

8 Salesmen or Pit Crew?

I had worn out the old Satellite. I was tired of driving that humiliating Army-green barge on wheels and wanted something cute and smart to compliment my “educated college girl” look. My dad drove me to a dealership owned by a friend of his. After eliminating everything I could not afford, I proudly signed on the dotted line to buy an adorable Plymouth Horizon. It was the perfect reflection of me: sassy, cute, fun, and smart. It was robin’s egg blue, had a sunroof and an 8-track player. I had arrived.

I was giddy with how impressed my friends would be. My dad said congratulations and left in his own car. I got behind the wheel and smiled as wide as Montana at the half a dozen salesmen waving me off on my maiden voyage. I turned the key and hit the accelerator. The car lurched forward and died. It happened so fast, there was no time to hide. Manual... not automatic. Did I miss something?

I had no idea how to drive a stick. So much for that smart, sassy look I was aiming for. I spent the next hour taking lessons in the dealership parking lot so I could drive it home without stalling and stuttering. Headline: “College Girl Utterly Humiliated by Smart, Sassy Blue Horizon.” What had happened? I had let the experts, my dad and his friend the car salesman, make my purchasing decisions for me. The emotional high of having a new car smothered my logic. I was so wrapped up in how cute it was, I completely missed the fact that I was not prepared for the car I was buying.

How many teens are in relationships beyond their adolescent capabilities? (“Julie is so lucky! She is dating a college senior named “Animal” and she is only 15.”) Kids are jolted, misled by their chemistry, and cannot control their cooling systems. Too much horsepower overwhelms their underdeveloped control modules. This is not to imply that young people are in any way stupid. Absolutely not. To whom else would you turn to program your thermostat or solve a Rubik’s cube? The point is, they can become awfully distracted by the pretty colors and veer into oncoming traffic while following a beautiful set of taillights.

They rarely travel alone, these young people. They ride in herds, traffic jams of kids, giving each other advice, “supporting” each other, selling each other the goods all around them. (“You are awesome at Guitar Hero. My boyfriend has a cousin who can nail Motley Crue on expert level, and he’s only been playing for the two months since he got out of jail. You should go out with him. We could all hang together.”)

Your student is surrounded by people daily who are eager to sell them something. There is no shortage of teenagers who will step right into the roll of “Car Salesman” and advise your student on the perfect ride. The trouble is, like some real car salesmen, these experts may not have your child’s best interests in mind. If you are a hungry buyer, and you think you want to own a Corvette, you will find yourself a salesman who will sell you a Corvette. You don’t pull into “Al’s Slightly Dusty Subaru” lot. You don’t want Al’s reliable automobile, you don’t want to hear Al tell you about how safe and fuel-efficient his cars are, even if it’s the affordable way to drive to work every day. No, you want to find Slick Rick at “Hot Rod Adventures” to put you in a metallic red, turbo-charged beast. It’s not Slick Rick’s job to sell you the insurance, just to get you behind the wheel.

So who sells to our kids? Who are the car salesmen in our kid’s lives? (Note: the word “salesmen” is intended to be gender non-specific. I am fully aware that there are great Car Saleswomen and Car Salespeople. “Salesmen” is just so much easier to say. Please

don't be offended. My brother sells cars and I love him!) Most often, the salesmen will be our kids' schoolmates. This is not so horrible when it comes to, say, shoe advice. ("Buy some flip flops. Who cares if they're bad for your posture, they're so cute with your green toenail polish!") But when it comes to matchmaking, their friends can fail in a number of categories.

The friends are inexperienced. ("Shelby, you are gonna LOVE this guy. He wears a blue hoodie just like you!") They don't always have your best interests in mind. ("Shelby, he's got a really hot car and he can drive ALL of us to the mall. His dad has a lawyer friend that got his points taken off from the DUI.") They are only salesmen; they are not the ones who have to drive the vehicle. Whatever happens to you after your "purchase" does not impact them. Look closely at their motivation. Some salesmen are just careless, but some can be downright self-serving. ("Don't blame me that he actually had a pregnant girlfriend. I only told you he was cute.")

So what are we to do, as the parents of these impressionable children? Yes, the "salesman" with the poor recommendation might feel a bit guilty as your student crashes into misery, but it's your student who does the driving. It is your daughter who will cry at night after Lance Romance cheats on her. It is your son who will mope and fail math when the GF dumps him for being too nice, the same way she ended the last seven relationships. Your student will be the one that has to write the break up letter, not you, and certainly not their trusted "experts."



Who pays for the broken fuel pump in your student's car? The car your best friend talked them into buying?

What we can do is teach our kids about taking more ownership in their decisions so they are not as vulnerable. But how? Kids are still not experienced in the ways of the world, are they? No,

especially when it comes to revealing the reality behind a pretty face. ("But what else do you need to know, Rachel? Look at his smile!") For one thing, our kids need to be armed with knowledge. We can guide our kids to find the information out for themselves, and then let's be honest here, follow that up with our own research. ("After all, his pretty smile sits right under that dagger tattoo below his left eye. What else do you need to know, Rachel?")

If your son wants to buy a car, he can read Consumer Reports to find out what they say about the safety tests, frequency of repairs, cost, and fuel efficiency for a particular car. CR will flat-out tell you what models to avoid and what models are recommended. Perhaps your daughter wants to buy the little Honda she saw for sale in the front yard of a farmhouse. She could pull up a CARFAX vehicle history report to tell her if the car has ever been wrecked or flooded. Use the information you have to investigate what you might be buying.

If your student is not yet interested in all the techno-temptations, by all means, **DO NOT STEER THEM THERE!** MySpace™, Facebook™, IM's, Texting and the Internet will all be there when your student is ready to roll. If, however, the momentum is already building towards that end, I would highly recommend using the technology that is available to your advantage. Your kids certainly will. Sure, you could ban your daughter from having a MySpace™ account, but she is capable of creating one anyway at her friend's house. I can name three kids today that have accounts under different names that their parents know nothing about. Instead of being so fearful of it, use it. Share a MySpace™ account with your student or even build your own. (Your child will show you how.) You are entitled to have the password for all accounts at all times. (You can do this. They are still underage and dependent on you. Be strong, brave buffalo.) Then, look at it. Look people up. With your teen sitting right there with you.

"So, sweetie, your friend Ashlee says that Jonathan is a nice boy who would never say a harsh word about anybody. Let's look at his MySpace™ page. Huh. It says right here, now tell me if I'm

translating this wrong, ‘I hate that @!#*&% science teacher. She’s a B@*!ch and I’m not doing her homework anymore.’ So what exactly did Ashlee base her assessment on? I’ll bet he has pretty eyes.”



Model It...

Spend some time on MySpace™ or Facebook™ becoming familiar with the latest virtual hangouts. Browse for some examples to share with your student. (Keep track of the links). Learn how to read the profile pages and what to look for so when the time comes, you can “browse” with your student. Have enough of both good and bad examples to choose from and use them as teaching tools.

- ✦ **I highly recommend that parental controls be enabled at all times. Log students on only when you are there and only temporarily in case you forget that you disabled the security.**

Salesmen don’t always tell you everything. They might only tell you just enough to get you to buy the car. They put the cars they need to sell out front, and put the best deals at the back of the lot. They might neglect to inform you that the last three models of this car were recalled, that it drives like a steamboat, or that “your mileage may vary.” Vary a lot. They want to sell you the car because they need the paycheck. This is not a bad motivation, but as always, “Buyer Beware.” You simply must investigate on your own. Test-drive it. Look up what other people have said about its reliability. Get the word-of-mouth opinion – from people you trust. Look beyond the tri-fold brochure on the desk. After all, if your “friend” steers you toward a “loser” guy, it just might be because she wants the “winner” for herself. Examine the motivation behind all your salesmen. You don’t walk onto the lot and buy the first convertible car you see. Jumping into the first

relationship you see because she has solid struts is just hormonal thinking. Control your chassis there, fella.

Everybody has advice to give, wanted or unwanted, some good, and some bad, some of it entirely inappropriate for your child. ("Oh, Tim is so handsome and he has such a good job at the country club parking cars. I'm sure he only sleeps around because he hasn't found the right girl yet.") To whom should your child listen? Let's switch gears. Instead of trying to find that one perfect salesman, what if our children were surrounded by folks who genuinely "have their back"? What if they assembled a pit crew of skilled experts with a keen eye and goals similar to their own?

Indy 500 racers are strapped into the driver's seat by their team, a team of racing experts. The pit crew's job is to keep the car safe, accident-free, and of course, to win. The driver stays in constant contact with his crew. Each member is hand-picked, highly-trained, and trustworthy. It is in all of their best interests that the driver does not crash. (No driver, no job.) The crew has an entirely different perspective from the driver. They can see what the driver cannot. ("Breaker, breaker, good buddy, your wheel's on fire.") They can see cars rolling end over end around the next curve. They know when you can put the pedal down because it's clean clear to Flag Town. They know how you have run before ("Too close to the wall, Joe!") and they know what is coming up behind you ("Here comes that pretty blonde thing with nothing on her mind but leaving you in the dust.")

Kids need the reliable and continuous influx of information that their pit crew relays to them. Your student speeds around the track on an adrenaline rush, no mirrors, falling in love with every little chassis that shimmies, they need some self-less, not self-centered, people to be their ears, their eyes, even their wisdom. ("Hey, Mia, you have tried to overtake this little Sports Car six times. It ain't working, sweetheart. Decelerate and back off. He looks down his spoiler at you.")



The time to pick your pit crew is before the race has started.

The pit crew needs to be assembled long before the start of the race, long before you hear: “Gentlemen, start your engines.” Every aspect of racing is discussed and diagrammed before you speed down the stretch toward the checkered flag. Safety is of utmost importance. They constantly keep an eye out for upcoming road hazards so you don’t have a blow-out before the race is over. (“Hey, Alex, you fell asleep in math class today. What gives?”) The driver’s ability is constantly monitored. (“You know, Samantha, I’ve seen your reaction to that smile before. You hit the wall last time. His sparkling grill shouldn’t throw you off again.”) The pit crew is aware that safety is vital, that upcoming road hazards need to be communicated quickly. Failure to do so can devastate a team. (“Perfume spill at the second turn! Veer left!”)

Your student might not be able to pick a pit crew by him or herself. After all, these are the same kids who let someone convince them to skip school after lunch. As manager, owner, and rescuer of the driver, you (the parent) may need to assist them with these Human Resource issues. (“So who sold you on the idea to wear a bikini top and a shawl to church? I’d like to have a talk with this Sunflower Patchouli.”)



Model It...

Write a blank check for \$10,000 and hand it to your teen.

Read out loud to your student: THIS IS AN EXERCISE and NO, YOU CANNOT HAVE THE CHECK WHEN WE ARE DONE. (Silly kids.)

Tell your student: I am going to write 10 names on the “Pay to the order of” line on this check. These 10 people

together will use this check to buy you a car. You will not be able to speak to these 10 people about what you want before they buy the car. Think carefully — who are those 10 people?

Your student's answer to this exercise gives you a good starting point for who should be in their "pit crew."

If your student doesn't have 10 friends for their Pit Crew, start with five. These should be the kids they see every day... and trust every day. These should be the people they "do" life with. If your student is having trouble coming up with a list of their own, this might be a great time to recommend kids you know that they hadn't thought of. Have your student invite these other teens to be in their Pit Crew, meaning that they are willing to make sound observations and tell the truth about what they see.

Now that your teen has sifted out a top-notch pit crew from the self-interested salesmen around her, she still wants to shop. We need to remind our little darlings that most of the inventory on the showroom floor should really be in the used car lot. There may be some fully ripe "lemons" on the lot but regardless, all these kids have some mileage on them. Even the shyest, most studious kid in physics class has been living and creating a history for himself. It is imperative that our kids take a look at the sticker on the window and find out what roads every potential date has traveled before. CARFAX would tell you if a vehicle has been ridden hard and used as a taxi cab. Consumer Reports will tell you that a particular model blows a tie rod when more than four crash dummies take it for a joy ride. So which model should humans carpool in?



Nothing in the "dating dealership" has zero miles on it.

Consider the ancient form of communication: no, not smoke signals, talking to people. ("You mean in person? No electricity

required?”) You can do this. People are still a great source of stories and insight despite their overwhelming need to be attached to their cell phones. Ok, fine, go ahead and call.



Model it...

- **Ask for three to five adult references to inquire about someone your child is going to date. Get phone numbers and actually make the calls.**
- **Check with teachers, friends, neighbors, pastors that you trust to give any pertinent information.**
- **Meet the parents at least by phone, but preferably in person.**

And by all means let us not forget this great age of information. This is the age of YouTube™ and MySpace™. By the time this book is published, we'll probably wear holograms of our complete history hidden somewhere under our left earlobe. You want to know what I did in 1978? Just press this button on my neck. (And then please let *me* know because it was all a blur.) But for now let's use the technology we have. Look someone up. Google their name. ("Well, what have we here? I thought you said Mara doesn't drink, but she has a video of herself on YouTube™ doing a keg-stand with a skirt on. That's odd.")

You can easily discover important information about a person, frequently because they advertise their own crazy behavior. Read a person's blog. They publish them on the web for someone to read, why not you? A student's blog tends to be a candid advertisement either in their favor or against it. Look at their MySpace™ page. Is it covered with nasty photos of binge drinking? Dripping skulls and gas masks? Pentagrams? Explore these with your teen sitting right beside you. It's one thing to describe a car wreck. It's another, much more vivid, experience to witness the carnage together.

Yes, these kids are young. They are trying to “find themselves.” Most are not yet fully assembled individuals who experiment a little with this strange style and that passing interest, and it may be years before they actually land in a “final” personality. (Did anyone else go to high school with the guy who only wore a long black coat and mumbled but who is now a successful animator?) Even though kids have a history, they are not who they are likely to become in real life. We need to teach our kids not to judge too harshly or too quickly, but to maintain a healthy caution about others’ behavior. Not every strange behavior is a red flag. Just because Johnny doesn’t wash his hair every day, doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s indifferent or unaware. Maybe his family is struggling financially.

And yes, many, even most of these kids have a ton of unrealized potential. The trick is to teach your student to sift through the sticker features to find what works. A car with potential might not go anywhere without a complete overhaul. An investment in a relationship must be examined in the same way. Unfortunately, some kids have already exhibited behaviors that render their “value” as a potential date sliding downhill fast. (“Dad, Nathan has only been suspended twice for his temper. He’s just mad because he hates school. This summer he will be so much cooler.”) How much of an investment does your child want to make overhauling their new date to prove out his potential? Would you want them spending all their time and money trying to restore a car that was in a six-car pile up?

No kid is freshly made; no teenager was freshly formed and baked just this morning with the freshness seal. You have to ask around. You have to look around. You have to talk around with your friends, on the web, to other parents, to coaches, to the local cops if necessary to find out about this prince who is taking your princess to the prom. Make sure that your precious teen is surrounded by a skilled and focused pit crew and not a self-serving cluster of grinning salesmen. The lemon law says that you can return a bad car. It does not apply to bad dates.



Drive It Home...

DIA-LOG with your student by asking these questions...

Identifying "Red Flags"

Read these data points with your student. Discuss whether they are or are not "red flags." Is everything as it appears? Is there a need to gather more information? How could your student expand his understanding of the facts?

- Your math teacher warns you to be careful sitting next to Sean
- Emily's sister is going to repeat 7th grade
- Tina wants to be an exchange student
- Joe is joining the military right after high school
- Amanda says she has a job offer after graduation as a full time model
- Nathan is good enough to make the Olympics next year in gymnastics
- Beth is probably not going to graduate

Buying a car? Get some facts. How many miles are on it? What is the history and current condition? Was it built to last? Is it dependable? Is it safe?

Looking ahead is not a common trait for teens. Encouraging them to get beyond immediate gratification is challenging but critical to improving their dating habits.



Test Drive...

Student:

Going on a date? Ask questions. Who is going to help you sort through the maze on the lot? Assemble a dependable pit crew who will hold you accountable and keep you safe.

Do some research. Knowing the "DATEFAX" can save you a lot of emotional turmoil. Let's break these facts down into three categories:

History — What has happened so far?

I'm selling my car. If I smoked in it, never changed the oil filter, and hit a deer, would you buy it? _____

What if I sprayed some air freshener and never mentioned the lack of oil changes or the deer? It's the same car. Now would you buy it? _____

Reminder to parents: students should gather data before they buy. Encourage them to use their pit crew for a clearer perspective.

Identifying "Red Flags"

Decide which of these are red flags and why:

- Sara has had six boyfriends in four months
- Bethany has never had a boyfriend because it is not her top priority
- Max has been suspended from school twice
- Katie has missed several days of school this year
- Justin just got fired from his job
- There are rumors about what Amy did at the Homecoming dance
- Michael has lived in 7 different places

Present Condition — What is it like right now?

If a driver wrecks his car, pays to have it fixed, and then keeps driving out of control, would you ride with them?

If you fall in love with a car that is rusted out, needs a front-end alignment, and is on the top-ten list for “most unreliable,” would you buy the car? _____

Everyone makes mistakes but not everyone learns from them. There are many reasons why a student might still part of the “available” inventory. Is it by choice?

Identifying “Red Flags”

Decide which of these are red flags and why. Give three possible scenarios for each:

- Allison wears extremely revealing clothes and looks hot
- Greg washes his hair three out of seven days
- Deena flirts with your best friend
- Trevor has a job at a gas station
- Cody never smiles
- Heather does not live with her parents

Future Promise — What will it be like tomorrow?

“Consumer Reports” says the car you are buying will lose over half of its value in one year. Do you buy it anyway?

You found a car that is everything you were looking for but is number one on the manufacturers’ recall list. Is this a good investment? _____

On a piece of paper, write who your best friend was in first grade, second grade, third grade... up to today.

Choose any one of those old names and answer the following question: Would share your deepest darkest secret today with that former BFF? _____

Given the usual length of "best friend forever," do you trust your current "best friend" to give you advice knowing the consequences of that advice might last longer than the friendship itself? _____

In the blanks below, write in the names of your top five closest friends that you are currently doing life with. When it comes to advice, are they a Car Salesman or part of your Pit Crew?

____ Car Salesman or Pit Crew



Read Your Manual!



This little piggy went to market... to buy a car. What were the other four little piggies doing?

Don't you think it would be a good idea to ask the other little piggies what they thought about the car before you put down the deposit? If you make an unwise choice, don't come running "wee, wee, wee, wee... all the way home!"

