

## **Targeting parents to influence the safety of their young drivers: Exploratory research informing a parent communication strategy**

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### **Abstract**

Parents have long been a target of road safety organisations to teach their young children safe road crossing behaviours and help their learner drivers to increase their driving experience. Research is now suggesting that parents may also have a role to play in preventing or reducing the risky behaviours of their children, as pedestrians, passengers and young drivers. Parental role modelling, parental monitoring and parental control have all been identified as potentially playing an important role in the safety of children and young people. The TAC, RACV and VicRoads recognise the potential of parental influences on risky driving behaviour and, as such, have developed a parent and road safety strategy. In developing the strategy, the TAC commissioned extensive exploratory focus group research which was conducted by Kerryn Alexander Research in Metropolitan and Outer Melbourne and the regional Victorian city of Bendigo. The purpose of the research was to investigate parents' awareness of their child's risk and to determine their agreement with several strategies to keep their young driver children safe, such as restricting them from late night driving in the first 3-6 months of solo driving. The outcomes of the research have been incorporated into a Parent and Road Safety Strategy and this paper will outline the findings of the research and a summary of the strategy.

### **Introduction**

Parents have long been a target of road safety organisations to teach their young children safe road crossing behaviours and help their learner drivers to increase their driving experience. Research is now suggesting that parents may also have a role to play in preventing or reducing the risky behaviours of their children, as pedestrians, passengers and young drivers. Parental role modelling, parental monitoring and parental control can potentially play an important role in the safety of children and young people.

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC), Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) and VicRoads recognise the potential of parental influences on risky road behaviours and as such have developed, and are implementing a strategy to target parents with road safety messages. This paper will provide a summary of the relevant research and outline the development of the strategy including a summary of exploratory focus group research that was conducted to assist the development of the strategy.

### **Communicating with Parents**

The TAC, VicRoads and RACV have a long history of communicating with learners, probationary drivers and their parents. Additionally, the agencies have communicated road safety messages via early childhood settings and schools with road safety education resources and programs. The early years resources include take home components to engage parents. The agencies also communicate specific road safety messages to parents of young children around child restraints, supervision on

the roadside, learning to cross the road, helmet use etc (see appendix one for examples of current programs for children, young people and their parents).

In 2009 the TAC and VicRoads completed a review of all key messages that were delivered to young people in Victoria from pre learner to full licensure (Elliott, 2009). One key gap the review found was in parent communication. The review identified that existing communications to parents were focused on increasing young driver experience and that the agencies weren't communicating with parents directly. The review noted that the agencies often rely on the young driver to pass brochures, such as the VicRoads Guide for Supervising Drivers, on to their parents. It is not clear whether and to what extent this information is read by parents, or if they receive the information from their children. It was clear from the review that more effective communication is required for parents, particularly with regards to risk taking behaviours. With young children, the information provided to parents is usually regarding teaching children to cross the road or proper use of child restraints. There is a small amount of information regarding parental role modelling and monitoring.

Based on the existing research, the TAC, RACV and VicRoads are now collaborating on a project to target parents to inform and encourage them to improve the road safety behaviour of their children as pedestrians, passengers and young drivers. The partners have identified two areas for potential intervention. Firstly, there is potential to target parents with specific road safety messages. Secondly, there is potential to target parents more generally with regards to parenting skills with the probability that improvement in these skills will improve the safety of their children on the road.

A review of the literature around parental influences and several discussions between the agencies did not provide a clear direction to follow with regards to messages to deliver to parents. This prompted the development of a communication strategy. The aim of developing this strategy was to identify the key messages, key intervention times and methods of communication for effectively targeting parents. To support the development of this strategy, a parenting and road safety expert group was convened. A communication strategist facilitated the group through several workshops to explore the relevant research findings and prompt expert discussion about the best way to target parents. The strategy identified a number of opportunities for intervention and it was decided to communicate with parents of young drivers as a starting point.

## **Exploratory Research**

During the process of developing the communication strategy, a number of knowledge gaps were identified. There was a lack of knowledge regarding Victorian parents' awareness of their young driver's road safety risk, what strategies, if any, they currently implement to keep their young drivers safe, their thoughts about intervening with their children from a young age until at least 18 years old, their ability to intervene with adult children, barriers to intervening and strategies to assist them.

Kerryn Alexander Research was commissioned to conduct extensive focus group research with parents in Metropolitan or Outer Melbourne and the regional Victorian city of Bendigo (Alexander, 2012). Two pilot focus groups were conducted with fathers and mothers from Melbourne to determine the discussion approach which was most appropriate. Ten focus groups were then conducted with parents and another four groups were conducted with first year probationary drivers (P1). See Table 1 for a list of the focus group definitions.

**Table 1. Focus group definitions**

		No of Participants
<b>Pilot 1</b>	Mixed gender parents of 15 year olds (mixed education)	8
<b>Pilot 2</b>	Mixed gender parents of 15 year olds (mixed education)	8
<b>Melb Inner</b>	Mixed gender parents of 16 year old learners (high education)	6
<b>Melb Outer</b>	Fathers of 16 year old learners (low education)	4
<b>Melb Inner</b>	Mothers of 18 year old learners (high education)	6
<b>Melb Outer</b>	Mothers of 18 year old learners (low education)	5
<b>Melb Outer</b>	Mothers of P1 drivers (18-21 years old) (low education)	8
<b>Melb Outer</b>	Fathers of P1 drivers (18-21 years old) (low education)	5
<b>Bendigo</b>	Mothers of P1 drivers (18-21 years old)	8
<b>Bendigo</b>	Fathers of P1 drivers (18-21 years old)	7
<b>Bendigo</b>	Mothers of 18 year old learners	8
<b>Bendigo</b>	Fathers of 18 year old learners	7
<b>Bendigo</b>	Female P1 drivers aged 18-20 years old	5
<b>Bendigo</b>	Male P1 drivers aged 18-20 years old	8
<b>Melbourne</b>	Female P1 drivers aged 18-20 years old	9
<b>Melbourne</b>	Male P1 drivers aged 18-20 years	8

### ***General Attitudes to Parenting and Road Safety***

In the non-pilot focus groups, the facilitator first asked the parents about their parenting style and role and about the level and nature of influence that they believe they have with their young driver children in general. Parents were probed about their thoughts and concerns about their young drivers driving independently and what actions they may be taking in relation to their concerns. The discussion also explored the nature and extent of new drivers' access to a vehicle.

The young drivers were asked about similar issues, but from their own perspective i.e., what role do their parents take and how they feel about their parents' level and style of influence etc.

### ***Parental Style and Role***

The focus group research found that parents can continue to have a high level of influence on their children until they are at least 21 years of age. Additionally the young people generally had a high level of respect and consideration for their parents and were more open to their parents' influence than many parents actually believe. Although most parents continued to have some rules and restrictions in place, they noted that from around the time their children are in their mid teens, their parenting style tends to be more focussed on guidance, advice and negotiation. Parents also felt that their children's independence was associated with leaving school, turning 18 years old and getting a drivers licence.

### ***Driving, Transport and Road Safety***

The focus group research found that most parents do not really start to think about the realities and implications of their children driving solo until they are close to obtaining their licence (i.e., generally around a month away). For some parents this realisation didn't really occur until their child actually obtained their licence. Although most parents were worried about the possibility that their children may crash, some of them were fatalistic and didn't think there was anything they could do about it. Some parents even felt that they shouldn't intervene and that it was up to the government/police or the young driver themselves to look after their safety.

Although most parents thought that they could not or should not do anything about their children's road safety risk, in reality a high proportion of parents were actually helping their children to get home safely at night. Many parents were still dropping off and picking up their young driver children from night time events, even when their children were over 18 years old. This practice was particularly common in the regional town of Bendigo where public transport and taxis were less available. In addition to picking their children up after night time events, parents also discussed transport options with their children and helped them to plan transport options. Generally all of these practices were to help their children avoid drink driving or getting into a car as a passenger with a drink driver. The use of designated drivers is also fairly common but the P1 licence restriction of only one passenger between the ages of 16-21 limits this practice for P1 drivers.

### *Demographic Differences*

The focus group research found that most children were still living at home at 18 to 20 years of age and were generally studying, in either their last year of secondary school or at university, or taking a gap year. In Bendigo, those children who were living at home were more likely to be working full time or completing an apprenticeship. Most of the Bendigo children who were studying at university had moved to Melbourne. The young people who were living at home in Bendigo, but were financially independent, including two young people who had their own children, tended to be less dependent on their parents. However, these young adults still valued their parents' guidance and opinions.

The parents and young drivers from Bendigo generally agreed that public transport and taxis were not a reliable option when heading home. Designated drivers or parents were realistic options. Some young drivers in the second phase of the probationary period (P2) had set up taxi type arrangements with their friends, and even with facebook friends, offering to pick them up for payment. Sleeping over at friends' houses was also a common option particularly when going to parties at friends' houses, on the outskirts of town or in nearby towns.

This research found that it was generally mothers who did the "parenting" and made rules and restrictions. Fathers tended to take on the enforcement role and provide back up and support for mothers. Mothers also tended to have more of a role in emotional issues, whereas fathers tended to take on a more practical role. This differentiation was more apparent in lower socioeconomic groups.

### *Access to a Vehicle*

Almost all of the current and imminent young drivers represented in the focus groups had access to their own vehicle or a vehicle shared with siblings. Some young people were given a car as an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday present; others received a "hand-me-down" vehicle from their parents, grand parents or an older sibling. Around one quarter of the young drivers had or intended to purchase their own car from money saved from part-time jobs and birthday money. Additionally, parents often contributed to the purchase. Children rarely drove their parent's expensive cars due to the higher insurance costs for young drivers.

In support of existing research (Watson and Newstead, 2009), the young drivers' first car was likely to be an inexpensive older model which is unlikely to be the safest car in the family. The young drivers and parents were also unlikely to have considered safety during their purchase, favouring features such as price, colour and preferred model. Generally parents and their children seemed unaware of the relative safety of vehicles and/or were unsure how to determine the safety level of a car. The reliability of vehicles was a much more important consideration as parents were concerned that their children's car would break-down and become stranded.

### ***Ideas for Parental Influence***

After general discussion around parenting and road safety the facilitator presented five specific ideas to help keep their young drivers safe. The aim was to see how parents would respond to the strategies and information to help guide our communications with parents.

The strategy ideas were:

1. Parents could restrict their kids from late night driving in the first three to six months of solo driving.
2. During the early months of driving, parents could reduce the crash risk for their kids at night by picking them up or giving them taxi money.
3. If kids are using the family car, parents could negotiate their kid's use of the car in the early months of driving.
4. Parents who help pay for their kid's first car could attach restrictions on its use in the early months of driving.
5. Parents could reduce the risks for their kids by allowing them to use the safest car in the family.

Overall the responses to the above ideas were very consistent across groups and there was considerable agreement between the views of parents and young drivers. Parents of 15 year old pre-learners and 16 year old early learners tended to agree more with most of the ideas. However, it is important to consider that their children are under more parental control than 18 or 19 year olds.

#### ***Idea 1: Parents could restrict their kids from late night driving in the first three to six months of solo driving.***

Awareness of late night driving crash risk was very low and there was a low level of agreement with this idea. The term 'restriction' was quite unacceptable to most parents as this approach tended to be inconsistent with their style of parenting with 18 to 19 year olds. As indicated earlier, the focus groups found parenting of young adults tends to involve guidance, advice and negotiation rather than rules and restrictions, even when living in the family home.

The high late night driving crash risk among novice drivers was not known to parents and this knowledge tended to be challenged by parents. Some parents questioned the definition of late night driving and the need for night time restrictions. Parents also expressed concern for children who need to drive at night for work purposes. Parents tended to feel that if their children had completed the 120 hours of supervised driving practice, including 10 hours of night time driving, and passed the VicRoads Drive Test then they should be a competent driver and able to drive solo in any conditions. Many parents felt that late night restrictions should be legislated rather than left to parents to manage and that the mandated night time driving hours as a learner should be higher than 10 hours.

#### ***Idea 2: During the early months of solo driving, parents could reduce the crash risk for their kids at night by picking them up or giving them taxi money.***

There was considerable agreement with the idea of picking their children up, at least from night time events, as many parents were already picking up their kids or assisting them with transport. However, some young drivers were concerned about burdening their parents with late night pick ups. Providing taxi money was a less appealing strategy as it was considered to be inconsistent with

many parents encouraging their children to be financially independent for their personal and entertainment expenses. There were also issues with the perceived safety of taxis in Melbourne and Bendigo and also the availability of taxis in Bendigo.

***Idea 3: If kids are using the family car, parents could negotiate their kid's use of the car in the early months of solo driving to restrict them from late night driving.***

Parents were receptive to the term 'negotiate' in this idea. Using negotiation is consistent with how parents view their own parenting styles for young people who are 18 or 19 years old. It was also considered possible to negotiate with their young driver if the car is the family car. However, parents were still sceptical about the late night driving crash risk and the value of avoiding late night driving.

***Idea 4: Parents who help pay for their kid's first car could attach restrictions on its use in the early months of driving.***

Within the parent and young driver groups there was a high level of "gifting" or helping out financially with the first car purchase. This idea only seemed to be realistic if the restrictions were discussed and agreed to before the car was purchased. Most parents felt that it would be inappropriate to put restrictions on a car that was a gift or even if financial assistance was provided. Again parents tended to reject the term 'restriction' as inconsistent with their parenting styles with 18 to 19 year olds.

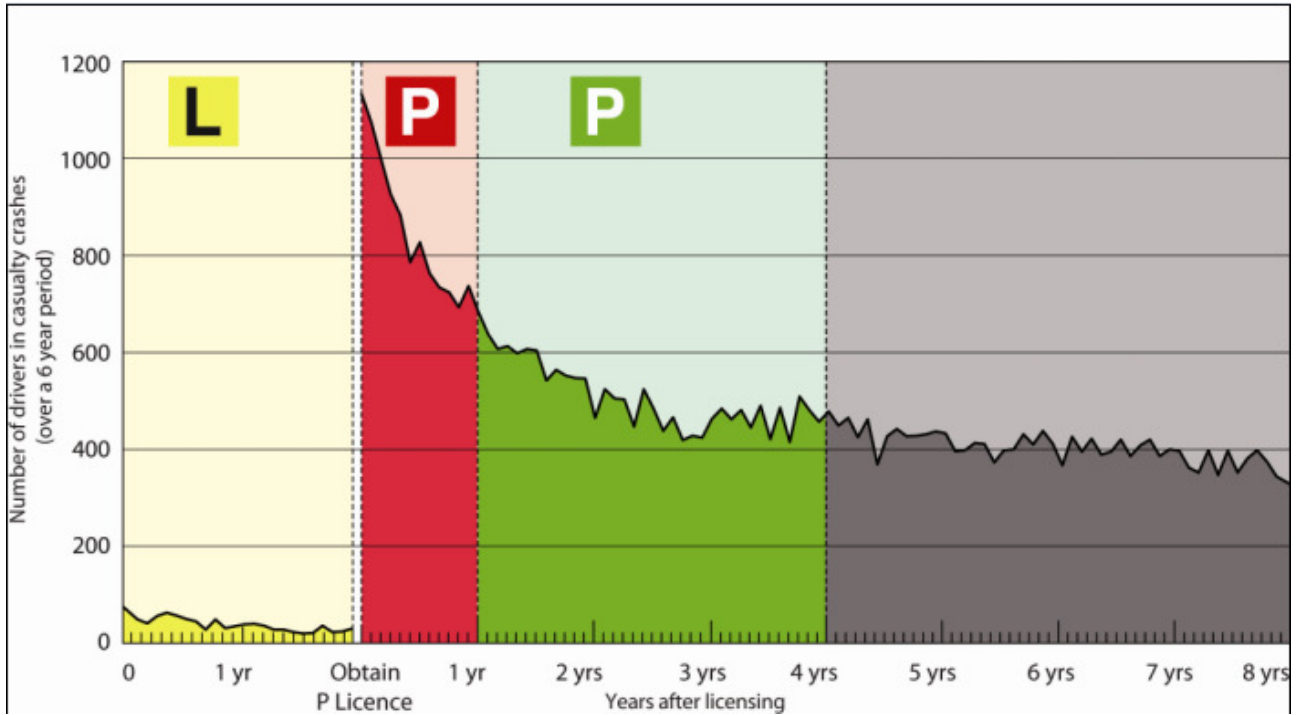
***Idea 5: Parents could reduce the risks for their kids by allowing them to use the safest car in the family.***

There was some resistance to this idea. There was a lack of knowledge about how to determine the safety of a car and the impact of a safer vehicle on surviving a crash. Many of the families pass on the oldest car in the family to the youngest driver. Many incorrectly believe that older cars are stronger and therefore safer. Prohibitive insurance costs for young drivers also often prevent young drivers from having access to a safer family car.

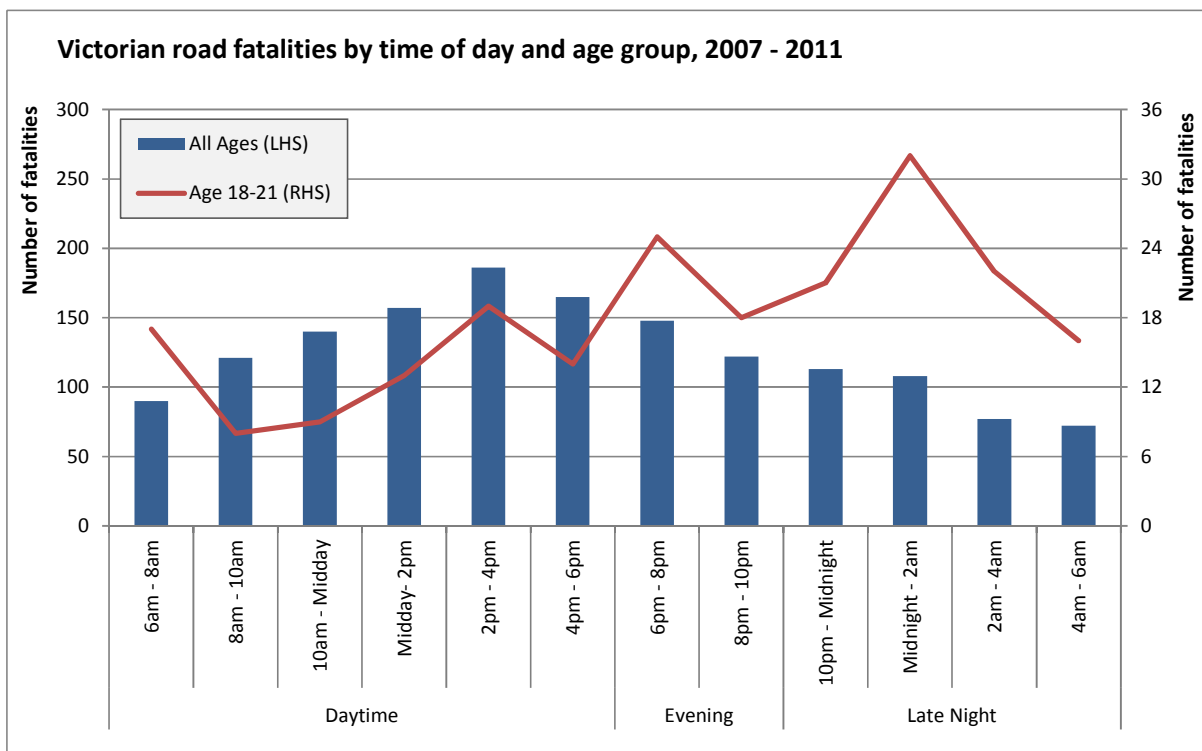
### ***Young drivers and Crash Risk***

The facilitator presented two graphs demonstrating crash risk for young drivers to ascertain parents and young drivers' awareness of the risk and also how they respond to crash risk information. The initial pilot groups demonstrated that showing these graphs before the ideas above strongly increased the likelihood of agreement/compliance with the statements. To better replicate the real world and to identify potential barriers and issues, the graphs were generally shown after the ideas for parental influence were discussed.

**Figure 1: Number of drivers in casualty crashes by years of licensing (over a 6 year period)**



**Figure 2: Victorian Road fatalities by time of day and age group, 2007 - 2011**



Overall the P1 drivers were aware of their elevated crash risk by time after licensing. However, only a small proportion of parents across all of the groups recalled having seen the crash risk by time after licensing graph (Figure 1), despite this being in the Guide for Learners/Learner Logbook and Guide for Supervising Drivers, which all learners are given at the VicRoads Customer Service Centre when they pass their Learner Permit Test.

None of the focus group participants had previously seen the night time graph (Figure 2) as it was created for the purposes of this research and was not available publicly.

Although awareness of the crash risk was low, parents and young drivers were not surprised at the elevated risk for young drivers, overall and at night.

When shown the graphs, parent's responses tended to be polarised. Some parents maintained complete denial of the risk, refusing to think about it or even look at the graphs. Others felt that they had to take immediate action by going home and talking to their young drivers about the risks. These approaches are likely to reflect differing parenting styles.

While the young drivers were generally aware of their increased level of risk, most felt that there was nothing they could do about it and felt unfairly 'blamed' when the graphs were shown to them.

### **Communication Strategy**

The focus group research informed the communication strategy. The communication strategy identified that the core challenge for a behaviour change campaign targeting parents with road safety messages was:

“To inspire parents to use their influence to intervene with their young drivers in the first six months of solo driving.”

The target audience was identified as parents of young drivers, who would soon be obtaining their car licence (mostly aged 17-18 years).

The communication strategy also identified the need for a multi pronged and integrated campaign that has numerous touch points or interfaces for the target audience, possibly including but not limited to: a television campaign, social media, press, outdoor, radio, PR with consistent messages across agencies. These channels should be supported by as many existing parenting resources and communication channels as possible.

### **Parents and Road Safety Strategy**

The focus group research and the communication strategy were used to inform the Parents and Road Safety Strategy (Harris, 2012). This Strategy provides context around the road safety issue and the target audience, a matrix of parental target behaviours, strategic approaches, action plans for communicating with parents of teenagers and young adults and children aged 0-16 years, stakeholder engagement and implementation of the strategy.

The target behaviours matrix outlined the following:

- Priority Issues, i.e., young novice drivers (0-6 months of licensure), teenage passengers, child passengers (0-16 years), child cyclists (0-18 years) and child pedestrians (0-16 years).
- Behaviours to improve, e.g., avoid driving at night in first few months of solo driving, adhere to GLS conditions, drive the safest car possible.
- What should parents do e.g., drive their children to/from parties/night time events, restrict the amount of solo night driving they do in the first months of licensure.
- How to get parents to do this e.g., get parents to understand the increased risks associated with night driving and over-involvement in crashes in the first months of the



probationary licence P's, provide parents with strategies for restricting night time driving.

- Potential action areas, e.g., inform parents about night time driving risk, inform parents about high crash rate in first few months of solo driving, encourage parents to continue acting as a supervisor for probationary drivers while driving at night.

The strategy identified that there is a need to prioritise both the target behaviours and the approaches to be taken. It was evident that many parents do not have a great understanding of the risks that their children face when they are first licensed, nor do they have many strategies to minimise these risks. It was determined that a long term health promotion approach is required to address the issues outlined in the target behaviours matrix.

The strategy notes that a broad population level approach is needed, with a primary focus on providing information about the risks all children and young drivers face on the roads, how to minimise these risks and for parents to discuss with their children what to do in certain situations. Later approaches should include more community or group level activities that reinforce the key messages, but are delivered in local community settings, such as schools or sporting clubs. In the long term, some work could focus at a family or individual level with parents or young people who are identified as potentially being at higher risk than the general population.

The strategy also outlines that, in terms of prioritising actions, the greatest opportunity for benefit appears to be in targeting parents of learners who are about to get their licence. While this target group should be seen as the priority, work should also be undertaken in other target groups to ensure that some of the key messages about parental monitoring and role modelling commence at early ages.

Detailed action plans have also been provided in the strategy, outlining each potential stage in implementing a long term health promotion campaign. The action plan for parents of teenagers and young adults outlines five stages:

1. develop key information messages and material
2. develop a targeted media campaign
3. include key information and messages in all existing agency materials
4. undertake community campaigns/initiatives
5. undertake targeted initiatives for high risk groups

The partner agencies have developed the key information and messages (stage one) and the TAC is now in the process of developing a targeted media campaign (stage two).

## **Conclusion**

The TAC, VicRoads and RACV have recognised the potential for parents to influence the safety of their children on our roads. Based on the available literature, behaviour change principles, extensive focus group research and subsequent strategies the agencies are now in the process of implementing the Parents and Road Safety Strategy. Shortly the TAC will be developing a targeted media campaign aimed at parents of learner drivers who will shortly obtain their licence and those who are in the first six months of their probationary licence.

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## Appendix 1

Examples of current programs/resources communicating road safety messages to children, young people and/or their parents.

- Fit to Drive (f2d) is a community program for young people that concentrates on personal safety and responsibility, and provides strategies to make them safer on the road.
- KeysPlease offers information and strategies for Year 10 students on how to use the learning to drive period, get 120 hours of practice, work with a supervising driver and become safe drivers.
- Looking After Your Mates is an education session about responsible consumption of alcohol and strategies to avoid drink driving. The session is suitable for Year 12 students and can be tailored to suit any business, organisation, sports club or youth group.
- VicRoads, DEECD, the TAC and RACV also provide other road safety educational support from early childhood to licensing age through handbooks, brochures, online resources, school materials, film making competitions, campaigns etc. More information can be found at [roadsafetyeducation.vic.gov.au](http://roadsafetyeducation.vic.gov.au)
- Drive Smart is a free CD-ROM training program which helps learners practice their skills and become more experienced and safer drivers. It is the perfect partner to getting hands-on experience in a car.