**[Really Dad ? Driving Lessons](https://www.ctworkerscomplaw.com/really-dad-driving-lessons/)**

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**Michael**

Every March 2nd I wake up my daughter singing “Happy Birthday.” I also sing to her on March 3rd, the 4th, the 5th, and so on for the next 60 days until it is actually her birthday, on May 2nd. If a friend of hers happens to be staying over during this two month period, there is always a moment of embarrassed confusion that Mickey has to clear up by explaining that it’s not really her birthday; it’s just a weird daddy thing. She probably chalks it up to another reason the Department of Children and Families should pay a visit to our home. But mostly she seems content to smile and play along, enjoying the attention of her extended birthday.

Since this year will be her sweet 16th, there has been an exuberant push to claim the rights and privileges attendant with her coming of age: yes, I mean driving. Because we spend a lot of time up in our cabin in Vermont, both our kids have been lucky enough to hone their driving skills on the lonely dirt roads of Windham where you are more likely to encounter a moose or bear than another vehicle. We had to curtail Michaela’s driving in Vermont for a time after a misadventure one fine February morning when she slid into a snowbank at the edge of the driveway, having been momentarily mesmerized by her own reflection in the rearview mirror. It took a good hour of digging and putting evergreen branches under the tires to finally extricate ourselves from the mound of snow, and with each passing moment of that spectacular morning that we were not carving turns on the mountain, I became a little more perturbed with Michaela. I started to lecture her about keeping her eyes on the road, when Lisa interrupted me to remind me that our daughter was only 10 years old, so I should probably go easy on her.

Now her mantra is for driving lessons whenever we get into the car. I want her to get as much experience under her belt as possible, under all sorts of conditions, before that day when I hand over the keys and she will disappear down the driveway without looking back. We practice driving up at the old airport which is private property, so is not technically against the law. She drives along the dirt tracks that parallel the rings where she has had horse competitions. I wonder how I could have been so nervous when she was in charge of just one horse, when now, she has to control several hundred horses revving under the hood. She practices parking in the lot adjacent to the firehouse, opening her door each time to see how close she came to the white line.

On a quiet Sunday, after we have driven down a deserted cul de sac, completing three point turns, backing into parking spaces, and pulling forward between the two white lines, I drive home. Mickey asks to park the car in the driveway. She pulls up to the garden circumscribed by a border of football-signed rocks. This would have been the end of an uneventful driving lesion, except she lurches forward crunching one of the small boulders against the undercarriage of the car. Michaela is all apologies. I can feel involuntary fasciculation’s rippling across my face as my daddy demeanor is losing an argument to the guy who pays the bills. Or as Michaela likes to say, the “bulldog” look was creeping across my face. “Are you kidding me, Mick?” I ask, the irritation leaking into my voice, her eyebrows furrowing. “But Dad, I didn’t mean to,” her bottom lip quivering, her eyes welling with tears.

I know what’s coming next if I don’t turn this around quickly. I invoke the wisdom of my grandmother, telling her: “Don’t cry over what money can buy,” a phrase I will try to remember a month later when my son totals the same car, but is not injured. Mickey puts the car in reverse, and I pretend not to hear the rending screech of the car being pried off the rock. I will wait till later to run my fingers along the gouge under the bumper. Mickey has her swag back as she rolls down the road again. The waterworks have been averted.

On another lesson, Michaela navigates down a mile-long descent, gathering speed as she goes. I see two things coming up fast—an oncoming dump truck and a garbage bin that the wind has blown about three feet into her lane. My right leg starts twitching as I hunt for a brake pedal that does not exist. “Slow down,” I caution, as I pucker-up the fabric from the seat beneath me. She follows my instruction to a tee, slowing the SUV but holding her line straight into the plastic can which goes flying into the yard from whence it came. On a brighter note, the dump truck speeds by without incident.

Note to myself: perhaps she needs a bit more practice before unleashing her on the highways. Another six years ought to do it. About the same time I tell the orthodontist to take off her braces.

**Michaela**

No matter what my father claims, my first accident (in a car) was not last year. In fact it was at least six years ago. I was young and small enough that my legs were too short to reach the controls of a vehicle, never mind a Durango truck. My parents had the brilliant idea to allow their child to drive down a snowy, slippery driveway. Of course as one could easily guess, I had not yet mastered my steering skills at age ten, so the two right tires may have drifted slightly off the road into a ditch that was impossible to get out of. But whose fault is that: the innocent little girl who was sitting on her dad’s lap driving; or the irresponsible father who allowed the little girl to drive? Really Dad? Anyway, I have not lived that one down, regardless of the fact that my little mishap has been eclipsed by another, shall we say, reckless driver in the family. \*Cough cough\* my brother \*cough\*.

As of right now, my sixteenth birthday is in two days, and if all goes well, I will get my learners’ permit in three days. So recently each of my parents has been individually giving me driving lessons. The first two lessons with my dad did not go so well. I will set the scene for you: Nervous Michaela is worried about driving and redeeming herself in her father’s eyes. We have just finished a nice drive on a dead end street. My dad drove home, and I asked to park the car when we are back in the driveway. My dad stops the car on a dead-end street. I get my seatbelt on, start the car, adjust the mirrors and the seat. I put the car in drive to pull around a small rock wall surrounding the garden in my driveway, we are cruisin’; and then bang. Well technically it wasn’t a bang, more of a high pitched “eeee” but in my dad’s ears it sounded more like the chi-ching of a cash register, back in the days of black and white movies. The bottom of the pristine driver’s side door was a wee bit too close to the rocks and apparently it came in contact with one of them. Woopsies. Even though the Audi A4 now lives at Nino’s Garage, unable to be driven, and NOT because of yours truly, I still reap the consequences of that tiny accident. In the bigger picture, that was just a chip in the fingernail polish. By the time my brother wrecked the rig, there was no finger left, never mind the nail to paint.

Now on to the second driving lesson. This time, we made it out of the driveway and down the hill without any issues, so I was feeling good. My dad is an easy person to drive with in comparison to my mother, who is like an air traffic controller, streaming live, warning me about even the most remote possibility of contact with another vehicle, pedestrian, or in Bethany, horses. My dad is much calmer, tending to point out dangers only when they are imminent, which is usually the style better suited to me. However, I do get anxious when I am driving down a hill, coming around a turn in a rather large vehicle, headed straight for a garbage can placed smack in the middle of my lane, while at the same time a truck is accelerating up the hill and around the turn in the opposite lane and the only instruction I receive is “Slow down.” Naturally, I chose the lane with the garbage can and not the one with the speeding vehicle, and perhaps the Durango may have grazed the rubber container. My dad yelled and then laughed at my mistake; the laughing hurt far worse than the yelling. Maybe if he had been a little more animated about the obstacles ahead, I could have avoided them altogether. Thank you though pops, so funny.

Although some of these lessons did not go perfectly, others did. They served not only as driving lessons but life lessons, time for my dad and me to talk about anything going on in our lives, even things that may have seemed stupid at the time. It’s like that country song about a father and a daughter who go fishing together, “She Thinks We’re Just Fishing.” I know we’re not just driving. I am grateful not only for the mistakes I can make when my dad is in the car, but for the memories that come out of them. And even though in a few months, I will be driving on my own, I might have to get a checkup on my skills every once in a while, dad. Because you know, your advice is always fire, as the kids say these days.