



KIDS IN OLD CARS

THE RIDE

of YOUR LIFE

I TREAT EVERY DRIVE IN AN OLD CAR THE SAME WAY AS A FLIGHT IN AN OLD AIRPLANE. ANY DISCREPANCY IS A “NO-GO”

They say becoming a parent is a life-changing event. And until I had a child I didn't fully understand just how right that statement was. But in addition to the obvious adjustments that came with having a kid (diaper changing, no sleep, being “that guy” on an airplane), that first drive home from the hospital with our daughter certainly saw my driving technique change.

Gone were any thoughts of cutting a good light at the bottom of the freeway on-ramp, or taking those long sweepers at speeds that made all four tires audibly “happy.” Nope. Even though our hours-old little girl was secured snugly into a car seat that cost more than my first car (under the watchful eye of a nurse I suspect was a drill sergeant in her former life), I was still terrified. There, in the back of a 450-horsepower AWD SUV with every safeguard imaginable, was this tiny little person who instantly made me the most cautious driver on the road.

It was winter, and when spring arrived, I had a stunning realization: Will I ever be able to take my kid in these old cars I love so much?

Experience over risk

Of course, the answer was “yes,” but a cautious one. Because any decent parent has to balance the value of any given activity or experience against the risk it may impose on his child. This equation runs the gamut, being applied from piggyback rides to airplanes and everything in between. Somewhere smack-dab in the middle of this list of potentially risky things is the act of strapping your kids into an old car and taking them for a ride.

Let's face it: Old cars are nowhere near as safe as modern cars. They don't stop, steer, or handle as well. There are no electronic angels. Most have limited impact protection, even when it isn't a unibody car that was spot-welded together in some restorer's shop (think about that for a second). Sharp edges abound, child safety locks do not, and seatbelts — if they are installed — are rarely ideal for child car-seat mounting the same way a LATCH system is in a modern vehicle.



They'll be asking for the keys before you know it

When it comes to making cars safer, we've come a long way in the past few decades. But there is also the aspect of distraction. Touch-screen 825-watt stereo satnav systems, Bluetooth phones, texting, satellite radios... they all tend to make even good drivers focus on stuff other than driving.

What follows is not in any way meant to either encourage or dissuade you from sharing your love of cruising in old cars with your kids. It is simply what I decided to do and how I view the risk-versus-reward profile of using my cars with my daughter onboard. And, as you may have guessed, I decided on certain cars and for certain trips where the risk is not that much greater than in a modern car.

Thinking ahead

For starters, you have to pick a car that has no mechanical compromises. No “I’ll fix that over the winter” stuff. No old tires, no growling wheel bearings, no doors that have some trick to make them work, etc. You also need to make sure your car won’t leave you stranded on the side of the road, or gas your child with carbon monoxide leaking into the cabin.

I treat every drive in an old car the same way I do every flight in an old airplane. Check all the fluids, tires, do a complete walk-around, make sure everything is perfect. And just like an airplane, any discrepancy turns a “go” into a “no-go.” Period.


Make sure the seatbelts that will hold your appropriate car seat are securely mounted, function properly and are in good condition. If you don’t know how the belts are attached to the chassis, you need to take a look. I’ve seen some scary ones over the years. Grade 5 minimum for the hardware, and through a reinforced part of the chassis is a must — and in a location that won’t put the belt at an odd angle or across anything sharp when in use.

What next? While loud pipes save lives, they are not what your kids’ sensitive ears need, so before you fire up that big block, put ear protection on the young one. I like the miniature-earmuff-style ones that you can buy at any big-box retailer, sporting-goods stores, and the like. Yes, they come in pink as well — ask me how I know. If you are in an open car, don’t forget the sun and eye protection, too.



Everybody remembers their first ride in a Cobra

isn’t good, either.

The bottom line is this: If we use our heads and avoid as many risks as possible, we can safely share this great hobby with our children. There is nothing like seeing a kid’s face light up at the thought of a “fun” ride, or watching them get even more enjoyment from it than you do. Do it right and you’ll be using your car, spending time as a family, and at the same time ushering in the next generation of enthusiasts. 

Where to drive?

I make sure to avoid areas I know will be congested or where traffic is faster than I feel comfortable driving with my daughter in the car — either for noise, wind or other considerations such as driving the car too close to its own limits (think pre-war car on the interstate).

And finally, the destination is also a consideration. Many of my dad/daughter runs terminate at a car show or cruise night, which she loves, but they bring a whole other set of caveats — especially cruise-in type shows.

Once you are out of the car, you have to be vigilant. Scan your surroundings. Watch for guys who think they need to rev their engines relentlessly when parking, because I’ve seen a few of them grab the wrong gear or miss the brake pedal, and it isn’t something you want to be near — especially with children. Watch for the “my car can do a burnout” guys, too, because having somebody close to ground level getting pelted with rocks, rubber, and hydrocarbons at eye level

HALF PG AD