

From Best to Worst in Six Months - "P" Offthe Spectacular Decline of the New Driver!

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Abstract

Did you know that the Learner Driver is one of the safest drivers on the road? Within 6 months of gaining their Provisional License however, they become statistically one of the most unsafe groups of road user. (source)

So how is it that within 6 months of 'going solo' the new driver goes from best to worst? The answer may seem obvious to anyone who has had experience with teenage children!

Research however, indicates that the problem lies with a volatile cocktail of inexperience, immaturity, driving at riskier times under riskier conditions with powerful motivations linked to the influence of the peer group.

Is this just a fact of life? Do we have to just accept that young drivers are three times more likely to be killed or injured in a road crash, or is there something we can do?

The NRMA - ACT Road Safety Trust and the ACT Department of Urban Services have in partnership embarked on a unique integrated graduated licensing system.

The overall general aims are

- To give greater information and education to young people prior to receiving their Learner Licence
- Increase the amount of driving practice during the Learner Phase
- Offer a unique intervention to under 26 year old Provisional drivers during their period of greatest risk

As part of the graduated licensing system, Freebott Pty Ltd has been successful in winning contracts to deliver both the "RoadReady" pre- Learner Licence course and the "*RoadReady Plus*" program for Provisional drivers.

"RoadReady Plus" is a program that has been operating for two and a half years in the ACT. It takes the form of a facilitated discussion workshop based on participants sharing their driving experiences with other new drivers. It explores the areas of hazard recognition, risk management, the development of safer attitudes and is a timely reminder of how complex the driving task really is!

As an incentive to participate in this program, young drivers receive an increase in their demerit points allowance and the concession of no longer having to display their "P" plates. (The program is also known as the "P"Off program!!)

THE "P" OFF PROGRAM

In Australia and other developed countries around the world it is common experience that young drivers are significantly over represented in crash statistics. More emotionally put, this means

that too many of our kids are dying young or having their lives irreversibly damaged as a result of road crashes, most of which were actually preventable.

There has been a great deal of interest and research into this phenomenon.

In 1994 a report by Catchpole J.E et al for the Federal Office of Road Safety (FORS) investigated the relative importance of 'youth' and 'lack of experience' as contributors to the over-representation of young drivers in traffic crashes.

There were no surprises with the outcome of this research confirming that crash involvement was found to be associated with a lack of driving experience and high levels of 'recklessness'. It was interesting to note however, that this study made the important step of demonstrating that 'recklessness' was a better predictor of young driver crash involvement than 'age'.(page 3)

The ACT has taken a proactive step in tackling this issue. The NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust provided a grant to the Department of Urban Services to undertake research and to develop a program to reduce the number of ACT young people killed and seriously injured in road crashes.

The research program was undertaken by a number of informants, but mostly by ARRB Transport Research. The project first became known as the *ACT Novice Driver Safety Project* and later as the *Road Ready program*.

The initial ARRB Report acknowledged that lack of driving experience makes an important contribution to the poor safety record of novice drivers:

“They have had little opportunity to develop and automate the many skills required for safe, efficient driving. These skills include vehicle control, hazard detection, risk assessment, prediction of the movements of other road users, response selection and attention allocation”. (Executive Summary page 1)

The resulting program aims to reduce young driver crash involvement by reducing the incidence of high risk driving behaviour and to increase the levels of supervised driving experience during the learner period.

Also highlighted in the above ARRB report is that young novices are also subject to powerful motivations which sometimes conflict with safety motives, the most important of these being the need to test and prove one's capabilities to oneself and to the peer group. This testing and proving is usually undertaken within the first six months of having a P licence.

In response to this ARRB finding the ACT Government's Department of Urban Services (DUS) engaged the University of Canberra (UC) to develop and trial an educational intervention with novice solo drivers.

The stated aim of the program was,

“to provide support for provisional licensees during their period of highest risk as new solo drivers by enabling them to identify, relate to and therefore avoid high risk behaviours and potentially high risk situations” (DUS Specification, March 2000).

The DUS Specification required that any strategy or strategies must:

- Be educationally sound
- Be acceptable to young drivers
- Have a high chance of improving safety of young drivers

- Have clearly stated objectives for each intervention
- Not to be just focussing on participants with poor crash history
- Be evaluated against alternative strategies

UC designed and trialled a course strategy based on “developing a peer culture among young drivers in which it is possible to hold discussions related to driving skill, perception, self analysis, analysis of conditions, issues of driver perception, and vehicle analysis”.

The course had an expectation of individual contribution and group participation in activities designed to stimulate discussion without excessive intervention from the facilitator.

After a positive evaluation the *RoadReady Plus* program came to being.

Freebott Pty Ltd won the DUS tender and commenced delivering *Road Ready Plus* program in February of 2001.

The program is not compulsory but there are significant incentives for participants.

Prior to 2001, ACT “P” platers received an 8 demerit point allowance. After the introduction of the *Road Ready* program, this allowance was reduced to only 4 points. By completing the *Road Ready Plus* program, provisional drivers gain an extra 4 points and no longer have compulsory “P” plate display. It is now more popularly known as the “P” off program!!!

In 2001 400 participants completed the course. In 2002 this number increased to 900 and currently we are on schedule to have 1300 participants in 2003.

It would appear, from the increased participation rates, (and engagement of attendees), to the program that the strategies within the program materials are highly regarded and enjoyed by participants. Whilst the incentives offered to encourage uptake of the program it is the quality of the program itself that maintains and generates interest..

In delivering the program we have been extremely pleased.

Our experience is that young drivers are attending the course for a variety of reasons, many of which are not only motivated by a concern for safety but also to gain the benefits and privileges offered for successful completion. We are not concerned why young drivers turn up for the course, we are just glad to have the opportunity to engage with and support them during their period of greatest risk!

Given that there is no practical driving element in the program we see this program more as a ‘check up from the neck up’. Put simply this is a chance to have new drivers re-challenge their attitudes, test their knowledge and evaluate their skills in hazard recognition and risk management in a non threatening environment.

Our experience of the program is that the desired and stated outcomes are being achieved.

In our workshops we actively promote the concept of emotional intelligence ie that between impulse and action there needs to be the process of ‘consequential thinking’. Promoting this process of “consequential thinking” is one of our major aims.

A high proportion of participants comment in their evaluations that, “the course made me stop and think”. It is interesting to note at this point that ‘recklessness’ has been identified as a major contributor to youth crashes (Catchpole et al). We would argue that recklessness often stems from a lack of consequential thinking!

Also pleasing is the regular number of participants who report that the discussions generated in the workshops made them realise how much they didn't know. This confirms that the program is fostering an environment of peer learning through shared experiences and, that it is in fact, assisting in the process of putting 'old heads on young shoulders'.

At this point we would like to share some anecdotes from "P" off workshops

Overall, our experience in delivering the program is that it is based on a sound educational model and is having a positive impact on the thinking and attitudes of young ACT drivers.

The course is currently being evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively and the outcomes will be known later this year. All indications are of a positive and promising outcome for road users.

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