

Learning to Drive Informally

My son, who was unschooled from the age of seven until he was 16, turned 20 earlier this month (2015). A week later, he passed his driving test at the first attempt.

About a year ago, when my son was approaching the end of Year 12, as it's called here in Australia, and would be graduating from the K-12 system but not going on to university, he decided it was time he learned to drive.

After he'd passed the written highway code test to get his 'L' plates, my wife and I were happy to teach him the actual driving but we have our foibles after many years of driving ourselves and thought it would be better if our son learned to drive 'by the book' (as his ten years older sister had done). On his parents' advice, he had a trial lesson with a qualified instructor – driving a manual car (stick shift) because that's what we have (and if you're licenced to drive a manual you can drive an automatic as well but not the other way around). When he returned from his hour's lesson he was in a grumpy agitated mood, told us it had all gone very badly, he hadn't understood what the instructor was telling him, hadn't understood what he was supposed to be doing, and that was it.

My wife and I realised after this that it would be best to allow our son to decide for himself how he would learn to drive. After all, we knew from his nine years of learning without the benefit of formal instruction what he was capable of (going right back to his first year out of school when his reading went from hesitant to excellent through playing videogames every day), so we decided to go with that however it eventuated.

We were used to our son mulling over things he wanted to do for a while before actually doing them, so we dropped the subject of learning to drive believing he would come back to it in his own good time. He has an unhurried attitude to life. That came from his

years of not going to school – in fact, the unhurriedness was one of the features of unschooling that I liked the best.

In January this year, my son decided it was time again to learn to drive.

That day I drove the two of us in our family SUV to a car park at a local sports field that I knew would be empty. My son had obviously been continuing to explore the subject of driving a car, he seemed to have been thinking quite deeply about it. He sat behind the wheel and we had a conversation about how the gears and the clutch worked. Then he turned on the ignition and practiced letting out the clutch numerous times to get the feel of it under his foot, listening to the sound of the engine, but didn't put the car into gear. I said nothing about that. We discussed mechanics and engine tones while he practiced getting the feel of the clutch engaging. This went on for an hour without him attempting to actually drive the car, then we swapped places and I drove us home. I didn't comment on anything that had transpired (very important!). Later I asked my son what he imagined would have happened if he'd actually attempted to move the car forward. "Kangaroo hops". I told him if that's what happened it was okay he could practice as much as he needed to until he got past that.

The next day we went to the empty car park again. My son sat at the wheel, switched on the engine, and resumed his practice of getting a feel for the clutch. I said nothing but I was wondering if we were going to be spending another hour sitting in a stationary car. Suddenly he put the car into gear, let out the clutch, and moved off as smooth as silk, braked, moved off smoothly again, braked, then did it for a third time. We then spent about an hour driving up and down the car park, practicing u-turns, stopping and starting and nearly all of his starts were as smooth as silk.

After that my son was driving at every opportunity, practically every day. After a few more sessions in an empty car park practicing u-turns and parking in a parking bay he was soon bored with that, so we went driving around the back streets. Then he was driving on the highway in the rush hour. He took over nearly all of the driving when we were out and about as a family. He drove the whole way from Sydney to Canberra after a visit to his sister, twice. All this on his 'L' plates. I know his mother had given him a lot of advice when she'd been in the car with him (she's the most

experienced driver in our family having done far more every day driving than I have) and I gave him some, but he was figuring a lot of things out for himself as well. Pretty much all of his learning to drive was accomplished in one way or another through informal conversation and hands on doing. Learning to drive by driving. Within a few months of that first day sitting in a stationary car my son was becoming an experienced driver while still on his 'L' plates, so we booked the driving test.

The day before the test, my son and I went for a drive around the city as a final preparation. I told him that all I'd been doing for a couple of months was keeping him company because it was required by law while he chauffeured me around. It had been a long time since I'd even commented on his driving. He was the driver. I was the passenger he didn't need or want any more.

The day of his driving test arrived. The test was scheduled to take 50 minutes. My son returned after 35. He told me he'd been a lot more nervous than he thought he would be. "How did it go?" "I passed." He showed me his copy of the examiner's check list. He'd botched the very first thing he'd been asked to do – a reverse parallel park – and after that he'd been virtually flawless. The examiner had scored him 95%. I was so proud of him. In fact, I was the one going "Woo hoo!" and he was, like, it was just a driving test.

Since he'd bought his own car shortly before the test, now we don't see as much of him as we used to.

Before my son's years of unschooling, it would never have occurred to me that it was possible for somebody to learn to drive without some kind of formal instruction. Apparently, it is. If you don't mind plenty of conversations and events unfolding at their own pace, which my wife and I became very used to with our son and that enabled us to trust him on this occasion. I hope he'll always keep that determination to do things the way he believes is best for him, and his unhurriedness. I've learned a lot from it.

And, by the way, contrary to the popular idea that being a parent in the passenger seat while a son or daughter learns to drive involves teeth gritting and white knuckles, one of the benefits of my son taking responsibility for progressing as and when he knew he was ready was that I never once felt anything other than completely

safe.