



# The Rear View

Life looks different from the back seat

By Kelli Wheeler

**I**t's amazing how different things look from the back seat of a car. It's fascinating how impressions are made, influences shaped, discoveries found and worlds expanded. Life can be so fulfilling and focused when you have a clear, unobstructed view.

I have to travel back to when I was a kid to really remember and understand it. It quickly comes rushing back. I hear Kenny Rogers singing "The Gambler" and see my mom in the front seat singing with gusto, "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away and know when to run . . ." I feel the excitement inside again upon discovering that I can read all the words that zip by me and know what they're telling me. I recall the shock and reality of death, heard on the radio when a traffic reporter's helicopter crashed live on air. I have the sense that I don't know where

we're going or when we'll get there, but I trust that we'll get there safely.

When you're a kid, much of your life is spent riding in the back seat of a car. You're subjected to other's agendas and just along for the ride. As adults, we forget how much stimulus, learning and growing is going on back there. We expect it in the classroom, we nourish it in our homes, we expand on it with extracurricular activities, but we take it for granted as we move about our daily lives from one errand to the next.

When my kids were infants and toddlers, I was much more aware of this. I was still very into creating a cocoon of safety and stimulation. I constantly talked to my infant son on the way to taking him to day care, even making up songs to sing to him. I made sure he had his favorite bright, colorful, soft, crinkly butterfly to stimulate all the senses. When my daughter came along, I added a mirror to the car seat headrest so she could see herself, and I played Rafi songs nonstop.

I realized later how lax I had gotten as my children grew when I glanced back in the rearview mirror to catch my baby girl singing with all her heart to the Beastie Boys: "You gotta fight! For your right! To party!"

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There have been, of course, times when I do realize the opportunity I have to interact and influence my kids as we move about our daily lives. It's been fun reliving the ABC letter-finding game my brother and I used to play in the back seat to ward off boredom and fights. We save the DVD player for long trips only. I've tried to spark conversations and also recognize teachable moments.

I'll never forget when we were in the car, driving past Safeway, when my daughter realized that "wiener" is not the correct name for a boy's private part. That led to the tandem discovery that "woo-woo" is not, technically, the correct word for the girl part, either. When I explained to her that most families have special names for private parts, but really there are correct anatomical name for his-and-hers parts, she looked around

from her vantage in the back seat and asked, "Well, then, what's the real name for grocery store? And what's the real name for car?" I couldn't help but laugh at her misguided observation that all this time we had been speaking in code to her.

When I finally convinced her all other words still meant what she thought they meant and gave her the correct words for boys' and girls' private parts, I was treated to a five minutes of her trying out her new words. "Vagina. Va-gi-na. Va-gi-na. Penis. Pee-niss. Penis and vagina." Big learning day back there.

Recently, it has been wonderful to hear my son unlock the world of reading with that magic key of knowledge. We've even touched upon science as he wonders out loud why it looks like the moon is always following him, and only him, whenever we drive at night. It's also been interesting to see his emerging musical tastes as he matures, rebuffing the Disney music in favor of the loud thumping bass and rap mixes of my Justin Timberlake CD. I may have to pull that one out of rotation, though, or I may soon hear my son declaring from the back seat, "I'm bringing sexy back . . ."

That's one discovery that certainly will not be welcome in the back seat of my car.

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