



### **Dr Bridie Scott-Parker: Parents, why you should let your teen drive YOUR car**

Dr Bridie Scott-Parker is a leader at the Adolescent Risk Research Unit (ARRU) in Brisbane, Australia. She is passionate about understanding the nature of adolescent risk and improving the health and wellbeing of all adolescents.

For over ten years Bridie has carried out extensive research into young drivers, not only in Queensland, Australia but also in New Zealand, America and Germany. She currently has a research project taking place in Columbia, Russia, Nigeria and Malaysia.

Here, Bridie speaks exclusively to One More Second about the risks facing teen drivers and what parents can do to help.

#### **Despite numerous types of intervention, young drivers continue to be overrepresented in road crashes. Why is this?**

The first factor is driving inexperience. Here in Australia we have a graduated licensing programme where young drivers are required to undergo at least 100 hours of supervised driving practice during a 12 month minimum learner period. Unfortunately, one of the messages that comes out of this is that 100 hours is all that you need to be a safe driver. Of course, a safe driver doesn't equal an experienced driver for many different reasons but 100 hours of driving experience is really just the tip of the iceberg of what drivers need.

We know we become safer drivers simply by learning to drive by ourselves, being able to read the environment, being able to predict hazards and hopefully being able to regulate our own driving behaviour. There is a reduction in crashes after three to five years of independent driving experience. So we find here in Australia that our youngest drivers, our provisional drivers, are the ones who are most represented in car crashes per se, in car crash fatalities and injuries.

#### **So we know young drivers are inexperienced. Are there other age-related factors?**

We know from numerous psychological studies that the human brain doesn't finish developing until around 22 years of age for females and around 29 years of age for males. One of the last areas to develop is in our frontal region, in which we can process decisions and think through what the consequences are going to be.

We also need to think about other age factors like friends, who may not be a positive influence in a car. Our research shows that friends simply being in the car is a risk factor; they don't even have to say anything but the young driver thinks they should show off to them.

Young people are also very busy people and tend to be quite fatigued. Teenagers are often juggling education, employment and they may have chores or family responsibilities at home. Also, they tend to socialise at times when our bodies are meant to be asleep, late at night or early in the morning and they are driving at these times which are particularly risky. We know that young drivers are more likely to be involved in crashes late at night and they are more likely to be carrying passengers, particularly if they are males. This can place them in a really risky situation. We know at some of these social events alcohol and drugs are more likely to be involved and if a driver is impaired by these substances they are much more likely to crash.

### **Does vehicle choice make a difference to young driver crash involvement?**

Absolutely. Young drivers tend to drive cheaper, older cars. Often they have inherited the old family vehicle that mum and dad don't want any more or they have been able only to purchase a very cheap vehicle with no crash avoidance and no crash protection features.

We don't want any young driver in a car that is not going to keep them safe. Young drivers tell me they are driving around in a "bucket of crap" because it's all they can afford. That "bucket of crap" is unlikely to have features that are going to keep them out of a crash. Things like ABS and traction control can help young drivers stay out of a crash in the first place. But if they *do* crash then we want protective features so they are much more likely to survive. We want there to be seatbelts, we want airbags; features such as that can help keep our young drivers safe if unfortunately they are involved in that crash.

Driving around in a "bucket of crap" that doesn't have crash avoidance and crash protection features is just one of the most perplexing things to me. One simple thing all parents can do to help keep their teens safe is get them in a safe car. Usually mum and dad's car is newer, it is likely to have crash avoidance features, it is likely to have crash protection features and there are consequences if something goes wrong. Parents can set limits on who drives the car, when, where, who are the passengers and so on. Children usually have their own phones so they can send messages and say 'yes we have arrived safely at our destination' and explain if there is going to be any deviation from the agreed upon plan. That is a great way to improve young driver road safety and to keep mum and dad involved.

### **How has social media impacted on adolescents and their behaviour?**

Social media is an interesting beast indeed. It can be a fantastic avenue and a great way to disseminate information; for example if I was looking today at developing a road safety programme I would be looking at having a social media component. Kids love YouTube and young people today are tuned into something for just a minute or two.

Conversely, social media has the capacity to be a very detrimental part of road safety. We are finding here in Australia that it is quite normal for teenagers to have access to their own phone. We are also finding that teenagers have a phenomenon called 'FOMO' or a fear of missing out. So they are highly attuned to any updates from their friends. Things such as what they are eating at the time, where they are shopping, Facebook accounts, photos that have been uploaded.

If you are texting on your phone while driving there are three huge issues. Number one your eyes are off the road and eyes off the road is one of the largest hazards to road safety. Related to that is number two: distraction; your attention is no longer on the road but instead on what your friend put on her Facebook page. Your attention is not watching what the car three cars ahead of you is doing as you are approaching a roundabout or a cross traffic junction with no traffic signals. Number three is that you are physically holding that phone in your hands. I have had a number of young drivers explain to me that thank goodness they have left the learner phase behind because now they can drive one-handed. That was their goal, to drive one-handed.

If you are driving your hand can come off the wheel to change gears or apply the emergency break whilst you are avoiding an emergency situation. The rest of the time we want two hands on that one wheel, two eyes on one road and we want one brain on the one road.

Social media definitely has the capacity to be a positive influence but I think we haven't harnessed it sufficiently yet and maybe we need technological advances that prevent mobile phones from engaging with the internet, from being able to take calls and receive texts whilst the person is driving

the car. If young drivers don't have the capacity to regulate their own behaviour we need some other form of intervention to be able to help them.

### **In additional to the legal requirements placed on young drivers, what requests/ instructions should their parents be making?**

This is a favourite passion of mine. I think most mum and dads really don't understand how important they are in the road safety behaviour of their child, for many reasons. In Australia it is a legal requirement for babies to be carried in the car in an approved baby carrier where the baby faces the rear of the vehicle from 0-6 months of age. When the child is deemed tall enough they are then able to travel in a booster seat which faces forward. From that point on that little sponge is sitting in the back seat watching and listening and taking in every single thing you do.

Later in life when they have their learner license you are usually the one that accompanies them for their lessons. Any supervising person needs to be aware they are not a bum in a seat.

Throughout the learner phase there are fantastic opportunities to keep reinforcing safe driving behaviour. I chat to learners and they tell me mum is sitting there on her phone or dad is working on his laptop while they are supervising. They tell me they are speeding by more than 20km/h an hour. Mum and dad are not engaged in supervising if they have not picked up that their learner is actually doing 60km/h in a 40km/h zone. Then when the learner gets their license I often hear from relieved parents; 'thank god I don't have to be in the car anymore, getting those 100 hours nearly killed me'.

There are two issues with that sentence. Number one: 100 hours does not equal a safe driver. Young drivers really only begin to learn how to drive when they are by themselves, when they don't have mum or dad sitting in the car telling them what to do. So you need to prepare them as much as you can. The other issue is we want mums and dads to stay involved after those 100 hours. Don't forget, you *can* still drive in the car even though your child has a provisional license. Some countries call it an intermediate or a restricted license.

### **If parents were going to do just ONE thing to help prevent their adolescent from being involved in a road crash, what should it be?**

The number one thing is stay involved. Be involved in road safety right from birth. Monkey see, monkey do. Your young driver has seen you for 16 years before they got a license. They have watched everything you have done in that car and they have taken everything on.

If they have seen you talk on your phone every time you drive they are going to talk on their phone when they drive. If you then turn around and say, 'don't do that' they are unlikely to listen to that message because they have seen you do that exact same thing and there were no bad consequences.

### **How can parents remain involved in their teens' driving?**

We want mums and dads to still be involved during the provisional phase. Set driving restrictions, particularly during the first six months of driving. There is a massive spike in crashes, fatalities and injuries during those first six months. Drive in the car with them. There is no law that says you must be in there but still hop in that car. You will be surprised how much their driving has changed.

Reward positive behaviour if they are leaving a great following distance between them and the car in front. Talk about privileges such as being able to go to the movies or being able to have a sleepover. Set up punishments if they are not being safe. Know who your child's friends are because they are the ones who are going to be travelling in the car with your child. If those friends aren't a positive influence step in and set limits and say those friends are unable to travel in the vehicle. The priority is keeping your young driver safe.

**In the years you have been researching driver and adolescent behaviour have there been any significant improvements or changes in behavioural trends?**

If we look back at young driver crashes over the last six decades it looks like graduated driver licensing has been one of the most effective measures that we have brought in. That is primarily through managing young drivers' exposure to risk and trying to get them to have as much practice as possible.

When we look around the world at jurisdictions which have introduced graduated licensing it does appear to reduce crash risk, however there seems to have been a bit of a plateau in where we may have achieved as much progress as we can. It is now time to think of the next best thing to come forward and make progress in developed nations.

Generally, in developed nations, less young drivers are being hurt in crashes than say 20 years ago. This is an excellent result and certainly one result that we want to keep moving in the same direction. But it is a totally different picture if we are looking at middle, low income and still-developing nations. Given it is the Decade of Action for Road Safety it is relevant to start thinking outside our own jurisdictions and not thinking just what is happening in the first world and developed nations. It is timely that developed nations help less developed nations move forward which is why I am now the leader of an international adolescent risk research consortium based here at the University of the Sunshine Coast and am running programmes and projects in developing nations such as Nigeria and Columbia.

Thinking outside the box – not just focusing on the young driver – is going to be the key to actually making any further significant and considerable differences in young driver road safety, not just in developed nations like Australia, UK and the US, but in developing nations where they need our greatest assistance.

**Do you have any final tips for parents?**

If you know that your child is a risk-taker there is no law that says they have to have their driver's license. Hold off and let them grow up a little bit and show that they can regulate their own behaviour. We call my son Evil Knievel. He is now 15-and-a-half. He won't be getting his learners when he is 16 because I know he is a risk-taker. I am going to wait until he is a little more mature and can show me that he can regulate his behaviour before I even think about getting him on the road. I know his friends very well and I know he is the risk taker in the group. He would be placing all the other kids at risk and I as a parent would not be very comfortable with that situation at all.

One of the best ways I feel parents can stay involved is to share the family vehicle. I have heard repeatedly over the years that kids who are in mum and dad's car are much safer drivers. You take a car home with a ding all the way down the side of the car or a speeding ticket rolls up in the mail two weeks later and you are in mum and dad's brand new car, doom on you. Young drivers tell me they go home in their \$500 bucket of rubbish and one of the panels is scratched and dented and mum and dad say 'We don't care; it's your car, you pay for it if you want it fixed'. But we want mum and dad to care if there is a dent or a speeding ticket. This is a huge deal. We only learn from our mistakes if there are consequences for those mistakes.

For more information on Bridie Scott-Parker and her research visit:

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