

# **ROAD SAFETY IN THE FIRST 1000 WEEKS: THE BIG PICTURE THURSDAY, 2 AUGUST**

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Good morning everyone and thank you for the chance to be with you today. I was delighted to accept this invitation to speak to you this morning on such an important issue.

Before I continue, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, and pay my respect to their elders and heritage.

I'm pleased to see many familiar faces in the audience today. For those who don't know me, my name is Gillian Calvert and I'm the Commissioner for Children and Young People in NSW. I also convene the NSW Child Death Review Team and chair the board of the Injury Risk Management Research Centre at UNSW.

In all these roles, I am keenly interested in what is being done to make our roads safer for children and young people.

## **Introduction**

We're here today because we know that on a per-capita basis, children and young people are significantly over represented in transport-related death and injury data. There can be no doubt that as a society we have a collective responsibility to reduce the rates at which children and young people die or

experience serious injury and lasting disability as a result of transport-related trauma.

The questions I want to raise with you today are about the best ways to do that. Do we have the right focus? Which of our interventions are working and which are not? Are we seeing the whole issue in context, or responding to the traumatic experiences of a few? Are we crowding the debate on road safety with adult perspectives and interpretations of the issue?

From my point of view as Children's Commissioner, the first consideration in this work is actively including children and young people in decision-making on the subject.

Young people are not mute on issues like these and deserve to be heard. They know their own world and are our most savvy advisors on practical ways to reach and influence young audiences.

If the measures we develop to help young people are to succeed, they must be developed in partnership with young people at every stage.

### **Children and young people in perspective**

The last census recorded NSW as having one million, seven hundred and forty thousand children and young people in their first thousand weeks of life. They make up twenty-seven percent of the total population in our State - that's one child or young person for every three adults.

As these kids move through their first 1000 weeks, they traverse key developmental milestones in their early years, their time at school, adolescence and transition to adulthood.

Today I want to look at how this developmental process intersects with our human urge to move and travel. I know that, in the course of this conference you'll be hearing a number of excellent papers on a variety of particular areas of interest and concern. I want to use this session as an opportunity to explore the broader context in which our concerns arise, to consider how we can work to engage with children and young people in developing safer environments.

### **Children and young people on the move**

Movement is fundamental to development from the beginning of life. Babies don't stay put for very long. Rolling, crawling, walking, running, cycling, riding, driving – movement is the human condition.

Soon after birth most Australian babies are placed in a car for the trip home from the hospital. Children are driven to visit friends and relatives, to daycare and school, soccer practice and music lessons. They quickly become self propelled – crawling and toddling, pushing along on a trike, running next door to visit a friend, walking and cycling to school. As they get older they catch buses and trains and eventually add motors of their own to their range of movement options.

### **Early years**

One of kids' key needs in their earliest years is to be surrounded by nurturing adults. US developmental neuro-psychiatrist Bruce Perry believes the ideal ratio for raising kids is four adults with a committed interest in each child. Nurture is clearly not the role of the parent alone.

Making and maintaining broader family connections frequently involves travel, sometimes lots of it. It would be interesting to map, for any group of pre-school children in Australia, how many cars they travel in, in the course of a week or a month. Mum's car and Dad's, Gran's and Granddad's, the farm ute and the car taken to town, the nanny's or babysitter's car, the friends who car pool for trips to day care, swimming lessons or kiddy gym, relatives who

provide a ride to mosque or market. And then to add in all the other ways in which children move through their world, the bikes, buses, trains and planes.

My counterpart in Scotland, Kathleen Marshall, headlined the following quote from a four-year-old in her first annual report: 'Everyone should be able to see a duck on a sunny day'. It's a great little image, and it's packed with meaning.

Unpack it a bit and it becomes evident that to achieve this goal, everyone must have parks in their communities and time to visit them. A child will need someone who can take them there during the day. It might mean a car trip and so an appropriate restraint, or a stroller and a street with a sealed pavement. Outings like this are essential building blocks for a child's development, but arriving safely can still be a challenge.

In 2005, the Child Death Review Team found that four transport-related deaths of children and young people in NSW may have been prevented by appropriate restraint use. Injury data from Westmead Children's Hospital shows that none of the children who experienced serious or fatal injury were using appropriate restraints for their age or size, whereas those who were optimally restrained experienced minor injury at most. I'm sure you're well aware of such data, but it bears frequent repeating.

It's estimated that, before the Work Choices amendment, an Australian factory worker needed to work 5.3 hours to pay for a child restraint, and 1 hour to pay for a cycle helmet. This is a comparatively good result, given that workers in some countries need three or four weeks of factory work to pay for a child restraint and even a helmet costs half a day's wage<sup>1</sup>.

Within Australia, however, access to and use of safety devices may vary considerably between population groups. For a factory worker with three children or more, whose employment status may be insecure in the current

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<sup>1</sup> Hendrie, D., Miller, T.R., Orlando, M., Spicer, R.S., Taft, C., Consunji R. & Zaloshnja, E. (2004). Child and family safety device affordability by country income level: an 18 country comparison. *Injury Prevention* 10, 338-343  
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economic climate, the relative proportion of the family income required to keep their children safe can be significant. This is especially so if the spacing of children means that a new baby arrives before the oldest child is ready to move into a booster seat, requiring purchase of an additional restraint.

Though most Australian parents and caregivers say they consider restraints worth the money, price has been cited as an issue for up to ten per cent<sup>2</sup>. On a population basis, this translates to a large number of children whose safety could be being compromised by socio-economic constraints.

Child restraint use is also lower in our rural areas. Farmsafe Australia has identified poor use of farm vehicles and motorcycles as a major cause of child deaths and injuries.

While a focus on road transport safety is appropriate for all Australian children, it's important to remember the off-road issues that are particularly relevant for children and young people in rural and regional communities.

Personal stories on this subject can be more powerful than statistics, however damning, in achieving the culture shift we need.

Here's one such story from a Tasmanian woman named Ara Popowski:

"We have been dairy farming for twelve years. We have six children who have all been carted around with us on the farm until recently when our sixth child who is three and a half fell off his little seat on the tractor when it went through a big hole. My husband looked down to see why the tractor wasn't going forward and there was our little boy lying right in front of the back tyre. It has really made us reassess our routine and safety procedures. We got a second

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<sup>2</sup> Reeve, K.N., Zurynski, Y.A., Elliot, E.J. & Bilston, L. (2007). Seatbelts and the law: How well do we protect Australian children. *Medical Journal of Australia* 186, 635-638.

chance. Our tip is ... just because we've always done it that way is a terrible reason to continue".<sup>3</sup>

There is concern, and appropriately so, about correct fitting and use of restraints. In addressing these concerns, it's important not to overlook the less common but significantly more risky issue of non-use of restraints. A figure of 92 per cent of kids in child restraints in Australia sounds impressive, but this also means we have eight per cent of kids unrestrained<sup>4</sup>. Using 2006 census data this equates to almost 70,000 children aged under ten in NSW alone not using any restraint in a motor vehicle.

I applaud the current initiatives to develop a national child restraint standard, but our tardiness in getting to this point is inexcusable. This new initiative provides an ideal opportunity to develop good legislation that, combined with good information and distribution strategies, will have a significant impact on the prevalence of restraint use and on injury levels.

### **Off to school**

We hear a lot about the fact that children are increasingly being driven to school, as parents and caregivers become more anxious about the risks of walking or cycling in urban environments. Paradoxically, of course, this increased traffic flow increases the risks for those who do still walk or cycle.

NSW has attempted to address this issue by making mandatory 40K per hour zones outside schools at times students are arriving and departing. There is little evidence of the effectiveness of this approach, certainly not in regard to compliance. It's an example of an attempt to tailor an intervention to address an aspect of a problem rather than the problem itself. In this case, what's

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<sup>3</sup> Farmsafe (2007) *Child safety on farms*. [www.farmsafe.org.au](http://www.farmsafe.org.au). Accessed 11 July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Reeve, K.N., Zurynski, Y.A., Elliot, E.J. & Bilston, L. (2007). Seatbelts and the law: How well do we protect Australian children. *Medical Journal of Australia* 186, 635-638.

called for is more general traffic calming measures combined with consistent, enforceable and enforced speed limits across the board.

Despite the increase in car transport, cycling and walking remain important ways for school-aged kids to move around the community. At least one in five still walk regularly to school in most areas. As kids reach school age, their social networks broaden and their pattern of movement spreads to include visits to friend's houses or the local shops.

Many parents remember with anxiety their child's first solo trip to the shop for an ice-cream or their first unsupervised bike ride. These milestones will usually be accompanied by a lot of parental preparation and rehearsal beforehand and debriefing afterward.

Interaction with adults is a key component of safety on the road at these ages. Early school years are a time of mastering many new skills. It's a time of eager learning and cognitive growth. Letters become words. Numbers connect and symbols become invested with meaning. Road signs convey messages that can be understood for the first time.

Not surprisingly, research shows what any person who knows kids can tell you – their skill in finding safe places to cross the road increases with age and maturity. Yet one group of researchers<sup>5</sup> recently found that year six students showed the same competence as adults in identifying safe and dangerous places to cross the road, and that at times children's road crossing judgements were less risky than adults. These sorts of findings should be ringing alarm bells for us. Kids can learn safe practices and adults can unlearn them, and undermine their kids' progress by setting a poor example.

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<sup>5</sup> Tabibi, Z. & Pfeffer, K. (2003). Choosing a safe place to cross the road: the relationship between attention and identification of safe and dangerous road-crossing sites. *Child: Care, Health and Development* 29, 237-244.

Children, we know, can quickly learn the skills they need to navigate more independently in their neighbourhoods. Kids can also assist their younger peers to avoid distraction and make safer choices on the road.

The relatively few studies that have sought their views show how well kids understand the risks they face as they move and travel within their environments. Researchers Greene and Hart asked groups of 7 to 11 year olds how to prevent accidents. They chanted in chorus 'look left and right before you cross the road' and other warnings and prohibitions they'd been taught by parents and teachers. But these kids also indicated that they gave critical acceptance to such generalised advice, which they found inadequate in many circumstances.

In relation to cycling, for example, they said they use their own judgement and experience in deciding whether or not to comply with what they have been taught, or in dealing with conflicting advice from adults, as illustrated in the following discussions about riding on the road:

*Carl:* Parents say don't ride on the road

*Facilitator:* And do you ride on the road?

*Carl:* Yeah!

*Facilitator:* And why do you do that?

*Carl:* 'Cos there's not that many cars come up and down our road...

*Tim:* ...We get told not to ride on the road but this policeman walked along one time and then said 'why are you riding on the pavement?' ... he said 'cos it's not fair for the other people who are walking, and go ride on the roads'. That's why I ride on the road now.

Green and Hart concluded that safety strategies should 'build on the strengths and competencies ... that children already possess'. They also note that a more integrated approach to risk management, rather than stressing 'dangers' in isolation, is more likely to resonate with children's own perceptions.

## **Getting older, travelling further and faster**

As kids reach adolescence, their milestones include developing a sound self-image and personal identity. Young people are developing their identity as drivers under intense scrutiny these days.

The observation that young people are over-represented in rates of transport-related trauma is most often framed in one of two ways. It's either a 'young driver problem', the idea that young drivers as a group are a problem or it's the 'problem young driver', certain problematic kids, mainly boys, whose attitudes and behaviour must be altered to effect any change. 'P plater' is often used as a synonym for danger in both generalisations. You don't read headlines that say 'fully-licensed driver kills two in crash'.

Public and media attention on young drivers often focuses on licensing issues. Graduated licensing systems have gained much attention and have shown genuinely positive results in reducing the incidence and impact of road crashes for novice drivers. The most common component of graduated systems is an extended period of supervised driving. It's not surprising that this is effective; experience is the best answer to inexperience, and inexperience is a major contributor to risk.

But even here, on what seems our safest ground, there are assumptions at work we need to consider. There's an assumption that every young person has available to them an adult with a clean drivers' licence and a registered vehicle, who's competent to instruct a learner and who has 120 hours free to give lessons. This is not the reality for some kids particularly disadvantaged kids.

Let me illustrate. Kids from poor families where there are weak familial relationships are already vulnerable. The 120 hours requirement may add to this risk. They don't have access to 120 hours of supervised driving so they just drive and end up in the criminal justice system with all the problems that

brings. Further the lack of a licence restricts their learning and job opportunities. And as a community we haven't compensated for this when introducing the 120 hour requirement.

Another area of intense focus is specific restrictions on P Plate drivers, but again many of these measures may have unintended consequences. Restrictions can limit exposure to difficult driving situations, rather than encouraging supervised opportunities to learn to manage risk.

It is traumatic and awful when children die and we want to prevent it. However we need to be thoughtful when we look at how we prevent it. We need to think about less obvious impacts of our choices. How much do we limit the many others to prevent the deaths of a very few. These are very difficult issues.

Many young people see restrictions as a punishment that can limit their access to work, study and social activities, especially for those who live further from urban centres. Curfews, vehicle power and passenger restrictions can have also have uneven impacts.

Better enforcement of existing legislation and general road safety improvements are more likely to produce better outcomes. But where restrictions are brought in, it's important that they're developed in consultation with young people, and that their effect is monitored to see that they don't create disadvantage for particular sectors of the community.

The National Road Safety Action Plan identifies four research-based action areas required to achieve a significant step down in the Australian road toll: safer speeds, safer roads and roadsides, safer vehicles and safer road users. All of these action areas are relevant to all road users, as we can see in this table.

**Table 1. Relevance of road safety priority action areas to road user groups. Adapted from Australian Transport Council 2006, p.44**

<b>Safer</b>	Walkers & Cyclists	Passengers: Old & Young	Drivers: Old & Young	Indigenous & rural users
Speeds	Y	Y	Y	Y
Roads	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vehicles	Y	Y	Y	Y
Behaviour	Y	Y	Y	Y

It's important to note also that young people are injured not only as drivers, but in the full range of transport related incident types. In the 2005 calendar year, young people in NSW aged 15-17 years were over-represented in deaths as passengers, pedestrians, drivers and motor cyclists, and one of the three pedal cyclists who died was also in this age group.

### **Society and culture**

Beyond the immediate attributes of the child or young person and their family lie factors in our society that impact deeply on road safety. The beliefs that influence young people's behaviour on the road reflect those of the general population. Some of these beliefs are useful and some are dangerously wrong, like the idea that accidents are random events that can't be prevented.

It's important for us to remember that kids operate in an environment largely created for them by adults. It's adults who design and market motor vehicles to a predominantly adult new car market. We drive the demand curve for alcohol production and consumption. We create the ads and TV shows that glamorise risky behaviour.

We have to remember that the problems kids encounter on the road are problems we've generated as a society. It will always be easier to assign individual blame than to develop social responses, but it's only the latter that will have lasting effect.

## **Fast wheels**

Newstead, amongst others, has argued that road trauma could be drastically reduced if every car on the road had all the safety features currently available. But of course young drivers with the least experience are the least likely to be driving cars with such features. As well as having the least money to spend, young drivers are typically the most susceptible to sales practices. Kids can be duped into buying cars that are unroadworthy, as found in a recent injury prevention surveillance project in NSW<sup>6</sup>.

Providing every L plater or every new parent with a brand new, state of the art vehicle is obviously unrealistic as an intervention. But there are some practical ways to make it more likely that novice drivers and parents of young families have a safer pool of vehicles to choose from.

About half of the new cars purchased in Australia are part of business or agency fleets, and typically enter the general used car market after two to three years. Many people in this room have an opportunity to contribute to the safety of the Australian light car fleet, and to improve the range of cars available to Australian families and to young drivers, simply by advocating within your organisations for the purchase of the safest vehicles in each class for the corporate fleet.

Taking road safety seriously, at a State or national level, may also mean investing in incentives for companies and agencies to purchase safe vehicles and for manufacturers to use proven design features in every vehicle.

Once again though, there is much that can be done with basic cultural change. Young people are a mirror of the values and culture of our society in

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<sup>6</sup> Mid North Coast Aboriginal Health Partnership. (2001). *Mid North Coast Aboriginal Injury Surveillance Project Report: Pride, Respect and Responsibility*. Sydney: NSW Health Injury Prevention Policy Unit.

their desire for fast wheels. Driving through the Sydney CBD every second bus stop bears this image:



**Figure 1. Billboard photographed in Crown St, Sydney, July 2007.**

This says something not only about manufacturers and advertisers, but also about us as consumers. Even in this audience, I wonder what questions we asked, or what features we looked for in our most recent vehicle purchase.

The Australian Transport Council noted in 2006 that ‘general speed management measures are very important to novice driver safety’ but young drivers ‘are unlikely to comply with speed limits if they observe that older and more experienced drivers do not do so’.

### **One for the Road**

This is equally true in relation to alcohol and fatigue and other factors. Young people are criticised for replicating the unsafe behaviour they see practiced by adults all around them.

Competing media images offer markedly different views about social standards on alcohol. Alcohol industry advertisements convey mixed messages to enjoy alcohol and drink responsibly. Content analysis of advertisements for alcohol found no reference to negative effects, although numerous benefits were shown including, in order of frequency: camaraderie, masculinity, flavour, escape, femininity, romance, adventure, refreshment, relaxation, and elegance<sup>7</sup>. The producers of *Famous* magazine found it appropriate to distribute alcohol flavoured lip gloss to the readers of a recent edition of a 'youth title'.

In a review of driving behaviour in television programming, Atkin found that twenty per cent of driving scenes depicted speeding, with far more positive than negative outcomes. Only four of 869 scenes showed drivers buckling their seatbelts or wearing them while driving. Such portrayals normalise risky behaviour<sup>8</sup>.

The challenge for us as a community is to change our collective behaviour and provide a single, safe example for kids if we want to achieve lasting improvements in road safety, for kids and for us all.

### **Working together: research and policy**

This conference is a welcome opportunity to reflect on the interaction between the disciplines and professions that work separately and together on this issue.

Effective cooperation between fields offers obvious benefits, but also poses challenges. From my viewpoint, we need to constantly question the way our separate efforts intersect and look for ways to work together more

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<sup>7</sup> Shanahan, P., Elliot, B & Dahlgren, N. (2000). *Review of public information campaigns addressing youth risk-taking*. Hobart: National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

<sup>8</sup> Atkin 1989 cited by Shanahan, P., Elliot, B & Dahlgren, N. (2000). *Review of public information campaigns addressing youth risk-taking*. Hobart: National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

consciously, particularly in deciding what questions are asked at the research stage and how research findings are applied in practice.

One area that deserves more attention is the need for children and young people to be included in our deliberations and decision-making. I congratulate the NSW Government for putting this into practice with developing policy, executing that policy and designing communication messages. I also congratulate the conference organisers for including youth delegates in this event.

There are many serious questions that need investigation about the effects of road transport and road trauma on kids. We know little about the effect of adult injuries on kids and families. We know less about how a child's injuries impact on parents or siblings. There's also very little published literature in this country on the relationships between road trauma and injury or disability. In all these areas, kids' viewpoints need to be heard. We might consider how many papers being presented in this 2 day conference have included kids in their research or have sought kids' viewpoints.

Listening directly to kids will give us more understanding of the contextual factors that influence behaviour. Pressure to make a certain number of deliveries each shift might have induced a young pizza deliverer to exceed the speed limit. Extended rostered hours might contribute to a young truck driver's decision to use stimulants.

We cannot consider children and young people in isolation from their families, and friends, and neighbourhoods. Relationships, movement between households and localities, tasks and responsibilities all need to be taken into account.

We need research that makes sense of events in their social context. Not just when and where an incident occurred, but why. What are the circumstances in which a normally careful parent will drive unsafely? How do people manage the issue of restraints when they use several vehicles, or if there are

extra children in the car? Is a convoy of cars driven by solo teenagers safer or more dangerous than five in one vehicle with a designated driver?

In reporting research findings, it's not enough to know if a solution is effective – we need to know how, under what conditions, and in what contexts a given solution will work best. Arai noted in 2005 that scientific journals show systematic deficiencies in reporting the context, methods and details of implementation. This in turn makes it difficult for policy makers to know how findings in one area will apply in another. Just because it worked in Oakland, doesn't mean it will work in Oakhampton or in Oxley.

And equally, in our policy development, we need to integrate research findings with the knowledge that comes from frontline practice and local experience.

We have to monitor the real effects of the policies we put in place. Will increasing the requirement from 50 to 120 hours of supervised driving for learners help or will some young people just give up on the idea of getting a license altogether?

Are young women more or less safe because of the passenger curfews between 11p.m. and 5 a.m? Have we, as some people worry, traded off road safety for young males with increased risk of assault on young women?

Combining an objective assessment of such issues with the actual experience of young drivers will help us find practical and cost effective ways for every young person to gain the experience they need to become safety-conscious drivers.

## **Conclusion**

For our youngest children it is mainly adults who make decisions about places to go, how to get there and how fast to travel. Adults choose the car and the child restraint, and do the driving. Adults build the environment in which that

travel takes places. Older children and teenagers make more decisions on their own, but continue to travel in family vehicles, over roadways and footpaths designed and built by adults, surrounded by our influences.

As adults and as researchers and policy makers, we have an opportunity to use a wider view of road safety in the first 1000 weeks of life to reframe this picture. We can work together with kids, their families and their communities to provide supportive environments, positive models of behaviour and constructive responses to the problems they face.

Our best interventions will take account of the diversity of children and young people's experience. Rather than only making decisions FOR those in their first 1000 weeks of life, I encourage you to also make your decisions WITH the people who are living those 1000 weeks. Their knowledge of their own lives is our best guide to outcomes that promote safety and wellbeing in the widest sense.

I encourage each and every one of you to live out your passion for road safety for our youngest citizens with a broad, un-blinkered vision that involves our kids as key contributors to the development of appropriate interventions.

Thanks and all the best for what I'm sure will be a fantastic conference.