

Young Drivers - adult responsibility (How to make novice drivers crash)

Stephen Haley (Apr 2008)

There are some reckless young tearaways on our roads for whom there is no excuse. Many of them cast their mayhem wider into a criminal lifestyle.

Fortunately they are few, and most young drivers are not like that. The vast majority of them want to be safe. But even these youngsters still crash far more than the rest of us. Sometimes they make tragic headlines of multiple deaths. Mainly these are young male drivers, but by no means always.

As adults, it is tempting to seek in every crash a way to just 'blame the kids', and perhaps begin to wonder whether they should be allowed to drive at all. But there are specific ways in which, without meaning to, we increase their crash risk and contribute to the carnage that disturbs us.

This is not to say we should find excuses for the novices who crash - they need to be encouraged to take more responsibility for themselves, not less. But along with this, and more importantly, we can not expect to reduce the problem if we deny the part that adults play in causing it. No matter how horrific the symptoms may be, we should not be blind to the underlying causes.

Along the complex and confusing journey that young people have into modern adulthood, the ability to drive is one of the most constructive elements. Mobility and independence is central to many healthy aspirations and opportunities. This makes it even more important that we help, not hinder, their progress and their ability to drive properly. It means providing the right level of challenging experiences to stimulate learning, and trusting them with what they can do. Too many youths already suffer with low aspirations.

Let's look at three handicaps that young drivers are faced with:

1. We constrain children's experience of risk in their most formative years

There is growing concern that shielding children from risk - especially in their play - stunts their natural development right through to adulthood. They are less aware of how to identify and deal with risks, and less prepared to take self-reliant responsibility for themselves. This has clear implications when they come to drive.

For dread of the slightest graze, we ban everything: ball games, tree swings, snowballs, cycling, running in the playground, and even skipping and conkers. Gone too is much of our play in contact with our children that used to present them with small confrontations and perils to resolve. And we thrust our head deep into the sand on the damage that this 'safe from harm overload' is actually doing.

Boys and girls are naturally different, of course, and in general boys are more adventurous and experimental, while girls are more cautious and compliant.

One of the most striking signs of our times is the extraordinary shrinkage in the 'radius of freedom' that most kids now have to venture beyond the garden gate. Many are barely allowed out on their own well into the teen years. But filling them with fear is more about the adult's own peace of mind than the presence of actual surrounding danger. Play that is fondly prescribed, provided and supervised is negative for their development into capable people. Freedom to explore themselves is replaced by being told what to do.

The 'cotton wool culture' of risk aversion and dependence - instead of risk awareness, taking responsibility and self-reliance - is an unhealthy lesson for every stage of their life. Alongside frustration at the bewildering rules, it lays down the assumption in their mind that someone else will always look after them.

Interestingly, with this over-protection we have also seen a steady deterioration in behaviour and discipline, notably apparent in schools. Perhaps it would help us understand what we are doing if we see the energies of childhood and adolescence as a balloon that will pop out somewhere else when it is squeezed.

Recent work on 'frontal lobe development' is also enlightening. This is the finding that the part of the brain responsible for key functions, such as hazard anticipation and risk management, is not fully developed until age 22-25. These functions have a clear application in driving, and also help to counter the over-confidence that comes from the ease with which most youngsters learn physical car control.

It is emerging from trials that the ability of this part of the brain can be improved with training and experience - which is excellent if the training is made available. But it also poses the possibility that the

converse can happen too, and that shielding children from risk might inhibit the natural process and pace of brain development, leaving youngsters with even less function than they 'should' have, and contributing to poor risk management ability.

Clearly, over-protection is a social and cultural trend, but driver training must address this handicap if we are to turn out safe young drivers.

2. We give them fictitious stereotypes of adults, males and drivers

Images of the adult world used in entertainment and marketing often bear little relation to reality. But careful presentation makes unlikely celebrities and fictional characters look like reasonable aspirations and role models. Especially in this fantasy, masculinity is defined as various blends of strong, fearless, daring and arrogant. And cars and driving are often employed to make the point.

For young boys, this taps straight into the raw urge for action-oriented challenges that nature has wired into the male brain. The images are designed to be compelling and to meet with approval in peer groups - who are equally confused about who they are and how to grow up. When they need guiding lights, these are false beacons that point to the rocks.

We see them hooked into the fantasy as the strutting bravado becomes a naked parade of the anxieties and self-doubt that it tries to keep secret. But this is difficult for a teenager to fathom from the inside, and even harder if there is no guiding adult male at home or close by to make sense of it all.

Girls tend to be less affected by the action-stereotype. The yearning in the female brain is to socialise instead. So boys tend to be drawn into 'heroic quest' computer games more seriously than girls, while the advent of chat-rooms has suddenly rocketed the hours that girls spend online. Even today's 'so cool' techno-kids are still nature's children, living out predictable roles.

At the same time though, we also see an overlap where some girls seem intent on copying the worst male behaviour, such as binge-drinking, creating a bizarre notion of competition and equality.

But still, and despite what they would have us believe, a lot of young people's behaviour is guided by what they believe an adult is. And this is definitely something they learn mainly from adults.

In fairness, we should not be surprised that saturating children with an alchemy of distorted stereotypes leads them to strange assumptions about what society wants and expects from them as they grow up. They don't see through fantasies as well as experienced adults can, and warping their view of the world makes a lot of things more difficult.

Again, this is a handicap created by social factors, but especially for young males, driver training must expose the stereotypes. This begins by recognising the specific flawed beliefs that create macho driving styles, and then carefully dismantling them. The action-impulse doesn't need to be outlawed, it is the backbone of male achievement, but it does need direction.

3. We withhold the most critical safety skills when we teach them to drive

This is the biggest opportunity of all - the way we train young people to drive. More than anything else, the present training ensures high risk when novices suddenly go solo.

There is now a broad and overdue acceptance that "fundamental reform in how we teach people to drive" is urgently needed. The traditional focus on physical car control does not impart the beliefs or the mental skills required to drive safely. Years of statistics bear testament.

This is no startling revelation, of course, it has been known for generations. The maxim, "You really learn to drive after passing the test", isn't an urban myth or something that teenagers dreamt up to torment us. It is a rational adult judgment on the training system borne of long experience - known for decades, yet still allowed to be true.

There are other beliefs too, implanted into young minds, which seem very logical to them, but lead to poor driving behaviour, such as:

- 'Driving skill is about good car control, especially at speed'
- 'Good car control will let me handle any situation'
- 'The L-test and a bit of practice covers the skills needed for safe driving'
- 'Passing the test demonstrates that an acceptable standard of safety has been reached'.

Again, these are not beliefs the youngsters invent. They are absorbed from the adult ether, and the training system allows them to thrive when it should be doing surgical removal.

In reality, we have been keeping big secrets, because we know that:

- real safety is in how drivers *think* - before they commit to physical actions
- focusing on car control will inevitably incite red-blooded young males to prove themselves
- novices are left to discover the most critical safety skills for themselves, as best they can on their own. And without being told what the skills are, or that they are necessary
- young drivers need to become far safer than their test performance.

The [Essential Thinking Skills proposal](#) to the Driving Standards Agency has already outlined a start-point for introducing thinking skills into driver training. It recommends the inclusion of:

- Beliefs - that are true (!) and provide a safer mindset from the beginning
- Sense of danger - to identify risk in terms that drivers can trust and control
- Driving skills framework - to explain how and why thinking skills are so critical
- Learning from experience - to implant a naturally increasing safety ability
- Specific techniques to improve risk assessment and control in real traffic situations.

To some extent, these are gained over time by experienced drivers. But the mystery box can all be disclosed and taught to learners and novices at the outset.

These are also the skills that *enable* drivers to take responsibility, and this removes another key blockage. Without knowing *how* to do it, the call to 'take responsibility' is a hollow demand that drivers will always struggle to meet. Car control is a poor illusion of being in real control of driving *situations*.

Significantly too, the lack of education in the mental skills leaves novices more exposed to picking up unsafe driving practices from family or friends, or bowing to influence from peer passengers. With little grasp of how to assess risk as they drive, there is no benchmark against which to judge the folly of inattention, drink, drugs, fatigue, wrong speed, or simply acting the fool. They are also more exposed to the dangers created by other road users.

Novice drivers are at the point of being most dependent on what they are shown. And their fate is currently skewed by the yawning chasm in the training they receive which builds false expectations, in spite of good intentions. Learners who pass the L-test most easily tend to have the worse crash record afterwards, and the coaching of *safe* behaviour is being examined by the [EU Hermes project](#).

Through honest eyes, the main reasons for the carnage among novice drivers are rooted in what the modern adult world is doing. We deny youngsters healthy encounters with risk, give them a distorted picture of adulthood, and withhold skills we know they need to have. In our nurturing of future generations, we can do much better.

Although some of the handicaps for young drivers are created in society, outside the realm of driving, this does not put them beyond reach. It simply underlines that driving is part of life, and that society tilts the pitch against many things that people need to do.

In driver training, our adult responsibility should lead us to:

- recognise how novice drivers are actively steered into high risk
- replace false beliefs with ones that will help young people understand and cope more successfully with the demands of driving. This can and should start at pre-driving age
- reveal the full scope of driving skill, and show how it really works
- teach the specific thinking skills that are the core of drivers being able to take care of themselves.

The necessary reform of driver training must accept the responsibility for creating safe drivers. The system design should not include restrictions and law enforcement as an easier alternative, or to cover over known and avoidable failures in the training. Our job is to work on the causes of the problem, not just punish the symptoms. No one wants a rising generation that is primed with resentment.

Many novice drivers themselves sense that something is wrong, and would be keen to learn about the 'real driving' that confronts them after the test. Young people *do* want to be skilled, and value the boost that comes from being regarded as such.

The adult responsibility is to take this opportunity, and ensure that fundamental reform is 'fundamentally different' from the stream of past measures that have made no impression on the casualty graph.

Stephen Haley runs the Skilldriver project www.skilldriver.org and is author of "[Mind Driving](#)". Contact steve@skilldriver.org

Input taken from Lauk Woltring, consultant in boys' development and member of the EU Hermes project, see www.laukwoltring.nl