



Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

They're still driving?

by Kari Berit

“How do I get Mom to stop driving? I've tried talking to her, but she just changes the subject.”

It's a common lament, and the conversation is often one-sided—like when you were 17 and tried to convince Dad you would be so, so careful with the car. This isn't about scolding your parents. Or parenting your parents, either. It's about helping them make a decision that's in their best interests—and may have life-or-death consequences for others.

Who's paying attention?

Many of us assume that as we age, driving skills decline. Research shows that age alone is not a reliable predictor of someone's ability to drive safely. Some older drivers are still road-capable in their 80s and 90s. And you and I both know people our age who should give up the car keys.

Thankfully, many older drivers are the first to realize their limitations, and most adjust willingly—if not happily. Some plan for off-peak times and low-volume roadways. Others avoid freeways entirely. And, warned by declining night vision, many gradually restrict their ex-

cursions to daytime.

Unfortunately, that's not universally the case. The automobile represents freedom, control and competence. It's natural for your folks to want to hold on as long as possible. Every few weeks, we hear of a new tragedy. The older driver who hit the accelerator instead of the brakes. The nice couple who left for a trip to the store and were found hours later in a parking lot 75 miles away. The confused senior who made a wrong turn and stopped dead in bumper-to-bumper traffic, unable to decide what to do next.

No family wants to forcibly “ground” Mom and Dad. But do you want to deal with the consequences if they continue to drive beyond when they can do so safely?

The big talk

Don't bring this up unprepared. Knowledge will help. If you're beginning to wonder about your parent's ability, let them drive the next time you go somewhere together. Are they merging safely? Driving too slowly for traffic? Drifting across lane markers? Squinting to read road signs?

If so, it's time to talk. The U.S. Department of Transportation publishes a 14-page booklet entitled: “How to Understand & Influence Older Drivers” (DOT HS 810 633, June 2006), which recommends three key preliminaries:

Step 1: Collect information from friends and family plus your own observations. Are friends afraid to ride with your folks? Have they seen them drive over a curb? Do you notice increased confusion or trouble with directions? Make dated written notes.

Step 2: Develop an action plan with your parents. Begin with, “I'm concerned about your safety when you're driving.” Know that the conversation could end right there, they're going to feel threatened. That's why you want written, dated observations. Empathize with them and listen to their concerns. The goal is to come up with an alternative that preserves their mobility and independence, but without endangering them or anyone else.

Step 3: Follow through. The more your parent is involved in the planning, the better the odds of success. But whether it means driving at different times, setting up rides, or relying on public transportation (including services designed for active seniors), your support is crucial. Expect occasional outbursts of anger, frustration or sadness. Change is difficult.

RESOURCES

AAA Clubs “Roadwise Review” provides an assessment tool people can use on their home computers.

AARP's Driver Safety Program offers “Test Your Driving IQ,” a self-assessment quiz found at www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has an assessment quiz at <http://seniordrivers.org/quiz/driver55.cfm>.

Finding support

Don't put this totally on yourself. Your parents listen to authority figures, so consider involving doctors or a clergy member. Peer pressure works, too; show them they're not alone, that more of their contemporaries than they may know have given up their keys.

If all else fails, you may need to force the issue. To report an unsafe driver, inform your Department of Motor Vehicles. When you do, know that they will be able to find out who reported them. But which would you prefer: temporary bad feelings from a very live parent or picking up the pieces from an accident you'll always know you could have prevented?



In Wisconsin

If your parent lives in Wisconsin, you should be aware that the DOT makes its decision to terminate a license on the basis of signs, symptoms, behaviors and the observations of witnesses, not simply on a diagnosis. The department looks for signs of impairment such as:

- confusion/disorientation
- difficulty making simple decisions/impaired judgment
- impaired response/reaction time
- disorientation/memory loss/inability to concentrate
- extreme exhaustion/chronic drowsiness

The DOT may require a road test, a vision exam, a knowledge test or a medical report. The result will either be no action or cancellation of the license. The latter requires a behavior report signed by a physician.

Find more Wisconsin DOT information on this subject at:

- DOT Aging Drivers Information: www.dot.wisconsin.gov/drivers/drivers/aging/
- DOT Medical Review Unit: P.O. Box 7918, Madison, WI 53707-7918, 608-266-2327, dre.dmv@dot.state.wi.us