

To What Extent are Rural Parents Involved and
Willing to be Involved in Driver Education?

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Abstract

With a growing interest in increasing parental involvement in driver education, it is important to find out what parents are doing and willing to do. Two-hundred-forty-seven parents of teenagers taking driver education classes across the state reported how much they were involved in driver education currently and their willingness to be involved. The results indicated that most parents were not very involved with their teenagers' driver education class outside of providing additional practice driving. However, $\frac{3}{4}$ of parents reported that parents should be required to be involved, but preferably through written materials sent home and access to information over the Internet, and not by attending classes or behind-the-wheel instruction. Preferences did not differ by school size. In addition, over 70% of parents would want information on all nine topics that we asked them about and some additional topics that they volunteered. Overall, the findings indicate that although parents may not be taking the initiative to be active in their teenagers' driver education classes, they are more than willing to receive the information.

Keywords: teen driving, parenting, driver education, driver training, young drivers

To What Extent are Rural Parents Willing to be Involved in Driver Education?

With few exceptions, the United States is the only country that allows persons ages 15 and 16 years to drive legally, and most eligible teenagers of that age do. Obtaining a driver's license is a "rite of passage" for U. S. teenagers; however, driving is particularly dangerous for them. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and injury among teenagers aged 15 to 19 across the country (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2005). High crash rates among young drivers are largely attributable to their young age, lack of driving experience, and risky driving behaviors (see review, Williams & Ferguson, 2002). Because driving skill and sound judgment are largely products of increasing age and driving experience, risk reduction is dependent upon driving experience; however, the more teens drive, the greater their exposure and, thus, their risk for crashes. Increasing the safety of teenage drivers is a national priority and promoting parental involvement in early teen driving experiences is an increasingly supported countermeasure to teen crashes.

Most efforts to include parental involvement in teen driving focus on how to teach teens to drive or awareness of teen drinking and driving (Beck, Hartos, & Simons-Morton, 2002; Simons-Morton & Hartos, 2003). For example, many resources related to parents as "driving instructor" are available from public agencies, private groups, and insurance companies. Few have been evaluated and none are embedded in what might be considered a comprehensive, planned, educational program. In addition, many high schools and special interest groups such as SADD/MADD disseminate information to parents about teen alcohol and other substance use and driving. However, most of these programs involve only a small number of highly-interested parents (Beck et al., 2002).

Currently, graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs in multiple states require parents to provide 20-60 hours of supervised practice driving for their teenagers during the permit or phase of licensing (see Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2005, for a list by state). For

example, 13 states, including California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana (starting in July 2006), Oregon, and Washington, require 50 hours of practice driving before teenagers are eligible for a restricted license. Most of the research shows that parents support increased practice driving in GDL programs (Beck, Shattuck, Raleigh, & Hartos, 2003; see review, Mayhew 2003).

Despite national support for increased parental involvement in teen driving, few intervention efforts focus on the parent role as "gatekeeper," a supervisory role such as that of GDL. GDL policies delay the eligible ages for permits, provisional licenses, and unrestricted licenses; increase supervised driving; place restrictions on driving at night and with teen passengers; and require young drivers to be "violation free" for an allotted amount of time before obtaining an unrestricted license (Insurance Institute, 2005). Parents can do each of these—determine when teenagers get a permit and license; require extra practice driving prior to independent driving; restrict when, where, and under what conditions teenagers drive; and impose consequences for violations of rules or restrictions. Our research indicates that parent behaviors are related to teen driving outcomes; that use of persuasive communications can positively impact parents' attitudes and behaviors toward regulating teen driving; and that promoting parental management of teen independent driving is most effective when it begins before teens begin unsupervised driving (Simons-Morton, Hartos, & Beck, 2004; Simons-Morton, Hartos, Leaf, & Preusser, in press).

Programmatic efforts to increase parental management of teen driving could be integrated into driver education to increase parental involvement in young driver safety, including determining when, where, and under which conditions teenagers can drive (Simons-Morton, & Hartos, 2003). This may be even more important in rural areas. Western rural states, including Montana, have teen and overall crash rates that are higher than the national average because a greater percentage of miles traveled are rural. Most of Montana's roadways are rural and in 2003, of all crashes and 89.5% of fatal crashes occurred in rural locations (Montana Department of Transportation, 2004). The higher speeds involved in rural crashes contribute to higher rates of

fatalities and serious injuries when compared to urban crashes (Montana Department of Transportation, 2004). Therefore, promoting parent management of teen independent driving in rural areas may be important in reducing teen driver risk.

However, the extent to which parents would support mandatory parent involvement in driver education is unknown. Although most parents support state policies that restrict teen driving (Mayhew, 2003), parents have busy schedules and little time to attend formal programs. In addition, access to programs may be even more difficult for parents in rural areas. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which parents in Montana (1) are involved currently in driver education and (2) would be willing to be included in driver education.

Methods

Participants

A stratified sample by school size (AA, A, B, C) of parents of teenagers currently enrolled in driver education courses across Montana was targeted for this study (see Table 1). Of the 247 parents who completed written surveys, 37% were from AA schools, 27% were from A schools, 25% from B schools, and 10% from C schools; these percentages are representative of the number of families taking driver education by school size. Of the parents, 71% were mothers and 25% were fathers; 91% were white, 3% were Native American, and 2% were Hispanic; and 62% were 35-44 years old and 35% were 45 or older. Of their teenagers, 54% were female and 46% were male; and 80% were in 9th grade. Of the families, most had one (15%), two (69%), or three (12%) adults, and had one (27%), two (41%), or three (20%) children in the household. In additions, most families had two (30%), three (35%), or four (19%) vehicles and a family yearly income of \$20,000-40,000 (29%), \$40,001-60,000 (28%), or \$60,001-80,000 (15%).

-Table 1-

Procedures

From Fall 2004 driver education enrollment data by school size, 43% of students were in "AA" schools, 28% in "A" schools, 20% in "B" schools, and 9% in "C" schools. Therefore, we

targeted similar percentages from 11 schools stratified by school size: AA, A, B, C (see Table 1). During classes, driver education instructors informed students about the study and sent home with students packets of information for their parents. Information included an introduction to the study, a parent consent form, a parent written survey, and an envelope in which to return study materials. Families were told that the state is considering adding a parent component to driver education and would be gathering information about ways to increase parental involvement in young driver safety. Participation was voluntary and parents had to provide written consent. Participating parents completed a written survey that took approximately 15 minutes, and received \$10 for participating. Study information, including consent forms and written surveys, were returned to driver education instructors in sealed envelopes within 10 school days. Driver education instructors were given a \$20 incentive for distributing study materials. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of UNC Charlotte.

Measures

Current parent involvement in driver education was assessed by several questions. Parents reported (a) how much they knew about the classroom curriculum in their teenager's driver education course (5-point scale from "none" to "all of it"); (b) how much they knew about the behind-the-wheel instruction in their teenager's driver education course (5-point scale from "none" to "all of it"); (c) how many more practice hours (0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-20, or over 20) of driving their teenagers would receive beyond that in driver education and by whom (you, spouse, family member, friend, other); (d) if the driver education course required parent involvement ("yes" or "no"); and (e) how often they were involved in nine aspects (see Figure 1 for list) of driver education (5-point scale from "a little" to "a lot").

Parent willingness to be involved in driver education was assessed by several questions. Parents reported (a) whether parents should be required to be involved in driver education ("yes, definitely," "yes if convenient," "maybe, not sure," or "no they should not"); (b) if required,

in which of seven ways (see Figure 2 for list) would they want to be involved (“yes,” “maybe,” or “no”); and (c) if parent information was part of driver education, which of nine topics (see Figure 3 for list) would they want information (“yes,” “maybe,” or “no”). In addition, parents reported if they had home internet and email access (“yes” or “no”), the quality and speed of their internet access (“poor,” “fair,” “average,” “above average,” or “first-rate”), and how many days per week they used the internet and email (0-7). Parents also responded to open-ended questions about other ways parents should or could be involved in driver education and other topics that parents would want information on as part of driver education.

Analysis

Frequencies were generated to determine parent responses to items related to current parent involvement in driver education and parent willingness to be involved in driver education. Chi-squares were used to determine any differences in parent responses by school rank.

Results

Current Parent Involvement in Driver Education

When parents were asked about how much they knew about the classroom curriculum of their teenagers’ driver education courses, about 10% reported knowing “all of it”, 28% more than half, 40% half, 14% less than half, and 8% “none of it.” When asked about how much they knew about the behind-the-wheel-instruction, about 15% reported knowing “all of it,” 32% more than half, 33% half, 14% less than half, and 6% “none of it.” Parent knowledge about classroom curriculum did not differ by school rank, but parents from A-schools reporting knowing more about behind-the-wheel-instruction than did all others.

Most (95%) of parents reported that their teenagers would get more supervised practice driving during the permit period than the 6 hours provided by driver education; 50% reported teenagers would get 20 or more extra hours, and over 90% of parents reported that they would supervise it. Extra practice driving and supervisors did not differ by school rank. About 44% of parents reported that their teenager’s driver education course “required” parent involvement and

required parental involvement did not differ by school rank.

Figure 1 shows parent reports about how often they had done any of nine aspects of being involved in driver education. About 42% of parents reported that they got regular progress reports from their teenagers “a lot,” and only 5-25% reported doing any of the other parent involvement pieces “a lot.” Only 5% said that they got regular progress reports from instructors “a lot,” and 54% reported that they did so “a little.” Overall, for the other parent involvement items, most parents reported doing somewhere between “a lot” and “a little.” Around 57-65% of parents reported some amount of finding ways to reinforce driver education materials, finding ways to reinforce driving instruction, learning about the risks of teen driving, learning about ways to teach teens to drive, learning about ways to increase teen driver safety after license, learning about when and where teenagers should practice driving, and learning about when and where teenagers should drive after obtaining a license.

Parent responses for how much they did some of the items differed by school size. For example, parent responses differed for getting regular updates from teenagers and for finding information to reinforce driver education material with a greater percentage of AA-school parents reporting doing them more often and C-school parents reporting them least often. A greater percentage of A- and B-school parents reported getting regular updates from instructors, and a greater percentage of A-school parents reported learning about when and where teenagers should drive once licensed than did the others.

-Figure 1-

Parent Willingness to be Involved in Driver Education

When asked if parents should be involved in driver education, 52% responded “yes, definitely,” 24% responded “yes, if convenient,” 19% responded “maybe, not sure,” and 4% reported “no they should not.” Figure 2 shows parent responses for which ways they would want to be involved in driver education if required by the state. About 65% preferred having written materials sent home and having access to the information over the internet; about 60%

preferred having discussions in person with the instructor and having access to the information through email; and about half preferred having discussion over the telephone. Far fewer preferred attending class (19%) or riding along during behind-the-wheel instruction (33%). Preferences did not differ by school rank. When asked about home internet and email access, 87% reporting having home internet and email access; 30% reported its quality as less than average, 35% average, and 36% better than average; and 82-86% of parents reported using email or internet at least once a week.

-Figure 2-

When asked about other ways parents should or could be involved in driver education, parents had a range of responses. There were many responses that parents and teens should log hours of practice driving together. Many responded that parents should be sent information about what their teenagers are learning so that they can follow along, track their progress, and reinforce these lessons at home. Some indicated that doing so would probably make parents better drivers. However, a few parents indicated that they did not believe parents should be required to be involved in driver education because they are responsible or because parents should not interfere with expert driver training. One parent suggested that parents should have their teenagers use student driver magnets for the front and back of the car they drive during the permit period, and that these could be paid for with a deposit and returned upon graduation. Other suggestions included using parents to speak to driver education classes about the issues of teen driving that everyone faces and that parents should be educated on the responsibilities that they carry for having a teen driver.

Figure 3 shows parent responses for the topics that they would want parent information on if it was part of driver education. Over 70% of parents would want information on each of the nine topics: ways to reinforce driver education material (76%), ways to reinforce driving instruction (83%), risks of teen driving (81%), ways to teach teens to drive (82%), ways to increase teen driver safety after license (91%), when and where teens should practice driving

(75%), when and where teens should drive once licensed (73%), monitoring teen driving (81%), and teen drinking and driving (86%). There were differences in parent reports by school rank. About 56% of C-school parents reported “yes” for information about ways to reinforce driver education material compared to 74% or over for the others. About 63% of C-school parents reported “yes” for ways to reinforce driving instruction compared to 77% or more for the others. About 59% of C-school parents reported “yes” to risks for teen driving compared to 77% or more for the others. About 59% of C-school parents reported “yes” to when and where teens should practice compared to 71% or more for the others. For when and where teens should drive when they get licensed, a greater percentage (82%) of AA-school parents reported “yes” than did parents from other school ranks (63-69%).

-Figure 3-

Parents also listed a range of other topics that they would want parent information on as related to teen driver education. These included teenage driver crash rates; driving with teen passengers; distracted driving hazards including cell phone use, radio use, and driving while tired; seat belt use; graduated driving licensing and privileges; driving in hazardous weather conditions such as ice, snow, and hail; financial costs of teen driving including insurance; changing flat tires; driving a manual transmission; driving safety related to darting hazards like deer, dogs, and pedestrians; road rage and patient and courteous driving; and alternatives for driving experience. One parent also suggested having a video on safe driving for students to take home and watch with their parents or guardians.

Discussion

Overall, the results from this study indicate that parents are not currently very involved in their teenagers’ driver education programs. Although over 75% of parents reported knowing at least half of what was going on related to instruction and training in driver education, only about 42% of parents reported getting regular updates from their teens about their progress, and no other item was done “a lot” by more than 25% of parents. In addition, only 5% of parents reported

getting regular updates from instructors “a lot.” Any differences in reports by school size indicated that parents in C-school were less involved than were parents from AA, A, or B schools. Therefore, rural areas may be differentially affected by distance in terms of how much involvement is possible or desired.

On a positive note, about 95% of parents reported that they would provide their teenagers with more practice driving than is provided by driver education. About half indicated that their teens would get 20 or more hours. These items did not differ by school size. Although positive, Montana recently passed its first graduated driver licensing (GDL) policy which requires parents to provide 50 extra hours of practice driving. Therefore, after July 2006, when GDL goes into effect, all parents should report that they will provide their teens with at least 50 hours of practice driving.

In addition, about 45% of parents indicated that their teenagers’ driver education class “required” parent involvement. Unfortunately, parents were not asked what exactly was required of parents. The Montana Traffic Education Program, which regulates driver education in the state, strongly encourages driver education to include parents in the role of “reinforcer” to strengthen skills taught by driver education instructors, and outlines some strategies for instructors to use to reach parents including the use of parent conferences and phone calls, parent-teen-teacher checklists, and parent guidelines for practice driving with teenagers. In 2004, Montana Traffic Education Program reported that 92 of the 145 school-based driver education programs included parents in a “parent night” or “parent ride along” (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2005). However, no state-mandated parent involvement exists at this time.

Although parents may not be very involved in driver education currently, it may just reflect passivity (versus an active decision). When asked if parents should be required to be involved the majority (76%) said that they should (52% reported “yes, definitely” and 24% reported “yes, if convenient”). Most parents would prefer being involved through written materials sent home (66%), access to information on the Internet (65%), discussions in person with the driver education instructor (59%), or access to the information by email (59%), and would least prefer attending classes (19%) or attending behind-the-wheel instruction (33%). Preferences did not differ by school size. In addition, over 70% of parents would want information on all nine topics

that we asked them about and some additional topics that they volunteered. Some information topics differed by school size with a smaller percentage of C-school parents reporting “yes.” Although parents may not be taking the initiative to find out information on their own, they are more than willing to receive the information. And, who better to provide the information than experts in the field: driver education instructors.

The idea of having a parent component to driver education delivered through email or internet is attractive. Web-based health information has several advantages because it has greater opportunity to be accessed on demand and to be tailored to the needs of the user. Unlike generic materials, tailored messaging creates individualized communication that has an increased potential of providing health messages that are relevant and ultimately more persuasive for target audiences (Brownson, & Kreuter, 1997; Kreuter, Farrell, Olevitch, & Brennan, 1999; Kreuter, Strecher, & Glassman, 1999). In addition, web-based programs are more amenable to being interactive and combining a variety of media to address purposes of interventions or learning styles of users, and to be updated and maintained to reflect the latest information. Finally, the Internet can help to reach populations who are hard to reach based on time, distance, or availability. This may be especially true for rural populations. Technological infrastructure and digital inclusion rates continue to grow such that the tools are available and target audiences are able to access them (Atkinson & Gold, 2002).

The latest national data on Internet access in Montana households indicated that 47.5% of households had Internet access in 2001 (see National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2002, for report of access by state). However, Internet access increases every year and is readily available for a significant portion of the population, especially families with teenagers (Atkinson & Gold, 2002). The results of this study indicated that 87% of these families with teenagers in driver education reported having Internet and email access at home. Such a high rate would indicate widespread access to internet or email driver education material. This finding should be substantiated in further research.

Montana's graduated driver licensing (GDL) program will be initiated in July 2006, and that, in and of itself, may help increase parent involvement in teen driving, because research shows that parents do, for the most part, provide the required amount of practice driving for their teenagers during the learner's phase (Beck, Shattuck, Raleigh, & Hartos, 2003) and that parents in states with GDL may place greater restrictions on teen independent driving than do parents in states without GDL (Hartos, Simons-Morton, Beck, & Leaf, 2005). However, because Montana is mostly rural, the integration of parent information about management of teen driving into driver education, before teenagers become licensed, may make the transition to, and through, teen driver training and GDL requirements easier for families. Although the findings of this study indicated that parents may not be taking the initiative to be active in their teenagers' driver education classes, they were more than willing to receive related information and would like to be (or at least think that they should be) involved in their teenagers' driver education classes.

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Table 1 Stratified sample: Parents of teenagers taking driver education by school size

Driver Education		School Rank ^a				Total
		AA	A	B	C	
Enrollment	n	854	552	391	181	1978
	%	43	28	20	9	100
Schools	n	5	17	21	12	56
Schools in study	n	2	2	4	3	11
Parents in study	n	92	67	63	25	247
	%	37	27	26	10	100

^a School ranks: AA = 900+ students; A = 370-899 students; B = 130-369 students; C = 1-129 students

Figure 1 Parent reports for how often they have participated in driver education in the following ways

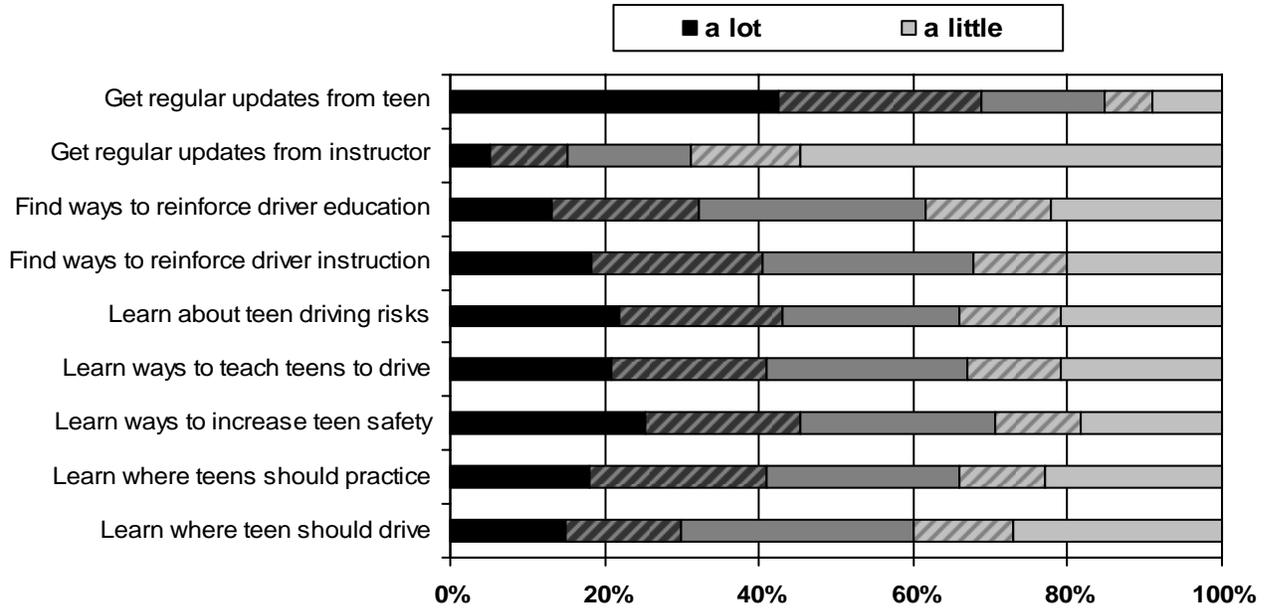


Figure 2 Parent reports for ways they would want to be involved in driver education if required

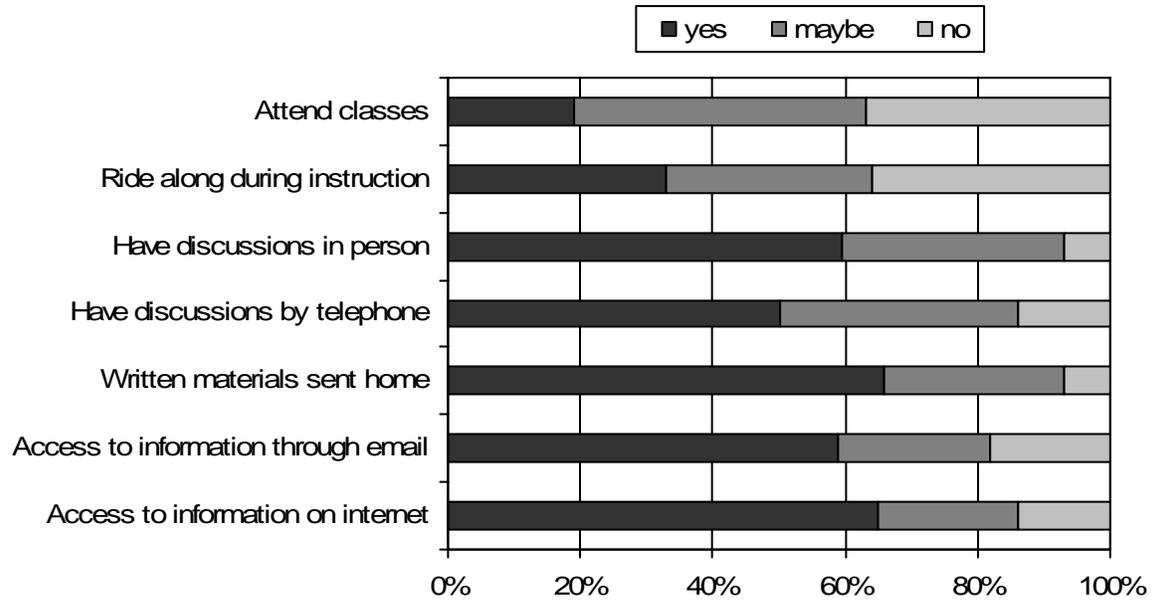


Figure 3 Parent reports for types of information they would want from driver education

