

Parental involvement - a protective factor in young people's risk of road trauma?

ABSTRACT

There is considerable evidence to suggest that parents have a stronger influence on their adolescent's behaviours than they may perceive. Greater parent involvement, boundary setting and parental supervision are associated with less risky adolescent behaviour. In an effort to improve adolescent risk behaviour on the road, Youthsafe has undertaken a multi-strategic approach to equipping parents to better support safe road behaviours in their teenage children. Program components include parent resources developed and distributed to specific target groups, including those from rural and urban NSW and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with appropriate media coverage. This presentation will discuss the influence of parents as a protective influence on young people's risk of road trauma and the approaches Youthsafe have adopted to address this.

INTRODUCTION

Youthsafe is a not for profit organisation that supports the prevention of serious injury in young people in transport, work and sport and recreational settings, but by far the highest proportion of unintentional death and injury for young people happens on the road. Youthsafe addresses youth injury prevention by developing educational initiatives and supporting organisations and individuals who are in a position to influence young people – including parents.

This paper presents evidence that parents have a stronger influence on young people's behaviour than may generally be perceived. Parent involvement, supervision and boundary setting have been shown to support less risky behaviour in adolescent children and young people while lower levels of monitoring and involvement have been associated with risk taking and anti-social behaviour.

This paper focuses on two critical periods when young people are moving to a higher level of independence – the first is young people who are new to driving and the second is for adolescents making the transition to high school . This paper also describes the multi-strategic approach Youthsafe has adopted to support parental involvement and includes our initiatives to address equity for parents in CALD communities.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND RISKY BEHAVIOUR

Influences on adolescent development are biological, cultural, educational, social and environmental. Of interest here are findings that link supportive parenting, particularly parental involvement, with positive adolescent development. Evidence linking parenting style with adolescent risk-taking and anti-social behaviour is of interest for road safety research because risky and anti-social behaviours are associated with road injury.

Before looking at findings drawn from the road safety literature, I'll briefly outline some general findings from longitudinal research that has looked at links between parenting/ parent involvement and young people's risky behaviour. Serbin & Karp's (2004) recent review of the literature identifies less parental involvement and lower levels of supervision as predicting behavioural problems in children. The literature broadly defines two areas of risk associated with poor parenting - specific risk which is the tendency for children to adopt their parent's risky behaviour patterns and general risk which is associated with increased risk for negative outcomes such as childhood injury, adolescent risk-taking behaviour, substance abuse and school failure (Serbin et al, 1991; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999).

In contrast, other studies have examined the mediational role that parents play in their children's positive developmental outcomes and, of particular interest for this study, how parental support and higher levels of monitoring have a protective and buffering effect associated with less risky behaviour during adolescence (Parker & Benson, 2004). Consistent discipline practices and a nurturing environment are protective factors for negative developmental outcomes in at-risk families where adolescents may be at risk for anti-social behaviour.

However, despite evidence of the association between parenting style and children's well being, the actual process that links parenting with children's positive and negative outcomes is not in itself well understood (Nagin & Tremblay, 1999).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S ROAD SAFETY

Parental monitoring and supervision during travel has a very protective effect, however, this is at its highest during early childhood when children's vulnerability as road users is widely appreciated – even so parents tend to overestimate children's abilities in traffic from a young age and parents are currently less involved than they could be (Simons-Morton, Hartos, Leaf & Preusser, 2005). There appears to be a lack of research investigating parental attitudes towards their children's travel safety as children become independent road users, however, the research that does exist suggests that parents should remain involved and vigilant even though they may no longer be accompanying young people when they travel – instead involvement comes from discussion about risks and other supportive strategies.

Road injury is the main cause of unintentional death and hospitalisation among young people, with injuries increasing sharply from 15 years of age and about three quarters of all preventable deaths among 15-19 year olds due to transport injury (RTA, 2003). Young drivers are a particularly vulnerable group - although 17-25 year old drivers represent only 16% of road users, they account for 28% of fatalities overall, and 33% of all speeding fatalities (RTA, 2005). The four major risk behaviours for fatal road injury are speed, alcohol, driver fatigue and not using a seat belt.

Before young people reach driving age the majority of injuries happen during passenger or pedestrian travel, and the number of pedal cyclist injuries increases. Aside from socio-economic factors, two of the main risk factors for injury are amount of traffic exposure, as unsupervised traffic access increases with age, (Carlin, Stevenson, Roberts, Bennett, Gelman & Nolan, 1997) and children's behavioural characteristics (Tight, 1996; Carlin, et al, 1997). In Australia, primary school students have very high rates of being driven to primary school (Roberts, Carlin, Bennett, Bergstrom, Guyer, Nolan, Norton, Pless, Rao, & Stevenson, 1997) when compared to students in other developed countries. While this decreases risk of pedestrian injury, from reduced exposure to the traffic environment, it also reduces opportunities for children to develop road crossing skills when they are still likely to be travelling with an adult (Carlin et al, 1997).

Evidence showing that parenting style influences the likelihood of risky and anti-social behaviour in children and adolescents is important in the road safety context because of the association between unsafe driving behaviour and other risky behaviours. Research shows that young adults with unsafe driving behaviours, as well as other anti-social and risky behaviours, could be differentiated in middle childhood from individual characteristics of aggression and attention deficit (Smart & Vassallo, 2005). It also clearly highlights the finding that parental restrictions and monitoring of young drivers is associated with less risky driving, fewer crashes and traffic infringements (Hartos, Eitel, Haynie & Simons-Morton, 2000; Beck, Shattuck & Raleigh, 1999; Beck, Hartos & Simons-Morton, 2005).

The main evidence for the importance of parental involvement in young people's early driving experience comes from the Checkpoints program, which has been tested in a series of studies in the United States. This program is designed around the principle that parents have a major role in young people's driving as they model driving behaviour and make decisions about their children's access to cars (Hartos et al, 2000). Parents also teach their children how to drive and supervise driving practice – which has been shown to complement formal driving instruction by providing young people with more varied driving experiences, such as driving at night, than that gained with professional instructors (Groeger & Brady, 2004).

The main purpose for this presentation is to point to findings that relate to parent involvement and outcomes for young people's driving behaviour.

The main educational tool for the Checkpoints program is the driver agreement – an individual contract between parent and child that is designed to support parental involvement for new drivers (Hartos, Nissen & Simons-Morton, 2001) and specifically addresses young drivers' exposure to factors that are known to increase their risk of crashing, including driving at night, the number of passengers carried, type of road and weather conditions. The driver agreement is intended to be short-term so that as young drivers gain experience, the conditions of the agreement can reflect their increasing skill level.

Recruitment into the Checkpoints program generally occurred at motor registries with young drivers and parents being asked to participate in the project at the time of receiving their licence or provisional licence. With so much variation in licensing conditions in the United States, the amount of experience and age at which young people begin to drive varies considerably. As well some states have a graduated licensing system and others do not. Although the driver agreement is a short term intervention, evaluation showed it to be effective, for example, a comparison of limitations on new drivers pre and post recruitment into the study showed strong acceptability of the agreement and substantial reductions in a range of risky behaviours (Hartos et al, 2001; Simons-Morton, Hartos & Beck, 2003).

MAIN FINDINGS RELATING TO INCREASED PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S DRIVING

- Parents were more likely to understand that **all** young drivers are at risk of crashing.
- Involved parents are more likely to introduce restrictions on young drivers, particularly in the initial phase of driving - although young drivers reported lower levels of restrictions than parents.
- Comparison of parent and young driver responses found that parents often underestimated the amount and type of risky driving behaviours their children self-reported.
- When levels of disagreement between parents and young drivers were high more risky driving behaviours, more traffic infringements and more crashes were reported by young drivers.
- When a driver agreement was used there is more likely to be resolution over disagreement about the need for limitations to reduce risk.
- Resources must be straightforward and readily understood to increase usage. Nevertheless some families did not read or make use of available resources such as the agreement and newsletters.

YOUTHSAFE'S RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRAVEL.

1. Young drivers in NSW

Youthsafe fact sheet for parents of young drivers and a Graduated Licensing Scheme Parent Workshop for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities

The most frequently used parent resource is Youthsafe's young driver fact sheet. This fact sheet provides parents with factual information about risk factors for young driver crashes:

- Inexperience
- Overconfidence and risk taking
- Not wearing a seatbelt
- Fatigue
- Passengers
- Drugs and driving

The fact sheet supports parental involvement in supervising young drivers as part of GLS in NSW. It also suggests appropriate restrictions to address these risk factors and promotes parental involvement in young driver experiences when supervising driving.

The GLS in NSW has been implemented to address many of the issues that are known to put young drivers at risk, such as sufficient driving experience in a range of road and weather conditions, and to support understanding among parents and the community of the risks faced by young drivers. However, the GLS system is fairly complicated for those new to this system of licensing and there are a series of checks and tests from learner to full licence.

To address issues of equity of access for parent information about young drivers, Youthsafe sought ways to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate resources. Consideration was given to the Chinese and Arabic communities as the first to be selected because of their populations within Sydney, the recency of immigration and the very different driving conditions in their home countries.

Youthsafe hosted the first Graduated Licensing Scheme Parent Workshop (GLS Parent Workshop) to be held in a language other than English.

- The workshop was in response to recommendations that resulted from consultation during Youthsafe's Arabic and Chinese Campaign – *Working with Parents for Safer Young Drivers* – this campaign identified equity issues around access to road safety support and information for Chinese speaking parents of learner drivers. There is a lack of published road safety information that is accessible to Chinese speaking parents of young drivers and up to then GLS workshops were only presented in English. Although a translator can be arranged the length and format of the workshop does not suit direct translation.

The project investigated:

- how the Graduated Licensing Scheme workshop could be modified so that the content and delivery were culturally appropriate to Chinese (specifically Mandarin) speaking parents of learner drivers.
- ways to address the issue of different skill levels of workshop participants as these were likely to include parents who had lived in Australia for very different lengths of time and with different levels of understanding about the State road rules, etc.
- limitations of the current GLS workshop in meeting the needs of Mandarin speaking parents of learner drivers and options for modifying the workshop content and delivery to overcome these limitations.
- how RTA guidelines could be maintained when a community directs project promotion.

The project highlighted the importance of partnerships - in this case between Youthsafe, the Australian Chinese Community Association and RTA. The multicultural media were very supportive and their involvement contributed greatly to the successful outcome. The success of the pilot means that two GLS workshops will be held in Sydney for the Chinese community each year.

2. Transition to high school

Transition to high school is another period of risk for young people. Although the injury data indicates that this is a time of considerable injury risk, there is a lack of research which addresses parental involvement during young people's transition to high school. Investigation, including focus group discussion, shows that this is an area that parents consider important and want information on.

To address the issue of safety around transition to high school, Youthsafe has developed a parent fact sheet. Parents, rather than students, were targeted for the resource as the most important issue to address is for parents to be involved in identifying risks and discussing safe strategies for their children as they begin high school.

The New South Wales road injury statistics show that there is a substantial increase in injury for students in the early years of high school. Four or 5 students aged between 12 and 14 years are injured each week in school travel times – a higher rate of injury than for any other time period, including holidays and weekends (RTA, 2003).

The biggest increase is in pedestrian injury, which peak among this age group. Also a substantial number of incidents involve a bus, for example students might be crossing the road after getting off the bus (RTA, 2003). The majority of these casualties occur on the journey home from school (RTA, 2003) perhaps because students pay less attention to the traffic environment when they are tired or are less focused on the need to get home, than when they have timetabling deadlines and need to get to school.

For students in rural areas most injuries involve travel as vehicle passengers but for those students living in urban areas most injuries happen when they are travelling on foot - again usually in the after school rather than before school period.

The road safety literature points to many factors that contribute to the vulnerability of junior high school students in general and to those who are making the transition to high school in particular. For example, when compared to primary school students, high school students:

- are more likely to travel independently
- travel further distances
- have a longer school day
- can be influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of new peers
- use mixed modes of transport including bus and train
- carry heavy school bags.

Transport safety initiatives in New South Wales targeting students in primary and high school include the 40km/hour speed limit in all school zones during school travel times and a range of educational resources about safe road and public transport travel. However, most incidents do not occur in the school zone and road safety education resources used within the curriculum during late primary or the first year of high school are not specifically designed to prepare students for the travel experiences that may occur during the journey between home and high school (NB The Roads and Traffic Authority contracted research (unpublished) prior to the development of road safety resources for Years 7 and 8.)

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FACT SHEET

The process of preparing and finalising a parent fact sheet to address road safety issues for new high school students took about 6 months. Initially a draft fact sheet was prepared and distributed to road safety educators and road safety officers in rural, regional and urban areas and they were asked to comment on its content and design and suitability in addressing road safety issues around travel to high school in rural and urban New South Wales.

This feedback was incorporated into the design, and focus group discussions were held with parents who had children in Year 6 and moving to high school next year and those who had already moved to high school and were in Year 7 this year. During focus group discussion parents reviewed the draft Fact Sheet and were asked about modes of travel and supervision during upper primary and early high school, their perceptions of safe and risky travel experiences associated with this transition and about the traffic environment for students arriving at school on foot, pedal cycle, by car, train and bus. Parents reported a need for such a resource and typically commented that safe travel issues had been dealt with from time to time, but that this would encourage them to

- discuss the risks students face on routine journeys
- have a back up plan in case something goes wrong
- make a trial journey with their child prior to high school starting.

Fact sheets have now been printed and there are copies available here if anyone would like to take one. They will be distributed to students in Y6 at primary school and Y7 at high school in NSW and may be sent out with school transport passes.

CONCLUSION

The promotion of parental involvement in all aspects of young people's road safety warrants more research and support. As shown here today there is strong evidence that this makes a considerable contribution to reducing the likelihood of children's risky behaviours and in this way makes an impact on reducing road trauma.

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