

# **Strengthening the learner driver experience through parent involvement and education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Effective learner driver education promotes a partnership between the learner and the supervising driver, who is often the parent. To enhance the quality of this partnership, the supervising driver requires support that combines practical and theoretical components, whilst remaining financially accessible. A model recently developed by RACV called the Parent Plus Program provides the supervisor with a free modelled on-road lesson with their learner and a professional driving instructor. The driving instructor acts as a mentor for the learner as well as the supervisor. The supervisor also receives sequential instructional information which is specific to the supervisor's and learner's experience, over a 3 month period. A program evaluation has shown that parents who actively participate in the program report being more likely to provide greater levels of on-road experience for their learner.

This paper provides an overview of the *Parent Plus Program* and reports on evaluation results of parents who participated in the program. Conclusions and implications for effectively engaging with parents and learners will also be highlighted.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Research has found that gaining on-road experience in the learner period helps learner drivers become safer solo drivers (Christie & Harrison 2001). The learner driver stage represents an important opportunity to gain valuable on-road experience with an accompanying supervising driver.

Learners need to develop many complex skills before they begin to drive solo. Effective supervising drivers can help the learner make the transition from learner to solo driver. However attaining necessary experience during the learner driver stage can be difficult. Whilst many parents and supervising drivers recognise the importance of practice, there are often obstacles in offering adequate on-road practice. These include the supervisor's lack of confidence in their learner driver's ability to safely control the vehicle and the supervisor's perceived lack of understanding of current road rules.

RACV have designed a program to help strengthen the learner driver experience through parent involvement and education. The Parent Plus Program is offered in partnership with the RACV Drive School.

## **2. PROGRAM DELIVERY**

When a learner driver commences their professional driving lessons with the RACV Drive School, they must provide the Drive School with contact information on their supervising driver. This is most commonly their parent.

The Parent Plus Program uses this data to send the supervising driver an invitation to the RACV Parent Plus Program. This invitation is accompanied by the first of three Parent Plus information brochures targeting the needs of supervising drivers. The invitation offers the supervising driver an opportunity to attend a driving lesson with their learner, as an observer. In addition, the lesson is offered free of charge. The supervising driver then notifies the Drive School of their intention to take up the offer.

The RACV Drive School encourages supervising parents to take up the free Parent Plus lesson in the learner's second or third lesson with the RACV Drive School.

During the free Parent Plus Program lesson the driving instructor tailors the lesson to the needs of the learner but also to the supervising driver in the back seat. The driving instructor focuses on commentary driving, highlighting the complexities of learning to drive and the identification of problem areas.

At the conclusion of the lesson, the driving instructor provides the supervising driver with the second of three Parent Plus information brochures targeting the needs of supervising drivers.

Approximately two months after attending the free Parent Plus lesson, the supervising driver receives the third and final information brochure.

The three Parent Plus brochures are designed to provide sequential information relevant to each stage of learner development.

### **2.1. PARENT PLUS BROCHURE DISTRIBUTION**

Brochure 1 is sent to all supervising drivers along with the invitation to participate in the Parent Plus Program. The brochure covers:

- Promotion of 120 hours of supervised driving experience for learner drivers,
- Successful supervising tips,
- Stages of learner development,
- What to do first?
- Supervisor's common concerns,

- Useful resources.

Brochure 2 is handed to the supervising driver by the driving instructor after conducting the free Parent Plus lesson. The brochure covers:

- The importance of variety in driving practice,
- Tips to help you supervise,
- Tips on providing feedback to your learner,
- What a supervisor might experience on an early drive with the learner,
- What a supervisor can expect from their learner during an early drive.

Brochure 3 is sent to all Parent Plus participants approximately 2 months after attending the free Parent Plus lesson. The brochure covers:

- Hazard perception and identification,
- Building experience in a variety of conditions,
- Tips to help your learner develop hazard perception skills,
- Different conditions for driving practice.

### **3. EVALUATION**

A Parent Plus Program evaluation was undertaken after the program had been operating for one year.

#### **3.1. OBJECTIVES**

The primary aim of the evaluation was:

- to measure the program's effectiveness in supporting the supervising driver in their role and
- whether the supervising driver is more likely to provide their learner with more on-road supervised driving experience as a result of participating in the Parent Plus Program.

#### **3.2. METHODOLOGY**

Parents who had participated in a free Parent Plus lesson between September 2004 and April 2005 were sent a Parent Plus survey form. Supervising drivers were asked to complete a 15 item feedback questionnaire which included multiple choice, rating scale and open ended questions. The supervising drivers answered questions about the effectiveness of the program and personal outcomes. As an incentive, participants who completed the survey went into the draw to win a \$120 Coles Myer voucher.

### 3.3. RESULTS

A total of 130 respondents completed the survey form. The response rate to the survey was 69%.

Respondents were asked whether they would be more likely to provide more on-road supervised driving experience to their learner driver as a result of the Parent Plus lesson. As shown in Figure 1, 66% indicated that it was likely or extremely likely that this would be the case.

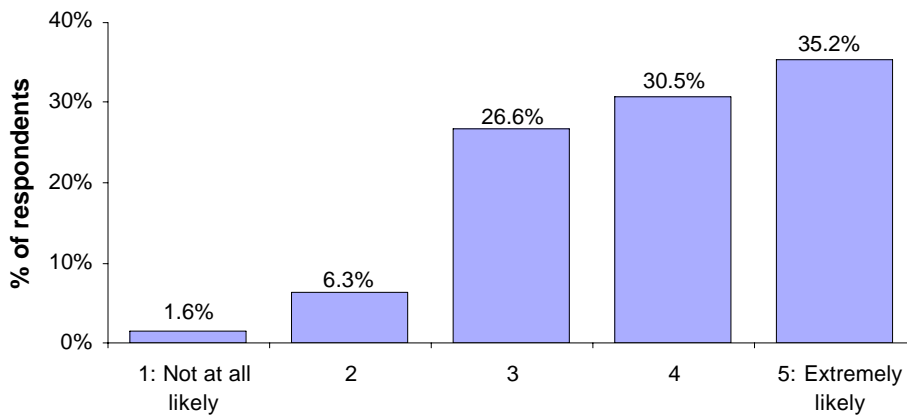


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents likely to provide more supervised on-road driving experience

Respondents were asked whether, as a result of the Parent Plus lesson, they felt more confident to give their learner driver experience in various on-road conditions. As shown in Figure 2, 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

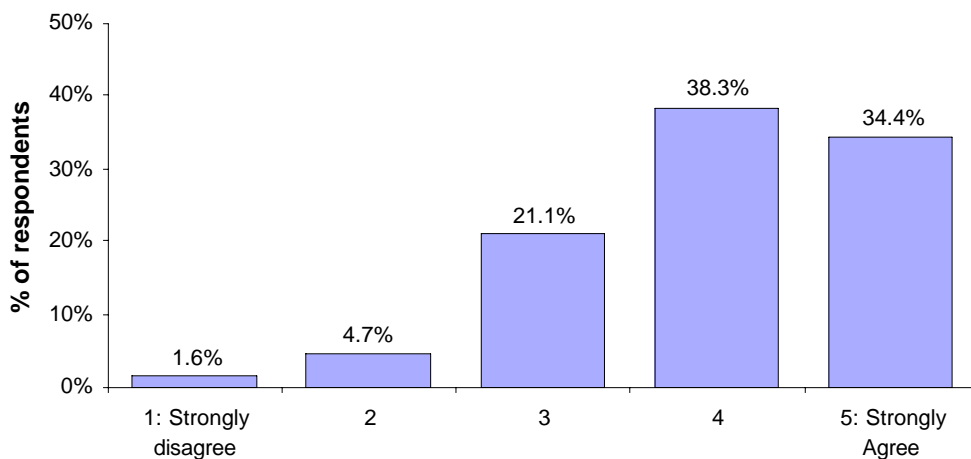


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who felt more confident in providing supervision after the Parent Plus lesson

Respondents were asked whether, as a result of the Parent Plus lesson, they had a better understanding of how to help their learner driver develop their driving skills. As shown in figure 3, 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

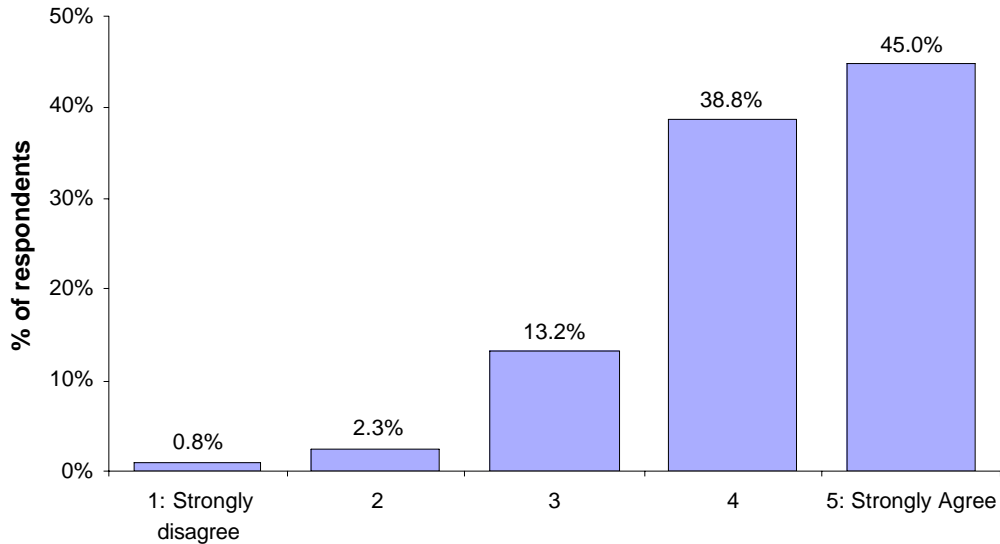


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents with better understanding of how to help learner driver

Respondents were asked to rate the three brochures on three attributes:

- relevance to the supervising driving task,
- presentation and,
- usefulness in assisting or informing them.

Figure 4 indicates that the majority of respondents found the materials good or excellent on all attributes.

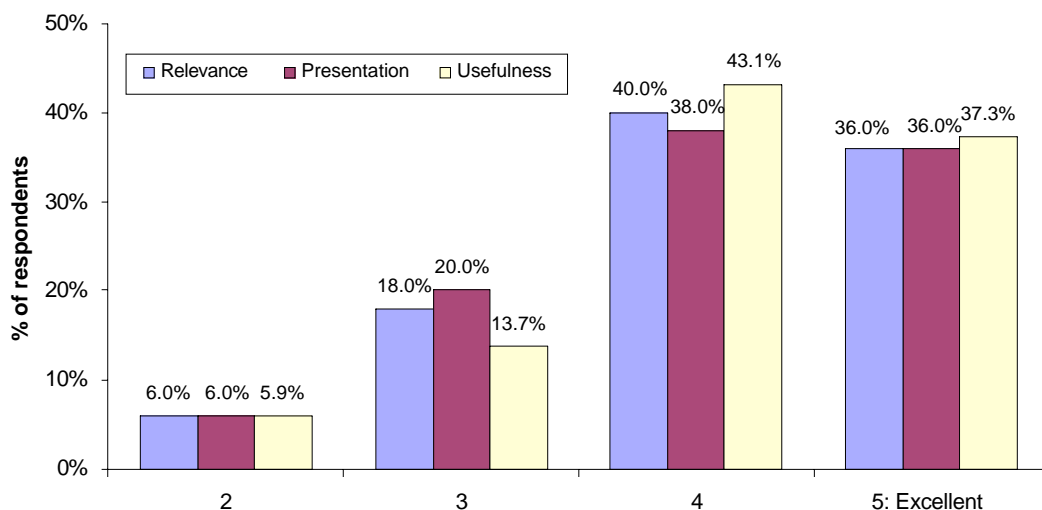


Figure 4: How respondents rated the printed materials

Respondents were asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 5) how useful the Parent Plus lesson was in assisting them to supervise their learner driver. 93% of respondents rated the Parent Plus lesson as useful or very useful in this regard.

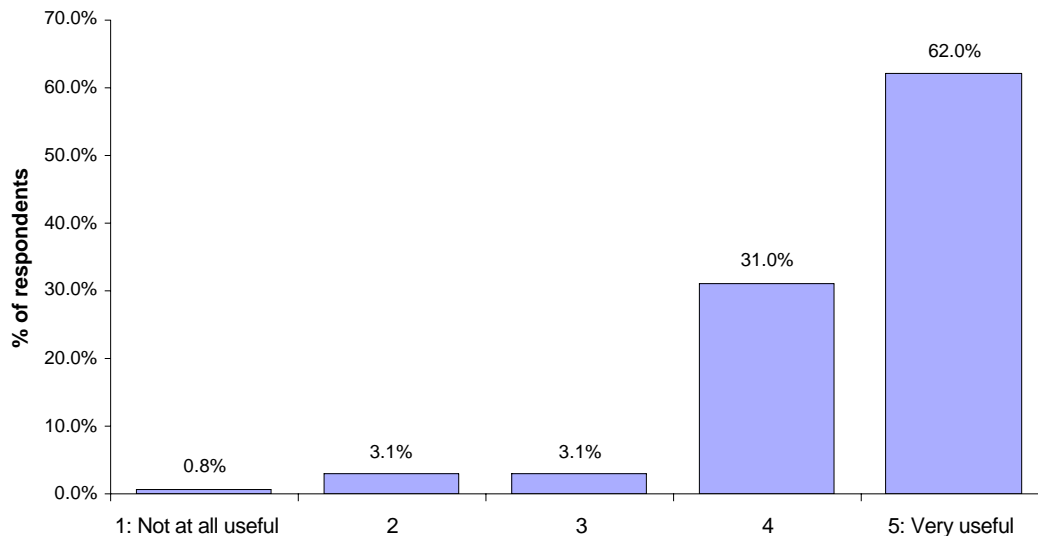


Figure 5: Usefulness of Parent Plus lesson in assisting supervising driver

Supervisors also completed open-ended responses in the survey. These indicated strong support for the program. The feedback included:

- feeling more confident,
- greater consistency between the professional driver trainer and the supervisor,
- reassurance that the supervisor was “on the right track”.

However, the survey revealed a need to raise the profile of the Parent Plus information brochures. Only 9% of respondents could recall receiving all three brochures while a further 29% recalled receiving at least one brochure. Considering the sequential, targeted information contained in the brochures this is a disappointing result. The brochures are an important support resource for supervising drivers.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The survey found that support for the program amongst supervisors was high. 93% of respondents rated the Parent Plus lesson as useful or very useful in assisting them to supervise their learner driver.

According to the survey responses, support for the program can be attributed to:

- a better understanding of how to help the learner develop their driving skills
- an intention to provide their learner driver with more on-road supervised experience
- a feeling of increased confidence when supervising their learner driver in various on-road conditions.

However an important element of the program is the provision of targeted information to supervising drivers through the distribution of the Parent Plus brochures. A future challenge is to raise the profile of the brochures amongst supervising drivers to maximise their educational benefit. To capitalise on the learnings in the free Parent Plus lesson, it is important for program managers to reconsider the brochure's content, presentation and distribution strategy to increase retention amongst supervisors.

The Parent Plus Program is helping supervising drivers. Supervisors report feeling more confident and more knowledgeable after participating in the program. Importantly supervisors indicate they are more likely to provide their learner with greater on-road experience.

When beginning their role as supervising drivers, respondents indicated high levels of anxiety. The supervisor's lack of confidence coupled with the learner's lack of experience reinforces the need for greater support during this time. The Parent Plus Program has helped alleviate some of this trepidation for the supervisor. By strengthening their commitment to increased supervision of their learner, supervisors are better equipping their learner to be safer solo drivers.

## **5. REFERENCES**

Christie, R., & Harrison, W. (2003). *Driver training and education programs of the future*. RACV Report Number 03/03