

## **Reaching young drivers: Fire services' contribution to a community based approach**

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### **Abstract**

Young and novice drivers comprise only a small proportion of licensed drivers yet are overrepresented in fatalities and injuries related to crashes on our roads. As authorised road accident rescue agencies in Victoria, Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) and Country Fire Authority (CFA) play a key role with police and ambulance services in emergency response. As a result fire services have a clear understanding of the very real cost of road crashes to individuals and the community.

In response to this issue MFB and CFA sought to make a positive contribution to the improvement of road safety amongst young and novice drivers and their passengers. To avoid duplication and ensure an integrated response with other key stakeholders MFB identified an opportunity to contribute to an existing educational program which has grown from a local level.

The 'Fit to Drive' program (F2D) for senior secondary school students is based on the philosophy that young people have the capacity to change attitudes in relation to risky behaviours on the road. The program's continued growth and sustainability is based on the strength of a range of partnerships between local communities, individual schools and state based stakeholders.

This presentation will detail the research undertaken, the development and implementation and evaluation of the resource by adopting 'best practice' principles in road safety education. Importantly, it will identify how individual agencies like fire services in unique partnerships can make a positive contribution to a model based on relationships between key stakeholders as an all of community response.

### **Keywords**

Road safety, education program, young and novice drivers, fire service.

### **Introduction**

Young and novice drivers comprise only a small proportion of licensed drivers yet are clearly overrepresented in fatalities and injuries related to crashes on our roads. As authorised road accident rescue agencies in Victoria the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) and Country Fire Authority (CFA) play a key role in responding to car crashes and are acutely aware of the very real cost of road trauma to the community. The fire services role is more than preparing and responding to emergencies, as community safety organisations there is a responsibility to be actively involved in injury prevention.

In the past, firefighters had initiated or been requested to deliver road safety messages in the form of lectures and displays to various community groups on an adhoc basis. The audience were predominantly young people for a number of reasons. Firefighters through their own experiences recognised young people were over represented in road crashes and generally

involved in some of the more horrific and tragic incidents. The majority of requests for presentations were coming directly from secondary schools, youth groups and the like for all sorts of reasons, generally due to the fire services experience as road rescue authorities they felt it would add credibility to any road safety messages. Was there a defined purpose for these presentations? Were any measurable outcomes achieved? Was this an emotional response to the problem? Whilst keen to make a positive contribution to the improvement of road safety amongst young and novice drivers and their passengers, it was clear the messages delivered were inconsistent, not necessarily aligned to the Victorian road safety strategy and on occasion inaccurate. Also presentation and displays delivered to school groups may not have been age appropriate or reflected current teaching practises, shock tactics may have been the key strategy employed and it may have been the only road safety activity undertaken by the students.

## **Research**

In 2003/04 the MFB's Community Education Department undertook a review of their road safety activities. The purpose being to achieve a consistent whole of organisational approach, ensure the needs and expectations of the community were being met and satisfying the internal needs of MFB. If fire services were to be involved in road safety education clearly defined measurable outcomes needed to be met, not 'lets do it' because the sounds or feels good at the time.

An analysis of current road safety research, data and existing road safety education programs was undertaken in order to make an informed decision as to the direction any involvement in road safety education should follow. The project brief included:

- Analysis of car crash and injury data;
- Seek advice from the key road safety stakeholders in Victoria;
- Analysis of existing programs;
- Research current road safety education 'good practise' models;
- Identification of potential gaps in existing programs.

The review highlighted a number of facts and issues:

- The road crash data clearly reflected the significant over representation of young people in road crashes, both in actual numbers and proportion of population. Research shows there are a number of contributing factors to road crashes involving young people including, inexperience, propensity to take risks, overconfidence, peer passengers, speeding, alcohol / drugs, non use of seat belts, driving at high risk times and fatigue.
- The Victorian Road Safety Strategy is a whole of government approach, providing a framework for government, non government agencies and the community to work collaboratively ensuring strategies developed are part of a comprehensive approach to road safety. (arrive alive! Victoria's Road Safety Strategy, 2002-2007) It was clear that effective road safety initiatives are those based on sustainable partnerships with key stakeholders and community organisations. (Enhancing the Safety of Young Drivers, 2003) MFB sought advice from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, VicRoads and Transport Accident Commission at the planning stage to ensure any fire service initiatives were appropriate and complimented existing strategies.
- Secondary schools have an extremely tight curriculum and there is a wide range of road safety resources currently available for the schools which can make it confusing for teachers. The Victorian Road Safety Strategy includes a detailed 'Traffic Safety Education

Action Plan' that recommends programs and materials to schools. This ensures where schools incorporate traffic safety into their curriculum the students gain vital knowledge, attitudes and skills appropriate to their level of development. Any additional activities undertaken should raise awareness of road safety, promote the key messages and increase knowledge of road safety amongst young people. (Adams, Cockfield & Remenyi, 2005) (Victorian Traffic Safety Education Action Plan 2002-2007)

- Any road safety education initiatives developed require a substantial commitment of resources by the fire service, it was clear a stand alone resource for secondary schools was not a consideration. Advocacy with the key road safety stakeholders provided an opportunity to leverage off their expert knowledge of road safety and educational 'good practise' principles, and identify potential gaps in existing programs where the fire service may be able to value add.

To ensure fire service's resources are utilised to best effect it was essential any road safety initiatives needed to reflect research driven 'good practise models'. The following principles were developed to guide the design and implementation of road safety initiatives:

- Prior to developing new initiatives identify existing resources and programs to avoid duplication;
- Initiatives complement or support existing road safety laws, messages and education programs;
- Effectiveness of initiatives will be maximised if partnerships are developed and maintained with other agencies involved in planning and delivery of road safety education;
- All fire service initiatives in schools must be linked with Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's Curriculum;
- Initiatives delivered into schools must be evidence based and use effective teaching methods consistent with understandings of child and adolescent development; Shock and fear approaches to be avoided; (Elliott, 2003)
- Initiatives delivered into schools should include activities which empower the students to perform the activities, and engage students relevant to their age group;
- The initiatives must be evaluated from the outset. Objectives must be realistic, clearly identify the intended outcomes and measurable;
- Fire services activities must be part of an ongoing sequential program; (Elkington, J, Hunter, K. & McKay, L. 2000)
- All road safety initiatives developed must address the resource demands placed on the fire service to ensure sustainable delivery.

By applying the principles listed above the Fit to Drive program half day workshop for Year 11 secondary school students was identified as the most appropriate program for MFB to become an effective partner and make a positive contribution to the safety of young people on the road.

## **Method**

### The Fit to Drive Model

Fit to Drive has grown from a local community based program on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula in response to a road crash involving young people to communities throughout

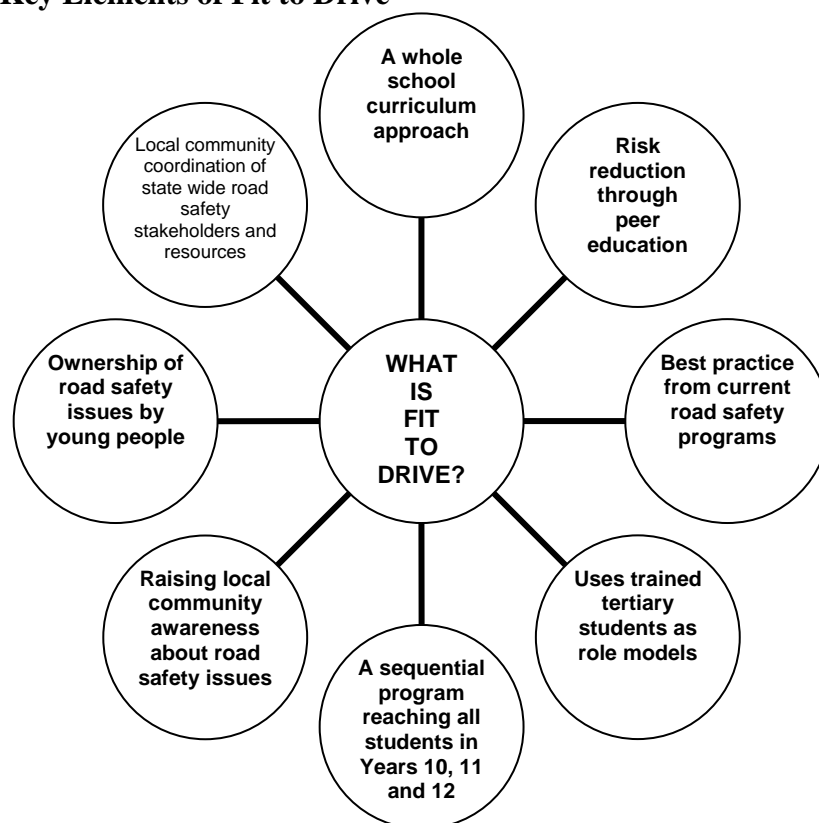
Victoria. The program’s continued growth and sustainability is based on the strength of the partnerships between local communities, individual schools and state based stakeholders.

Fit to Drive provides a platform for local communities to coordinate a range of resources and activities for young people developed by road safety agencies and stakeholders including Transport Accident Commission, VicRoads, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, RMIT University, local government, Victoria Police, RoadSafe, Royal Automobile Club of Victoria, MFB and CFA. Fit to Drive is presented to teachers as an integrated whole school curriculum approach, linking core traffic safety education programs and enrichment activities to reach all students in Years 10, 11 and 12. (Adams, Cockfield & Remenyi, 2005) The program is consistent with, and reinforces messages from the Victorian road safety strategy, such as learner drivers obtaining at least 120 hours of supervised driving practise.

A key component of Fit to Drive is the Year 11 half day workshop and a significant feature of the workshops is the facilitated discussion based on peer education principles that encourages students to make positive choices as road users. The workshops consist of the following activities;

- Facilitated peer group discussions lead by trained university students who represent creditable role models to the students due to closeness of their age and life experiences;
- High impact presentation from the Victorian Police Road Safety Information and Awareness Unit;
- A car crash case study facilitated by MFB or CFA;
- Practical demonstration of the correlation between speed and safe stopping distances by road safety agencies or local community stakeholders. (Nucleus Group et al 2008)

**Table 1: The Key Elements of Fit to Drive**



(Fit to Drive Statewide Steering Committee et al 2006)

In 2005 MFB formalised their involvement with Fit to Drive and began delivery of a resource as part of the half day workshop to participating schools within MFB's area. As the demand for the program grew so did the requests for the fire service component of the workshop. This initially created a dilemma as many of the schools were outside the jurisdiction of the MFB. The MFB and CFA both recognise the importance of providing a joint response to address the safety concerns the Victorian community. In 2007 CFA formally adopted the MFB resource creating a unified and consistent approach by the fire services to the safety of young people on the roads.

#### Fire Service Car Crash Case Study

MFB developed a case study of an actual car crash involving young people to compliment and enhance the messages of the half day workshop. While the case study focuses on choices, peer pressure, responsibility and consequences of the crash, the activity also raises issues around the circumstances of the crash. This includes issues such as travelling without a seat belt, travelling in the boot of an overloaded vehicle and driving an unfamiliar vehicle.

The activity is designed to engage the students by using facilitated group discussions, challenging their values and have them take responsibility for the choices they make as a road user. A key success factor is ensuring the discussion driven by the student and relevant to their stage in life and their experiences.

The students are introduced to the circumstances surrounding the car crash then broken up into small discussion groups with the focus on;

- Choices made by all involved;
- The influence of peer pressure;
- Who is responsible;
- The impacts of the crash.

The small group work is followed by a facilitated large group discussion with all the students. This enables the students to share with each other what they believe are the key factors that lead to the crash and the unsafe decisions that were made. The student's take ownership of the issues, reflecting on their own values and share strategies they would be comfortable using if they found themselves in similar circumstances or unsafe situations as a driver or passenger.

### **Results**

#### Road Crash Case Study Evaluation

An evaluation of the fire service case study was undertaken by the MFB in 2007. The evaluation was designed around use of a survey methodology with a sample of students across several schools, who participate in the program. The methodology involved two self-complete survey questionnaires several weeks prior to and following the program. Six hundred and thirty students completed the pre program survey and five hundred and twelve the post program survey. Two hundred and eighty-six pre and post program survey responses from individual students were able to be matched and these were also analysed.

There was an indication of some significant positive shift in student perceptions of the level of risk between pre and post program survey responses, associated with selected behaviours that related to some of the case studies key messages and issues – travelling without a seatbelt, travelling in the boot or back of a car and driving an unfamiliar car. These provide

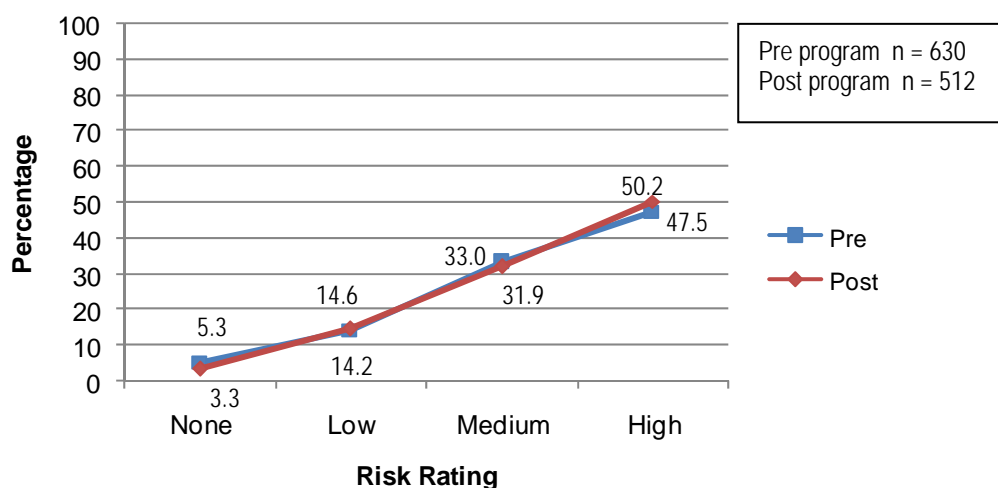
specific behaviours and perceptions that young people involved in the fire service activity are being influenced to change, or have existing positive perceptions and behaviours reinforced.

Over half of the students (52.1%) reported pre-program that they had travelled as a passenger and not worn a seatbelt. Table 2 shows the ratings pre and post program for all survey respondents for the perceived level of risk for the statement *'Travelling without a seatbelt if there aren't enough for all the people in the car'*. This shows some positive shift in ratings post program compared with pre-program, with an increase in ratings of this as a high risk rising from 47.5% to 50.2%, and similarly the rating of this as having no risk dropping from 5.3% to 3.3%. Analysis of the matched ratings pre and post program for this statement showed a significant positive shift in ratings by students (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z=-3.159$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Post-program 48.0% of students were not prepared to travel now without a seatbelt.

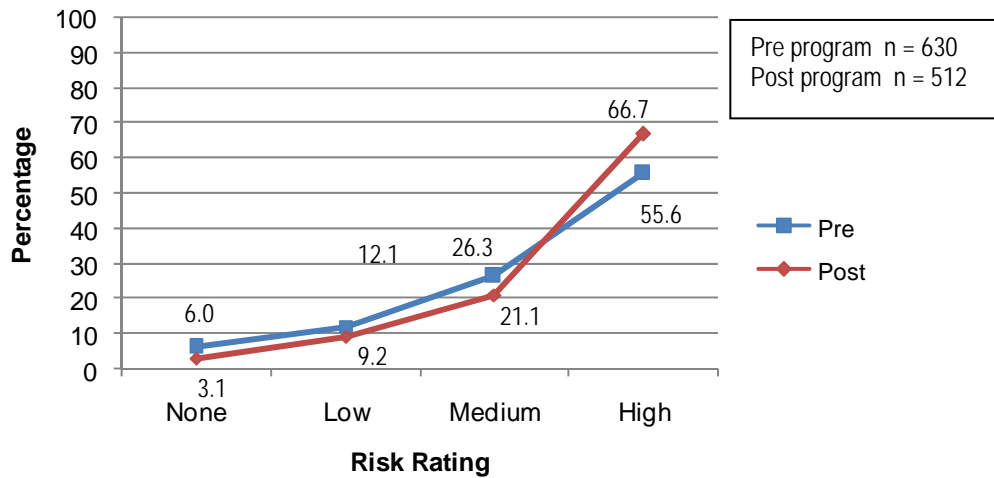
The majority of students (74.3%) had never travelled in the boot or back of a car themselves. Table 3 shows some positive shift in ratings pre and post program for all survey respondents for the perceived level of risk for *'Travelling in the boot of a car if there aren't enough seats for all the passengers if it is only for a short distance'*. Analysis of the matched ratings pre and post program for this statement showed a significant positive shift in ratings by students (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z=-4.538$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The majority of students (71.9%) reported post program that now they would not travel in the boot or back of a car themselves.

Table 4 shows the student ratings pre and post program for all survey respondents for the perceived level of risk for the statement *'Driving a car you haven't driven before'* indicates quite a significant positive shift. Analysis of the matched ratings pre and post program for this statement showed a significant positive shift in ratings by students (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z=-5.022$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

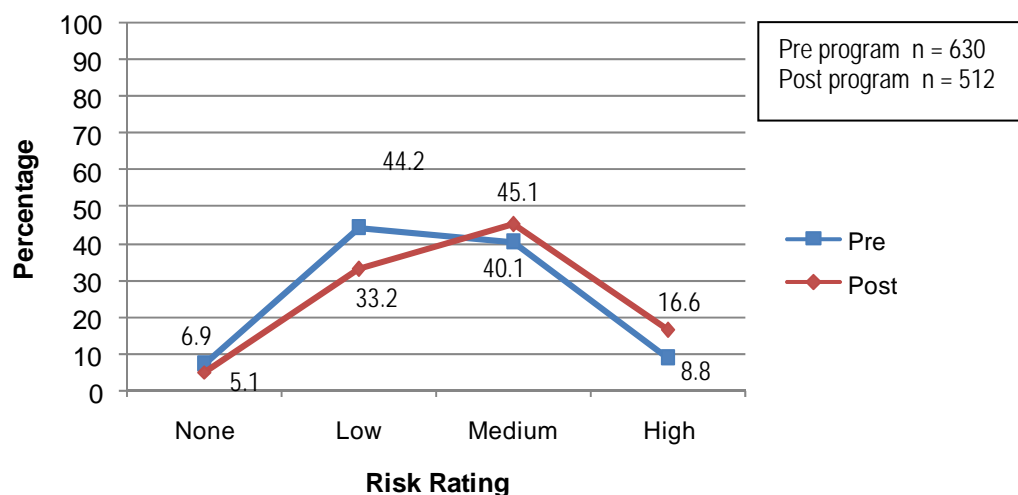
**Table 2: Student ratings pre and post program of the level of risk associated with 'Travelling without a seatbelt if there aren't enough for all the people in the car'**



**Table 3: Student ratings pre and post program of the level of risk associated with ‘Travelling in the boot of a car if there aren’t enough seats for all the passengers if it is only for a short distance’**



**Table 4: Student ratings pre and post program of the level of risk associated with ‘Driving a car you haven’t driven before’**



These issues are raised within the fire service activity alone, and are not given significant emphasis in other aspects of the half day workshop, so it is reasonable to attribute any such shift to the impact of the program.

While the analysis of questions relating to risk behaviours pre-program and post program does not provide conclusive support for an impact of the program, it does show a relationship between past behaviour and likelihood of repeating that behaviour in the future. It also demonstrates in many cases on issues related to some of the program’s key messages that many of those students who reported sometimes undertaking a particular behaviour, reported they would not be prepared to now (post program). (Dynamic Outcomes Consultants. 2008)

## **Discussion**

The unique nature of the Fit to Drive model has opened networks for MFB and CFA create strong partnerships with the major road safety agencies, local government, schools and local community organisations (Eg;RoadSafe, local services clubs, local businesses). This collaborative approach has had a number of benefits for the fire services;

- Sharing of road safety information and resources;
- Availability of road safety and educational expert advice to assist with the continual improvement and evaluation of the fire service resources;
- Coordination of the program at a local level has established strong links for fire services with local communities and secondary schools;
- Raises the profile and credibility of fire services as a partner in road safety;
- Accredited training for fire service personnel.

Currently the Fit to Drive training program is undergoing accreditation with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority. The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority has approved intention to accredit the training program as a course in Delivering Road Safety Education For Young People in secondary schools. The training has already been incorporated within the higher education course elective “Risk Management and Young People”. This is open to students within the Youth Work, Social Work, Social Sciences, Education, etc programs at RMIT University. It may also be taken as an accredited external elective by students at other tertiary institutions and as a stand alone fee paying course.

These attributes among others have established Fit to Drive as a stable and sustainable model attractive to road safety stakeholders and local communities across Victoria. The fire services have finite resource, this program allows us to maximise those resources to best effect delivering a quality road safety resource to young people.

It is important to highlight, for Fit to Drive to be successfully replicated there must be a strong commitment from local partnerships to support the program. To establish the program a substantial amount of work needs to be undertaken at a local level, including setting up of a local committee, promotion and implementation, managing schools and road safety resources, and a program budget [3].

## **Conclusions**

F2D commenced in 2001 in 18 secondary schools in the municipalities of Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, in 2008 the program will be delivered across the state into approximately 160 secondary schools in 26 municipalities and demand is growing.

The program demonstrates how individual agencies, like the fire services, in unique partnerships can make a positive contribution to a model based on relationships between key stakeholders as an all of community response to keep young people safe on the roads.

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