

Important Conversations with Older Drivers

Among the most difficult conversations we will ever have with our older family members are the ones involving their ability to drive a car safely and whether or not it is time for them to give up their keys. Take care to tread lightly -- you cannot help older drivers if you alienate them. Many mature drivers resent their children or others making decisions for them, evoking feelings of dependence. So, staying positive and supportive, not bossy is key; and listening and understanding the concerns of older drivers is your best bet.

Predictably, most people want to keep driving as long as possible. While experts agree that driving ability generally begins to deteriorate at age 55, all drivers are not the same. Some people can continue to drive safely well into their advanced years. Others can't. The earlier you discuss the inevitable consequences of aging with the senior in your life, the better you and your loved one can agree to the plan of action that works best.

Here are some tips from AAA for communicating with your older loved one about this very important topic:

- Remember that most older drivers think of themselves as safe, in fact, safer than younger drivers.
- Show them you know how important driving is in their lives.
- Explain that you want them to stay safely behind the wheel for as long as possible. Their safety and the safety of others on the road is the number one objective.
- Remember, parents have played the role of decision-maker for a lifetime. Don't expect them to comfortably accept a role reversal in which their child becomes the decision-maker. Assess the older driver's behind-the-wheel skills as objectively as you can. Encourage the senior driver to take a self-assessment and visit a medical professional for a vision and driving-fitness check-up.
- Talk about strategies to correct specific driving weaknesses, overcome their fears, and set their mind at ease. Keep in mind that hospitals in the area have driving evaluation programs which may be worth your while to check out.

It is so important for families to discuss their observations with the individual's physician and determine whether or not their older loved one has clear driving judgment and ability. You may want to suggest to the doctor at the next regular appointment, that they evaluate the patient for driving ability, and if deemed necessary, make a driving referral for skills assessment. It's also helpful to call right before the scheduled appointment to remind the doctor or the office staff that you would like this assessment. Most major hospital systems have a driving therapy evaluation component associated with their occupational therapy departments. Ask the doctor or contact the hospitals in your area to see if they do indeed have an Occupational Therapy Driving Evaluation Program, have them do the assessment and share the results and their professional opinions. This proactive method of determining ones ability to



drive, although difficult, is a very helpful way to involve skilled professionals in helping make the decision and supporting the transition to giving up ones license.

Assessing an older driver's abilities and one day making the decision to take away the keys is a decision that may involve many people. To overcome resistance, consider discussing the issue with the driver's spouse, other family members, and health care professionals such as a doctor or driver rehabilitation specialist. Another credible voice may help in discussing these issues. Most of all, assure the senior driver of your continued love and support and intent to keep everyone safe.