

Dad's Driving School, Lesson 1: What message are you sending?

Long before they hit 16, children learn to drive by watching (you guessed it) how mom and dad behave behind the wheel

My son is just over a year-and-a-half old. And what's remarkable for both me and my wife is watching him develop his own personality, the blend between what we "gave" him and what he's learning on his own.

What I'm fascinated with, in particular, is how much of his personality is forming through mimicking our actions in astonishing detail. He's constantly surprising us by doing things we had no idea he knew how to do. When did he learn what hand cream was for? When did he learn the moves to "Mr. Knickerbocker?" And most importantly, when did he learn how to lift up the toilet seat, and who taught him to throw in toothbrushes?

As a new parent, I was unprepared for the "sponge" aspect of growing children. It's sobering to realize that



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you are imprinting your child every moment they are with you.

Serious role

I think most parents take this role seriously. They limit the amount of TV and videos their kids watch, try to make sure their kids' friends aren't the kind that start fires for fun, and generally try to model kindness, courtesy and emotional intelligence when the little ones are around.

That's all well and good, but based on what I've seen on the roads, apparently good intentions are often lost somewhere between shifting from second to third.

Think about it. Driver education doesn't start when they're sixteen and you find yourself pinned in the passenger seat, not sure what you're more afraid of; the fact that your child is now controlling a ton of metal capable of going very fast and causing very messy injuries, or the fact that you must be ... no! Not that old!

No, you began teaching your children how to drive many years before that magic moment. It started back when they were old enough to mimic, and young enough to think that what Mommy or Daddy did was always the coolest thing going. If they do it, it must be right.

Driving requires a great deal of attention. So much so that it can be easy to forget that there is a co-pilot or two in the back seat. And while you may forget your audience every once in a while, they never forget about you.

A previous co-worker of mine learned this lesson a particularly hard way. He had a bit of a temper, and was admittedly not the most patient driver. He also, in his opinion, was a careful and loving father to his four-year-old daughter.

I don't recall the exact details of the incident, but suffice it to say he ended up stopped at a red light next to another driver who had angered him in some way. He did what he always did; thumped the steering wheel and started hollering.

Like father....

But, the thump on the wheel was the cue for his little girl, who interrupted Daddy and started yelling and cursing the driver down in fine style. Her father was horrified, not just at her anger and her colourful language, but also how blissfully unaware he had been while he taught her to do it.

Remember that the next time you get in your car and don't buckle up your seat belt, or blow through a red, or lose your temper behind the wheel. Your kids learn how to act by what you demonstrate for them. What did you show them on the drive home today? What will they remember that you didn't even know you did?

Please don't turn your teenager over to a driver's education class and think that their subsequent good or poor driving behaviour is strictly because of the level of instruction they received. It won't be. How you taught them to drive many years before counts, too.

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

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