

Heads up on helmets – Developing a parent fact sheet about teenagers and bike helmets.

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Introduction

Bicycle helmets are reported to reduce the risk and severity of head injury by more than 60% [1, 2]. The mandatory use of bicycle helmets has been required by law in NSW for almost two decades. Despite this, legislation data indicates that many adolescent cyclists continue to ride without their bicycle helmet. In NSW half of the adolescent cyclists involved in a bicycle crash were not wearing a bicycle helmet (where helmet usage was known) and a quarter of young cyclists sustained a head injury [3].

Studies reviewing the effectiveness of bicycle helmet use initiatives found a strong link between parent involvement and helmet use by adolescents [4, 5]. They point to a need for more parental input citing that although parents appear to underestimate their ability to positively influence their children, evidence suggests that parents have a strong influence on adolescent behaviour [6]. A review of existing resources indicates that many bicycle safety programs are designed for primary school children and don't always include parental involvement. To support parental awareness and involvement and to provide relevant information for young adolescent cyclists, Youthsafe has developed a fact sheet, for parents of 12-15 year olds, about the importance of correct bicycle helmet usage.

This was a joint project between Youthsafe and the NSW Centre for Road Safety, Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA).

Method

There were 4 stages to this project:

1. Reviewed current literature and resources.
2. Conducted community consultations with NSW parents and adolescents regarding their use of bicycle helmets.
3. Developed a draft parent fact sheet to reflect information obtained from the literature review and consultations.
4. Piloted and evaluated the draft fact sheet with parents of adolescents.

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of The Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney.

Both quantitative and qualitative data was obtained from the parent and teenage consultations. A parent survey and adolescent survey were developed and reviewed by Youthsafe staff. The parent survey was administered to parents recruited through Youthsafe's existing networks.

The adolescent survey was administered to students from three metropolitan and one regional NSW school. In addition four focus groups were conducted with adolescents from metropolitan and regional schools.

A draft parent fact sheet was developed and was reviewed at Youthsafe and the NSW Centre for Road Safety (RTA). Modifications were made after which a printed mock-up version of the fact sheet was produced. The mock-up fact sheet was pilot tested with parents of adolescents. Feedback was gained from a focus group and written feedback form.

Survey and Focus Group Results

Two hundred and ninety one (291) adolescent surveys were completed. The participants were aged twelve to sixteen years old (mean age = 13 years). Overall participants reported poor bicycle helmet use with only 13% using a helmet each time they ride and 41% indicating they never wear a bicycle helmet when riding. Male participants were less inclined than females to wear a helmet. The main reason given by participants (58%) regarding what they liked about wearing a helmet was safety/protection. Interestingly 32% of participants could not identify anything positive about wearing a bike helmet.

The main reasons given by participants (72%) regarding what they disliked about wearing a helmet were because they are uncomfortable, hot/sweaty/itchy and have a poor design (ugly, big/heavy, restrictive, straps). 65% of participants indicated that understanding the safety benefits of helmets and improved design would encourage them to wear a bicycle helmet.

Participants were required to indicate whether their family had rules regarding the use of bike helmets (46% indicated yes). Their understanding of the bike helmet law was also measured (85% were aware of the law). A comparison of these results with their actual helmet use indicated that the role of family and family rules was more influential on helmet use than knowledge of helmet wearing legislation.

The findings from the four student focus groups were similar to those identified in the written survey.

The parent survey asked parents to report how often they thought their child/ren wear a bike helmet when riding. Within this population parents (n=13) reported that 93% of their children (n=26) wear a bicycle helmet every time they ride. All parents reported that they had family rules requiring children use their helmet every time they ride.

Resource Development

Based on the literature review and community consultations the draft parent fact sheet included information on:

- current helmet usage and rates of head injury
- the law and fines
- how to correctly fit a helmet
- communicating with teenagers about the importance of a correctly fitted helmet
- choosing the right helmet.

Evaluation of the fact sheet, by parents of adolescents, was very positive and resulted in the need for only minimal changes such as increasing the font size and changing the order of some written text. Parents indicated they would use the fact sheet with their children.

Conclusion

The fact sheet will initially be distributed through NSW secondary schools and the NSW RTA. Distribution will be monitored to identify reach and numbers ordered.

References

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