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Editorial

The parental factor in adolescent reckless driving: The road ahead

Adolescence is characterized by experimentation with risky behaviors, and risky driving is one of them. Such behavior represents a serious threat to youngsters' health, and may even be fatal, with car crashes being the leading cause of injury and death in this age group (Beck et al., 2005; Winston and Senserrick, 2006), especially for males (Shope and Bingham, 2008). While this is a well-known fact, an integrative explanation of the complex mechanisms underlying the adolescent tendency is still lacking. Such a model is a prerequisite for the design of effective countermeasures. One major issue that has to be taken into account is the role played by parents in shaping teen driving behavior.

It is important to bear in mind that for teens, driving is not just a quick and easy way to get from place to place. Often it is the danger and sensations associated with driving that make it so attractive and enjoyable at this age. Multiple factors come into play here, such as displaying mastery of a desired skill, emotional regulation of threats and moods, and coping with the social demands and challenges inherent in this period (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2010c). Moreover, though we tend to perceive risky driving as unreservedly maladaptive, risk taking is also one way in which adolescents cope with a central developmental task: liberating themselves from their parents and asserting themselves as grown-ups and independent autonomous individuals (Baumrind, 1987; Shedler and Block, 1990).

Although adolescents in general exhibit a higher risk endorsement than their parents (e.g., Simons-Morton et al., 2011), empirical evidence also show that the model of driving behavior parents provide is reflected in their offspring's driving. In fact, parents' involvement in traffic violations and car crashes has been shown to predict their children's involvement in similar incidents (Ferguson et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2006). Moreover, studies using self-report questionnaires have found evidence for intergenerational transmission of driving styles (Bianchi and Summala, 2004; Miller and Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2010; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2005), as well as driving norms and values (Lahatte and Le Pape, 2008), and studies based on in-vehicle data recorders report parent–teen resemblance in driving behavior (Prato et al., 2009, 2010).

Significant associations have been found not only between the two generations' driving styles, but also between parents' habitual driving modes and their teens' attitudes toward accompanied driving (ATAD; Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2010b), which, in turn, affect their endorsement of driving style (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2010a). Thus, parental tendencies for anxious, risky, and angry driving styles were related to higher tension, avoidance, disapproval, and anxiety in their children's attitude toward the accompanied driving period, while a higher parental tendency for a careful driving style was related to lower negative ATADs among the adolescents. As the accompanied driving period may be critical in establishing safer driving habits that will continue to be practiced once adolescents are permitted to drive on their own, this insight into parents' impact on teen drivers is highly significant.

Additional validating evidence of the parental influence is provided by the studies of Brookland et al. (2014), Ehsani et al. (2014), Scott-Parker et al. (2014), and Schmidt et al. (2014) in the current issue. Brookland et al. (2014) found that adolescents' crash involvement was related to parents' crash involvement; Ehsani et al. (2014) established a correlation between the kinematic driving of parent–teen pairs, which was most pronounced in the beginning of teens' driving experience; Scott-Parker et al. (2014) show that the risky driving behavior of young male drivers was associated with the perceived riskiness of their fathers' driving, and the same tended to be true for female drivers and their mothers; and Schmidt et al. (2014) report that parental modeling of aggressive driving, substance use driving, distracted driving, and moving violations was predictive of youth risk in all domains of risky driving examined in their study. Taken together, these investigations provide further indications that an individual's driving style may be shaped within the family of origin, and may be associated with the parents' driving styles and behaviors.

Despite the importance of this basic observation, our understanding of the mechanism that might explain it is still incomplete. On the one hand, children model themselves on their parents in all aspects of life. Since teens are exposed to their parents' driving throughout their lives, it is reasonable to assume that they will model their own driving behavior on their parents as well, as research has indeed found. On the other hand, adolescence is the time when teens are trying to prove their individuality and thus behave in a differentiated mode from their parents, which is reflected in part in the fact that the associations between the generations in respect to driving behaviors are far from complete. Thus, it is still necessary to gain a deeper understanding of parent–teen dynamics and obtain a fuller picture of the parental factors contributing to teens' driving behavior.

One possible explanation for the parental influence lies in the socialization processes through which parents communicate their standards of conduct. These include parental monitoring of adolescent behavior, the quality of the parent–adolescent relationship, and parent–adolescent communication (Kotchick et al., 2001).

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The first of these, parental monitoring and control, has been shown to be inversely associated with involvement in reckless driving. When parents know what their adolescent children are doing and who their friends are, impose limits on teenage passengers and night driving, supervise their teen's driving, and restrict access to a car, the adolescents are more likely to take fewer risks, report less speeding and more seat belt use, and be involved in fewer traffic violations (Beck et al., 2001; Bingham and Shope, 2004; Graber et al., 2006; Hartos et al., 2000; Taubman – Ben-Ari and Katz – Ben-Ami, 2013). The study by Brookland et al. (2014) in the current issue provides further evidence of the validity of this avenue of research by indicating that the children of parents who implement fewer driving rules exhibit a lower compliance with GDL conditions.

The second factor, the way adolescents perceive their relationship with their parents, is another important predictor of teens' risk-taking behavior. Research has shown that the perception of support from parents is related to lower risk taking by children (Parker and Benson, 2004), and that emotional responsiveness and psychological autonomy-granting by parents promote the development of a responsible, competent adolescent (Nijhof and Engles, 2007; Steinberg, 2001). Moreover, teens with authoritative parents reported half the crash risk in the preceding year than those with uninvolved parents (Ginsburg et al., 2009). When the Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein et al., 1983) was used to examine teens' perceptions of problem solving, communication, affective reaction, affective involvement, and general functioning in the family, these dimensions were found to be significantly and negatively related to their willingness to take risks while driving (Taubman – Ben-Ari and Katz – Ben-Ami, 2013; study 3). Furthermore, the family's coherence and adaptability (Olson, 1986) have both been negatively related to endorsement of the reckless and angry driving styles, and positively associated with a preference for careful driving (Taubman – Ben-Ari and Katz – Ben-Ami, 2013; study 4). These findings suggest that positive family processes do more than simply discourage dangerous driving behaviors among adolescents; they may also help develop positive assets or strengths in their youngsters that work to prevent such behaviors (Chen et al., 2008).

The studies of Laird (2014) and of Mirman et al. (2014) in the current issue provide insight into how the parent–teen relationship can positively impact adolescent driving behavior. Laird (2014) reports that parents who have an established style of providing structure and autonomy support to their children are more likely to integrate involvement in the driving process and the imposition of driving limits into their routine parenting style. Mirman et al. (2014) show the importance of support provided by parents and teens to each other in the process of driving practice, so that parents in mutually supportive dyads reported stronger intentions to be engaged in their teens' practice driving during the permit phase than those in dyads where both members reported receiving a low level of support.

Research has also found the third factor, parent–adolescent communication, to be related to adolescent driving, with poor parent–child communication associated with risky driving behavior (Turner et al., 1993; Wills et al., 1996), and higher frequency of parent–teen communication about safe driving (as reported by teens) associated with teens' positive attitudes toward safe driving (Yang et al., 2013). While these studies indicate the significance of family communication, it is important to note that Goodwin et al. (2006) found that although there was general agreement between parents and teens as to whether certain things were said or done by the parents concerning the youngsters' driving, the interpretations of these acts by the two generations barely exceeded the level of agreement that would occur by chance. Another study found only modest agreement between parents and their teens in respect to parentally imposed restrictions on mobile phone use while driving (Foss, 2007). Foss alludes to a basic communication gap between parents and their teenage offspring, so that the message parents believe they are conveying by their words or actions and the message perceived by the adolescents may not be one and the same. Such communication problems are of considerable concern, as Beck et al. (2005) found that greater agreement regarding restricted driving conditions was significantly associated with decreased driving risk among newly licensed young drivers. New evidence reported by Goodwin et al. (2014) in the current issue indicates that when parents are accompanying their offspring in the car, the most common type of comment they make is instruction about vehicle handling or operation, followed by pointing out something about the driving environment, negative remarks about the teen's driving, and helping the driver navigate. Other potentially helpful types of instruction, including explanations or insights relating to higher-order skills (e.g., hazard anticipation and detection), were less frequent. Such information, obtained from direct observation, enhances our awareness of the gap between professionals' views of effective parental guidance and parents' behavior in practice.

The concept of Family Climate for Road Safety (FCRS) may help us to take a step forward in understanding the impact of the parent–teen relationship on adolescent driving by providing an integrative lens through which to view the complex issues involved. FCRS refers to the values, perceptions, priorities, and practices of parents and the family in regard to safe driving, as perceived by young drivers (Taubman – Ben-Ari and Katz – Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013). It consists of seven dimensions: (1) Modeling, i.e., the model that parents provide to their children by their own modes of driving and their degree of obedience to traffic regulations; (2) Feedback, relating to parents' positive and encouraging comments to their offspring in regard to driving safely, and their ability to praise their children for safe and considerate driving; (3) Communication, a reference to open and direct communication between parents and adolescents in respect to driving behavior and risk taking, such as parents' guidance on how to anticipate potential hazards on the road and inclusion of the young driver in framing the family "contract" regarding their driving; (4) Monitoring, or parental observation and supervision of their youngsters' driving, including making sure they do not drive recklessly and having them inform the parents of where they are taking the car, who is going with them, and when they intend to be home; (5) Commitment to safety, a reflection of parents' authentic commitment to road safety, obeying traffic laws, and considerate driving, including the time they are willing to invest in safety education; (6) Messages, a measure of parents' clear verbal safety messages to young drivers that are understood by their children; and (7) Limits, i.e., the extent to which parents set systematic and clear-cut boundaries on adolescents' driving behavior, discipline them for traffic violations, and make known the restrictions that will be imposed if they do not follow these rules.

Studies have found that young drivers who perceive their parents to be good role models, to provide encouraging and empowering feedback for safe driving, to enable open communication, to convey clear messages regarding safe driving, to monitor their driving, and to set well-defined limits on breaking traffic laws, report taking risks less frequently, being more personally committed to safety, and driving more carefully and in a less aggressive and reckless manner. On the other hand, teens who perceive their parents to be uncommitted to safety report driving more recklessly and being less committed to safety themselves (Taubman – Ben-Ari and Katz – Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013).

In addition to increasing our understanding of the nature of the parental influence on teen driving, these findings call attention to a crucial task for professionals: the need to identify different kinds of families and the particular dynamics within them during the course