

{ AGING with an Attitude }

Should you help them stay on the road??



By Dorie U. Sugay

Dorie Sugay is the Executive Director of Visiting Angels, a company that provides living-assistance services to seniors and adults-in-need who wish to stay in their own home or receive one-on-one care within a facility.

This article is for informational and educational purposes only. It was written independent of Visiting Angels.

Taking driving privileges from a teenager is tough but not as heart-wrenching as taking the same privileges from the parent who raised you.

Some adults are able to drive through their later years. But others are no longer safe on the road. When you visit for the holidays, take the time to assess how Mom and/or Dad are doing. You want to look for ways to help them be able to continue to drive safely, rather than look for ways to take the keys away. This approach will help you get their cooperation later, if you do need to ask them to give up driving! Take a walk around the car, check out the entrance to the garage, the bush on the curb, and even the garbage can. Have them take you on a tour of their area, taking their usual routes – you will learn a lot.

Here are other things to make a note of:

- Have they received a warning from the police for poor driving behavior? They won't necessarily tell you but you should ask about a citation.
- Are there signs of close calls, minor collisions - dents or scratches on the car? Does the garbage can look abused? How is the entrance to the garage? Why did they have the bush by the curb removed? Is it because they can't control the car, or is Mom driving Dad's car and it is too big?
- When you drive with them – are they relaxed and confident? (When you are confident, it does not matter who is with you, so don't let them convince you they are nervous because you are there. But do emulate their life as well as you can – don't have screaming kids in the back seat).
- Does driving tire them out? If so – why? It is best to avoid times when people are going to/from work or dropping/picking up kids at school.
- Does Mom or Dad get disoriented easily?
- How is his/her ability to react to an unexpected challenge? Especially in

the winter months when the roads are moist, this could be a big issue. Just because they drive 4 blocks to the store does not mean they won't run into crazy drivers.

- Does he/she have difficulty dealing with glaring objects? (street lights, headlights, etc). Choosing driving times can solve this issue.
- How are they when they change lanes? If they have difficulty looking over their shoulder or turning their head side to side, that means they are not at 100% capacity.
- How well can they see street signs, curbs, people/objects on or around the road? (if they get easily distracted, is the solution as simple as turning the radio off?)
- How well does he/she navigate and deal with obstacles and distractions?
- Do speeding cars frighten or distract them?
- Do other drivers tailgate or pass them all the time? Are they able to stay calm when this happens or do the noise and speed rattle them? Remember, sometimes very slow driving can cause accidents.
- How is their hand/foot coordination?
- If your loved one takes medications for a prior stroke, ALS, dementia, epilepsy, MS, Parkinson's disease, seizure or sleep disorders, or uncontrolled diabetes - these could affect driving ability.
- Was his/her license checked at age 70? There have been times that people who should no longer drive pass the test – if you have good reason to believe your parent should no longer drive, you can talk to the DMV about it confidentially. A note from their physician helps. According to a the Highway Patrol, usually it is best for someone in their 70s to be checked at least every 3 years, and after 80, to be checked every year.

When you assess if it is time to have “that talk”, you might first talk to their physician. But be warned - they may find that a breach of their privacy if you share your concerns with their doctor without their knowledge. It is a blessed rarity when

a senior decides it is time to give up the keys – most fight for it as if their life depends on it. Most link driving to independence, others just don't welcome being told what is good for them. If you have the backing of their physician, it may help. If they argue that they will drive while DMV extends their license, you may have to share your concerns with the DMV.

Throughout the conversation, make sure you emphasize that this is not just about their capability, it is about their safety and the safety of others. Don't get into an argument. If you have ever suspended the driving privileges of a smart teenager – trust that this will be a tougher

If “it” is time and you are dreading it, think of this: which would you rather deal with, their wrath or the consequences if they are injured or they injure someone?

conversation! Be prepared to suggest an alternative approach to transport – taxis offer discounts; there's the Outreach Program, and if they would not mind a companion, they can hire a personal assistant (best not to call them caregivers during this volatile conversation).

Make sure you also assess if taking the key is enough or if you need to take the car. If you are hiring a companion to help out, driving the family car is best because the cars of companions are not commercial vehicles – Mom or Dad won't be covered if there is an accident.



But if the car is there, you should be aware that even the most dignified seniors have been known to grin silently as they turn over the keys, because they have multiple copies or they figure they can get duplicates. Unless they accept that it is no longer safe for them to drive, some may agree to stop driving but see no harm in doing so once in a while. My caregivers at Visiting Angels can tell you stories about seniors who “just one time” decided to drive again. And they are smart about it, they do so when there is no one but the crushed garbage can to tell on them.

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Last September, he biked a 62-mile trek from Big Sur to San Simeon for Best Buddies, which helps people living with Downs syndrome find employment after graduation. “It was challenging; about 4,000 feet of elevation change,” he recalled.

But that wasn't Rob's longest bike ride. That one covered 175 miles over two days from Milwaukee to Sturgeon Bay. Rob has been cycling for 15 years. The hobby evolved after doing a lot of spin classes three to four days a week, which he said helped him develop good form. Now he

enjoys taking spin classes two to three days a week.

Rob has two children - twins who are 29. His daughter is an attorney in Chicago and his son works for an insurance company in Milwaukee.

Shado, pronounced Shadow - the couple's 97-pound “lap dog” - is also an important part of their family. Rob says the 7-year-old rescue dog saved Val's life in 2007. Val passed out while she was dialing 911. Shado licked her until Val woke up. She realized she hadn't finished dialing and was able to complete the call.

Rob says he and Val love to travel – content with either a business trip to Napa or Texas or visiting wineries in Los Olivos, near Santa Barbara.

“There are great wineries around us. You don't have to travel far,” Rob said.

He has been pouring wine at Fernwood Cellars in Gilroy for the past two years after being a wine club member for six years.

“It gives me a break from my real job,” Rob said. “I love to talk to people. It's easy to talk about good wine.”

