

Learning to Drive in Rural Areas: Parents' Perspectives on Issues and Solutions

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Biography

Warren Harrison is a social and behavioural scientist with over 15 years experience in road safety research. He is a registered Psychologist, a Member of the Australian Psychological Society, a Member of the International Council on Alcohol, Drugs, and Traffic Safety, and an Associate Fellow of the Australian College of Road Safety. He has worked in senior research roles at VicRoads, MUARC, and ARRB. He has a Masters degree in Educational Psychology and has been self-employed for 2 years. In the last two years Warren has conducted research for clients such as RTA, NRMA Insurance, NRMA Member Services, VicRoads, the WA Office of Road Safety, and the TAC.

Abstract

The problems confronting the parents of learner drivers in regional centres and rural areas differ substantially from those confronting urban parents. Distances are greater, access to varying driving conditions is often more restricted, and access to professional assistance or broader government services is limited. The reliance on motor vehicles to meet mobility needs is greater, and young people have often developed basic vehicle handling skills before they commence their official learner period. This paper presents the results of a small series of discussion groups undertaken with parents in regional centres in Victoria. The discussion groups were conducted as part of an evaluation of materials developed for parents by RACV, but were broad enough to allow parents to discuss their concerns about their involvement in their learners' driving and to share solutions to some common problems. The paper will address some of the experiences of rural parents as supervising drivers, the blockages to providing experience for learner drivers, responses to the potential introduction of exposure-reduction measures, and the needs of parents undertaking this role.

1. INTRODUCTION

The continuing road toll problem outside metropolitan areas has led to an increasing focus on the road safety needs of people in rural areas and regional cities. This requires the development and implementation of road safety programs that take into account the specific context of road use in these areas. This paper presents some of the results of an evaluation of a program targeting learner drivers and their families. Part of the evaluation involved discussions with parents of learner drivers in regional centres of Victoria. The discussions were conducted to collect information about the response of parents to materials in the program, and to collect more-general information about the learner driver period from a parent's perspective. The results presented here relate to the latter, aiming to inform the development of programs to increase the amount of experience accrued by learner drivers and the confidence of parents acting as supervisors.

2. METHOD

A series of four discussion groups were conducted – two in Shepparton and two in Albury-Wodonga. These involved 26 parents who were drawn from the sample of parents who had completed one or both of the surveys used to evaluate the original program materials developed by RACV. These surveys were distributed through schools and as part of the Keys Please program conducted by VicRoads. Parents were recruited by telephone and

they were paid \$20 for participating. The discussion groups were conducted to collect information about parents' perceptions of the learner period, their experiences with their learner drivers, and their response to some other issues that are outlined below. Each group took about 90 minutes.

3. RESULTS

The results of the discussion groups are presented below under headings that reflect the issues covered in the groups. Liberal use is made of quotes from group members to illustrate the general trends in discussion and attitudes. The quotes do not include all comments made on each issue, and some issues that were discussed are not included here due to space limitations.

3.1 Early Learner Experiences

Parents talked about early experiences they had with their learner drivers that were generally a source of learning, but that also added stress to the learner driver experience for both the parent and their learner.

<p>With our current learner we ended up in an irrigation ditch on the first day out.</p>	<p>My boy had a lucky escape when he rolled the ute on the farm. He thinks he will be much more careful after that experience.</p>
<p>She hadn't done much driving and she'd had a bit of experience on roundabouts in Shepparton but we went to Melbourne and she drove in peak hour. She was very stressed. She took a roundabout a bit fast and ended up stopped on the median strip. We were used to really big roundabouts in Shepparton and this one was just too small. We decided not to tell Dad about it.</p>	<p>My daughter was driving home and we have a lot of kangaroos around the place. I kept telling her to be careful of them and she told me not to worry and that it was all under control. Then a kangaroo came out and she was lucky to avoid it. Next morning I drove her into the bus stop near work and she kept telling me to be careful with the kangaroos. She seems to have learned the lesson.</p>

Most of these experiences appeared only to have a temporary effect on the amount of experience provided to learners. Some issues did have longer-term effects, and parents were particularly aware of the potential dangers associated with driving. Parents were careful to manage the learner experience in a way that minimised potential risk.

<p>We know a family with a learner who had an accident that left them without the learner driver who was killed and his sibling with lifelong injury. We know the impact of that on the family. It is always on our minds. Initially we didn't let our L plate driver drive with anyone else apart from the instructor in the car, but the problem with that is that these times are limited.</p>

3.2 Stress and Emotions

Parents reported many instances of stress, anxiety, and loss of emotional self control and generally agreed that these incidents were problems for them.

<p>My wife has taken all of our kids for driving lessons. One reason is that she is much more patient than I am. I tend to let them know that I am in fear for my life, and this creates friction in the car so it's better if I don't go along.</p>	<p>My learner refuses to sit next to me. If I tell him that I think he's going to fast or something like that he stops the car and refuses to go on. I end up having to drive.</p>
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I get scared a bit and I tend to voice things when they do something wrong. I know I have a problem with this. If there were two parents like this it could affect the learner's confidence.	My husband doesn't do much because he has a bit of a short fuse and he'd rather leave it up to me.
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Some parents appeared to be more accepting of the occasional loss of self-control and did not feel that it was a major problem, perhaps suggesting a more resilient relationship with their learner driver.

I've gripped the dashboard and the kids have a good laugh about that.

There was a willingness to work through issues rather than react emotionally, and a willingness to move on from stressful situations rather than focus attention on them.

I've had stressed periods where something has been done wrong, but generally no stress. We work through those issues.	You just have to be really really cool.
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Some parents also had a good level of self-awareness and a willingness to exert strong self-control to ensure stressful situations did not interfere with supervising their learner.

I know if the kids have been fighting and she wants to go for a drive then I'm just not in the mood. I need to be calm within myself before I can take her for a drive.

There were also a few situations where stress and anxiety had a significant impact on the amount of experience accrued by the learner driver.

I've panicked and told her she was doing the wrong thing and she spat the dummy and got out of the car and refused to drive any further.	A friend of mine got into the car with a learner for the first time. The learner stalled, there was a yelling match, and the learner didn't get into the car again for six months after that.
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3.3 Time

There were two points of view about the time issue. Some parents felt that finding the time to provide practice was a problem and that this was an important factor that prevented them providing the experience to their learner that they would like to.

There are only 24 hours in the day.	It's time.
It's like everything. I can make a trip faster than her and I think it's four minutes I can save, or I'm in a hurry today.	We live in town and it takes a lot of time to get 120 hours.
I find that finding the time for driving can be a problem. When he wants to go driving I quite often have something I have to do and vice versa. It can sometimes be a pain in the neck. I know it shouldn't be but it is.	It's just time and competing interests. We've got work. Our daughter has got sports and school, homework and so on. It is difficult to find the time for lessons.

Others, however, felt that time was not a problem – primarily because they were able to combine providing practice with their day-to-day lives. Many parents encouraged their learner driver to drive whenever they wanted to go somewhere. For families on farms outside regional centres, this will most likely result in achieving the 120 hour recommended

level of experience relatively easily – although the complexity and range of practice may not be as great as that provided for novice drivers in built-up areas.

For us the time factor is not a problem as we live out of town and have to do a lot of driving.	Every time we went out they'd hop in the car and drive.
We find that we haven't got the time to set aside specific times for practice, but he drives whenever we need to go somewhere.	Whenever we take her to work or training, she gets in the car and drives. Wherever she goes, she drives.
She drives because of her social life and sport. That is where she does all of her driving.	I find that if the kids are in the car, they drive.

One parent noted that she had learnt to manage her own time better to minimise the likelihood that time-pressure would interfere with her learner's practice.

3.4 Attitudes and Personality

Parents commented that there were differences in the personalities and attitudes of learner drivers that could influence how much driving they did.

Personality makes a big difference. My two were completely different.	It depends on the eagerness of the learner. We have to get ours out of bed early so he can drive to school.
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There were also differences between parents that meant some were less willing than others to provide opportunities for practice.

I'm very different from my partner.	I find it a bit hard because I like driving.
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3.5 Overconfidence

It was broadly agreed that learner drivers were sometimes too confident.

I live on a farm so my daughter & son drive anything and everything. My biggest problem is that they are overconfident. Nothing is a problem to them. We've got to try and take the confidence out of them.	She came in after a drive with her father looking rather sheepish and said "Dad says I can make the car do things he didn't even know it was capable of doing".
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The relationship between self-confidence and the unwillingness of some learners to take opportunities to practice was noted by some parents, perhaps reflecting the relative ease with which vehicle control skills can be learnt and the failure (on the part of novice drivers) to recognise that experience helps develop more-advanced driving skills.

Our 17-year-old is very confident. He knows how to drive already but won't get in the car to practice. He refuses to drive, and he is a bit too confident when he does. He feels he doesn't need the driving experience as he can drive already.	We have a son who also didn't want to drive and now if he wants to go anywhere he has to drive or bike it. We even pretend that we're sick or tired to force him to drive. He needs a scare to try and reduce his confidence.
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3.6 Couple and Family Issues

Providing opportunities for practice has implications for families that can discourage parents. Parents noted that supervising a learner can add stress to their own relationship.

One of the most stressful things I find is when my wife and I are both in the car. I'm probably a bit more relaxed than she is. It's really hard for both of us to sit in the car and for only one of us to give instructions, especially when the person in the back seems to see more. It must be very hard on the learner.

Parents sometimes worked this issue out by ensuring that the learner was supervised by only one parent when both were present.

We have a rule that when there were two parents in the car the one in the back is not allowed to say anything.

3.7 Teaching Style and Encouraging Experience

Parents in the discussions had different approaches to their role as supervising driver, but there were some similarities that parents agreed were associated with successful outcomes. Parents had their own confidence problems, especially with early supervision of their first learner driver. Some felt that the Keys Please program provided valuable information and encouragement, and that similar programs should continue to be offered.

Keys Please gave us the confidence as parents. It was really good to go there before he got his learner's	It showed us we didn't have to be perfect, we just had to be there.
	It's good to take things slowly.

Some parents talked about needing to learn to accept that learner drivers will make mistakes, and that these can be an important source of learning.

I go for a different tack. I tend to be supportive and try to shut up. I tried to give him the space, I have to stop myself talking. He knows what to do and I have to stop myself anticipating him.	I rarely say anything in the car. I just let them drive. If they make a mistake I talk pretty quietly to them.
	Mistakes are a part of learning.

Although some parents were less skilled at ignoring small errors.

I tend to give negative comments rather than positive. I'm not nagging but they tend to think that you are having a go at them. We get on the wrong wavelength sometimes.	I was hyperventilating and she made her way along until finally we could stop
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Some parents attempted to encourage their learners to do things that were challenging as a way to encourage them to develop confidence and their ability to handle traffic.

I tend to encourage him to go beyond his comfort zone.	I would suggest alternative routes and push this to get them used to dealing with traffic.
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The need for a gradual introduction to more-complex driving situations was well-understood by parents, with some indicating that they had made use of the "From L's to P's" booklet published by VicRoads as a guide to pacing their supervision.

For the first couple of drives you try to find somewhere out of the way where there won't be other traffic to hassle them, and that's hard to find.	I know of a parent who was shocked that we let our learner drive on a holiday to Central Australia last year. She said that she does not let her learner drive when there are other family members in the car. I think we need to give our learners all sorts of experiences.
They get enough confidence that you can take the next step and let them drive with passengers in the car.	
It's a building up chunk by chunk. The other day I asked if he wanted the radio on and he said no. It was too distracting.	

Parents were unable or unwilling to provide some practice, however. This was especially so for driving in wet conditions (as a result of recent drought conditions in rural Victoria) and for driving in Melbourne.

Driving in Melbourne is just information overload.	Mine haven't driven in Melbourne because I won't drive there. It's too scary.
We haven't had any rain. Our learner has had her permit for nine months and it has rained only twice.	My daughter came home one night just after she got a licence and burst into tears because she'd never driven in fog. I've never even thought about giving her a chance to drive in fog.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the discussions conducted with parents provide some direction for developing programs to help parents provide more practice opportunities for learner drivers.

The supervisory role is not stress-free. It is possible that the early stress associated with the supervisory role may discourage some parents from providing as much practice as needed. This was confirmed in the discussion groups where a small number of parents admitted that the stress associated with supervising their learner had resulted in them minimising their role in the learner's driving. Helping parents to deal with this early stress may have a beneficial effect on the provision of practice opportunities. The effect of early stress also appeared to be an issue for some learners. Given how common early-learner stressful events and interactions appear to be, it may be useful to increase learner drivers expectations that things will go wrong, and to provide mechanisms to help them deal with their own stress and early lack of confidence. Some parents indicated that they had to learn to accept that mistakes were inevitable and that they needed to avoid commenting on every issue. This type of advice might be helpful to learners.

Having a learner driver in the family appears to increase family or relationship stress levels. Some couples disagree on the amount of practice that should be available for the learner, some disagree on instructional techniques, and some disagree on specific instructions and advice when in the car together when the learner is driving. A consistent message for parents about the amount of practice and on instructional techniques that aid skill development may help here, as would suggesting specific rules about supervising when there are others in the car. Many parents had worked these out for themselves, but it is likely that other parents have not.

The stress issue extends to the parents' own feelings of self-confidence in the new role of supervisor or (in many cases, particularly in rural areas) instructor. Parents in the discussion group indicated that there was a high level of uncertainty at the beginning of the learner period, and a resulting lack of confidence that made early sessions with the learner difficult. Some additional information about instruction during the early stages of the learner period would help parents in this situation. Although it is common to talk about parents of learners

as supervising drivers, the discussions confirmed that parental supervision involves substantial instruction. It might be useful to provide parents with material and advice about instructional issues. While this is likely to be met with resistance from the professional instruction industry, the reality of learner driving in rural areas appears to be that parents do act as instructors and are likely to continue to do so. Providing extra information to parents about instructional issues might also help solve some of the stress-related problems that appeared to relate to inappropriate instructional styles. Some parents appeared to be more skilled as instructors than others, and providing advice may help increase the effectiveness of parents in this role. It might also be beneficial to recast the parents-as-instructors role into a mentor role. There is good advice available for mentoring skill-development that could assist parents in their work with learner drivers.