

Youthful driving, parents and peers

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Attempting to “look cool” is a major factor influencing the driving behavior of the youth, whether riding a two-wheeler or driving a four-wheeler. Driving gives a sense of elation, purpose, boosts self-esteem and steps one’s self up in the pecking order whether on the road or off it. Such feelings if not tempered with a cold look within and a sense of responsibility, metamorphosize into recklessness with obviously disastrous results. A basic ability to drive is certainly necessary for a person to drive and avoid crashes. This ability is acquired through knowledge, skill development, and experience. All new drivers must acquire knowledge of the rules of the road mandated by the Motor Vehicles Act and how a vehicle works. This knowledge is often gained in a driver education or driver training class, with some behind the wheel learning. However, a disdain initially for the traffic rules, and then a contempt for the same follows, and the young and teenage driving behaviors follow a pattern: young and teenage drivers (often ineligible by law to drive) tend to speed, follow vehicles too closely, demand right of way by honking, make illegal lane changes, and jump red lights at traffic signals with a universal contempt for traffic rules and law of the land, since they know that the legal process is tedious for the law-enforcers as well, and if required, parents will bail them out in no time. Hidden traffic risk perception and reaction to it is not matured enough in the young¹, something that requires split-second decision making and appropriate physical response.

Lifestyle issues are going to be a major factor determining one’s driving abilities. Risky and reckless driving can also be due to fatigue or distraction. Young drivers are more prone to distraction, drowsiness and sleepy driving². Sleep loss interferes with their functioning³. Young novice drivers also seem more easily distracted from the driving task and are inexperienced

at judging the driving demand in relation to additional tasks⁴. Use of cell phones is a major cause of distraction while driving, and inspite of clearcut law on the issue, it is extremely common to see two wheeler riders riding with one hand holding the cellphone against the ear. Cellphone use during driving a four wheeler too is unsafe in view of distraction it causes. In addition, radio and CD players, as well as eating, drinking, smoking, or interacting with passengers, are other sources of distraction that young novice drivers may not have adequate experience to handle while driving. Young drivers and passengers also put themselves at greater risk of injury in crashes by not wearing their safety belts. The reasons for this lack of utilizing a proven safety measure is entirely clear: a state of denial, that “accident will not happen to me during this short drive”. A common sight during the recent H1N1 flu scare in Pune was a two wheeler rider speeding on the road, wearing a face mask but not a helmet.

During the teens. the are still developing and growing physically with psychological boosts. Emotional development, self discovery as individuals and forming relationships are the evolving factors during this phase, often testing their limits. Of paramount importance to them is their social life and sexual identity. When they get behind the wheel, all these issues and factors affect their driving behavior. Early access to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco is another significant factor for exhibiting risky driving behavior⁵. In addition, youngsters with better grades in school tend to have less risky driving⁶.

Parental influence is perhaps the largest and most complex set of influences on youthful driving behavior. The young drivers form a set of “right” or “wrong” driving habits by observing the parents’ driving behavior, and these perceptions strongly influence how they drive, and often the young drivers drives in ways similar to their parents⁷. Parents’ expectations of their young driver are also important, and when those are conveyed clearly and convincingly, those expectations can affect driving behavior. Parents who are involved in their young people’s lives, who monitor, who nurture, who have high expectations, and who are not overly permissive, tend

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to have youngsters who drive with fewer crashes and offenses^{5,8}. While a parent who bribes a traffic policeman (in full view of his child) after jumping a red signal obviously is making a poor example for the young and impressionable mind. Other individuals who can influence young people's driving are the school bus drivers: a school bus driver who regularly honks, takes wrong turns, overspeeds and jumps traffic lanes, jumps red signals, and does not stop at proper place is corrupting a young mind, and encouraging risky, unsafe driving.

The driving behavior of peers is an understandable influence on young drivers. Same age group friends can also influence young drivers' behavior, as seen in the negative influence of a young male passenger on male drivers. Significantly, a moderating effect of a young female passenger on drivers of both genders is known⁹. In addition, the norms and expectations of a partner (girlfriend, boyfriend, significant other, or spouse) can have an important influence on driving behavior: whether egging to a risky and reckless behavior, or sobering, safe driving habits.

In a world deluged by information, the role of media cannot be underestimated when it comes to modulating driving behavior. The media, both advertising and entertainment, also promote fast driving and performance driving more than safe driving. The young person's perception of driving risk is developed from these sources — how dangerous it is to drive, how likely a crash is, how likely it is that someone could get injured or killed, or how likely one is to get a ticket, be fined, or jailed for a particular driving infraction. Community norms and enforcement for driving behavior and how these are conveyed to young people will influence their perception of driving risk and, therefore, their driving. The national culture should promote car oriented safe driving.

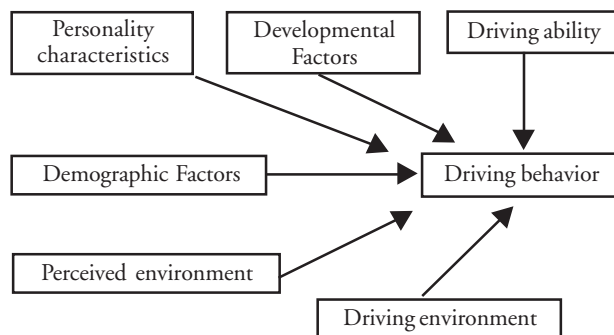


Fig 1: Factors influencing youthful driving behavior¹⁰

Further, youngsters spend a lot of time with video games, many of which encourage aggressive behavior or car racing, with potential effects on young people's subsequent driving behavior.

So what is the way forward to safe driving? The first step is to be taken by parents by setting a perfect personal example. A young, novice driver should take pride in observing traffic rules and should "feel cool" in driving safely. A healthy respect for other people on the road should be inculcated, as well as for the laws laid down in the statute. Some parents even purchase a car for their teen driver, and they may not purchase the safest or smartest vehicle for a young driver. Parents can be encouraged to restrict novice teens' driving under certain weather and road conditions until their experience is adequate. Parents can also be advised about the risks associated with making a vehicle available to their teen, and the types of vehicles that would be safer for teens to drive. Drivers of public transport vehicles, especially those of school buses, should be made to realize their responsibility towards nurturing good driving habits at an impressionable age. Public figures and media celebrities can promote safe driving through sustained campaigns. On the other side, laws must be enforced to affect behavior. Enforcement should be certain, swift and not allowing unsafe behavior to go unchecked. Enforcement should also be consistent, not permitting the perception that the consequences will not happen to all drivers all the time. Equally important is that law enforcement should not allow delays to dilute the effect on subsequent behavior. Licensing norms and procedures have to be critically evaluated and the applicant's personality and history too should be taken into consideration while issuing the driving license.

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