safe if employed correctly.

My advice is to choose one method at the beginning stages and stick with it for a while. This will confuse your learner driver less, as there is already a lot of information to retain. Later on you can try the other method.

At the end of day though your learner needs to know and understand the value of both steering methods. This is because each steering method has application to differing situations. This is how it works.

Hand Over Hand Steering – Crosses hands on top of the steering wheel and can be used on all manoeuvres and tighter turns. In using the hand over hand method, the hands should operate on the top half of the wheel, as this avoids arms getting tangled up. It is recommended that hands should stay in the top quarter or quadrant of the wheel in the direction they are turning (between nine and 12 for a left turn and three and 12 for a right turn). This way the hands don't reach back to opposite sides of the wheel.

Pull/Push Steering – Both hands move in an up and down motion on the sides of the steering wheel. This method is thought to offer more control as a driver has full control of the steering wheel without ever getting confused about hand position.

Now the bad news folks! For those of you that use the "wax on wax off" method – don't teach it to your kids! This is a lazy baby boomer method of steering that became fashionable when power steering hit the scene. It's ultra easy for your hand to slip off the wheel, and it works very poorly in complex driving situations.

Planning Practice Sessions

The practice sessions that work best are the ones that are well planned and thought through. Too often supervisor and learner jump in the car and head off for a practice session with little concept of what they are trying to achieve or how to go about it. A little bit of planning work will go a long way to helping avoid the stress and poor communication issues that sometimes result in a potential screaming match that is both unproductive and lacks educational focus. Here are some basics that will keep your sessions on track.

Knowing the Route

Everyone's in a hurry and sometimes we forget to work out the route we are taking for the practice drive. Hand waving and using meaningless instructions like "turn here" and "go this way" can confuse your learner driver and cause lots of in-car stress. Make sure your learner understands which way is right and which way is left. If there is any doubt write an L or R on the webbing of the matching hands.

Clear communication is very important. I think the worst communication I have heard came from a nervous supervising driver who in a rather high pitched voice said to her learner, "Right, now turn left!" How confusing is that?!

The current thinking is to use what is known as the "At, When, Do" method. As an example, you may tell your learner, "**At** the next intersection **when** the light turns green I want you to **turn left** if it's safe."

On short drives of up to 15 minutes or so (especially in the beginning stages) consider demonstrating the route to your learner driver by driving it for him/her so that they know exactly where you want them to drive and what type of road conditions they will encounter. Point out locations where a left or right turn is required. Talk about the speed zones you are driving through. Discuss approaches to roundabouts. In short, talk them through everything they need to know about the route you will be asking them to drive. You will find that your learner is far more aware of the route and as a consequence will be feeling more comfortable about the drive. And so will you!

For longer drives grab the UBD or Gregory's and work through the route together, or grab your computer and pull up Google Maps. Discuss where you will be going and what the road conditions are likely to be like. Talk about how you are going to get from your house to major roads, where you are going to need to turn, whether you need to merge and where you should park when you reach your destination. Once again you will both share a higher degree of comfort and awareness about the route you will be taking. As confidence increases, shift the responsibility for route planning to your learner as this is a skill they will need to utilise when driving independently without you there to guide them.

Setting Objectives

The reason for your practice drive should be more than "we have to get this done". Often people jump in the car and engage in skill development that is more about getting through a "whole lot of stuff" as quickly as possible, rather than achieving something specific that is measurable. If you do this it is very hard to measure progress, because you don't actually know nor have any plan about what you have both set out to achieve.

My suggestion is to set objectives for each of your practice sessions, so that you can work towards agreed outcomes, and measure progress. So, for each lesson:

- Meet for five minutes prior to each lesson and set an objective. This can be achieved by using the tasks provided in the front of your log book.
- Meet for five minutes at the end of each lesson to discuss whether the objective has been achieved.
- Use self appraisal techniques and ask your learner driver "How do you think you went today? Do you feel you achieved the objectives we set for the lesson?" If the answer is yes, set new objectives for the next lesson. If the answer is no, agree to reset the current objectives for the next lesson.

If you can do this you will have focus and meaning for each and every practice session, and all the supervising drivers involved with your learner will be able to track progress in the context of the tasks outlined in your log book.

Debriefing

When your learner driver has been practising for some time, and is doing well, you may feel the time is right to take on some longer drives. I always advise that a longer drive for a learner should be much shorter than a long drive for an experienced driver. New drivers fatigue more quickly than experienced drivers. Heightened stress levels combined with the need to absorb and react to rapidly changing conditions and make corresponding fast decisions, means this is all a new ball game for a learner driver. Remember learners fatigue quickly, even when you may feel they are improving.

One to one and a half hours is enough for an "experienced" learner driver, and certainly no more than two. You deserve a break after being so long in the passenger seat too. Use the break as an opportunity to debrief with your learner about what has happened in the first half of the practice drive, so that the second half begins with a clean slate.

By the time you are letting your learner take on longer drives you are probably pretty happy with the progress being made. However, it's likely that during the drive you will notice a couple of concerns that you want to raise. My advice is to "hold that thought" until you stop for the debrief, unless your concerns are road safety related.

The aim is to keep it positive. So, when you stop for that break tell your learner what a great job they are doing – reinforce the positives. In short, make them feel good about the session – we all like to receive praise and your kids will be looking for it.

Then don't spoil it all by saying, "Well you are doing a good job, but you got this wrong and that wrong." Rather, use the comfort you have created by instead asking your learner what they thought about the drive. Your learner, now well within their comfort zone, and without defensive behaviours will most likely respond well to this. Maybe say something like, "You are doing a great job, but that was a long drive – is there anything you noticed that happened on the way that you would like to talk about?" Normally the issues raised are the ones that you noticed anyway but if your learner raises them then you aren't being a critic!

Commentary Driving

Commentary driving is a technique often used by driving schools. It means that a commentary on “what is happening” and “why it is happening” is occurring at all times during the practice drive. The commentary describes all the driving activity and provides a rationale for each action. There are three ways to use it:

Step 1

As the supervising driver demonstrate the technique to your learner driver, continually explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Step 2

When your learner is driving, you continue to provide a running commentary, except that this time you provide it in advance of when your learner driver will need it, so that the learner can use the information as well as understand why you are providing it.

Step 3

Later on, as proficiency increases, your learner driver can provide the commentary back to you, explaining what is happening and why they are doing it. This is really valuable, because it means that you get to hear what is going on in your learner’s head. Sometimes we assume a level of understanding of the skills we have been teaching. To have your learner recount correct procedures can be very reassuring. Sometimes though, your learner will provide commentary that is inaccurate. This then gives you the opportunity to fix up something that would have otherwise been missed.

Remember!! If commentary driving is used there is no room for other irrelevant conversation – it’s all about the learning to drive experience and not all the other things that may be happening afterwards.



Manual or Auto?

I have had many supervising drivers ask me, “Should we kick off using an automatic or a manually geared vehicle?”. Most people who own a manual vehicle feel that it is safer. They feel this because “it is important to feel the vehicle”, “you have more control” and “there is additional braking power”. To some extent these things are true. However, many of us simply prefer to drive autos, and so this is the vehicle type we have available. Other people have a choice of both vehicle types sitting in their driveway.

My view is that it is more important that your learner gains experience driving the vehicle that is going to be their main transportation. If this is an auto, then this is the car to use. If you have a manual and an auto, and your learner will be driving both, simply ask your learner which one they would be more comfortable learning on.

Often more confident learners prefer to start with a manual. Nervous learners (and sometimes nervous supervising drivers!) may prefer to start off in an auto, as there is less to know about and operate at the beginning – no nasty gear sticks and clutches! In any case once your learner has developed the skills and proficiencies you are going to teach, you can go back to a nice quiet area and teach gear change. With a confident learner, this skill really doesn’t take very long, and once mastered you can return to the proficiency level you deviated from.

The Best Way to Teach Changing Gears

Work with your learner to establish a mental picture of the gear layout. The goal should be to change gears without having to look at the gear stick. This will keep your learner’s eyes on the road where they should be.

It is important that in a manual vehicle your learner is able to change gears using a smooth action that suits the vehicle’s capacity. Teach them to get the timing right and to coordinate the clutch, accelerator and gear stick – changing down too early or changing up too late can cause your engine to grunt, groan or rev too high.

Smooth clutch control is important on take-off. Teach your learner to pause movement of the foot when the friction point is reached.

I would encourage you to give your learner lots of practice in a quiet location so that the skill is already there before moving into traffic.

In an automatic vehicle, the gears can still be useful, especially when travelling on steep downhill roads. Choose first gear or second gear to help control speeds.

Another very important technique to teach relates to gear change on approaches to corners. You will often find your learner is confused about when to change down to second gear. Basically, you would need to change gear early enough on approach so that full control is achieved just prior to making the turn, leaving enough time to cope with the unexpected. Remember to encourage your learner to keep an eye on the mirrors and signal intention before and during the procedure.

Teaching Low Risk Driving

It is incredibly important to teach your kids to drive defensively. The favoured term these days is **low risk driving**. Some of you may remember that when we learnt to drive we were taught that we should “drive everyone else’s car” as well as our own. I still think this makes a lot of sense. If we watch and predict risky behaviours from other drivers we are much less likely to be involved in their problems. An example may be that we stick to the speed limit, but a lot of drivers don’t. If the wayward driver behind you roars up to the proximity of your bumper bar, please don’t teach your learner to tap the brakes lightly “to give them a bit of a scare”. Rather, teach your learner to move across to the left when safe to do so, or to change lanes if possible. It’s much better to avoid a dangerous situation.

This is an attitude that is developed over time in young people, influenced to a large degree by the example set for them by their role models (see “**Role Modelling**”). I remember working with a Dad who confessed that the worst moment for him in his role as a supervising driver was when he “lost it”. The driver behind his learner tailgated and honked his horn for several kilometres, trying several times to overtake in dangerous situations. Finally, this guy overtook, only to be pulled up by the next set of lights. Dad got out and ran up to the car, abused the driver and kicked the door. Apart from being fortunate that the driver ahead didn’t have a gun in the glove box, the message he sent his son was that road rage was a normal reaction to situations that experienced drivers can find themselves in all the time. So always try to stay calm!

Your learner will find that during the driving test there will always be an emphasis on low risk driving. The driver examiner will test for your learner’s ability to be able to have a strong awareness of the driving environment to avoid any dangerous situations. Skills include:

- Scanning the road environment
- Perceiving hazards to make decisions about how to avoid or manage dangers
- Leaving an appropriate gap
- Travelling at a speed appropriate to the conditions.

Let’s take a look at the best way to teach your learner each of these skills.



Scanning

Scanning is probably the most important low risk driving skill that can be taught to a learner driver. Scanning is all about a driver knowing what is happening in the road environment around the vehicle. A driver who has effective scanning skills:

- Looks up the road well ahead of the vehicle
- Checks down both sides of the road
- Uses mirrors (rear and side)
- Looks up each side street as you approach
- Slows down if a blind corner blocks the view
- Checks instruments (especially the speedometer)

Be sure that your learner is a proficient scanner before test time. It also might save their life one day.

I always advise supervising drivers to start teaching this skill early on. You will probably find when you get your learner into light traffic situations for the first time that this skill will need to be developed from scratch. Most learners start off with both hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel with the line of sight focussed directly ahead. This can be very disconcerting as the sightline of your learner looks like it is directed at the top of the bonnet, or at best just past this.

Your challenge here is to start to get your learner to respond to all the activity occurring in the road environment all around. The best way to kick this off is to ask your learner to tell you what is happening in the road environment during the drive.

It’s also not a bad idea to start this off by taking the wheel yourself and asking your learner to talk to you about what is happening in the road environment around them while you are driving. Even though they are not behind the steering wheel it forces an inexperienced driver to “have a look”. For most this will be a new thing – don’t assume that all that time you have been driving your kids around that they have noticed anything much at all. They haven’t needed to.

When your learner is back behind the wheel talk throughout the drive and ask your learner to acknowledge what is happening. For example, “See those kids playing on the footpath. One of them has a ball so we had better keep an eye out in case it rolls out on the road”. Your learner will probably only take a very quick look, and then focus back to the front. But at least you have started to get the scanning process underway.

Other tips:

- Ask what speed your learner is doing. This makes them move their eyes away from the front focus
- Ask what a sign says up ahead. This makes them scan down the length of the road
- Ask what type of vehicle is two or three car lengths ahead. This also makes them scan down the length of the road
- Ask your learner to tell you what is behind. This makes them use the rear and side view mirrors
- Pose a few what ifs – for example “what if there was a truck broken down around the bend?” This makes your learner consider the possibilities for hidden dangers.

Crash Avoidance Space (or the Three Second Gap)

Crash avoidance space is really all about the distance between your car and the car in front. The idea is that a suitable gap is left that will provide enough time to react and brake safely in order to avoid a crash, rather than rear ending the guy ahead. Most drivers don't realise that it takes time (up to half a second) to see the hazard, and take action. Then, once a driver recognises the danger, there is a reaction time needed to put the foot on the brake pedal (up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a second). Then of course it all depends on how good the car's braking system is.

I remember my father telling me when he taught me to drive that the best way to keep a safe gap was to leave one car length for every 10 miles (16 kilometres) an hour that I was doing. This worked but was a more complex task involving estimation and variable vehicle lengths.

It's very important to leave a suitable gap from the vehicle ahead, no matter what speed you are travelling. The current thinking is that the gap should be three seconds, at least in fine conditions. The good news is that this is a really easy skill to teach.

Simply tell your learner to take note of a marker that the car immediately in front is travelling past. This may be a telegraph pole, signpost, parked car or any other stationary object. Then start counting... 1001, 1002, 1003. When you get to 1003 your car should have reached your chosen stationary object. If you get there before 1003 then tell your learner to back off – it is too close to the car in front to be safe. On the other hand, if it takes your learner a lot longer to reach your chosen spot, then you might need to think about moving back to a nice quiet area. There will be a lot of cranky people behind you, and they won't stay patient for long!

Make sure you teach your learner to maintain the gap. Use the checking technique together every few minutes. Another good tip to use in traffic is that when you stop behind a stationary vehicle check to see that the bottom of that vehicle's rear tyres are visible. This has several advantages. It makes sure you are not too close. And as you move forward your three-second gap will already be in place. And if rear-ended, you will have less chance of being rammed into the car in front.

One other thing – leaving a three second gap is really only a rule of thumb. If it is raining, foggy, snowing, and hailing or any combination of these, then it's a good idea to increase the gap to four seconds.

Road Position

We've already talked about crash avoidance space as it relates to vehicles in front or behind. Your learner also needs to understand the need to make sure there is enough space on the sides to avoid a crash. Ideally a gap of one metre should be left from parked and approaching vehicles.

Allocate some time to talk about how crashes occur and how the position of the vehicle on the road can minimise the risk of a crash. For example, keeping over to the left on curves and the crest of hills is a good insurance policy. We just don't know what is coming and it might be too close for comfort, so let's encourage our learners to keep as far away from the unexpected as we can.

Driving to the Conditions

Many inexperienced drivers believe they can drive to the maximum posted speed limit their licence permits. I have talked to many learners who truly believe that because "it's an 80km/h zone... I am allowed to do 80km/h... so I'm doing 80km/h no matter what".

Experienced drivers know that sometimes the posted speed limit isn't the appropriate speed for the conditions. In situations where vision is limited (heavy rain or fog), where there are lots of pedestrians about, where there is high traffic volume or just unfamiliarity with the area, then it is a good idea to teach your kids to back off 10km/h, just in case the unexpected happens.

Hazard Perception

I'm sure I'm not telling you anything new when I say there are a lot of road safety hazards out there! Hazards include pedestrians darting out, vehicles turning across the line of traffic, rubbish on the road, road works and potholes and many other things. Hazards are all around us and things seem to jump out at you when least expected.

So how do you reduce the dangers whilst teaching your learner to foresee hazards to minimise the risks? Simple answer – scanning and well developed vehicle control skills.

Scanning, discussed above, is the key to identifying hazards. Hazards can be immediate and therefore require an immediate response. A driver who is scanning will be "on top of the game" (well, at least as much as you can be) when that driver in front performs an illegal U-turn. A driver who is scanning will also be more aware of the things that "might go wrong". Don't take your learner into busy fast moving traffic situations until you are convinced your learner is starting to demonstrate this skill.

Similarly, you need to be convinced that your learner is able to use the vehicle's brakes effectively. Braking is taught as a four-stage skill – light pressure (touch the brake lightly to illuminate the brake lights and prepare the brakes to operate), squeeze (gradual pressure is applied to the pedal), freeze (enough pressure has been applied that the car will stop, so the pressure is frozen at that point) and ease (at the last moment where the car is just about to stop, you ease off a little pressure to reset the suspension and avoid the violent head jerk).

This technique gives a driver better control and a smooth response that can help avoid hazards.

Teaching Your Learner to Overtake

I've included this in the content of this book because hundreds of supervising drivers have told me they just hate to teach this. In fact, in some cases supervising drivers have told me they won't teach overtaking, because it's "just too dangerous".

The main question from parent supervising drivers is, "How can you teach a learner to overtake when they have speed restrictions?" Although in some States and Territories there are no special speed restrictions for learners, in others there is a maximum speed limit for a learner of only 90km/h. So sometimes it can seem a bit daunting to find a vehicle travelling slow enough to overtake.

Well the news isn't all bad. Overtaking includes manoeuvres around a car that is pulled up to parallel park. It also includes lane changing which can often be practised at lower speeds as the opportunity arises.

However, it is still important that your learner is taught to overtake on a single lane road, and this is the lesson that seems to worry supervising drivers the most. With a low speed restriction for learners this can seem particularly difficult. After all, how can you overtake a vehicle that is travelling at a higher speed than a learner is allowed to travel? My tip is to involve friends and family in the planning of this exercise. Simply ask someone you trust to drive their vehicle in front of the learner's vehicle at a lower speed than the learner is allowed to travel. You can then engineer the overtaking manoeuvre in relative safety, knowing that the vehicle ahead will not speed up, cut you off or do anything else unpredictable.

It also helps to demonstrate the overtaking technique to your learner as often as necessary to ensure that they fully understand it, and then talk the learner through the overtaking procedure when it is their turn. You may need to think about the way that you, as an experienced driver, approach an overtaking situation. I guess the first thing you would do is ask yourself "Do I really need to overtake?" If the answer is yes then this is probably what you would do, and therefore should teach to your learner.

Here is the suggested overtaking procedure you can teach:

1. Stay back to allow enough room to look ahead and make a safe overtaking judgement
2. Keep an eye on the side and rear vision mirrors so that you know what is happening around you
3. Move out slightly to get a view ahead
4. Indicate right – allow an appropriate amount of notice to ensure the drivers of the cars in front and behind understand your intention
5. Once clear, choose an appropriate speed for the manoeuvre and pull out to pass, whilst continuing to check your mirrors
6. Indicate left – once again allow an appropriate amount of time
7. Move in ensuring enough clearance from the vehicle now behind. A good guide as to when to move back in is when the car in the other lane can be seen entirely in the interior mirror. This is also a good strategy for gap selection in normal lane change situations.

When teaching overtaking or lane change in multi-lane traffic try using the MISS method. This well-known technique was taught to me by a professional driving school, is simple to remember and easy for your learner to understand. **MISS** stands for:



It's all fairly self-explanatory. Side and rear view mirrors should be checked first, indicator on, check blind spot over the shoulder and steer into the gap or lane. Too easy!

Whichever technique you choose, remember to "talk it through" and demonstrate several times before asking your learner to try it out. Demonstration for this and other techniques helps to clear up any misunderstanding that your learner may have. Learners don't always understand when supervising drivers tell them what to do – demonstration is a much more powerful learning tool. And later, when your learner is behind the wheel keep on talking them through the skill you are teaching until you are sure they have it under control.

Teaching Your Learner to Merge

Whenever I talk to groups of supervising drivers and the topic of merging comes up everyone's initial reaction is to think freeways and motorways. Believe me, the last thing you want is the first time your learner merges on a motorway without having practised in safer locations.

Here's how you do it:

1. Find a location near your home where two lanes merge into one. Ideally the location should be low speed and quieter during off peak periods.
2. Demonstrate the merging technique to your learner. As previously pointed out showing rather than telling, is a much more powerful way to teach and you will be more confident that the lesson has not just been heard but also understood.
3. Think the task through before reaching a merge lane. This helps to avoid a too slow approach and the difficulties in merging that can occur when speeds don't closely match that of the moving traffic you are merging with.
4. Check mirrors, indicate, look over your shoulder to check your blind spot and select a safe gap to merge. Aim to merge at this point.
5. Steer into the gap and take your position. If this is done correctly it should mean that other drivers will not need to adjust their speed or position significantly.
6. Don't always assume that everyone is going to drive in a rational, sensible fashion. How often have you seen other motorists speed up to cut a merging driver off? Talk about contingencies in case this happens and the merge can't be completed. This can be particularly dangerous when merging on freeways. The best advice I can offer in a freeway situation is to tell your learner to continue onto the shoulder and pull up when it is safe. Never tell them to pull up hard at the end of the merge, as the motorists behind will probably plough into the back of you as they accelerate to merge themselves.

Teaching Parking

Reverse Parking

Almost every inexperienced driver finds reverse parking challenging, but your learner can be asked to perform this task in the driving test. First up it's not a bad idea for supervising drivers to actually know how to perform a reverse park effectively, as you should demonstrate this skill to your learner first. So, all those years spent driving around the block waiting for a space to open up are in the past. Time to upskill and practise the procedure before you teach it.

Here's how you do it:

Find a quiet road first, so that you aren't distracted by other traffic. Outside the front of your own house may be a good location, if your street is quiet. If you have two cars, park one in the street. Otherwise ask a neighbour if it's OK. It's a good idea to check as everyone gets nervous when they look out their window to see a learner using their treasured vehicle as a test dummy!

On your test, the examiner will ask you to reverse into a space of about two car lengths. You must park as close as possible to the kerb (usually within half a metre) without touching, hitting or mounting it.

Your learner will find it easy after a while. Just practise these steps:

1. Pull up beside a parked car around one metre out with the passenger mirror of your car level with the front of the parked car.
2. Indicate, engage reverse and perform a 360-degree scan and finish by looking out the rear window.
3. Begin reversing slowly in a straight line until the back wheels/back seats of your car are level with the rear of the parked car. At that point start turning full lock to the left while keeping the car moving slowly. When full lock is reached release a little pressure off the wheel to avoid damage to the power steering.
4. Hold the wheel here until you reach a 45-degree angle (this can be checked by looking over the front left wheel of the car. When looking over the front left wheel, if your line of sight makes you look down the road at the same time then you have reached the correct angle), at this point begin turning full lock to the right while the car is still moving slowly. Again, release a little pressure once full lock is achieved.
5. Once in behind the car and parallel to the kerb, straighten wheels and secure the car.

This can take several lessons to master. Keep practising this skill slowly until it becomes second nature. Now that you are an expert again, it's time to teach your learner to reverse park.

Angle Parking

Angle parking is a simpler skill to master.

Here's how you do it:

1. Signal left, slow down and then stop the car if safe about two metres from the parking space
2. Have a look left for vehicles and pedestrians
3. Start your turn from the middle of the parking space, and then turn the steering wheel hard toward the centre of the space. After entering the space, straighten up and position the car in the centre of the bay
4. Stop without hitting the kerb or at the line.

Teaching Three Point Turns

The three-point turn is a manoeuvre that is useful in a variety of situations. It is used most often when there is a need to make a turn but there isn't enough room to perform a U-turn.

Here's how you do it:

1. Check there is no traffic behind and indicate. Turn in the direction you want to go until you are perpendicular with the street. Stop just before the kerb, or if you are entering a driveway do not go past the property boundary or letterbox.
2. Now put the car into reverse gear. Reverse back or into the lane on the other side of the road that is close to the kerb, checking your mirrors and over your shoulder as you go.
3. When you are ready to move forward indicate, check your mirrors and blind spot, and then proceed forward.

Teaching Roundabout Use

Roundabouts are always a hot issue. They are a great road safety asset, and have replaced many dangerous intersections. It is rare to see a severe crash at a roundabout site, but that doesn't mean that there aren't crashes, usually involving some sort of vehicle damage. I have a friend who is a panel beater, and he calls roundabouts his "best friend"!

There are some simple rules you follow to teach effective roundabout use.

Here's how you do it:

Basically, road authorities advise that the roundabout sign means **Slow Down**, prepare to **Give Way** and if necessary stop to avoid a collision.

Always remember that on the approach to a roundabout get into the correct lane (if you are turning right make sure you are in the right lane). On the approach remember that if you are turning left or right you must indicate left or right. So, for example, if you are taking the first exit indicate left. You should indicate, if practicable, on the exit when going straight ahead. If you are taking the third exit, indicate right on the approach and left before exit.

You must always indicate left off the roundabout where it is practical to do so. This is even the case when you are continuing straight through the roundabout.

The biggest rule is to remember to give way to traffic that is already on the roundabout. Also, give way to traffic approaching the roundabout if you think there will be a chance of a crash (for example if the car on your right is obviously heading towards the roundabout at high speed, although not yet on it).

Remember, the rules for slowing down, giving way and indicating are exactly the same for single and double lane roundabouts.

Teaching Hill Starts

For most learner drivers, this task is more difficult in a manually geared vehicle. Coordination of parking brake and clutch takes a bit of practice to master.

Auto vehicles roll back on a hill as well, particularly when the transmission oil is warm. Even though hill starts in an automatic vehicle are simpler, there is still a process to follow to avoid excessive roll back. Less than 50cm roll back is the desirable measure.

Here's how you do it in a Manual:

1. First up coordinate the release of the handbrake with bringing the clutch pedal up.
2. When the "bite" occurs apply the accelerator gently and smoothly to a point where the engine tremble disappears.
3. At this point maintain the position of your feet and release the handbrake.
4. Continue to accelerate gently while continuing to bring the clutch pedal up.

Here's how you do it in an Auto:

1. First up coordinate the release of the handbrake with gentle application of the accelerator.
2. When you feel the vehicle "want to move forward", simply fully release the handbrake, and accelerate away gently.

Provide a Range of Other Experiences

It's important that your learner experiences all, or as many varied driving conditions as possible before they are driving by themselves. This includes city driving (including motorways) and country driving on a variety of road types. For city dwellers you may need to consider leaving your local area to find a nice stretch of unsealed road to practise on. For country folk you need to be prepared to commit to a trip to a busier area (preferably one that has highway, motorway and peak hour) so that the first time your kids experience conditions that they are not often familiar with, they are with you.

Driving at Night

Most Australian States now require a minimum number of hours of night-time driving experience recorded in the log book. As experienced drivers, we can sometimes take night-time driving for granted, and perhaps consider that it really isn't too much different to driving during daylight hours.

For a learner driver this isn't the case. Nearly all the learners I have spoken to say that they are much more nervous about night drives. Think about it. Learners have to experience the glare of the oncoming head lights; it is harder to judge distance and gaps between cars and it's harder to read signs. It's also harder to make eye contact with other drivers. There is a whole range of different conditions around night drives that need to be experienced and practised. You need to be there with them to keep the experience a safe one.

Although some Australian States may require less, I recommend that 20 hours of night driving experience is a good benchmark to aim for.

If it's possible to commence teaching your learner driver during daylight hours it will be less stressful for both of you, allowing for an eventual graduation to the night-time drive.

Log Book Tips

Australian States require use of a log book during the period the learner's licence is held. Typically, the log book provides guidance to supervising drivers, is a teaching tool and requires completion of a driver experience record.

The log book is best thought of as your bible while teaching a learner to drive.

You need to look after it and ensure that you comply with the requirements that are usually listed at the front. Treat the log book as if it's a legal document and then you won't go wrong.

The following points will help you to keep it accurate and up to date:

1. Ensure that all entries are legible and completed in black or blue ink. No liquid paper.
2. Record all the information requested and don't leave blank spaces.
3. If you make a mistake draw a neat line through the error and rewrite the entry neatly.
4. Avoid ditto marks; rather ensure a written entry for each category required.
5. Ensure that all information is recorded in the log book. Road authorities won't accept attachments to the log book, so those records that have been written down on bits of scrap paper or photocopied can't be included.
6. Sign each entry where required. Supervising drivers should use a full signature rather than initials.
7. Photocopy, scan or photograph each entry page as a back-up in case the log book is lost.
8. Ensure driver fatigue is considered and no drive is longer than two hours, without a break recorded.

Multiple Supervising Drivers

There's no getting away from it. Parents have a big role to play. There are just too many hours and who else is available that can show that level of dedication? Other unrestricted licence holders can help though. Perhaps it's time to recruit faithful relatives! If available, able and keen, grandparents are an obvious choice. I'm often told most kids seem to listen to their grandparents more than their parents. In fact, many parents I have spoken to recount their own learning to drive experience with their own grandparents.

Why do your kids listen to grandparents rather than their own parents? Is it because they have a common enemy?!! Good joke, but probably not. I remember this comment made by my own kids, "If Grandpa was here he'd know how". Our kids often respect age, experience and display better manners when with their grandparents. They listen to their grandparents and don't argue with them. If this is true for you then grandparents operating as supervising drivers (providing the skill levels are there) are going to be a great help to you.

Another option to help share the stress load is to ask family friends to help. Or even swap kids with your friends! You will probably find your learner more inclined to behave respectfully, and arguments are less frequent when two people work with each other who aren't genetically close.

Working with a Driving School

If you have the spare cash, a professional driving instructor can be your best friend. Let's face it – our kids are never going to believe what we tell them. But I can guarantee that your kids will believe a driving instructor every time, even if the instructor gives much the same instructions that we do.

A professional driving school can really strengthen and hasten the learning process. The right instructor is going to give your child the right information, and the current techniques to enable your learner to be a safer and competent beginning driver. Most parents don't think about the way they drive – we just do it automatically. Sure, most of us can drive competently, but ask us how we teach it and that's a different matter. So why not engage a professional to cover all those "sticky" bits that we simply aren't sure how to explain well?

Here's the low-down on how to work with a professional driving instructor:

Choose someone you like and someone who will like your son or daughter

It might sound silly to say this but a lot of people just go to the Yellow Pages to make this decision. A much better idea is to ask your friends who they have been using, and are they happy with the service they have received. Does your learner like being with the instructor? Recommendation is a much stronger reason to buy any product and goes some way to guaranteeing that the service you receive will be pleasant, relevant and useful.

Check that the driving instructor is accredited

Driving instructors generally complete a training program conducted by State Road Authorities, and receive license accreditation as a result. This gives you a benchmark of quality, which is otherwise not available. Be wary of any driving instructor who is not accredited – if they haven't the commitment to engage in best practice in their chosen profession, then it is likely they won't engage in best practice with your son or daughter. Check with your State Road Authority or ask for evidence that the instructor is accredited. The driving instructor should be able to show you a valid accreditation licence, which is usually on a photo card issued by your State Road Authority. They should also have a valid Working with Children Check.

Ask if it's OK to sit in the back seat while the lesson is underway

I have never spoken to a licensed instructor who has a problem with this. Sometimes your learner might not find this comfortable, but if it works for all three of you it's a great thing to do. Supervising drivers can learn from the instructor, as well as have an understanding of "what to do next". If you don't want to sit in the back, at the very least ask the driving school to spend a few minutes with you after the lesson. You have two questions you need to ask. Firstly, "What did you do today?" Secondly, "What should I do in the next lesson?" That way you know what's going on and where you should head. And you are informed. The alternative to this approach is to ask your child what happened. You know what I mean. The information you get back from kids is sparse. Question: "What did you do today?" Answer: "Stuff". If you insist on speaking to the instructor at least you will know what has gone on.

Engage the driving school of your choice early in the scheme

Most driving schools I have spoken to say they get called in towards the end of the scheme. This has one big disadvantage. It's possible they will spend your money undoing the things that have been taught wrongly. Driving instructors usually prefer to be involved early in the scheme. This can be especially useful if you are a nervous supervising driver. The school can teach your kids how to control the motor vehicle and get them started. Sometimes this is the hardest bit. Consider purchasing some additional lessons if the hip pocket stretches to it. Maybe bringing the instructor back around half way through the teaching program to get some feedback on what's working well and what needs additional time.

Finally, a pre-test evaluation a couple of weeks prior to the driving test can be reassuring, or otherwise provide feedback to "fix up" a couple of techniques prior to test time.

All in all, the driving instructor of your choice should become an interested and important partner in the overall process of teaching your learner to drive.

Additional Courses for Learners

I am often asked by parents, "Would it be useful to buy an advanced driving course for my learner?" My answer is always the same: *No!* It's my belief that because a new driver is not an advanced driver then it doesn't make a lot of sense to enrol them in a course that has been designed for experienced drivers. Typically courses like this extend upon the skills of drivers that have been on the road for many years (maybe someone like you!). Advanced driving courses are popular because you get to do all that "fun stuff", like braking at speed and learning how to respond correctly in emergency situations. In other words, you are taught how to react and handle your car in extreme situations. This is all fine for you but not for your kids. Research shows that young drivers who complete a course like this actually have so much fun that they try to repeat the experience when they are out there on the road. You don't want your kids braking at speed, skidding and trying to handle a vehicle in dangerous situations. It's just not a good spend of your hard-earned dollars. Remember also that inexperienced drivers with little exposure to dangerous situations simply don't have instant recall to the course content to use in an emergency situation.

A Defensive Driving Course is a better way to go. Defensive driving courses have much more focus on classroom discussion as well as practical sessions. They encourage the use of low risk driving techniques, foster correct attitudes and behaviours and have an emphasis on enabling an inexperienced driver to avoid emergency situations, rather than focussing on how to get out of them, making them ideal for P Platers. Usually these programs run over one day, and although not cheap, a Defensive Driving Course can make a wonderful birthday or Christmas present!



Quality Time

I've spoken to many parents who roll their eyes when I mention this is a great way to spend quality time with your kids. Let's face it – not many 16 and 17 year olds want to hang out with Mum or Dad. So maybe relish the fact that you have your son or daughter all to yourselves for the many hours it will take to complete the scheme that applies in your Australian State. This opportunity may never present itself again.

And keep it positive! Don't criticise your learner openly, and certainly not in front of other people after the lesson. Don't always tell but rather ask. Give your learner heaps of positive reinforcement – your kids will be looking for praise rather than criticism and will respond to you and the experience according to how good they feel about their progress and how comfortable they feel working with you.

Most people in the Baby Boomer and Generation Xers learnt to drive for only three months (or even less in some cases). Nearly every parent I have spoken to says that they have a strong memory of the experience. So, for your kids who are going to be spending much longer learning to drive, there is an iron clad guarantee that the memory will be there forever. I think you will want it to be a positive one.



Getting Ready for the Driving Test

When I got my licence it was pretty fashionable to say that, "I got it first time". And I did! But not everybody does and that hasn't changed over the years. Sometimes it can be about nerves and these can let us down on the day. It's pretty hard to control a car when your palms are sweating and your heart is beating 180 times a minute!

One way to reduce nerves is for your learner to know that all the preparation has been completed and all the content described in your State's licensing scheme has been covered, understood and completed. Here are some tips for learners that should help:

1. Book in for your test early. Many motor registries book out well in advance
2. Ensure your log book has been completed to the required standards set by your road authority. Conduct a final check the day before the test
3. Check the vehicle that is being used for the test to ensure it's roadworthy. A test will never proceed in an un-roadworthy vehicle
4. Don't have a late night prior. You want to make sure you are at optimum performance
5. Don't drink too much coffee before the test. This can make you tense and increase your heart rate and stress level
6. Arrive a bit early – running late can really stress you out
7. Be polite and friendly.

And for supervising drivers...

1. Keep a calm tone with your learner. Understand that this is one of life's great stresses for a young person. Be supportive and remember what it was like for you!
2. Make sure you stay to the test completion. If your learner doesn't pass on the first go then you will need to be there to drive home. Sometimes new P Platers can be so excited that you might have to drive home anyway!
3. If your learner doesn't crack it first time be supportive, listen and try to encourage your learner to think forward to the next test time, which after all won't be too far off. Expect and allow for a bit of grumpiness and low self esteem.

Moving from Ls to Ps

As a parent, I bet you will probably agree with me when I say that one of the scariest times to be a parent is when you see that P Plate disappear up the road for the first time. It really is a time when you change forever from the role of supervising driver to worrying parent. You have a real right to be worried. This is your child who has moved from a supervised situation to an unsupervised one – and are they really a much better driver now that there is a P plate proudly displayed?

We know that the risks of a crash anywhere in Australia and around the world are higher in the first few years of driving than at any other time of a person's driving life. Young drivers are known to be over-involved in crashes. On average a P Plater is about four times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than older drivers. This is a pretty scary statistic. What this really means is that every time your young driver takes the road there is around four times less chance of them coming home safely. This situation improves as experience increases, but the risks are still high – too high for most parents to accept without trying to do something to improve the chances for their kids.

One way to do this is to still be a part of the process, even if we are not sitting in the car with our P Plater. You may feel that your P Plater doesn't want you involved now that the provisional license has been granted. But your involvement is still important, and achievable with just a little negotiation.

Let's look at it from your son or daughter's perspective. Most young people still live at home in the first year or so of P Plate driving. This means that you pay a lot of the bills – this is your first bargaining chip. Many first year drivers also use the family car, and this gives you a right to set down some guidelines for the vehicle's use. Even if your P Plater drives their own car they will be at you for some of the bills – even if it's just having the vehicle on your insurance cover. Basically, we are still responsible for our kids, even at the ripe old age of 17. Some young people may resist this to a degree, but most still know it, and even want it. My experience in working with young people tells me that they are comfortable with parameters. Give them some rules and they will usually follow them. Give them no rules and they will make up their own.

The best way to determine car use rules is by negotiation, and not imposition. If your young driver is a part of the rule making decision process, there is a greater chance that this will improve compliance.

The rules you determine together need to be doable, prescriptive and documented. Road safety experts recommend that you get together and draft up an agreement to govern the use of the P Plater's vehicle. This agreement is formal and generally covers the first 12 months of the P Plate period. Most often this is called a Vehicle Access Agreement. It's not a bad idea to personalise the agreement by giving it a name, like John's Car Use Agreement, or Emma's Driving Plan or even Pete's P Plate Package.

So, get together with your new P Plater and decide what conditions should be included. Consider issues like:

- Late night driving
- Passenger numbers
- Duration of drives
- Driving with zero alcohol
- Smoking while driving
- Mobile phone use
- Safe and appropriate speeds
- Wet weather driving.

It's time now to decide what the consequences will be if the agreement is broken. For example, breaking the agreement may mean withdrawal of driving privileges for a minimum period of time. This may even depend on the offence. Ensure that you all agree and then add this to the bottom of the agreement.

Now document the level of parental support that will be provided. You may agree for example to pick up your son or daughter from parties that go after 11pm, to negate any reason for driving late. Or, if it's your car, you may want to specify when the car is available.

Bullet-point all your decisions and ensure that all parents and your P Plater sign the document. This is now a binding partnership agreement, that if broken has consequences.

Your final agreement may look something like this:

Emma's Driving Plan

During her first 12 months of driving Emma agrees to:

1. Only drive up until 11pm and not before sunrise
2. Drive with only one passenger
3. Not drive for more than 2 hours without a 15-minute rest
4. Never drive after drinking
5. Not allow smoking in the car
6. Only use a mobile if pulled over in a safe location with the ignition off
7. Drive to speed limits
8. Slow down in areas where it is unsafe to drive to the speed limit, like if it's raining or there are school kids around

During her first 12 months of Emma's driving Mum and Dad agree to:

1. Pick Emma and her friends up at parties that go later than 11pm
2. Provide the small family car for use on weekends and to drive to and from school
3. Discuss safe driving and answer questions about driving as needed

We all agree that if Emma breaks the agreement she will lose use of the car for at least two weeks.

Signed _____

Date _____

Above all continue to provide guidance and support. Your kids are still growing up and need your continued input to help ensure a safe, long and healthy life. The best way to do this is to be a part of their lives, rather than an observer. Let them help with the decision-making but guide and help them through those early years of driving. It will be the best investment you have ever made.

Need More Help?

There are many additional sources of information that are available if you need more help. All road authorities within Australia have a comprehensive website. The website will also list a contact phone number that you can access.

Additionally, many local councils have a dedicated road safety officer who can help. Or liaise directly with your motoring association or log on to their web site to access the many resources they make available to you. If you are using a driving school make sure you pump the instructor for information. Or just pop into your local road authority for advice.

And Finally...

No need for me to wish you good luck – everybody regards me with suspicion when I do this! The main thing is that your investment in this program works not only towards producing competent drivers using Australian roads, but that your son or daughter will have every opportunity to drive in a manner that enables them to stay safe and to grow to live long and happy lives. One day they will be teaching your grandchildren to drive... Now that's a scary thought!




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