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DRIVING SMARTER &lt; WHEELS

# Families sharpen road skills

Young Drivers' program lets parents go back to driving school so they can help kids learn right

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TORONTO STAR

It took me three attempts to pass my road test to obtain my G licence — and parallel parking did me in twice.

On the second test, I tried parking on our downtown street and hit a light standard.

The instructor (they weren't known for a scrap of humour back then) scowled at my nervous jokes while making a big red notation on his clipboard.

The third time, if it weren't for my dad's persuasive charm — "Come on, give my daughter her licence" — I might still be taking the bus to all my appointments.

I thought of this when our daughter Kelly turned 16 in April and the first words out of her mouth were, "When can I get my driver's licence?"

My husband Frank couldn't wait to take Kelly driving after she obtained her Class G1 licence in August. Since G1 drivers must have a qualified, licensed driver in the passenger seat (with at least four years' experience), Frank was excited about teaching Kelly his driving skills.

But we didn't want Kelly picking up our bad driving habits, either. (Including parallel parking, which I haven't yet mastered.)

So we enrolled her in a driver-training program at Young Drivers of Canada's Oakville branch — for two weekends of in-class instruction, followed by 13 private in-car sessions — in preparation for her G1 exit road test. Price: \$868, including GST.

Looking over my daughter's student driver workbook and the MTO's *Driver's Handbook* got me thinking: how rusty were her parents' driving skills? And if Frank was going to supplement her professional instruction, how could he improve his approach?

So we went back to driving school ourselves — just for an evening — at Young Drivers' Co-Driver Program, an in-class session included in our lessons package.

YD has been teaching the Co-Driver Program for 10 of its 30-plus years, and each of its 55 centres in Canada (35 in Ontario) offers the program, says Scott Marshall, YD's director of training and a driving instructor for almost 20 years.

"A lot of people believe they are

good drivers and feel they can teach others to drive," he says. "Although they may not have been in crashes, their driving habits may not be strong enough to teach someone else.

"They could be teaching others their bad habits."

Among other things, the program covers making proper turns and positioning yourself in traffic to avoid conflict. The 2½-hour session we took was a true learning experience and a reality check of how the world has evolved since the last 15-plus years when we first got behind the wheel.

You may feel compelled to help your teen with problems you encountered when first learning to drive. But remember, we're all different and your teenager may not be struggling with the same manoeuvres you did at their age, our YD instructor, Jane Winhall, explains.

After reviewing graduated licensing in Ontario (initiated in 1994) and the learning curve, Winhall — a funny and engaging speaker who had taught Kelly in class — covers the four cornerstones of YD's *Collision-free!* Approach to Driving for students and parents:

- Effective seeing habits;
- Maintaining space to operate your vehicle;
- Allowing other road users their space;
- Driving proactively by predicting the actions of other road users.

Topics include braking early in routine stopping to avoid rear collisions, the leading cause of accidents in North America.

We also discuss navigating left and right turns as well as responding to anticipated problems by moving to the lane of least resistance or risk and by adjusting speed.

Routinely checking the rear-view mirror and/or side mirror every five to eight seconds is stressed, along with the importance of scanning all intersections — left, centre and right on approach and before entering one from a stopped position.

"We need to predict the worst and prepare for that," Winhall tells the 20-odd parents in our Oakville classroom.

Today's population explosion equals much-busier highways, traffic flow and signage. Too many entrances and exits snarl traffic. Most



JIM ROSS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Frank Price coaches his daughter Kelly, 16, on the finer points of parking at Maplevue Mall in Burlington.

of us were taught to drive in the middle lane of a highway when lanes weren't as crowded, "to give us space on either side," Winhall says.

But that no longer applies. Now YD students learn to "drive in whichever lane offers you the best view ahead, the best flow of traffic and the least risk."

This is often the right-hand lane, even though that involves cars feeding on and off. And stay two, preferably three or even four seconds behind the vehicle in front, we're told.

Part of the company's collision-free approach, notes Winhall, means having "an escape route." Ideally, "you stagger the vehicle for an escape route by creating space

on both sides of you. You adjust your speed or change lanes to regain space," as well as staying out of a driver's blind spot.

I confess that I don't practise these techniques myself, having been afflicted with the "hurry-up syndrome" in my increasingly fast-paced life. I am admittedly impatient with slowpoke drivers.

With today's need for speed, it becomes a hazard if you don't drive as fast — or as slowly — as those around you. That's why, says Winhall, students are taught to "go with the flow" and drive, within reason, at the same speed as surrounding traffic.

You'll encounter motorists who want to whip past your car and in and out of lanes; well, let them. "What's the rush?" Winhall asks.

Yes, I repeat to myself, what is the rush? Safety is more important. Not that I exceed the speed limit of those around me, but I should be practising these staggering techniques and falling back to get out of drivers' blind spots.

I was taught to place my hands on the steering wheel at the nine and three o'clock positions. Students are now encouraged to use the 10 and two positions. "In an emergency situation, you can turn faster and more accurately," says Winhall.

In addition, many of us learned hand-over-hand on the steering wheel when turning, just as her students are still taught. This allows for making the most accurate turns in the least amount of time.

But now we do "palming" turns mostly out of laziness. (Guilty, I confess.)

Making a left-hand turn in a busy intersection can rattle the most experienced of drivers. An "S-Approach," affords better visibility, explains Winhall. Here's how it's done:

You hug the right-hand edge of the turning lane and then slowly drift over to the left side when your vehicle is two car spaces from the end of the traffic island, just missing the end of the island; you then straighten the wheels and car. This allows the best view of oncoming traffic.

Speaking of wheels, I also learn a technique known as ground viewing. Winhall shows us a rendering on the screen of a car turning in a lane.

It looks like it is headed left. She tells us to look at the wheels — they are actually pointed right. "Tires will show you first what the car will do before the signals."

So much to absorb — how do our kids do it, I wonder? Or, is it like learning a new language, a computer skill or riding a bike: suddenly it all comes together?

Winhall says that most people learn best visually, by being shown. And she encourages us to help our kids drive by being aware, in the passenger seat, of what is happening in front of us.

"Get them out as often as possible. And let them teach you."

For more information on Young Drivers, visit [yd.com](http://yd.com).

## SMOOTHING THE WAY

Here are some tips from Young Drivers of Canada for safe and effective co-driving.

- Make a plan. Don't have your novice drive aimlessly around the neighbourhood. Since only professional instructors can take G1 permit holders on major highways, Winhall suggests practising on quiet residential streets or a GO station during off-hours.

- Try a deserted shopping mall at night that has everything to help the beginner learn: lots of lane ways, turns, small hills with curves and practise driving in the dark.

- Spaced repetition works best. Half an hour, three times a week is more beneficial than an hour and a half once a week.

- Help your new driver while in the passenger seat by staying ahead of them visually. Look for problems 15 seconds ahead of the car. Check your rear-view mirror every five seconds.

- A common mistake is allowing a novice to drive through a traffic situation for which they are unprepared on the way to their practice area. The co-driver should drive there instead.

- Phrase directions carefully. For instance, say "At the next street, turn right" rather than "Turn right at the next street."

- Winhall explains: "You want them thinking about the next street, before they think about just turning right into someone's driveway."

- Tell your novice what to do rather than what not to do, since our minds are often attuned to the last thing heard and we seize on that. Shouting "Don't hit the curb!" pretty well guarantees they will.

- Beware of busy intersections, which are challenging for even the experienced. Don't allow your debutante driver to make a left turn into traffic unless you can see — for certain — that it's safe.

- Don't use the word "right" to mean okay or correct. Don't say: "Make a left turn at the lights, right?"

- Know what you're going to do if your new driver makes mistakes.

- One example: If they hit the accelerator instead of the brake, say "Off the gas" in a firm (but not overly loud) voice while simultaneously shifting the (automatic) transmission into neutral, looking for an open space and steering into it. You can practise these moves in the driveway alone in the car.

- And hey, don't forget how you felt when learning to drive.

- Keep things in proportion and don't lose your sense of humour.

- "Find something positive to say and leave it (the driving session) on a good note," Winhall recommends.

Source: Jane Winhall and Young Drivers of Canada



JIM ROSS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Kelly Price works on her parallel parking. End a practice session on a positive note, experts advise.

## A lot to remember

On the drive home in our 2001 Subaru Legacy L wagon after our evening Co-Driver session, my husband Frank tries driving with hands on the steering wheel at the 10 and two o'clock positions. Although he perseveres, he finds it uncomfortable.

I do the same the next morning, but revert to nine and three for the same reason. Some habits are hard to break.

But I do make a conscious effort to use hand-over-hand turning.

That afternoon, while driving into work on the QEW from Oakville to Toronto, I decide to put the collision-free approach to the test.

I stay in the middle lane, which I've always felt most comfortable in. I maintain a following distance of three seconds and I leave an opening on either side for my escape route.

I stay out of drivers' blind spots and hold back, if needed, to let motorists beside me pass.

Plus, I keep putting my hands at nine and three, rather than 10 and two. Heck, I think I prefer dipping down occasionally into eight and four.

So much to remember all at once. Around Exhibition Place it gets crowded on the Gardiner, so I switch into the right-hand lane and I follow it to my cut-off for Yonge St.

Finally turning into the parking lot, I use the hand-over-hand method.

I stay in the middle lane on my way home that evening. Planning my escape route seems easier.

Turning left onto Ford Dr. off the QEW ramp, I try an S-Approach. I'm not sure if it's the same as demonstrated; I'll have to go back to the books for that one.

I feel more empowered in making driving as safe as possible for myself and others.

But these pointers are going to take some practice.

—Janice Bradbeer