



Obstacles to engaging in young driver licensing: Perspectives of parents



Sehana Naz^{a,b,*}, Bridie Scott-Parker^{b,c,*}

^a University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, 4350, Australia

^b Adolescent Risk Research Unit (ARRU), School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Business and Law (FABL), University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs Drive, Sippy Downs, Queensland, 4556, Australia

^c Sustainability Research Centre, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs Drive, Sippy Downs, Queensland, 4556, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Young novice drivers remain at greater risk of injury and death despite a wealth of interventions including graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs. The key to implementing safer practices inherent in GDL appears to lie with optimising the role of parents. This qualitative research explored the parent's perspectives of obstacles to engaging in the driver licensing process within a GDL program. Parents also shared advice on what they found helpful, and where relevant, recommended changes in the process to enable safer practices for young drivers.

Method: Twenty-three parents (aged 35–60 years, $M = 49.52$, $SD = 8.01$, 11 males) participated in semi-structured interviews regarding licensing experiences with their young driver children. The young drivers included learner ($n = 11$), provisional (restricted/intermediate) ($n = 9$) and open (unrestricted/full) licence drivers ($n = 3$), ranging from 16 to 24 years ($M = 18.04$, $SD = 2.21$, 13 males).

Findings and conclusions: Content analysis revealed that most obstacles were encountered at the learner licensing phase, with the parent-reported difficult temperament of the learner driver the most prominent. Unsurprisingly, advice to other parents to be patient and remain calm featured heavily during the same phase. Anxiety from not having control of the vehicle was another obstacle at the learner phase, translating to anxieties for child safety in the early stages of provisional driving. Recommendations for the current GDL included more rigorous road rule testing, with general support for the program, professional driver training at learner and provisional stages facilitated parental engagement through the licensing phases.

Practical applications: The findings overwhelmingly suggest a need for parents to be educated regarding their importance in, and of, the driver licensing process, and the efficacy of their instruction, content and practices.

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1. Introduction

According to the report “Health for the World’s Adolescents” published by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016), road injury is the leading cause of death and one that can largely be avoided for adolescents worldwide. After controlling for licensure, evidence shows teen drivers still have a greater crash rate

* Corresponding authors at: Adolescent Risk Research Unit (ARRU), School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Business and Law (FABL), University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs Drive, Sippy Downs, Queensland, 4556, Australia.

E-mail addresses: bscottpa@usc.edu.au, u1026403@umail.usq.edu.au (B. Scott-Parker).

URL: <http://mailto:bscottpa@usc.edu.au> (B. Scott-Parker).

compared to older drivers (McCartt et al., 2009). In Queensland, Australia (DTMR, 2016a) relatively stable figures for fatalities involving young adult drivers aged between 16 and 24 years have persisted for a decade: in 2005, 72 young adults aged 17–24 years old were involved in road fatalities (22% of all road-crash fatalities), and while the actual number of fatalities decreased to 55 by 2014, the overall percentage represented by young adult drivers increased to 24.7% (DTMR, 2016a).

Young driver road safety is not only a concern for road safety researchers, policy-makers and practitioners; it is also a primary concern for parents and the wider community (Beanland et al., 2013; BRAKE.org.au, 2016; DTMR, 2016a; Goodwin et al., 2006; Road Safety Education, 2016; Tilleczek, 2011; Tronsmoen, 2010). As such, a breadth of interventions have been introduced to help reduce driving risks – including intentional risky driving behaviour

– for young novice drivers. Strategic Police enforcement using random breath testing and shock advertising campaigns have been found to positively impact upon road safety, however these efforts are aimed broadly at all drivers (e.g., Guria and Leung, 2004; Williams and Wells, 2004). Driver training programs have specifically targeted young drivers in the form of driver education, professional driving lessons, and defensive driving courses to enhance the young driver's skills, but there is little consensus on their efficacy in producing safer independently-licensed drivers (Beanland et al., 2013; Tilleczek, 2011; Tronsmoen, 2010).

The most successful young driver intervention to date appears to have been the introduction of graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs, developed in the 1980's and formally introduced in Queensland in 2007 (DTMR, 2016a; Scott-Parker, 2015). GDL consists of varying requirements and restrictions through the supervised learner licence phase and the restricted provisional (P-plater) licence phase, before progression to the unrestricted open licence phase, allowing the young novice driver to develop the complex skills involved in being a competent driver (DTMR, 2016a; Hedlund et al., 2006; Scott-Parker, 2015; Senserrick, 2007; Simons-Morton, 2007). Importantly, GDL allows the young novice driver to gain driving proficiency on public roads from in a sequenced and controlled progression from low-risk to high-risk conditions (Keating and Halpem-Felsher, 2008; McCartt et al., 2009; Simons-Morton, 2007; Williams, 2009), with research demonstrating that GDL is widely accepted by both parents and young drivers (e.g., Hedlund, 2007; Senserrick, 2007; Scott-Parker, 2015; Simons-Morton, 2007).

Moreover, GDL actively encourages parents to be continuously involved in the driving process through the practical logistics of licensure. Parents are central to their young novice driver's licensure in Queensland as the enhanced GDL program requires a minimum of 100h certified supervised driving practice submitted in a logbook prior to practical driving assessment (Scott-Parker et al., 2011a,b). While a breadth of research around the world has explored the influence of parents from pre-licensure (Begg et al., 2012; Simons-Morton, 2007), through the learner (McCartt et al., 2007) and provisional licence phases (Preusser and Leaf, 2003; Williams et al., 2006), research reveals that parents lack essential information regarding the purpose of GDL (Hedlund, 2007), the efficacy of their instruction and the importance of experience gained through their driving lessons (Tronsmoen, 2011). Moreover, Mirman and Kay (2012) found parents require additional training and support in being involved with their child's licensure.

Indeed, the views of parents regarding the young driver licensing process are essential in determining and promoting various safe driving programs for young drivers (Simons-Morton, 2007; Williams et al., 2006), with parents in US states in which GDL programs are in place more likely to set restrictions upon their young novice drivers than parents in US states in which no GDL program is in place (Mirman et al., 2012). Past research has focused on the peer networks of young drivers (e.g., Scott-Parker et al., 2009; Curcio et al., 2015), and the social influences of parents (Guggenheim and Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2015; Scott-Parker et al., 2014a,b), including the perceptions of the learner drivers themselves (Guggenheim and Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2015; Scott-Parker, 2015), revealing that parenting styles can impact upon the road safety outcomes of their young driver (e.g., Simons-Morton et al., 2008). Perhaps surprisingly given the critical role parents play in their young novice driver's road safety, and the reliance of parents upon driver training information provided by authorities in respective jurisdictions (e.g., Mirman et al., 2012), there is limited research by way of comparison into the views and perspectives of parents regarding GDL (Brooks-Russell et al., 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2006). Further information is required regarding parental concerns related to the driver licensing process, their perception of obstacles

and risks involved, and how they as parents can assist in effectively communicating messages of safer driving practices to young drivers (Williams et al., 2006), particularly as GDL programs are characterised by mandatory minimum practice requirements and driving restrictions during independent licensure.

As such, the present study aimed to investigate the obstacles experienced by the parents in staying involved and engaged in their child's driver licensing process, from the pre-learner phase, through the provisional phase (P-plater/restricted), to open/unrestricted driver licence phase. Factors that facilitate initial – and sustained – parental engagement, and recommendations regarding the current Queensland GDL program that could further support and sustain parental engagement in their young novice driver's licensure were also explored. The potential to generalise these recommendations to other GDL programs is also noted. Finally, the study sought to gain advice for parents who are about to embark on the novice licensure journey from parents themselves experienced in the young driver licensing process. A qualitative methodology was employed to augment the sparse literature regarding parental perspectives (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twenty-three parents (11 males), aged 35–60 years ($M(SD)=49.52(8.01)$ years) participated in the study. The age of the 23 young drivers (13 males) described in the study ranged from 16 to 24 years ($M(SD)=18.04(2.21)$ years). The licence type held by the young driver at the time of parental-participation included 11 learner licences (47.8%), 9 provisional licences (39.1%) (7 provisional 1, the first 1-year phase of restricted driving, 2 provisional 2, the second- and third-years of restricted driving), and 3 open licences (13.0%). The young drivers had held their respective licences between 0 and 42 months ($M(SD)=11.11(9.47)$ months). Participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling and snowballing of the personal and professional networks of the authors, and no incentives were offered. The interviewer (the first author) has been trained in qualitative methods, thereby limiting interviewer bias.

2.2. Design and procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Sunshine Coast prior to data collection (A/13/518). Participants were recruited either by email or in-person invitation, including parents attending school pick-up and drop-off zones of the school at which one of the author's children attended. Participants were advised of the aim of the study, given a research project information sheet and an interview at a mutually-convenient time was arranged. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 10min to half an hour (full list of questions in Appendix A) were recorded during interviews conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. All interviews were transcribed verbatim with the exception of one failed recording (participant excluded) and one emailed response (verbatim responses included). Informed consent was gained either in writing or verbally at the commencement of the interview recording, and interviews ceased when the participant indicated they had shared everything they could in response to each question.

2.3. Content analysis

A content analysis, using NVivo and Leximancer™ was completed independently by two researchers for a random selection of five transcribed interviews, and compared for corroboration and

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