

Faith



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis Make the most of being their driver

The vehicle I drive is white, but it might as well be yellow because most days of the week, I am a taxi.

I really don't mind it — largely because of advice I received when my children were small. Through multiple conversations, I began to realize how spending time with my kids in the car is a gift to be enjoyed, not a burden to be endured.

First there was the dad who told me how much he enjoyed taking his daughter to school. The 20-minute commute was their special time, a chance for him to stay up-to-speed on her life and have her uninterrupted attention.

Then there was the mom who told me that when your child turns 16 and starts driving, you slowly begin to lose them. They want to spend more time with friends and less time at home.

While this may not true for everyone — and parents clearly call the shots in how much rope to give — it was the case in my life. Many of my best teenage memories involved driving around with my friends, blaring our favorite songs and enjoying our newfound freedom.

All this to say, I try not to wish away my years as a taxi. I try to remember how the constant shuttling of this season is a stage I'll later miss. The truth is, many of the best conversations with my kids happen in the car, and here are a few reasons why:

► **I have their undivided attention, and**

they have mine: Unlike home, the car doesn't require a juggling act. I'm not distracted by laundry, dishes, clogged toilets, etc. My only job is to drive, and this frees my mind and makes me more attentive, better able to talk and really listen.

► **Picking my kids up from school and activities allows me to catch their raw emotions:** I can often sense by the way my kids approach my car how their day went, whether school or practice went well or not. I love being the first one to hear about an accomplishment or a disappointment. I like getting their news hot off the press, and even the car rides where a child bursts into tears can open the door to important dialogue.

► **Driving my kids enables one-on-one interaction:** When you have multiple kids like I do, it's hard to carve out alone time. I embrace one-on-one moments whenever they come, using things like a 5-minute drive to dance to tell my daughter I am proud of her and ask questions about her life.

► **Not facing a person makes it easier to have honest conversations:** I once learned in a psychology class that the car is a great venue for hard conversations because when we look at someone, we may hold back due to fear or embarrassment.

In her online article "The Power of Sideways Listening," author Joan McFadden talks about

the joy of car confession and quotes Dr. Arthur Cassidy, a social media psychologist, as saying, "Sideways listening is unobtrusive and provides the reassurance to offspring that parents are actively listening. ... It can be perceived by teenagers as less threatening and might encourage more openness of communication at a time when they naturally keep more from their parents."

In short, being side-by-side can help both parents and kids talk bravely.

► **Having older kids requires new ways to connect:** Gone are the days where my kids would open up to me as I tuck them into bed. Many nights, my oldest girls stay up later than me finishing their homework. Car talks help me keep a pulse on their lives as their lives play out. Being in multiple carpools, I also love to transport their friends and get to know them better.

My oldest daughter just turned 15, and that means I have one more year as her taxi. Already, she is pumped up about the freedom soon to come.

I know it's the natural progression, but it still makes me sad. She and I connect a lot in my car, and while it will be nice to have a driver, I'll sure miss her as a passenger.

If the walls of my Suburban could talk, they'd have a thousand stories to tell. My car has heard laughter, tears, fights, rap music,

praise music, funny dialogue, serious dialogue, confessions, prayers, tales from my past and advice on every subject — from what to look for in boys to tips for handling conflict.

My parenting truly changed when I recognized the value of time in the car. Never did I imagine, as I buckled screaming babies into car seats, that one day down the road, hanging out with them in the car might actually be fun.

It's not possible or practical to always be the driver, but when we parents are, I believe in making the most of it and seeing our car rides as a chance to connect and share what's going on.

Good conversations can happen when we're in a tight space and forced to talk. The biggest game changer of all may not be what we share with our kids, but what share with us and we learn to sit quietly behind the wheel and make a point to really listen.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a Mountain Brook mom of four girls, columnist and blogger for The Huffington Post. Her two books for teen and tween girls — "Liked: Whose Approval Are You Living For?" and "10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know" — are available on Amazon and everywhere books are sold. Join her Facebook community at "Kari Kampakis, Writer," visit her blog at karikampakis.com or contact her at kari@karikampakis.com.

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