

ORIENTATION SESSIONS FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG NOVICE DRIVERS: AN ASSESSMENT OF U.S. PROGRAMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The role of parents in the licensing process has expanded greatly since the arrival of graduated driver licensing (GDL). Lengthy learner stages, supervised hours requirements and driving restrictions have created new responsibilities for parents that did not exist 20 years ago. A growing body of research has investigated how parents handle these responsibilities. In many cases, parents do not have a clear understanding of what, where and when teens should be practicing. With respect to GDL restrictions, parents show good awareness and understanding of the nighttime and passenger restrictions; however, the limits imposed by parents often lack strictness, focus on less important safety concerns and are not sustained.

Given the current shortcomings in parents' supervision and management of young novice drivers, many researchers have pointed to the need to assist parents with this responsibility. In recent years, many states, local jurisdictions, and private and nonprofit organizations have created programs intended to provide guidance to parents of new drivers. "Parent orientation sessions," where parents (and sometimes teens) attend an in-person meeting, have become especially popular. Although such programs are becoming commonplace, few have been rigorously evaluated.

The objectives of the present project were to: 1) select promising parent orientation sessions for comprehensive assessment, and 2) prepare recommendations that states and other jurisdictions can use in implementing or improving orientation sessions for parents of new drivers.

KEY FINDINGS

All of the programs assessed in this project had strengths as well as areas for improvement. Based on the program assessments and review of the scientific literature, nine recommendations were provided for states and other jurisdictions that currently provide — or are planning to implement — an orientation session for parents of new drivers.

1. **Be evidence-based and grounded in research** - A program that is grounded in research brings an understanding of how teens learn to drive and how parents can best assist with that process. It also recognizes what research shows to be effective — or ineffective — at promoting safe behaviors.
2. **Provide clear guidance for parent action** - To be effective, programs need a small number of clear, concrete, measurable behavioral objectives for parents. Once the behavioral objectives are established, programs should be structured to maximize the likelihood parents will engage in these behaviors.

ABOUT

Established in 1947 by AAA, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety is a not-for-profit, publicly funded, 501(c)(3) charitable research and educational organization. The AAA Foundation's mission is to prevent traffic deaths and injuries by conducting research into their causes and by educating the public about strategies to prevent crashes and reduce injuries when they do occur. This research is used to develop educational materials for drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists and other road users. Visit www.AAAFoundation.org for more information.

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AAA FOUNDATION FOR
TRAFFIC SAFETY
607 14th Street, NW, Suite 201
Washington, DC 20005
202-638-5944

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3. **Have repeated contacts with parents** – Research suggests that several exposures are needed before information is effectively recalled or impactful. As such, programs should endeavor to find a way to have repeated contacts with parents.
4. **Incorporate principles of adult learning** - Programs should focus on helping parents understand key points and taking appropriate action (active learning approaches), rather than concentrating on delivering information to parents (passive learning approaches).
5. **Explain the rationale for GDL and the role of parents** – Beyond understanding what the laws are or what restrictions are imposed, parents need to understand that the purpose of the learner stage is for teens to get substantial experience in a wide range of settings, and that parents are responsible for making sure this happens.
6. **Be designed and conducted by individuals outside the driver education system** - Driving instructors typically are not trained on the actions parents need to take or how to work effectively with adult learners. As such, even programs delivered within the driver education system should be designed and conducted by individuals outside the system.
7. **Have systems in place to ensure the program is standardized and delivered consistently** – Departure from or tweaking of instructional material is commonplace, which can inadvertently undermine key messages. To be effective, programs must have systems in place to ensure the program is standardized and delivered consistently.
8. **Evaluate outcomes** - An evaluation, although potentially time-consuming and costly, can be very important in revealing what is working, what is not working and what changes are needed for a given program moving forward.
9. **Mandate parent attendance** - Even a program that is demonstrated to be effective will not succeed if it does not reach a substantial proportion of the target population. Voluntary programs are particularly likely to miss the parents who most need to be present — those who are less motivated and less engaged with their teen’s driving.

METHODS

The investigators conducted a nationwide scan of programs that offered some form of orientation sessions for parents of new drivers. The search identified approximately two dozen programs of various size and scope and represented a mix of statewide, locally based and online programs. A smaller set of programs were selected for in-depth assessment. This assessment considered program history, the extent of audience coverage, content and delivery, efforts to ensure program fidelity, and any existing evaluations. Program strengths and weaknesses were noted.

Research team members visited eight of the nine selected programs (one program was online only). During site visits, the project team observed one or more parent orientation sessions in person. The team also met with key personnel who administer or oversee the programs for additional insight into the program. For the online program, members of the research team participated in the program in the same manner as the intended audience would. Site visits were conducted between June 2016 and August 2017. The assessments considered: (1) program history, (2) extent of audience coverage, (3) content and delivery, (4) efforts to ensure program fidelity, and (5) whether a program evaluation has been carried out.

A systematic review of the relevant scientific literature was also conducted to find related information regarding evidence-based guidance for program development and included the fields of young driver safety, social psychology, education, and other related fields.

