

Child Restraint Research and Awareness Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Properly used and secured child restraints reduce the risk of death and injury in a motor vehicle crash by about 70%. However, past research indicates that over 70% of restraints in Victoria are not correctly installed.

Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) commissioned a market research survey of parents to ascertain their attitudes and beliefs about the selection, fitting and installation of child restraints. Over 400 parents with children aged under 6 years old were surveyed.

Results from the survey indicated that parents generally install child restraints themselves and believe that the installation of the restraint is the easiest aspect of fitting a restraint. This is alarming when more than two out of every three restraints are incorrectly installed.

To promote awareness of child restraint issues, a campaign was developed to encourage parents/guardians to:

- have their child restraints professionally fitted
- ensure that the children are in the appropriate restraint for their size and weight
- ensure that the restraint is always done up.

Results from the market research, campaign details and initial findings are discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

For a number of years RACV has been involved in events that aim to reduce the risk of children being killed or seriously injured in road crashes. In 1999/2000, RACV decided further research was necessary to develop an understanding of parents/carers beliefs and perceptions about child restraints. The findings from the research provided a framework for the development of a promotional campaign targeting child restraint usage. The campaign aimed to encourage parents to ensure their children are always restrained in correctly fitted and installed restraints. There were a number of components to the campaign that were introduced at different times over the campaign period. This paper provides research findings and details the components of the campaign. It also examines the results and feedback received following the campaign.

BACKGROUND

Child restraints are specifically designed to provide protection for children and infants in the event of a vehicle collision. Kahane (1986) found that properly used and secured child restraints reduce the risk of death and injury in a motor vehicle crash by about 70% (cited in Henderson et al., 1994).

Since 1996, RACV and the State Emergency Service (SES) have conducted an annual event called Safety Seat Sunday, where free child restraints checks are available at a number of large shopping complexes throughout Melbourne, Victoria. Results from the last four years have shown that an average of 70% of restraints were incorrectly fitted. Of those restraints fitted incorrectly, a significant proportion (25%) could result in the serious injury or death of the child in the event of a crash. Furthermore, research shows that the incorrect use of

restraints is even higher among the non-English speaking background communities (Reark Research, 1997; Imberger & Rowe, 1996; Preece 1994).

Ensuring that restraints are properly fitted and maintained is crucial in ensuring that children and infants are afforded maximum protection in the event of a crash. Therefore, it is important that consumers are aware of:

- the range of approved child restraints available, and which specific models perform better than others,
- the circumstances under which specific types of restraints should be used,
- appropriate methods of fitting and securing particular restraints, and
- where to get reliable information/advice about selecting and using child restraints.

RACQ completed a study on child restraints last year (RACQ, 1999). The study found that parents/carers generally think that it is easy to install child restraints and therefore do not seek professional assistance or advice. This finding is alarming when parents/carers were found to be generally poor at fitting child restraints. RACQ (1999) reported, that where child restraints were fitted incorrectly, more than half the faults were considered to be life threatening.

The RACQ study also found that 10% of children were not restrained. Parents/carers tended to not use restraints on shorter trips, shopping trips, or where there were too many people in the vehicle.

Families who did not restrain their children were more likely to :

- possess older restraints
- be non-native speakers of English
- not in full-time employment
- have a lower combined household income.

CHILD RESTRAINT SURVEY

RACV commissioned a market research survey in August 1999 to determine parents/carers awareness of child restraint issues. This was important in understanding why child restraints continue to be incorrectly fitted, given the results from Safety Seat Sunday. Full report from the survey is available from RACV (Glanvill, 2000, Report No: PP 00/01).

OBJECTIVES

The Child Restraint Market Research study aimed to gain information about:

- the awareness of issues surrounding the choice of appropriate child restraints
- the level of awareness of the RACV/VicRoads Approved Fitting Stations
- which issues are least well understood regarding child restraint usage
- how to help RACV develop an appropriate strategy to raise awareness and reduce the number of restraints incorrectly fitted.

METHODOLOGY

The research included both a qualitative and quantitative component. The qualitative program consisted of 12 in-depth interviews both in country Victoria (4 interviews) and in metropolitan Melbourne (8 interviews). The participants all had children under the age of 6 and came from a variety of income levels, vehicle types driven and restraints used.

The quantitative program consisted of 431 telephone interviews, of 15 minute duration from a random sample of Victorian households. All participants were parents/guardians of at least one child under the age of 6.

RESULTS

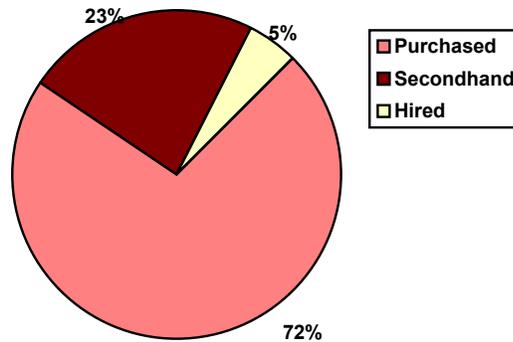


Figure 1: Where parents obtain restraints

Results from the survey found that 71% of parents/carers purchased their latest restraint new, whereas 23% obtained a secondhand restraint and a small number (5%) hired the restraint (Figure 1). When asked what sources of information were available on child restraints, unprompted 39% of respondents said that information was available from RACV, 21% said brochures from Maternal and Child Health Centres or the Child Health Nurse, 17% from a retailer and 16% in hospitals.

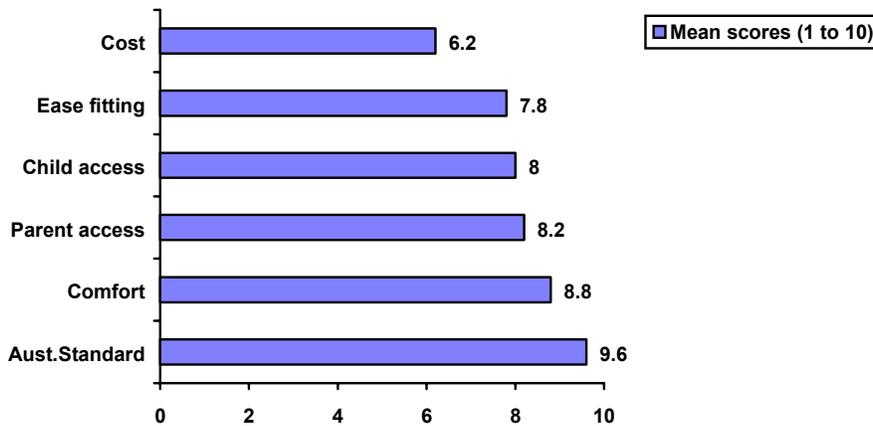


Figure 2: Ranked Importance of Factors in Purchasing Restraints

Respondents were asked about the factors that contributed to their restraint selection and purchase. Ten factors were listed and respondents were asked to rank them according to their level of importance when purchasing a restraint (1 to 10, 10 being extremely important). See Figure 2. The top mean scores are as follows: the Australian Standard sticker displayed (9.6), that the restraint looked comfortable for the child (8.8), ease of access for the parent (8.2), ease of access for the child (8.0) and ease of fitting (7.8). The cost of the restraint was not considered as important as safety, comfort, access or fitting of the restraint, with a mean score of only 6.2.

The qualitative component of the market research indicated that the experience of purchasing a restraint was viewed by most parents/carers as difficult. Sales staff were viewed as being uninformed about restraint

products, and guidelines/instructions on restraint packaging were often the only source of information available to consumers when selecting or installing a restraint.

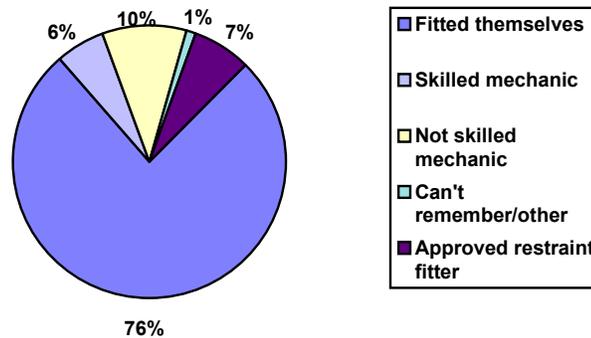


Figure 3: Who fitted the restraints

When the participants were asked who fitted their child restraints, 76% said that they had personally fitted their restraint, 6% were fitted by a partner, family member or friend who was a skilled mechanic, and 10% by a partner, friend or family member who was not a skilled mechanic. Approved restraint fitters installed 7% of restraints of those surveyed (Figure 3). Most parents/carers were aware that they could have restraints fitted and checked professionally. However, only 24% of parents/carers actually consulted an Approved Restraint Fitter to have their restraint checked after it had been installed.

The respondents who reported fitting the restraints themselves did so because, it seemed easy (78%), they had done it before (13%) and 5% because they did not know they could get someone to do it for them. When queried about the fitting of their next restraint, 74% said that they would fit it themselves. Only 7% of parent/carers participating in the study said that they would consult an Approved Restraint Fitter to fit their next restraint.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The RACV survey found that parents/carers look for the Australian Standards sticker on restraints when purchasing a restraint. In other words, the safety value of the restraint is important to parents/carers. However, while parents/carers place value on having the Australian Standards sticker, 76% fit the restraints themselves rather than having it professionally installed. Parents/carers fit their own restraints because they believe that it is “easy”. They fail to realise that not only does the restraint itself need to be safe, but that the installation is also an important safety consideration. There is also a lack of knowledge and understanding about the complexity of fitting restraints correctly. This is concerning considering the results from Safety Seat Sunday show that approximately 70% of restraints are fitted incorrectly.

RACV CHILD RESTRAINT CAMPAIGN

Based on these research findings, RACV developed an awareness campaign.

The campaign had the following objectives:

- to ensure that children travel in a restraint that meets the Australian Standard and is appropriate to the child’s needs,
- to ensure that child restraints are correctly fitted in vehicles,
- to encourage people transporting children to use approved child restraint fitting stations.

COMPONENTS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Media and Promotional

The media and promotional components of the campaign comprised radio advertisements and a poster. Three radio advertisements were developed, focusing on the central messages of the campaign - ensure you have the appropriate restraint for your child, that it is installed correctly and that it is always done up. The advertisements were quite emotive and designed to catch and maintain attention. The radio campaign ran throughout Victoria for 6 weeks, on commercial radio stations whose main audience demographic were people with children under the age of six.

A poster was developed with the same three key messages - correct restraint selection, properly installed restraints and restraints that are always done up. The title of the poster "Will your child survive a crash?" was deliberately personal and emotive to encourage people to read the rest of the poster. The poster was also designed to complement existing brochures explaining how to use restraints safely.

Three thousand of the child restraint posters were distributed to all Victorian maternity hospitals, community centres, maternal and child health centres and to one thousand child care centres. Posters were also distributed to VicRoads early childhood consultants, RACV/VicRoads Restraint Fitting Stations and RACV retail outlets.

Two articles also appeared in the RACV RoyalAuto magazine relating to the child restraint campaign that is distributed to over 1 million Victorian motorists each month.

RTA NSW - Child Restraint Testing

RACV, in conjunction with NRMA, supported an extensive child restraint testing program undertaken by the NSW RTA. The program involved testing restraints to see how well they performed in a variety of crash situations. The restraints were also tested to see how easily they could be fitted into a variety of vehicles ranging from a small hatchback to a large four-wheel drive. The restraints were examined to see how easily children could be secured in them. Based on the test results, those restraints that performed to a standard higher than the current Australian Standard were given a "preferred buy" rating. Based on this information, a brochure was developed that outlined the performance of the restraints and listed all the restraints that received a preferred buy rating. This brochure was released in July 2000.

Fourteen thousand copies of this brochure, the *Buyers Guide to Child Restraints* have been distributed to relevant outlets, agencies and organisations. Demand for the brochure from individuals and agencies continues to be high.

Ethnic Radio Campaign

RACV sponsored a VicRoads campaign targeting the use of child restraints in non-English speaking background communities. Radio advertisements were played on community radio in a number of different languages highlighting the importance of putting children in appropriate child restraints. Brochures were produced in 11 languages and peer presenters from various different cultural and linguistic backgrounds spoke to groups about child restraint usage.

AWARENESS - OUTCOMES OF CAMPAIGN

Media Coverage

Media coverage of the campaign primarily centred around the launch of each component. With the launch of the radio advertisements and poster in April, articles appeared in both the Herald-Sun and The Age, and many of the suburban and regional papers. ABC and commercial radio also covered the story.

The *Buyers Guide to Child Restraints* was launched in July and attracted extensive media coverage. A story was run for the national news on two television stations and regional news throughout Victoria, with articles in both The Australian and the Herald Sun. Fifteen suburban papers ran a story and news stories were run on both AM and FM radio stations.

Advertising Awareness

Member survey results showed that one in five people surveyed had seen or heard advertising about child restraints. This recall figure is very high and suggests a successful campaign. Of the people who said they had seen or heard advertising about child restraints, over half had children 8 years or younger, indicating that the campaign reached its target audience. The research found that brochures and posters were more likely to have been seen by parents with young children and that brochures were more often seen in the city, while posters were more often seen in Country Victoria. The key messages that respondents recalled from the advertising accurately reflected the key messages of the campaign.

Behaviour Change

Evaluating the effectiveness of the campaign is difficult. However, the campaign was developed on sound research findings. The aim of the campaign was to raise knowledge and awareness in the hope of changing behaviour, but determining behaviour change is difficult. Results from the next Safety Seat Sunday to be held in November will be monitored to see if there has been a change in the extent of fitting faults following the campaign, or the number of people having their restraints checked.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The safe use of child restraints is an issue that attracts enormous community support, as well as media attention. It is also an issue that from a road safety perspective continues to be problematic. Despite the success of this campaign, too many children are being placed in restraints that have not been fitted properly, significantly increasing the risk of serious injury or death in the event of a crash.

The recommendations arising from this study are as follows:

- development of further programs/campaigns highlighting the complexity of installing restraints correctly is warranted to change the community perception that fitting child restraints is easy
- greater research and initiative developed focusing on restraint usage for people from non-English speaking backgrounds
- the development of a simpler system for installing restraints that minimises the opportunity to incorrectly install restraints, should be a priority.

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