



When to Take The Car Keys From Mom Or Dad

BY DAVID GOODMAN AND FRANK ESPOSITO

Martin certainly appreciated his 88-year-old mother's energy and independence. Engaged and mentally sharp, she continued to attend adult education classes, participate in church and community activities and regularly visit family and friends.

Still, he found himself worried about her safety when driving. It was the same anxiety he felt when his teenage daughter started driving. His mother drove her 10-year-old Cadillac everywhere, but over the winter had been involved in two minor fender benders and a couple of near misses. In addition, he knew that she continued to drive on the Turnpike and the Parkway although she was feeling increased anxiety about getting on and off the ramps.

He felt the time was fast approaching when she would have to quit driving. It was a conversation he knew he had to initiate with her, one that he needed to do sooner rather than later. He was not sure what to say or, most importantly, how to say it in a way that would not insult her and yet have the desired effect of getting her to stop or seriously limit her driving.

ARE OLDER DRIVERS AT RISK?

In fact, seniors as a group are relatively safe drivers. The actual number of accidents involving older drivers decreases as age increases. That's the good news.

The bad news is that drivers over 75 have a higher risk of being involved in an accident for every mile they drive. The rate of fatalities increases significantly by this age—in fact, it is on par with teenage drivers.

So, what can be done? According to AARP, ongoing conversations with family members can help. A survey of older adults found that more than half said they followed the suggestions of others, with women generally more compliant than men. They may prefer to hear it from their spouse (or from professionals such as their doctor), but will listen to their adult children.

CONSTRUCTING A GAME PLAN

Experts believe that while any discussions on driving are likely to be emotional for family members as well, they should not be put off. They suggest the following:

- Be prepared to have multiple conversations. Ongoing and candid conversations are recommended in order to establish a

pattern of open dialogue and give the older adult time to consider the situation.

- Start with appropriate conversation openers. Rather than tell a parent that “you need to stop driving,” it is more effective to begin by talking about the importance of safety and health, other options that may be available to help them get around, the dangers of certain road situations, etc.

- Use mishaps or near misses, or health changes as a lead in. For example, praising a senior for choosing to limit her driving to day time or discussing how the taking of a new medication may make them sleepier or less alert should be considered.

- Observe the senior at the wheel. A conversation has far more meaning when the senior's driving is experienced first hand.

- Investigate the alternatives to driving. To make any decision more palatable, it is important to see what other options exist.

- Discuss your concerns with a doctor. It's always easier to blame any decision on the doctor. A recommendation to stop driving that comes from the senior's doctor usually carries more weight than when heard from the adult children.

- If there is initial resistance, suggest that the older adult be tested for an assessment of their driving skills. These tests are commonly administered by rehabilitation centers, hospitals and VAs.

- Be supportive. Adult children need to understand that this is more than just the loss of their car, but a clear blow to their freedom and independence. The transition can be a difficult one.

What if all these steps fail to get the desired response? Experts say that if a high-risk driver refuses to stop driving, the family may have no choice but to sell or disable the car.

Meanwhile, Martin has started discussions with his mother, and has convinced her to eliminate her night driving and any driving on highways. She recently told him that she would like to consider selling the car, which thrilled Martin, until she added that she wanted to buy a car that got better mileage. He realizes it's an ongoing process.

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