

An informed Choice every parent can Make.

The moment of decision – some may say indecision, but that's the same as looking at a glass of water and saying it's half empty when it's really half full. The question "what car" challenges every parent the day a son or daughter eclipses the all important moment when they can now legally start to learn to drive a vehicle. This is more powerful and potentially more destructive for them than every other life experience that has occurred up to this moment. The power to be independent, gain instant peer respect, be autonomous and free to choose outside any and all previously stated guidelines, an illusion of little or no consequence that is intoxicating – remember?

In "OUR" day (how often have we heard that?), the family car was either a Mk 1 Zephyr or a Morris minor or something in between – poles apart but at best they were all wobbly beasts with terrible brakes, heavy steering and only three forward gears with synchromesh. The Morris would struggle to reach 60 mph on the flat let alone up a hill and dad (mum didn't drive) patiently taught everyone to drive within those limits simply because exceeding them was impossible! That was important, an accident at 40 mph resulted in a bent bumper, a dent in the guard and a clip around the ear – all fixed on a Saturday morning with a hammer, some paint and often brute strength. None of these apply today, not even the "clip around the ear"!

So now it's all different. Used cars are available at ridiculously low prices, private to private sales on internet sites dominate the market and sons and daughters know exactly what they want to impress. Without the benefit of hindsight many a parent has unwittingly approved the purchase of a seemingly non-descript "nice little car" as it slips under the radar crammed with a powerful turbocharged engine and capable of exceeding twice the legal speed limit within minutes. How do we know, we see it everyday with youngsters still at school driving turbocharged weapons, bought as their "first car" by unsuspecting parents. But how do you know as a parent the danger, most of us don't have a clue what goes on under the bonnet, quite frankly the technology has become alien? It's more likely to be the cost of fuel going in the other end that has your attention, so how do you "avoid" the trap? It's actually very easy but only if you know how and "knowing how" is what we are going to discuss. But before we move forward perhaps a bit of background so you can see where I am coming from and where you can go to find a solution.

First off I have a son and he's crashed twice and hard enough to write off 2 cars – so believe me I know the feeling, from the anger after the self righteous "I told you to be careful" after the first accident to the horror arriving at the scene only minutes from home confronted by a mangled wreckage. The first was a Corolla and was a slow speed "slide" in the wet with minimal impact into a roadside barrier that was put there expressly for this purpose. Not so serious but the barrier height effectively cut the inner guard in half which for an insurance claim was a "write off" but as a "do up" ideal for a panel beater over winter and enough that it was repaired and put back on the road. Still drivable and nothing more serious than dented pride it was a first lesson which in hindsight was going to be easier than the one that followed. The second accident in a BMW 318i with airbag, ABS and all the mod cons was so serious that without the benefit of the afore mentioned passive and active safety there could have been a fatal outcome, the car was a total and absolute wreck and as a counterpoint had he been driving the

“old” Corolla he would certainly have been seriously injured but nothing worse than a bump on the head. Yes the airbag and the pyrotechnic belts went off, yes the car had done its job – the speed 80 – 90 kph in a 100 zone and the road wet and slippery with a bad off camber corner, a road he travelled everyday until this happened.

We taught him to drive initially then put him through a full driving instruction course, but inevitably we can only do so much. Both these cars fitted the “formula” I had decided appropriate for a restricted driver which I will share presently. The BMW however was chosen for its solid construction, active and passive safety and excellent value for money, both cars incidentally were NZ new, as I don’t have a lot of time for used imports. The BMW was replaced with a NZ new Audi 80 2.0 1996 model, red, leather, alloys, Auto, air conditioning, 1 owner with ABS, airbag and Audis excellent pro ten safety system. In a hard collision this literally drags the steering away from the driver at the same time it pulls the drivers seat backwards as well as pulling the seatbelts tight (and setting off the airbag) all with pyrotechnic charges and steel cables – do we want to test this theory in practice – I think not!

I have and continue to compete in motorsport including Targa and circuit racing, drive and observe in “safety car” duty for Motorsport NZ including the A1 GP and compete in long distance endurance racing. I appreciate the potential for disaster can be just around the next corner and have had many occasions where I have been thankful for the benefit of experience. I have also taken that experience and used it in driver training, teaching young learner drivers in a controlled environment, to think about and react to different real life situations, ones they will have to face in the future. Nothing beats experience but you have to first “experience” something before learning to avoid the same outcome “next time”. Motorsport has often been maligned as a “dangerous sport” and based upon the environment – it is potentially dangerous but it is also a safe way to gain invaluable experience and life skills. Motorsport acknowledge this that’s why a novice “race or rally car” driver can only compete after being observed under controlled supervision; must pass written, oral and practical tests before being permitted to progress from club sport timed dual sprint events to national events involving competition. Then after further observations can they graduate to a full competition licence graded accordingly as they continue to demonstrate both the experience and maturity to meet required Motorsport standards of driving and sportsmanship. Break these rules and the stewards are ruthless in their enforcement with fines that are significant with little or no chance of appeal. So if a novice or even an experienced Motorsport National Race and Rally grade licence holder such as myself cannot just jump in and drive a NZ V8 touring car without the appropriate licence and grading, why do we currently have no restrictions on a 15 year old learner driver driving cars far more lethal than a NZ V8 on public roads?

The “formula” for staying alive I believe is simple. It comes down to power output – not the size of the engine and not the number of cylinders (although a 4 cylinder is always the preference). If you apply a standard based entirely on the manufacturers published engine power output for a given engine then you cannot go wrong. I have found that 75kw is a number that most agree to be an appropriate benchmark for a restricted driver which is just on 100bhp. Some may decide that even 75kw is too high and set their own benchmark with a younger driver, but whatever the number you set, stick to it. Basing the formula on engine size is a crock – a 1300cc Starlet Turbo delivers 78Kw (107hp) as standard but can easily produce 100kw with a better exhaust, cold airbox and some electronic wizardry not to mention much more with a bigger turbo – so forget engine

size. Motorcycles have a 250cc learner limit and that has been successful, cars need a more accurate assessment and power is the only logical choice.

How do you do this? Simple because we have something called "the internet" all you do is go to www.carfolio.com click on the alpha character for the brand you are interested in, select the brand and then start searching. As an example choose Toyota and then sort by Hp Ascending and right up to 100bhp you'll find 241 possibilities including the popular and evergreen Corolla 1.6 but not the thumping GT 16V. If you are unsure check the engine cc rating, imports especially display a body plate fixed to the bonnet underside stating this, otherwise get the seller to give you the information. Subaru, in a similar search reveals the 2005 Impreza 1.5S at 99 Hp as the most powerful restricted driver option and not the 221bhp turbo, same goes for Mitsubishi and the list goes on. The 1.3 Corolla my son had as a first car was a mere but adequate 74bhp engine 1290cc 12 valve. The BMW 318i was an E30 at 103bhp and the current Audi is 115bhp, all in much the same vein but now with the benefit of a full licence and experience his taste for cars has matured and speed is no longer a factor, safety, quality, comfort and space are the main considerations.

All you can ever do as a parent is guide your kids. You nurtured and protected them when they are young and helpless, so why throw them into the deep end when they get their drivers licence? Don't give them keys to a powerful car and expect they will come home safely unscathed - they won't. The lure and the excitement of driving on the edge where they think they are indestructible overcomes any fear, remember a 75kw car will still do over 160 kph. The choices you make with their first car will guide them to make mature decisions in the future. Accidents will happen for sure and corrections will be made that's part of learning and sometimes the hard way. But if you provide them with a vehicle that allows them to acquire the necessary driver skills to survive then you can be confident that their future will be safer with the benefit of that knowledge. Set standards and provide guidelines that if they choose to follow then that's a win win – sometimes experience is the only leveller but ultimately it's not a game although survival is the ultimate goal – remember it's tough out there.