

Closed roads to Safe People

Pre-learners, disabilities and caravans: using closed roads to develop safe drivers

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Abstract

Safe people is arguably the most difficult component of the Safe System to create positive change, yet safe people are critical to maximise safety on our roads. This presentation will provide an overview of the programs delivered at the METEC Driver Training Centre to three key groups: 1) pre-learner drivers, 2) people living with a disability and 3) drivers towing (e.g. caravan, boat). Insights will include experiences from all three driving groups and the instructors who teach the courses and recommendations to creating safe drivers and safe roads for all road users.

Background

Driving is a complex task and learning new skills on public roads can be intimidating. This presentation provides insights from driver training experiences for three key driving groups: pre-learner drivers, people living with a disability and older people learning to tow a caravan. The training is delivered at the METEC Driver Training Centre in Victoria in two parts: 1) in-class theory and 2) on-road driving experience on a 5km circuit of closed roads that emulate public roads. Closed to the public, it provides a safe space for people to learn and importantly, to make mistakes that will not have traumatic outcomes, which aligns with the Safe System principles that humans will make mistakes but those mistakes should not result in death or serious injury. The focus is to deliver holistic driver education that creates positive attitudes and behaviours.

Pre-learner and Learner drivers

For young potential drivers, establishing good habits and behaviours during the pre-learner period is critical to developing a safe attitude about driving. Individual experiences, the opportunity to ask questions and drive in a safe, simple environment are key elements to building a strong basis for safe learner and probationary drivers. METEC has been providing driver education and training to pre-Learner and Learner drivers, since 1971. Our combination of in-class information covers a range of information; including road law, attitude, hazard perception, distractions, fatigue and drug and alcohol awareness. Feedback received from parents, teachers and students alike is positive and supportive of both the content, and the ability for inexperienced drivers to reinforce their in-class learnings with an on-road component in a realistic and safe environment. In the last financial year we had over 5400 student visits and feedback from participants, parents and teachers of participants was overwhelmingly positive in their acknowledgement of the safe driving messages and providing a platform for first-time and inexperienced drivers to gain solid road-law and hazard perception knowledge whilst driving in a safe controlled environment. An “off-road” facility supports the VicRoads staged learning approach by providing a suitable controlled environment to practice and develop beginner skills. Long term, in depth studies are planned for 2019.

In Victoria, the State Government recognises the importance of a staged approach to learning, through the VicRoads program, Road Smart (VicRoads 2018). Piloted at METEC in 2017, Road Smart is now available to all Year 10 students at no cost and METEC is an authorised “Off-road” facility.

People with disabilities

For people with disabilities, driving can be a pathway to independence. The National Disability Insurance Scheme supports people living with a disability in their plan for Specialist Driver Training under the Improved Daily Living category. For other people, driving offers a valuable, if somewhat unexpected, form of therapy. A short case study is Bill, a 22 year old man with a severe intellectual disability who will never be able to drive independently on public roads. On arrival at METEC he is typically anxious, making loud noises and occasionally throwing himself on the ground. However, when Bill engages with his Instructor, he immediately calms. He remains calm and engaged throughout his 20 minute session as he drives a dual-operated car around the closed roads. Driving is valued as therapeutic and important for his cognitive skills.

As a “closed road” facility, METEC is for many the only option to drive either therapeutically or as a process of providing a place for those that are unlicensed, and without a permit, to ascertain the probability of a long-term outcome. Some participants with a learning disability can take longer than usual to learn and comprehend the complex task of driving, others will not, and should not, progress to public roads. As parents are usually the first point of contact with our Organisation, their description of the disability and/or the challenges faced by their children, varies greatly and is subject to opinion and interpretation, they are generally unlicensed at this point with no experience at all. An initial meeting is imperative to have some understanding of the ability to communicate, answer questions and comprehend information before any driving is done. For many young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, experiencing the task of driving will help them to better understand the complexities of driving and work towards gaining a learner permit with a view to eventual driving independence or alternatively, reaching the conclusion that they don't want to or are unable to drive at all.

Grey nomads & travellers

Every year a growing number of baby boomers retire, buy a caravan and start their great Australian road trip. While these self-proclaimed grey nomads are lifelong drivers, for many, towing a caravan is a new and unfamiliar experience. Closed roads provide space to learn and develop specialist towing skills including the mechanics of loading, hitching, driving to avoid overload, sway and control. Skills that maximise towing safety, both for themselves and other road users are essential. Towing safely requires the consideration of many factors, including loading, hitching, weight ratios and limits to be checked, all before you even get on the road. As more cashed-up baby boomers hit retirement, many choose the flexibility of travelling in their own vans. Many choosing to head north for winter periods and enjoy the warmer weather on offer. The 55+ age group is the most common age for longer period and distance trips, however the 30-54 age demographic is growing steadily for shorter overnight trips. The number of Caravan registrations has increased by 30.7% from the five year period 2011-2016, with the overall numbers increasing annually. Crash statistic information is difficult to find and unavailable from the usual statistical agencies, however loss of control of vehicle and/or van is not uncommon and can occur without warning and be catastrophic, however with the current and projected growth of the Industry we are sure to see many more Caravans on our roads. There are many safety aspects to consider when towing a Caravan, load capacity, weight distribution and brake set-up of both vehicle and Caravan, just to name a few. We still then need to consider the practical skill levels of the driver and the importance of a solid understanding of all the mechanical elements in play that are required to tow safely, competently and with confidence for the safety of all road users.

Conclusions

The closed road facility at METEC provides a safe space to learn. For new drivers, drivers with a disability, grey nomads and nomads in general, it's a space to learn and develop new driving skills.

While for people with more severe disabilities provides the opportunity to experience driving that would otherwise not be possible on public roads.

References

VicRoads (2018). Road Smart at:

<https://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/safety-and-road-rules/road-safety-education/secondary-schools/road-smart>

www.caravanstats.com.au Caravan Industry Association of Australia