



## Does parental support enhance the link between restrictions and adolescents' risky driving?



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### ABSTRACT

Parents' driving restrictions appear to reduce adolescent risky driving, which is associated with crash risk, yet the relational context in which parents impose restrictions may alter their effectiveness. Newly licensed adolescents ( $n = 151$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.1$  years, 53% female) and their parents ( $n = 174$ , 71% mothers) reported parenting style, driving restrictions, and risky driving behaviors. Concurrently, higher levels of parent-imposed driving restrictions were associated with lower levels of inexperience-based and volitional risky driving shortly after licensure. The associations were stronger in the context of high levels of parental support than in the context of low levels of parental support, particularly for boys. The associations also were stronger for inexperience-based risky driving than for volitional risky driving. Longitudinally, restrictions imposed shortly after licensure were not associated with inexperience-based and volitional risky driving one year later after controlling for risky driving shortly after licensure.

### 1. Introduction

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of teenage death in the United States (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2016). Teenagers generally drive less than most adults, but they have a disproportionately high rate of crashes and crash-related deaths. In 2015, > 2700 teenagers in the United States died from injuries suffered in motor vehicle crashes. The fatal crash rate per mile driven for 16–19-year-olds is almost three times the rate for drivers aged 20 years or older; within the group of teenage drivers, the fatal crash rate for 16- and 17-year-olds is almost double that of 18- and 19-year-olds (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2016). Non-fatal crash rates and near-crash rates also are higher for teenagers than adults (Lee, Simons-Morton, Klauer, Ouimet, & Dingus, 2011; Simons-Morton et al., 2011). High crash rates among young drivers stem, at least in part, from risky driving maneuvers due to inexperience or volition (Simons-Morton, 2007). Thus, it is imperative that we implement programs and policies that reduce teenagers' crash rates.

While drivers' training programs may be useful for teaching driving skills, there is little evidence suggesting that drivers' training reduces crash risk of young novice drivers (Beanland, Goode, Salmon, & Lenné, 2013). Similarly, parent-focused driving interventions generally do not reduce crash risk, and those with the most promise require extensive resources (Curry, Peek-Asa, Hamann, & Mirman, 2015). In contrast to

implementing formal driving-related interventions, targeting general parenting behaviors may be a cost-effective way to increase teenage driver safety and possibly reduce other forms of adolescent risk-taking as well (Beck, Hartos, & Simons-Morton, 2002; Laird, 2011). Thus, the goal of the current study was to evaluate whether parents' restrictions and the parent-child relationship context within which parents impose restrictions are associated with risky driving. Specifically, we tested associations linking parents' restrictions with adolescents' inexperience-based and volitional risky driving behaviors to determine whether the strength of the associations differs as a function of the parent-child relational context.

#### 1.1. Adolescent risky driving

Compared to experienced drivers, teenagers are more likely to drive too fast for conditions and to follow too closely (Simons-Morton, Lerner, & Singer, 2005). One study found that adolescents' rates of elevated *g*-force events, representative of risky driving maneuvers such as rapid stops and sharp turns, were five times higher than adult rates throughout their first 18 months of driving (Simons-Morton et al., 2011). However, it is unclear why adolescents engage in elevated rates of risky driving. Risky driving behaviors may be one form of the elevated risk taking that is commonly reported during adolescence (Lambert, Simons-Morton, Cain, Weisz, & Cox, 2014; Taubman-Ben-Ari,

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2014). For instance, individuals with high levels of sensation seeking are more likely to engage in risky driving (Mirman, Albert, Jacobsohn, & Winston, 2012; Prato, Toledo, Lotan, & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2010), and adolescents who engage in risky driving generally engage in other risk-taking behaviors as well (Bina, Graziano, & Bonino, 2006; McDonald, Sommers, & Fargo, 2014; Vassallo et al., 2008). Thus, some risky driving maneuvers may be an expression of an underlying propensity toward risk-taking. We use the term volitional risky driving to refer to this type of risky driving.

Volitional risk is likely not the only contributor to adolescents' risky driving. Some of adolescents' risky driving behaviors may reflect a lack of driver skill due to their relative inexperience with driving (McKnight & McKnight, 2003; Simons-Morton, 2007). Approximately one-third of adolescent risky drivers do not exhibit other problem behaviors (Vassallo et al., 2008), and the risky driving behaviors of younger adolescents appear to be less connected to other risk behaviors than the risky driving of older adolescents (Bina et al., 2006), suggesting that inexperience may be another contributor to risky driving. Novice drivers may experiment with vehicle speed and risky driving maneuvers as a means of trial and error and as a way to become familiar with the driving process (Simons-Morton, 2007). Inexperience also may lead to poor hazard anticipation and decision-making, which then requires adolescents to engage in risky maneuvers to avoid a collision. Effective policies need to address both inexperience and volition as contributors to hazardous driving among novice drivers.

To address inexperience-based risky driving, Graduated Driver's Licensing (GDL) systems have been implemented across the United States and worldwide. GDL systems restrict the conditions under which teenagers drive (Williams, Tefft, & Grabowski, 2012), so that novices are able to gain driving experience in relatively safe situations before they drive under more dangerous conditions (e.g., at night). GDL systems target inexperience-based risky driving on a large-scale level. No widely implemented programs specifically address volitional risky driving by adolescents. However, parents may be able to reduce the likelihood that their children will engage in both types of risky driving.

### 1.2. Parental restrictions

Parental limit setting is a key strategy to reduce adolescent risky driving (Simons-Morton, 2007). Parental enforcement of GDL restrictions may be essential for teen compliance with these laws (Brookland, Begg, Langley, & Ameratunga, 2014). Additionally, parents may further reduce their adolescents' crash risk by expanding on weak GDL restrictions. For instance, many nighttime GDL restrictions do not begin until midnight or 1 A.M., whereas teenagers' fatal crashes most frequently occur from 6 P.M. to midnight (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2016; Williams et al., 2012). Similarly, some states allow one, two, or even three passengers to be present under GDL laws, despite research showing that even one teenage passenger increases crash risk (Williams et al., 2012). Parents also can impose additional restrictions, such as cell phone bans and restrictions concerned with other distractions, to enhance the safety effects of existing GDL laws. Thus, parents can extend GDL laws to more thoroughly restrict driving during high-risk conditions and can gradually release restrictions as their adolescents become more experienced.

Parent-imposed driving limits are associated with less risky driving (Hartos, Eitel, & Simons-Morton, 2002; Mirman et al., 2012), fewer traffic violations (Hartos, Eitel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2000), and fewer crashes (McCartt, Shabanova, & Leaf, 2003; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Katz-Ben-Ami, 2012) among teens, suggesting that parents' driving restrictions are indeed an effective way to reduce adolescent risky driving. Parents' restrictions likely reduce risky driving by limiting inexperience-based risky driving. Restrictions also may reduce volitional risky driving to the extent that adolescents have fewer opportunities to engage in risky driving altogether. We expect higher levels of restrictions to be linked with lower levels of inexperience-based and volitional

risky driving. However, the parent-child relationship context also may influence inexperience and volition, as well as the extent to which adolescents comply with parents' restrictions.

### 1.3. Parent-child relationship context

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), adolescents are likely to internalize their parents' rules and act in accordance with those rules if parents help their children meet basic psychological needs by providing warmth/involvement, structure, and autonomy support (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Van Petegem, & Duriez, 2014). Parents' warmth, structure, and autonomy support independently contribute to fulfillment of adolescents' psychological needs by allowing adolescents to feel connected to their parents, understand their parents' rules, and transform their parents' values into their own (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Parents can provide warmth by expressing love, being supportive, spending time with their children, and paying attention to things that are important to their children. Parents' warmth and involvement fulfill children's need to feel connected to and valued by important others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Parents provide structure by conveying clear and consistent rules and consequences and by maintaining the role of authority; structure does not concern the extent of parents' restrictions but instead how clearly restrictions are imposed (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010). By providing structure, parents can facilitate children's competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, autonomy involves the experience of authentically initiating or endorsing one's own behaviors, rather than having internal or external motives as the driving force on behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). By taking their children's perspectives, supporting their initiations, and helping them solve problems on their own, autonomy-supportive parenting promotes adolescents' self-endorsed functioning (Vasquez, Patall, Fong, Corrigan, & Pine, 2015).

In sum, supportive parenting that provides high levels of warmth/involvement, structure, and autonomy support facilitates children's adjustment and well-being and encourages children to act in accordance with their parents' values (Steinberg, 2001). Furthermore, parenting style (i.e., the relational context) may moderate the effectiveness of parenting practices (i.e., restrictions; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). When parents impose restrictions in a way that does not support children's self-determination, adolescents may choose not to comply with the restrictions when possible or they may reluctantly comply with the rules without internalizing their parents' reasons for these rules (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In either case, the intended safety effects of the restrictions may be lost (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Niemiec, 2009).

Although no known study has examined the relationship between adolescent driving and SDT dimensions of parenting specifically, some research suggests that a supportive parenting style may enhance the ability of parents' restrictions to curtail risky driving. For instance, adolescents who describe their parents as implementing high levels of rules as well as high levels of support are more likely to report safe driving behaviors and attitudes than adolescents whose parents are low on either rules or support (Ginsburg, Durbin, García-España, Kalicka, & Winston, 2009). In addition, adolescents are less likely to endorse a reckless driving style when their parents provide a supportive environment that emphasizes road safety (e.g., by enabling open communication and clear messages regarding driving; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Katz-Ben-Ami, 2012). As both of these studies operationalized risky driving in a way that is consistent with volitional risk-taking, practices delivered in a supportive parenting style appear to be associated with less volitional risky driving. However, it remains unknown whether high levels of support increase the potential for restrictions to curtail inexperience-based risky driving. Consistent with Darling and Steinberg's (1993) general hypothesis, we expect associations linking higher levels of restrictions with lower levels of risky driving to be stronger when parents impose restrictions in a supportive context than

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