

From hindrance to help – parental influence in novice-driver education

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Abstract

Funded by the Australian Government and sponsored by Australia's motoring clubs, Keys2drive aims to reduce the high crash risk for newly-licensed drivers by providing free one-hour lessons to novice drivers and their parent/supervisor. Inclusion of parents in Keys2drive lessons is compulsory and underscored by research showing that the depth and breadth of parental involvement in novice-driver education is an important factor in its effectiveness (Masten & Chapman, 2003). In 2019, Keys2drive commissioned new research to measure, among other things, parents' confidence, attitudes, skill and readiness to supervise a novice driver. The research highlighted a need for ongoing upskilling of parents to improve safety outcomes.

Context

Parental influence on novice-driver safety manifests itself in various ways, including the example parents set as drivers themselves (McIntyre, 2015), and their depth of involvement as their children progress to solo driving. But, usually, parents cannot tell conclusively if they are doing a good job. They rarely have a way to measure their own performance or benchmark it against best-practice standards, nor regular access to expert advice.

Researchers argue that certain parental teaching behaviour may help develop basic manoeuvring skills, but not higher-order skills that help prevent crashes in non-supervised environments (Simons-Morton & Ouimet, 2006). Like novice drivers, parents are also susceptible to optimism bias, where overestimation of their own skills and preparedness for this complex task becomes problematic.

Although some parents have more suitable temperament and ability as driving supervisors, researchers argue that, to decrease crash rates, better education across the board is usually required (Gegersen et al., 2003).

This is where Keys2drive comes in.

What did the research show?

The 2019 Keys2drive new research comprised several in-depth focus groups, surveys, online forums, and face-to-face interviews. It revealed various noteworthy parental attitudes, perceptions and other observations:

- Most parents felt very confident and rated themselves highly skilled as supervisors
- All felt teaching and demonstrating safe driving behaviour was extremely important
- Parents overwhelmingly valued their role and the need to: teach correctly, lead by example and instill safe driving practices in their children
- Some questioned their ability to consistently teach good habits and compliance with road laws
- Some parents used their own judgement and instincts and some sought further information before becoming supervisors
- Most felt apprehensive about their inability to continue supervising their newly-licensed children
- Most taught through oral instruction, rather than demonstration
- Almost half of learners and pre-learners reported observing poor parental road-safety behaviour, including speeding, drink-driving and smartphone use.

Keys2drive intervention

Mandatory parental involvement is a defining characteristic of Keys2drive. With the aid of specific information from accredited instructors and accessible, take-home guides, Keys2drive helps counteract the common and unhelpful ‘do as I say’ approach, whereby a novice-driver’s brain is on ‘autopilot’ and parents teach what they know: “change lanes”; “slow down”; “do a U-turn here” etc. Keys2drive instead focuses on two-way active learning, which helps parents develop the necessary skills to supervise novice drivers in a more meaningful, cognitive way. Parents learn that, ideally, their supervisory involvement continues, not ends, at the P-plate stage.

Researchers argue that parents and children often find the learning-to-drive experience stressful and full of conflict (Simons-Morton & Ouimet, 2006). This can lead to parental disengagement; Keys2drive addresses this by teaching parents to relinquish more control, which helps learners to self-question, self-assess and self-correct their own performance instead of just responding to instructions.

Keys2drive’s influence on parents

With positive and enduring ways to address them, the Keys2drive curriculum aligns strongly with the research findings. Post-Keys2drive lesson feedback from parents is instructive, often focusing on their receiving greater insight, critical-thinking tools and ways to correct bad habits. Parents also report an increased awareness of novice-driver safety, and a renewed confidence and understanding of their ongoing role and how it can influence behaviour.

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