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Teaching driving readiness to young teens

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Missy Menzes, occupational therapist and founder of *Extra Credit! LLC*, is dedicated to helping school-aged kids and families dealing with “hidden disabilities” and learning differences. As program director of *Driving Readiness for Teens (DRT)* and a member of the *Texas Teen Safe Driving Coalition (TTSDC)*, Missy is excited to be able to add a unique and valuable perspective to caregivers of potential drivers. She hopes to reach the central Texas community as part of her volunteer roles in the TTSDC’s Zero Teen Driving Fatality Initiative and others nationwide as a guest blogger for the *Drive it Home™* project.



Community mobility is a necessary part of human independence and socialization. While most individuals can use public or private transportation, not everyone can or should drive. As a pediatric occupational therapist, one of the most important and unique roles that I have taken on is facilitating driving readiness potential for high-risk teens. **Principles of my**

DRT therapy program and concepts of “driving fitness” are relevant to any parent raising a potential driver.

The first step of assessing readiness for driving is to notice how the child moves, sees, thinks, feels, and takes on general responsibilities. All of these attributes will, in some way, affect driving performance. **Parents of middle school and even younger school-aged children should ask the question “Is my child coordinated, attentive, and adaptive?”** Start addressing noted concerns in any ways you can on your own, and



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seek assistance for areas of need from qualified therapists or other professionals early on.

Pre-driving skills include coordinated use of extremities, quick/accurate visual & cognitive perceptual processing functions, and safe attention and reasoning abilities. A driver must be able to effectively filter and process incoming sensory stimulation while attending and responding to “most critical” information. One must also be knowledgeable about rules of the road, have good anticipation skills, and be capable of managing unexpected events as well as stressful situations.

My DRT therapy program activities vary among families to enhance the areas that we determine to be specifically problematic or at risk for their children. Students perform individualized home activities between sessions. These vary from simple postural and coordination exercises to more complex visual and cognitive processing games. I occasionally prescribe the use of cutting-edge technologies such as Drive Fit® or Interactive Metronome® at home. These modalities help build skills of noticing, prioritizing, and reacting to information both quickly and over time.

Once foundations for driving are well established, it’s time to proceed to pre-driving “passenger level” training activities. Most of my program recommendations at this stage are based on specialty training I received from Miriam Monahan of the [Driver Rehabilitation Institute](#). If you have a child with unique needs, I highly recommend you work with an occupational therapist trained in American Occupational Therapy Association ([AOTA](#)) courses, if not a certified driving rehabilitation specialist.

For ideas to guide your own “backseat driver education” before permit time, my advice is to thoroughly check out [driveithome.org](#) from the National Safety Council. I have all my DRT participants reference **Drive it Home™** because it offers free parent resources, including digital driving lessons, courses, programs, and videos. Parents can use this information as a way to initiate dialogue about teen driving risks and road safety, but



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much of it can also provide ways to approach aspects of driving earlier on with your children.

Every parent has the opportunity to help teens be better prepared for driving by addressing some readiness skills before permit time. You can ask them to put down their phone or tablet, stop thinking about what happened today and what's to come, and stay focused on the road when a passenger. Teens could practice identifying cars in the blind spots with you, help navigate by providing directions, and notice general distractions or obstacles to avoid.

Of course, safety is always Priority Number One. If implementing this or any other type of parent-initiated readiness training is in any way distracting or emotional for you as a driver, don't do it! There are other ways to practice pre-driving skills safely. From afar, one can safely observe traffic flow at a neighborhood intersection or community traffic signal. Individuals can also take note of driving behaviors while shopping somewhere busy. An important aspect of readiness is awareness that people break rules sometimes. A safe driving practice is to make sure the careless actions of others don't cause you to have an accident.

Perhaps most importantly, caregivers should practice good habits for teens to follow. You know the big ones: buckle up, follow the road rules, always be a defensive driver, no texting or phone use (even over the speaker), only initiate use of navigational systems if necessary when the vehicle is in park, and keep your vehicle in good shape. There is really no good excuse to break these safety measures, but some habits can be difficult to curb.

Drivers should also avoid eating/drinking, listening to the radio/movies in the car, putting on/taking off things, reaching for objects, glancing at a phone or other device, or having distracting conversations/thoughts. These actions have led and can lead to serious accidents. It's also important for drivers to keep emotions in check and practice time management. It's never safe to drive under the negative influence of added stress or pressure.

I know that many of these tips can feel difficult if not impossible to follow at times. The important thing to remind yourself of is this cold, hard



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truth: **driving is the number-one killer of teens.** Teenagers cannot comprehend their levels of risk as inexperienced drivers and are more likely to engage in distracting behaviors. It is also much easier as a caregiver to set driving rules and say assertively to a teen, “You absolutely cannot _____ while in the car” if they can’t argue back to you, “But YOU do it, so why can’t I?!”

As seasoned drivers, we need to remind ourselves of how stressful the learning-to-drive process can be for everyone involved. As parents, we can start teaching kids early on, and they will (hopefully) listen to us, imitate us, and do as we say. More work ahead of time should mean less of it later on, and this will be especially useful when dealing with a teen who is hormonal, emotional, distracted, or stressed.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you have found this perspective and some of the suggested recommendations of value. It has been a pleasure acting as a guest blogger. Please use any of the tips I’ve provided here as loose guidelines. As a parent, you are ultimately the only one responsible for actions taken with your child. Driving is one of the most dangerous things that we regularly do, and this important privilege should never be taken lightly.

Drive safely!

“Ms. Missy,” OTR

P.S. To learn more about Extra Credit! LLC, visit www.extracreditaustin.com and [like us on Facebook](#) to receive informative postings. For more information about OT’s role in driving rehabilitation and community mobility, please check out [AOTA](#) and the [Driver Rehab Institute](#).

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