

Parents' Attitudes about Connecticut's

Orientation Course for Parents

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Introduction

Parents play a crucial role in the licensing of their sons and daughters. They make decisions about the timing of licensure, teach driving skills, impose rules about driving privileges, and control access to vehicles. Parents now carry out these tasks in the context of graduated licensing (GDL), which extends the learner phase and requires that a minimum number of hours of supervised driving be done, and establishes night and passenger restrictions in the initial license phase.

GDL empowers parents by giving them a set of sensible rules designed to protect young beginners while they are learning. However, it is important that parents know the rules, understand and appreciate their rationale, and know that they may need to supplement them with their own rules. In general, parents need to understand the dangers involved in teen driving, and that their close involvement is necessary not only in the initial supervisory phase, but in the high risk period right after initial licensure and beyond. It is also important that parents have an understanding of best practices in teaching their teen to drive, recognizing that their own driving behavior--for better or worse-- has been a model for their teen for many years.

Parents clearly have a vested interest in protecting their children from motor vehicle injuries. However, there is great variation in the knowledge and actions of parents during the licensing process that can have safety effects, and many parents are deficient in these areas. Research has shown that many parents do not know the graduated licensing rules in their state and/or do not understand the reason for them. Since it is well known that parents are the chief enforcers of GDL rules, the importance of their knowing and buying in to them is obvious. Studies also have indicated that many parents do not appreciate the high risks involved in teen driving, why they exist, and the extreme risk involved in some driving situations, such as when teens transport other teens. In addition, many parents are unsure about the best techniques and practices for supervising the initial driving of their teens.

There are instructional and advisory materials for dealing with all of these topics, but merely providing parents with these materials has been found to be insufficient. Parent orientation sessions on how to handle the licensing process are available in some areas, but their availability is limited and the sessions are optional. In August, 2008, Connecticut became the first state to require a parent or legal guardian of a 16- or 17-year-old to complete a two-hour training course before a driver's license could be obtained. The course was designed to cover risk factors in teen driving, the learning-to-drive process, the Connecticut GDL law and its rationale, and the parental role in driving supervision, involvement in the licensing process, and in supporting the GDL law. To determine reactions to and evaluations of this course, a telephone survey was conducted of participating parents in its first year of existence.

Results & Methods

A list was provided by the DMV with names and phone numbers of 16 and 17 year olds who had recently been licensed. Phone numbers were acquired via internet phone number directories matching last name and address of the teen. Of the 1,688 names looked up, 1,193 resulted in a phone number (71%). All but 176 of these had at least one attempted call resulting in 300 completed interviews.

All of these were calls to parents or guardians of the teens who took the 2 hour course. Of these, 63% were mothers, 36% were fathers and 1 teen had both parents attend the class. There was 35% of the parents who had incomes at or below \$100,000; 43% had higher incomes and; and 22% did not answer. Most parents had at least a college degree (79%). The majority of parents also had a prior teen that had gone through the licensing process (61%) (See Table 1). Of the 296 parents that reported an age, the average age was 49 (Median = 48.5).

The teens were somewhat evenly split between males (51%) and females (47%) with 2% of the parents have more than 1 teen going through the process simultaneously (See Table 2).

Of the 299 parents who knew whether their teen was home schooled or went to a commercial driving school, 83% sent their teen to a commercial school. Parents making over \$100k per year were more likely to send their teens to a commercial school (88%) than parents making less than that (72%) ($\chi^2 = 9.93, p = 0.002$).

All questions were analyzed to explore differences between the demographics described above. Only significant ($p < 0.01$) findings are reported. For parent responses to the questionnaire, percentages exclude unknown/ don't know responses unless otherwise noted. The number of parents for unknown/don't know are reported.

Table 1. Parent Demographics

	Number	%
Sex of Parent		
Mother	190	63%
Father	109	36%
Both	1	0%
Household Income		
<= \$100k	104	35%
> \$100k	129	43%
DK/Refused	67	22%
Highest Education:		
High School	28	9%
Some College	35	12%
College Degree	123	41%
Some Grad/Prof. School	20	7%
Graduate Degree	93	31%
DK/Refused	1	0%
Prior Experience		
1st Teen Through	111	37%
Prior Teens Through	184	61%
DK/Refused	5	2%

Table 2. Teen Demographics

Sex of Teen			
Male	153	51%	
Female	142	47%	
More than 1 Teen	5	2%	
School Grades			
A	158	53%	
B	125	42%	
C	17	6%	
Teen's Age			
15*	2	1%	
16	269	90%	
17	29	10%	
Commercial or Home Schooled†			
Home	51	17%	
Commercial	248	83%	

* 15 is not a valid licensing age, these 2 responses treated as "missing."

† 1 parent did not know

Attitudes towards the class were overall very positive (See Table 3). Parents overwhelmingly agreed with the statements that: training helped their role as a parent of teen driver (85%); training will prevent teen crashes (71%); their trainer was knowledgeable (97%); the class was well organized (90%); the training was informative (92%); they approved of the requirement (83%) and; they would recommend the class to other parents (82%). Parents reported that overall the course was excellent or good 86% of the time.

Table 3. Parents attitudes regarding class (agreed with statement)

	Number of Parents	% of Parents
Training helped in my role as parent of teen driver		
Agree	252	85%
Disagree	46	15%
Don't Know/Refused	2	
Training will prevent teen car crashes		
Agree	210	71%
Disagree	87	29%
Don't Know/Refused	3	
My trainer was knowledgeable		
Agree	290	97%
Disagree	9	3%
Don't Know/Refused	1	
The class was NOT well organized		
Agree	29	10%
Disagree	270	90%
Don't Know/Refused	1	
The training was informative		
Agree	275	92%
Disagree	25	8%
I approve of the training requirement		
Agree	247	83%
Disagree	49	17%
Don't Know/Refused	4	
I would recommend the course to other parents		
Agree	245	82%
Disagree	52	18%
Don't Know/Refused	3	
Overall rating of the course		
Excellent/Good	256	86%
Fair/Poor	43	14%
Don't Know/Refused	1	

Note: Agree/Disagree includes "strongly" and "somewhat" agree/disagree.

Parents were asked if they did new things with their teen driver as a result of the course. Of the 291 who responded, 43% percent reported that they did something new. The most frequently reported “new” things parents did was “enforce” or at least remind the student about the laws regarding teen drivers and spent more, or better quality instruction time with the students.

Parents were asked if they would enforce driving laws more as a result of having taken the class. Of the 298 parents who responded, 34% said they would be more likely to enforce the laws (another 64% said they would have enforced them anyway). Fathers were more likely to say that they would enforce as a result of the training (44%) compared to mothers (28%) but mothers reported they would have enforced anyway (71%) compared to fathers (53%; $\chi^2 = 10.5$, $p = .006$).

Parents were asked if various topics were covered in the class, and then if they knew the information provided before the class (i.e. did they get new information). Most topics were reportedly covered (90% + of parents say the topic was covered). Responses of “Don’t know” were included in the percentages (See Table 4 for details).

A few topics were less well covered. The topic of complete teen brain development (or lack thereof) was reported to have been covered by 52% of parents (19% did not know if it was covered or not). More parents for whom this was their first teen through the process reported that they were unsure if this was taught (28%) than parents who had a teen go through the process earlier (14%). Vehicle choice was reported to have been taught to 31% of the parents (17% were unsure if it was covered or not). “Other risk factors” were reported to have been covered by 55% of parents (with 13% not sure if it was covered or not). Given that all three of these had a relatively high proportion of parents being unsure if it was covered or not, it is difficult to ascertain if it was indeed not covered or that the wording in the questionnaire left parents not understanding what topic was being asked about.

Parents responded to whether they had already known the information regardless of whether or not they reported having been taught the topic. Four topics were already well known by parents with at least 80% of the parents reporting that they already knew the information (Teen involvement in fatal crashes; distraction; alcohol; and; use of electronic devices). Information on passenger restrictions, time curfew and the suspension of teen licenses were unknown by between 22% and 37% of parents. Information about brain development, vehicle choice, penalties and other risk factors were unknown between 41% and 54% of the time.

Next parents were asked what the new teen driving regulations were. The regulations pertaining to passenger restrictions state that newly licensed drivers may not have any passengers except a parent or driving instructor for the 1st 6 months (the second 6 months allows other immediate family members). We considered a parent has accurate knowledge of the law if they said no passengers are allowed for the first 6 months regardless of whether they said parents or driving instructors were excepted. Using this definition, 65% of parents knew the law.

The regulations also require nighttime restrictions (no driving) between the hours of 11PM and 5AM with exceptions for work, school, religion and medical necessity. We considered a parent as having accurate knowledge of the law if they mention a restriction of driving between 11PM and 5AM

regardless of whether or not they knew the exceptions. Given this definition, 77% of parents knew the law.

There were 38% of parents reporting not knowing when asked about the regulations regarding alcohol for teens. About 10% reported that the regulations were either a BAC of .01, .08 or the same as for adults. There 40% who were accurate reporting either 0 tolerance (any alcohol is illegal) or a BAC of 0.02.

Table 4. Topics Reported to be Covered and Already Known

	Parents Reporting Topic Covered		Parents Reporting Already Knowing the Information*	
	Number	%	Number	%
Teen Involvement in fatal crashes	241	90%	253	84%
Distraction	282	94%	280	93%
Brain Development	155	52%	161	54%
Vehicle Choice	94	31%	138	46%
Passenger restriction	287	96%	231	77%
Time Curfew	287	96%	213	71%
Alcohol	293	98%	298	99%
Electronic Device Use	284	95%	275	92%
Penalties	280	93%	175	58%
Suspension for Violation	285	95%	188	63%
Other Risk Factors	166	55%	116	39%

* Includes "Don't Know"

Most parents knew that there was a ban on teen cell phone use with 85% reported that they were never allowed to use a cell phone (with a hands free device) while driving. Parents of 16 year olds reported this 86% of the time compared to parents of 17 year olds who said "never" 72% of the time ($\chi^2 = 25.91$, $p < 0.001$).

Parents were asked about their interest in a variety of potential learning opportunities. When asked if they would be interested in taking driving lessons for parents from professional instructor 32% were very or somewhat interested. They reported 48% of the time that they would be interested (very or somewhat) in being coached by a professional on how to teach their teen to drive. Also, 40% said they were very or somewhat interested in talking with parents who had gone through the process previously.

Only 12% parents reported that there were topics that they wished were covered but were not. The majority however listed topics to be taught to the teens NOT to the parents (noting that this was only the first 2 hours of an 8 hour requirement for the teens).

About 13% of parents reported that their teen gets "distracted" at least once per trip. Fathers were more likely than mothers to report that a teen gets distracted (Fathers: 20%; Mothers:9%) ($\chi^2 = 8.11$, $p =$

0.004). There were 67% of parents that reported being extremely or somewhat concerned about distracted driving.

About 10% of the teens were 17 when they started the licensing process. It was of some interest to know why they delayed their licensure. Of the 29 parents whose teen waited until 17, 34% clearly mentioned teen maturity, grades or responsibility as the reason for delay. Some other more ambiguous responses may have indicated maturity also but were not included in the percentage. There were 17% who responded that it was the teen's choice and another 14% whose teens did not have the time at 16 to go through the process. The remaining reasons were other things like cost and weather, but some were ambiguous in that they could have multiple meanings. For example, a response like "we waited until he was ready" could mean maturity or teen choice.

Parents were asked if the driving instructors expressed any dissatisfaction with the DMV during the course; only 5% of parents said they did.

Discussion

The survey results provide strong endorsement for the parent orientation requirement. Most parents approved of the requirement, would recommend the training to other parents, gave the course and the instructors high ratings and thought that the training would help them in their role as a parent of a teen driver. Specifically, almost half said that because of the training, they were doing things with their teen they would not have done otherwise, and many said that they were more likely to enforce GDL rules as a result of the instruction. Almost all parents were satisfied that all relevant topics were covered during the course.

There clearly is need for a parent orientation course. There was considerable variation among parents in what they knew about the topics that were covered, but a substantial number had limited knowledge about teen crash risk factors and the particulars of the Connecticut graduated licensing law. Parents professed to have the least knowledge about vehicle choice factors, and more than two-thirds reported that information on this important topic was not covered in the course.

The survey results do not reveal the extent to which teen driving behavior and crash involvement is affected by the parent training, compared with that of teens prior to the requirement. However, they do suggest that the course is having beneficial effects, and is an excellent way to inform parents about issues they should be familiar with, and to motivate them to be more involved in guiding their teens through the dangerous early-driving period.