

# 7

## Family and personal influences on young drivers

Families play an important role in the driving behaviour of young people in terms of the attitudes and values they transmit, the role models they provide, and the direct involvement they have in young people's driving careers. Other Australian Temperament Project research has shown that young people in their mid-20s are still very much connected to their parents and value their parents' input, and that parents provide considerable advice and support to young people, both emotionally and practically (Vassallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson, 2009).

This chapter looks at two broad issues:

- the influence of parents on young drivers' vehicle purchase; and
- links between young drivers' personal characteristics and their driving behaviour.

Looking specifically at parental influences on young people's driving behaviour, research has shown parallels between parent's driving behaviour and that of their sons and daughters. For instance, a number of studies have shown that parents with a history of crashes and violations more often have children who become involved in crashes or violate road laws (Ferguson, Williams, Chapline, Reinfurt, & De Leonardis, 2001; Wilson, Meckle, Wiggins & Cooper, 2006). While these studies cannot speak to the reasons underlying these trends, it is likely that family attitudes and values as well as parental modelling are involved.

Another way in which parents may influence young people's driving behaviour is through the assistance they provide when their sons and daughters are learning to drive. In the ATP study, almost three-quarters of young learner drivers had practised driving with their parents on at least a weekly basis (Smart & Vassallo, 2005). Driving practice occurred despite the fact that young people and their parents commonly experienced stress and conflict during these practice sessions, with 78% of young adults and 86% of parents reporting some or a lot of stress. Thus, parents play a considerable role in helping young people acquire the skills needed for driving.

Parents may also influence the driving careers of their young adult children after their children have gained their licence. One way in which this may occur is through the advice and support parents provide when young people are purchasing a car. The scant research located on this issue comes from North America and focuses on parents of teenagers (Cammisa, Williams, & Leaf, 1999; Hellinga, McCart, & Haire, 2007; Rivara, Rivara, & Bartol, 1998).

While these studies found that teenagers would most commonly be provided with a car already owned by the family, parents nominated a variety of factors that would influence their choice if they were purchasing a vehicle for their teenagers. In the study by Hellinga et al. (2007), the most common factors selected were safety and reliability. When specifically questioned about the safety features the car should have, parents said driver airbags (78–83% across the three states involved in the study), front passenger airbags (52–67%), and antilock brakes (22–62%) were the most important features, while 7–12% said that they did not consider safety at all. The parents in Cammisa and colleagues' study (1999) selected price (22%), teenager's preference (13%), and small size and manoeuvrability (10%) as the most important factors that would influence their choice. In contrast, Rivara et al. (1998) found that parents of teenagers undergoing driver education training thought the following factors would be important or very important: insurance costs (94%), price (87%), repair record (85%), fuel economy (77%), antilock brakes (73%), airbags (65%), other safety features (84%), and large size (42%). Other factors were less commonly nominated.

These findings shed light on the factors that are important when parents purchase a car for their teenager, and also provide an indication of the factors that parents of young adults in the twenties might consider important. However, once young people reach adulthood and move into employment, it is common for many to purchase their own vehicles. The role of parents in the choices young people make is relatively unknown. The present study sought to explore the factors that parents believed young people should consider when purchasing a vehicle, the factors they thought had actually been important, and the degree of influence parents thought they had exerted on the choices of their young adult children. We also looked at whether these aspects were related to young people's educational attainment, gender, type of occupation and residential location (metropolitan or non-metropolitan), as well as the quality of parent–young adult relationships and the financial support parents had given their 23–24 year old sons/daughters.

The second issue this section addresses is whether (a) personal strengths such as social skills, temperament style and similar attributes, and (b) lifestyle factors such as employment, relationships, and “settling down” are related to driving behaviour. It is well established that positive states such as optimism, life satisfaction and happiness; character strengths such as empathy, persistence and self-control; and connections to others, including partners, families, peers, communities and society (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), are associated with positive outcomes among young people (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004).

In terms of driving behaviour, much attention has focused on the personal characteristics of young problem drivers. It is known that young problem drivers tend to show higher aggression or hostility (Cavallo & Triggs, 1996; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 2003); more attentional difficulties (Barkley, Murphy, Dupaul, & Bush, 2002; Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2000); are more attracted to sensation-seeking; and more often hold attitudes favourable to “norm-defying” behaviour (Cavallo & Triggs, 1996; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 2003) than other young drivers. However, much less is known about the opposite side of the equation—whether particular personal attributes and strengths are associated with a low-risk, law-abiding approach to driving. Our first *In the Driver's Seat* report (Smart & Vassallo, 2005) found that low- and moderate-level risky drivers aged 19–20 years had higher social skills from late childhood onwards than high-level risky drivers, and the low-level group was higher than the moderate-level group on some aspects of social skills too. Similarly at 19–20 years, low-level risky drivers tended to be more civically minded and socially responsible than high-level risky drivers. While these findings suggest that the low-level group was more socially skilled, more striking were the lower personal capacities of the high-level group compared with other young drivers. There appears to be little other relevant research on this question, as the focus of much past research has been on young problem drivers rather than young people who drive safely.

Increased maturity is linked to a lower involvement in risky driving. Bingham and colleagues (2008) recently showed that greater psychosocial maturity gained through the taking on of adult roles, attitudes and behaviours was associated with lower rates of problem driving. Similarly, Jessor et al. (1997) argued that the decrease in risky driving that occurred between 18 and 25 years was related to the embracement of adult social roles, and greater behavioural and psychosocial “conventionality” (e.g., full-time employment, marriage). However, as noted in Chapter 4, early adulthood can be a period of considerable risk-taking, with antisocial behaviour, gambling and substance use relatively common at this age. Young people who engage in risk-taking or who have friends who are involved in risk-taking tend to also engage in risky driving (Beirness & Simpson, 1988; Shope & Bingham, 2002; Vassallo et al., 2008). These findings suggest links between young people's lifestyle preferences and their driving tendencies, with those who have moved into employment, are in a committed relationship, have become parents, or are not involved in other forms of risk-taking, being more likely to be safe drivers.

Thus, the second broad issue addressed in this chapter is whether positive personal attributes and lifestyle characteristics indicative of “settling down” are related to a safe, law-abiding approach to driving.

## 7.1 Family influences on young drivers' vehicle purchase

We look first at family influences on young drivers' vehicle purchases, with four issues investigated:<sup>91</sup>

- the factors that parents thought young people should consider when purchasing a vehicle;
- the factors parents thought had influenced their son/daughter's choice of vehicle;
- the degree of influence parents thought they had exerted on the choices of their young adult children; and
- whether parents' involvement in their son's or daughter's car purchase was related to the quality of their relationships, or to the provision of support.

### Vehicle purchase: Factors parents thought young people should consider

Parents were asked whether their young adult children had bought a car since gaining their licence, and whether parents had helped to select the vehicle. A total of 814 young people (81% of the sample) had purchased a vehicle, and 544 parents (67% of parents whose son/daughter had purchased a vehicle) had helped with the selection of the vehicle. If parents had helped in the selection of a vehicle, they were then asked: "When providing advice and assistance to your son/daughter, what did you think should have been the three most important factors in the choice of his/her vehicle to purchase?" Parents were asked to choose three responses from the options listed in Table 25.

Most parents (84%) thought that price should be an important consideration in their son's or daughter's selection of a vehicle. Three-quarters selected reliability, while fuel economy and safety features were also ranked highly, with about 40% of parents choosing these options. Factors associated with the appearance, power, comfort, or special features of the car were of low importance as fewer than 5% of parents thought their son or daughter should consider these factors when deciding on a car to purchase.

**Table 25 Factors parents believed their 23–24 year old children should consider and actually considered when purchasing a vehicle**

	Should consider		Actually considered	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Price	445	83.6	642	80.8
Reliability	400	75.3	394	49.6
Fuel economy	214	40.3	250	28.9
Safety features	206	38.8	230	12.1
Size	139	26.1	215	27.1
Type of vehicle (e.g., 4WD)	50	9.4	154	19.4
Manufacturer	33	6.2	100	9.7
Style/image/appearance	26	4.9	96	31.5
Other reason (describe)	23	4.3	77	5.9
Power/performance	16	3.0	56	12.6
Comfort	14	2.6	54	7.1
Special features (e.g., CD player)	4	0.8	47	6.8

Note: Percentages add to more than 100% as multiple responses were obtained.

<sup>91</sup> Due to the number of statistical tests that were performed for each issue, an adjusted significance level of  $p < .01$  is used to reduce the risk of Type 1 error (a finding of significant differences when there is no such difference). For reader interest, results that are significant at the conventional  $p < .05$  level are reported as trends, but are not interpreted.

The responses of parents of young men and of young women were compared to explore whether there were differences in the factors that parents thought should have been important in their son's or daughter's choices. While there were trends for significant differences on a number of aspects (price, type of vehicle, style/image, power/performance and safety features), these did not reach the adjusted significance level.<sup>92</sup> However more parents of young women than young men (34% vs 16%) thought vehicle size should be important.<sup>93</sup>

The responses of parents of young people living in metropolitan areas were compared with those of parents of young people living in non-metropolitan areas on this issue, with no significant differences being found. Similarly, parents' perceptions were not related to their sons'/daughters' educational attainment (classified as university, other post-secondary, or secondary only) or occupational status (percentile ranking on the ANU\_4 Occupational Status classification system).

## Vehicle purchase: Factors parents thought young people actually considered

All parents of young people who had purchased a vehicle since gaining their licence were asked which three factors they thought had been the most influential in their son or daughter's choice of vehicle. Their responses are shown in Table 25.

Price and reliability were the two most common responses (81% and 50% respectively), followed by style/image/appearance (32%), fuel economy (29 %) and size (27%). The other factors were selected by fewer than 20% of parents. While there were similarities between the factors parents believed should be important and those they thought had actually been important (e.g., price and reliability), there were some differences too (see Table 25). Few parents rated style/image/appearance, power/performance and vehicle type as factors that should be important, but many more believed that these factors had been influential in their son's/daughter's choice. On the other hand, parents tended to think safety features should have been an important consideration, but fewer believed it had been.

We again compared the responses of parents of young men and parents of young women to investigate gender differences (Figure 33). There were significant differences on five of the eleven factors (excluding other reasons). More parents of young women than young men thought reliability (trend), size, fuel economy and safety features had been important,<sup>94</sup> while more parents of young men than young women thought type of vehicle and power/performance had been important.<sup>95</sup>

There were no significant differences according to young people's residential location, educational attainment or occupational status.

## Influence of parents on vehicle purchase

Parents who had helped their young adult children select a vehicle were asked to rate how much influence they thought they had exerted on their son's or daughter's choice. The great majority of parents thought they had some influence, with 58% perceiving that they had been somewhat influential, and close to another third feeling that they had been very influential (Table 26). Only 1% thought they had had no influence at all on their son's/daughter's car choice.

Parents of young women more often felt they had influenced their young adult child's choice of vehicle than did parents of young men (Figure 34). There were no significant differences

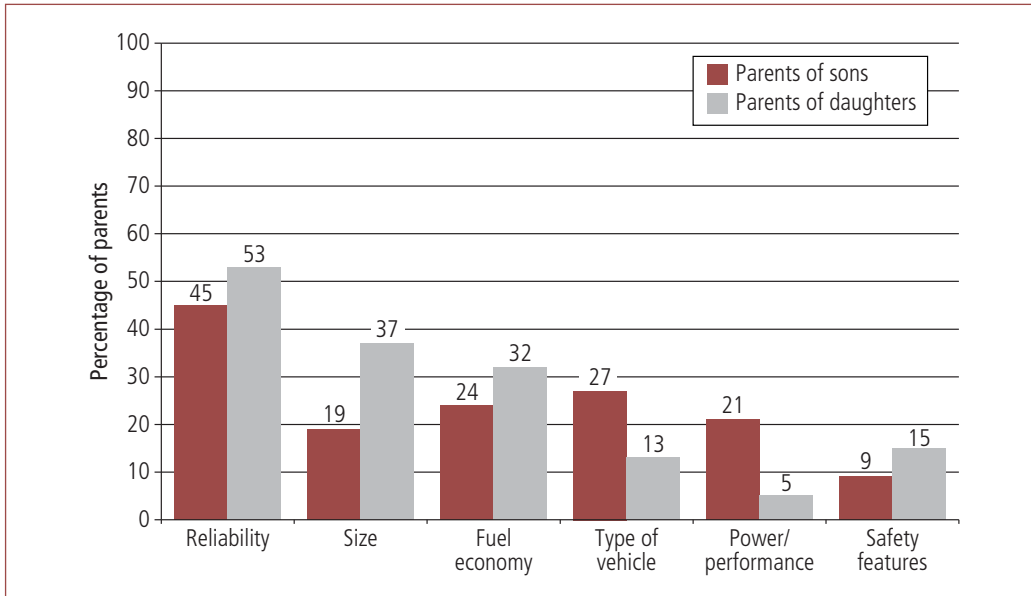
92 Gender differences on factors that should have been influential—price:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.28, p < .039$  (trend); type of vehicle:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.09, p < .043$  (trend); style/image/appearance:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.20, p < .040$  (trend); power/performance:  $\chi^2(1) = 5.78, p < .016$  (trend); safety features:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.42, p < .036$  (trend).

93 Gender differences on factors that should have been influential—vehicle size:  $\chi^2(1) = 24.86, p < .001$ .

94 Gender differences on factors that had been influential—reliability:  $\chi^2(1) = 5.84, p < .016$  (trend); size:  $\chi^2(1) = 34.40, p < .001$ ; fuel economy:  $\chi^2(1) = 6.73, p < .009$ ; safety features:  $\chi^2(1) = 6.57, p < .010$ .

95 Gender differences on factors that had been influential—type of vehicle:  $\chi^2(1) = 26.10, p < .001$ ; power/performance:  $\chi^2(1) = 45.87, p < .001$ .

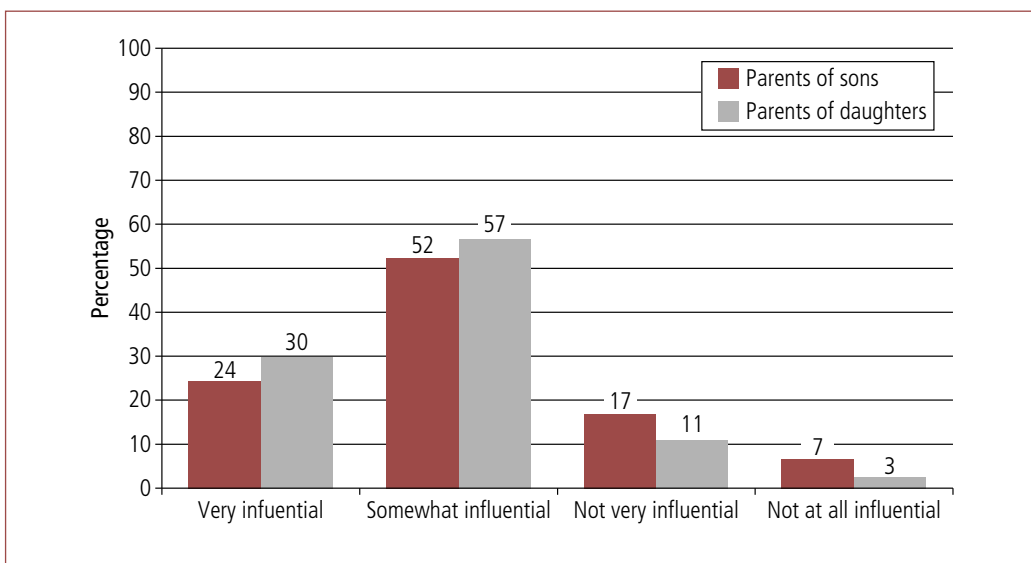
between parents of young people living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas on the amount of influence parents thought they had exerted, or according to young people's educational attainment or occupational status.



**Figure 33** Factors parents believed their 23–24 year old children actually considered when purchasing a vehicle, by sons and daughters

**Table 26** Parents' perceptions of their influence on their 23–24 year old children's vehicle purchase

	<i>n</i>	%
Very influential	157	30.3
Somewhat influential	303	58.4
Not very influential	52	10.0
Not at all influential	7	1.3



**Figure 34** Parents' perceptions of their influence on their 23–24 year old children's vehicle purchase, by gender of their child

## Influence of parent–young adult child relationship on vehicle purchase

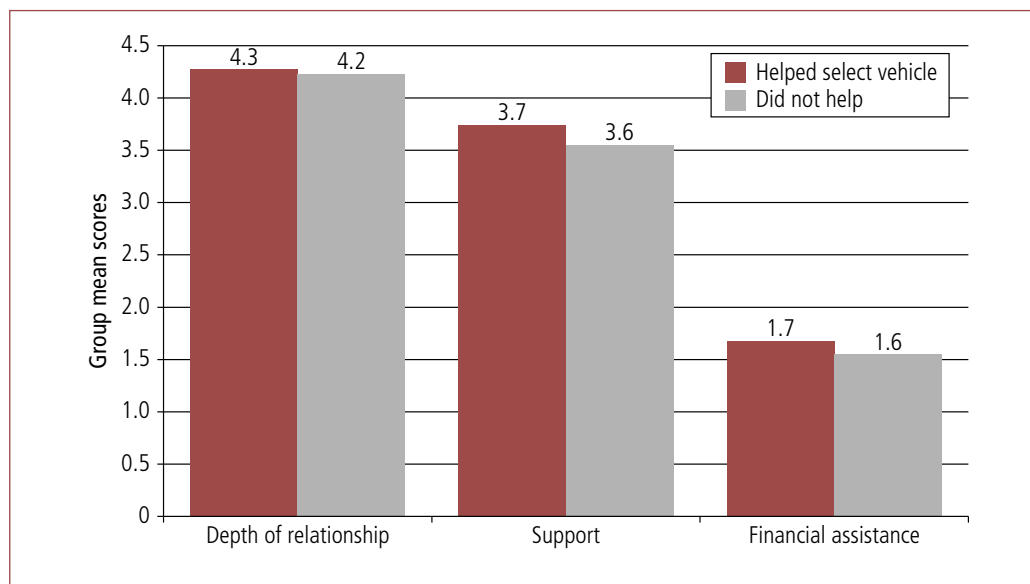
The next issue examined is whether the type of relationships between parents and young people, and the supports parents provided, were related to parental involvement in, and influence on, young men’s/women’s purchase of a car.

Using Pierce, Sarason and Sarason’s Social Support Scale (1991), adapted for parent report, three aspects of parent–young adult relationships were measured (with a 5-point response format ranging from never to always):

- depth of relationship (e.g., he/she values the relationship between you);
- support (e.g., he/she counts on you for help with a problem); and
- conflict (e.g., he/she gets upset with you).

Financial assistance was measured by five items asking whether parents had provided help with bills or rent, a loan or gift of money, substantial material assistance (e.g., a car), education course fees, or other forms of financial support, using a yes/no response format. The number of differing forms of assistance provided was summed (possible range of 0 to 5).

Figure 35 shows that parents who helped with the selection of a vehicle tended to be more supportive, and had given greater financial assistance.<sup>96</sup> There was also a trend for them to perceive there to be greater depth in their relationships with their sons/daughters.<sup>97</sup> However, the differences were more of degree, as the average scores of the two groups were at the higher end of the scale on depth of relationship and support (between 3 and 4), indicating that good depth and support were generally from “sometimes” to “often” present. Similarly, the two groups’ average scores on the number of differing types of financial assistance given by parents were considerably above 1, suggesting that most parents in the ATP sample had financially supported their young adult children in some way.

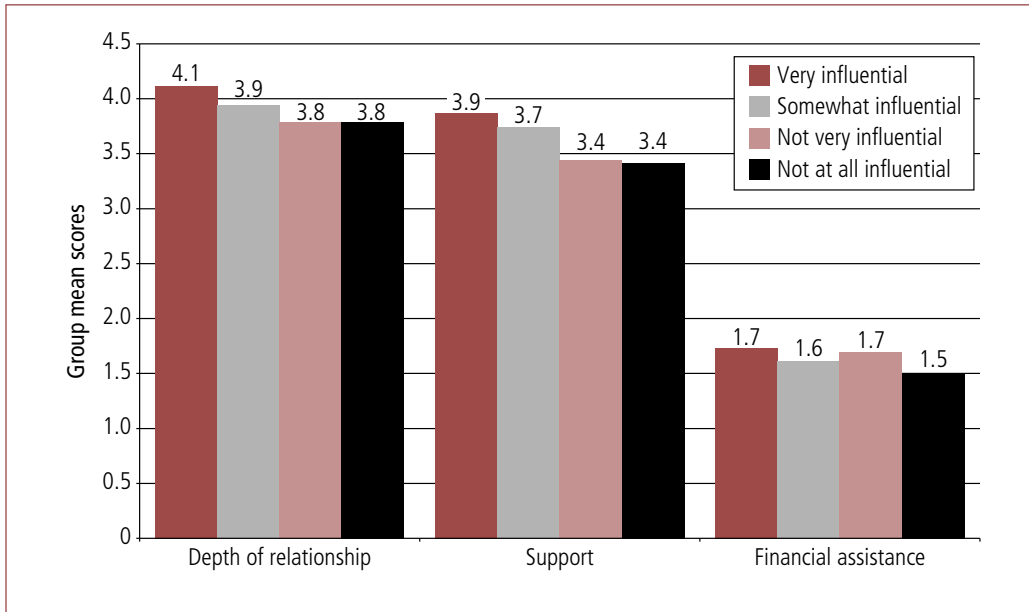


**Figure 35** Depth of parent–young adult child relationship, support and financial assistance by whether parents helped with vehicle purchase

96 Helped select vehicle—support: ANOVA  $F(1, 805) = 12.93, p < .001$  (parents reported their young adult child counted on them to listen or help with a problem, or had sought parents’ advice); financial assistance: ANOVA  $F(1, 779) = 12.17, p < .001$  (e.g., parents had helped with bills or rent, given a gift or loan of money, and/or paid education course fees).

97 Helped select vehicle—depth of relationship: ANOVA  $F(1, 807) = 4.01, p < .046$  (trend) (parents reported their son/daughter depended on them, valued their relationship, and felt parents were important in their lives).

Parents who thought they had influenced their son/daughter’s vehicle choice tended to report better quality relationships with their young adult children (more depth, greater support) and there was a trend for them to have provided more financial assistance (Figure 36).<sup>98</sup>



**Figure 36** Depth of parent–young adult child relationship, support and financial assistance, by how much parents influenced vehicle purchase

### Summary: Family influences on young drivers’ vehicle purchase

A total of 81% of the ATP sample had purchased a vehicle since gaining their licence, and two-thirds of their parents had helped with the selection of a vehicle.

Parents who had helped with the selection of a vehicle thought that price, reliability, fuel economy and safety features were the main features that should have been taken into account when their son/daughter purchased a vehicle, while factors such as style/image/appearance, power/performance or special features were of low importance. The great majority of parents thought they had had some or a great deal of influence on their son’s/daughter’s choice. The most common factors that parents thought had actually affected their son/daughter’s choice were (in order): price, reliability, style/image/appearance, fuel economy and size.

There were consistent gender differences, with parents of young women more frequently believing that factors relating to safety and fuel economy had been important considerations, and parents of young men more often thinking that type of vehicle and power/performance had been influential. Parents of young women also felt that they had had more impact on their daughter’s choice of vehicle than did parents of young men.

Parents of young people from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas did not differ on their degree of influence on young people’s vehicle choice, or in their opinions of the factors that should have and had been influential. Similarly, parents’ perceptions were not related to the educational attainment or occupational status of their sons/daughters.

Parents who helped in the selection of a vehicle or believed their opinion had been heeded tended to have better quality relationships with their sons/daughters and had more often financially assisted their young adult children in other ways.

<sup>98</sup> Influence on choice of vehicle—depth of relationship: ANOVA  $F(3, 592) = 6.54, p < .001$ ; support: ANOVA  $F(3, 593) = 8.79, p < .001$ ; financial assistance: ANOVA  $F(3, 570) = 3.23, p < .022$  (trend).

## 7.2 Personal attributes, lifestyle characteristics and driving

The second issue addressed is whether positive personal attributes and lifestyle characteristics are associated with a less risky, law-abiding approach to driving.

To examine this issue, the low-, moderate- and high-level risky driving groups identified at 23–24 years were compared (Chapter 4). In summary, the low-level group showed the lowest levels of all types of risky driving at 23–24 years, although they had occasionally engaged in low-level speeding, fatigued driving and mobile phone use when driving. The moderate-level group was intermediate between the low- and high-level groups on the risky driving indicators and had shown frequent low-level speeding, as well as regular fatigued driving and mobile phone use when driving. The high-level group were frequent speeders and mobile phone users when driving, showed moderate levels of fatigued driving and non-seatbelt use, and also occasionally engaged in drink-driving and driving when affected by illegal drugs.

### Personal characteristics of low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers

The three risky driving groups were compared on the following characteristics:

- *social skills* (Smart & Sanson, 2003), reported by young people, with a 5-point scale ranging from never/almost never to always/almost always:
  - *empathy*—e.g., I try to be a kind and caring person; people come to me to share their problems;
  - *assertiveness*—e.g., I am considered to be a leader; I initiate conversations in groups;
  - *responsibility*—e.g., I fulfill my obligations; I am punctual in meeting task deadlines; and
  - *self-control*—e.g., I can assert my opinion without fighting or arguing; I accept constructive criticism;
- *temperament style* (Windle & Lerner, 1986), reported by parents about their young adult child, using a 5-point scale ranging from very untrue to very true:
  - *sociability*—e.g., enjoys meeting new people; tends to withdraw in new situations (reverse scored);
  - *flexibility*—e.g., can make him/herself at home anywhere; his/her first reaction is to reject something new or unfamiliar (reverse scored);
  - *positive emotionality*—e.g., his/her mood is cheerful; generally is happy;
  - *persistence*—e.g., persists at a task until it is finished; can stick with an activity for a long time;
  - *negative reactivity*—e.g., reacts intensely when frustrated; yells or snaps at people when angry;
  - *distractibility*—e.g., if he/she has to stay in one place for a long time, gets very fidgety; can always be distracted by something else, no matter what he/she might be doing; and
  - *activity*—e.g., is energetic; never seems to keep still;
- *other personal attributes*, reported by young people, with the same 5-point scale used for social skills:
  - *perspective-taking* (Davis, 1983)—e.g., I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision; when I'm upset with someone, I try to put myself "in their shoes";
  - *optimism* (adapted from Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981)—e.g., when I think about the future I feel optimistic; things usually turn out well for me;
  - *identity clarity* (adapted from Markstrom, Sabino, Turner, & Berman, 1997; Rosenthal et al., 1981)—e.g., I've got a clear idea of what I want to be; I know what kind of person I am;
  - *autonomy* (adapted from Chassin, Pitts, & DeLucia, 1999)—e.g., I am an independent type of person; I am comfortable doing things without the help or input of others; and
  - *planfulness* (ATP-devised scale)—e.g., I make and carry out long-term plans; I make detailed plans for what I want to achieve.

Low-level risky drivers showed more highly developed personal characteristics in several areas than other drivers, as indicated by Figure 37. Overall, there were significant differences on 3 of the 16 aspects assessed and trends for differences on another 6 aspects. Thus, low-level risky drivers were more empathic and responsible and showed greater perspective-taking than moderate-level and high-level risky drivers.<sup>99</sup> The aspects on which there were trends for differences were self-control, sociability, persistence, reactivity, capacity to plan for the future, and autonomy.<sup>100</sup> Once again, the group differences found were a matter of degree, as group means were generally around 4, indicating that these attributes were often present among members of all groups.

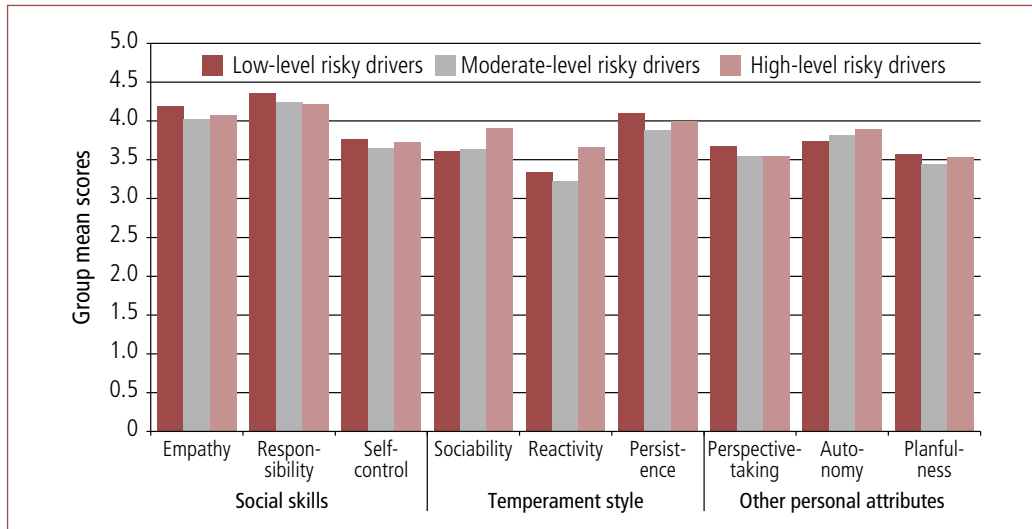


Figure 37 Personal characteristics, low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers, at 23–24 years

## Lifestyle characteristics of low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers

Turning now to lifestyle characteristics, the three risky driver groups were compared on the following four areas of life, as reported by young people:

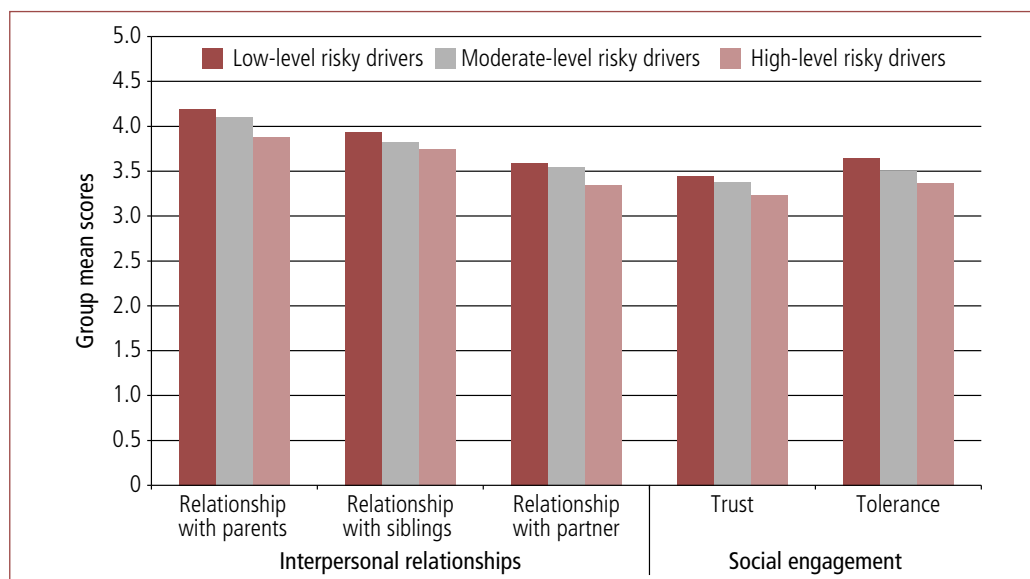
- *interpersonal relationships*:
  - *relationships with parents* (Pierce et al., 1991)—a composite of depth of relationship (e.g., your relationship with them is important to you), support (e.g., you can count on them for help with a problem) and conflict (e.g., they upset you) sub-scales, using a 5-point response format ranging from never to always;
  - *relationships with siblings* (Pierce et al., 1991)—parallel items as for relationships with parents;
  - *relationships with friends* (Pierce et al., 1991)—parallel items as for relationships with parents; and
  - *extensiveness of friendship network* (Stone & Hughes, 2002)—number of close friends and number of other friends, using the following categories: none, 1–2, 3–5, 6–10, 11–15 and 16 or more;
- *romantic relationships*:
  - *closeness of relationship with partner* (adapted from Braiker & Kelley, 1979)—e.g., I feel very attached to my partner; my partner encourages or helps me to do things that are important to me, using a 4-point response format ranging from rarely/never to always;
  - *length of current relationship*—total number of weeks in duration; and
  - *length of longest committed relationship*—total number of weeks in duration;

99 Empathy (social skills): ANOVA  $F(2,945) = 11.51, p < .001$ ; responsibility (social skills): ANOVA  $F(2,944) = 7.33, p < .001$ ; perspective-taking: ANOVA  $F(2,945) = 7.48, p < .001$ .

100 Self-control (social skills): ANOVA  $F(2,945) = 3.97, p < .019$  (trend); sociability (temperament): ANOVA  $F(2,713) = 3.26, p < .039$  (trend); persistence (temperament): ANOVA  $F(2,713) = 3.45, p < .032$  (trend); negative reactivity (temperament): ANOVA  $F(2,713) = 4.49, p < .012$  (trend); planfulness: ANOVA  $F(2,937) = 3.04, p < .048$  (trend); autonomy: ANOVA  $F(2,945) = 3.33, p < .036$  (trend).

- *educational attainment and occupational status:*
  - *educational attainment* (ATP-devised ranking system)—1 = postgraduate university degree; 2 = graduate diploma/certificate; 3 = bachelor university degree; 4 = diploma/advance diploma; 5 = certificate 3 or 4; 6 = certificate 1 or 2; 7 = other post-secondary qualification; 8 = Year 12; 9 = Year 11; 10 = Year 10; 11 = Year 9; 12 = Year 8; 13 = Year 7; 14 = primary schooling; and
  - *occupational status* (Jones & McMillan, 2001)—percentile ranking on the ANU-4 Occupational Status classification system;
- *social and civic engagement:*
  - *involvement in social/community groups* (Stone & Hughes, 2002)—number of differing groups participated in during the past 12 months (e.g., sports, recreation/hobby, arts/cultural, education/training, religious groups), with a range of 0 to 13;
  - *civic engagement* (Stone & Hughes, 2002)—number of differing civically oriented activities participated in during the past 12 months (e.g., volunteered, donated money, taken part in a demonstration/march, undertaken fundraising for charity, signed petition), with a possible range of 0 to 16;
  - *trust in people* (Stone & Hughes, 2002)—mean of 4 items (e.g., most people can be trusted; people will try to take advantage of you if they can; reverse scored), using a 5-point response format ranging from disagree completely to agree completely; and
  - *tolerance* (items from Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia study and ATP-devised items)—mean of 3 items (e.g., having people from different ethnic backgrounds makes Australia a better place; immigrants should change their values and behaviours to those of their new country; reverse scored, using same response format as trust in people).

A small number of significant differences were found on lifestyle characteristics, as shown in Figure 38, with differences evident on 2 of the 13 aspects and trends for differences on another 3 aspects. The low-level group had better quality relationships with parents and were more tolerant in their attitudes.<sup>101</sup> There were also trends for differences on relationships with siblings and romantic partners and level of trust in others.<sup>102</sup> There were no differences on the length of young people's current romantic relationships or their previous longest committed relationship. The three groups did not significantly differ on their educational attainment or current occupational status, or likelihood of taking part in civic activities or participation in community and other social groups.



**Figure 38** Lifestyle characteristics, low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers, at 23–24 years

<sup>101</sup> Relationship with parents: ANOVA  $F(2,939) = 10.22, p < .001$ ; tolerance: ANOVA  $F(2,940) = 6.68, p < .001$ .

<sup>102</sup> Relationship with siblings: ANOVA  $F(2,906) = 4.21, p < .015$  (trend); relationship with partners: ANOVA  $F(2,623) = 3.78, p < .023$  (trend); trust: ANOVA  $F(2,940) = 3.88, p < .021$  (trend).

### Summary: Personal attributes, lifestyle characteristics and driving

The low-, moderate- and high-level risky driving groups identified at 23–24 years (see Chapter 4 for details) were compared to investigate whether positive personal attributes and lifestyle characteristics were related to a safe, law-abiding approach to driving.

Low-level risky drivers seemed to have more highly developed personal characteristics than moderate- and high-level risky drivers in several areas. They were more empathic and responsible and showed greater capacity to see the point of view of others.

There were also a small number of significant differences on lifestyle characteristics. The low-level group had better quality relationships with parents, and tended to be more tolerant in their attitudes. Similar trends were also evident on several other personal and lifestyle characteristics, but these did not reach the adjusted significance level.

## 7.3 Discussion and implications

This chapter explored two main issues on which there has been little previous research: the influence of parents on their young adult children's vehicle purchase, and connections between mid-twenty year olds' personal and lifestyle characteristics and their driving behaviour.

Approximately 80% of young people had purchased a car since gaining their licence, and close to two-thirds of their parents had helped with the choice of a vehicle. Of these parents, almost 90% thought they had influenced their son's/daughter's choice to some degree, with about 30% feeling they had had a large influence. Parents were more likely to have had an influence if relationships between the young people and their parents were close.

Parents also answered questions on the factors they thought their sons/daughters should have taken into account when selecting a vehicle, and the factors they thought had actually been important. Parents of young women more often selected aspects related to safety (e.g., size, safety features) as salient in their daughters' choices than parents of young men, while conversely parents of young men thought type of vehicle and power/performance had been stronger influences on their sons' choices.

Young people's personal characteristics were related to their driving style, with low-level risky drivers tending to be more empathic and responsible and to be able to see another person's point of view than moderate- and high-level risky drivers. They also tended to have better quality relationships with parents and to be more tolerant in their attitudes. However, their educational attainment, occupational status or involvement in a romantic relationship was not related to their driving behaviour.

Some implications of these findings are discussed next.

### Parents influenced their son's/daughter's car purchase

Parents and families are still clearly influential in early adulthood. Not only did the majority of parents help their sons and daughters with their selection of a motor vehicle, young people almost always took notice of their parents' opinions. Closer relationships were linked to parents having greater influence on young people's choice of a vehicle. Additionally, our comparisons of low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers showed that closer relationships between young people and their parents were related to a more law-abiding driving style. Together with other ATP findings showing that young people value their parents' input and feel that parents play an important role in their lives (Vassallo et al., 2009), these findings suggest that parents have a larger influence on young people than is commonly thought. Parents are not often considered in road safety efforts targeted at young drivers. However, given the continuing importance parents seem to have in the lives of their young adult children, there may be scope to make use of their influence, most obviously in relation to young people's purchase of a vehicle, but also in relation to young people's driving behaviour more generally.

In terms of car purchase, information could be directed at young people of driving age and at their parents as well. The resources already available are relevant for both groups; for example,

the TAC's <[www.howsafeisyourcar.com.au](http://www.howsafeisyourcar.com.au)> website contains safety ratings for differing car types, fact sheets about buying a safe car and information about differing car safety features; and <[www.racv.com.au](http://www.racv.com.au)> provides advice about buying and selling a car, information about the value of pre-purchase inspections and purchase recommendation reports. Some targeted campaigns could focus on encouraging parents to be involved in their sons'/daughters' car purchase, highlighting the characteristics that are important to consider when purchasing a car. As many young people may be purchasing second-hand cars, information on how to identify a safe, roadworthy used car would also appear valuable. The current findings support the value of such initiatives.

The mechanisms by which parents might influence their sons'/daughters' driving propensities remain poorly understood. The current findings cannot explain how a positive relationship with parents might lead to a lower involvement in risky driving. However, they echo earlier findings from this study (Smart & Vassallo, 2005), in which poorer parent-child relationships were found to be important precursors of risky driving and crash involvement at 19–20 years. It was thought that close parent-child relationships may have enabled parents to exert greater influence on young people's activities and friendship groups, decreasing their likelihood of becoming involved in risk-taking activities such as antisocial behaviour, substance use and risky driving. It is possible that close parent-young adult relationships may help maintain young people's avoidance of risk-taking, including risky driving.

## Parents were more conscious of safety and roadworthiness than young people

While there were similarities in the factors that parents thought young people should have and did consider when selecting a vehicle to purchase, there were some disparities too. Unsurprisingly, price was the most common factor, with more than 80% seeing this as one of the three most important factors. Three-quarters of parents thought reliability should have been important; however only one half thought this had been a central issue in their son/daughter's choice. Similarly, almost four-tenths of parents believed safety features were important, whereas just over one-tenth thought this had been a major consideration for their young adult children. On the other hand, very few parents (5%) thought style/image/appearance should have been important, but almost one-third believed this had been an influential factor. Likewise, only 3% of parents thought power/performance should have been considered, whereas 12% rated this aspect as one of the most salient factors for their young adult children.

It is difficult to compare the current findings with those of other studies, as previous research has focused on the factors parents themselves would take into account when purchasing a vehicle for their teenager, whereas the current study looked at the factors that parents thought young people should have considered. There were some consistencies: for example, a similar percentage of parents selected price in the ATP study and in Rivara et al. (1998), while the proportion nominating safety was similar to Hellinga et al. (2007). However, more ATP parents selected reliability than the parents in Hellinga et al. (2007) and Camissa et al. (1999); fewer selected fuel economy than Rivara et al. (1998); and the proportion nominating size was larger than Camissa et al. (1999) but smaller than Rivara et al. (1998). As noted earlier, it is difficult to draw comparisons due to cultural differences (the other studies were from North America), differences in the age of the young people (the North American studies were of parents of teenagers while the current study was of parents of young adults) and differences in the vehicle purchaser (parents vs young people).

The current findings suggest that while some young people focused on safety and reliability when choosing a vehicle, others were also swayed by aesthetic and image factors. Parents seemed to be more conscious of safety and roadworthiness issues than young people. These findings reinforce the value of parents being involved in their sons'/daughters' vehicle purchase, as they can guide young people to give greater priority to safety and reliability. Research shows clear links between vehicle type (e.g., sedan, four-wheel drive, light commercial, sports cars) and size (large, medium, small) and rates of crashes, crash-related injuries and deaths, with sport utility vehicles (SUVs), sports cars and smaller vehicles being more frequently involved in these outcomes (e.g., Broughton, 2008; Newstead, Cameron, & Watson, 2004; Wenzel & Ross, 2005). Further, in recognition of the dangers that high-powered cars pose to young drivers, the Australian states of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland have brought in restrictions to prevent probationary licence holders from driving high-performance vehicles. One implication

of these restrictions is that the purchase of high-performance vehicles by young people should be discouraged. Overall, the current findings suggest that initiatives to inform young people's vehicle choice remain relevant and necessary.

## There were gender differences in the factors that influence vehicle purchase

When considering a vehicle to purchase, young men were more attracted by vehicle type and power/performance than young women. Power/performance has been linked to a higher risk of crash involvement among young novice drivers (Senserrick & Haworth, 2005). These findings suggest that young men give less attention to safety and reliability when selecting a vehicle than young women, and are more oriented towards car attributes that may decrease their safety on the road. Interestingly, while few parents thought type of vehicle, style/image/appearance and power/performance should have been major considerations in the choice of vehicle, more parents of young men thought these factors should be relevant than did parents of young women. Thus, there may be cultural acceptance for young men to value these aspects.

As seen earlier in Chapter 3, there were gender differences in rates of risky driving. Young men exceeded the speed limit (especially at the higher speeding categories of 11–25 km/h over the limit and more than 25 km/h over), drove without a seatbelt, and drove when affected by alcohol more often in their ten most recent trips than young women. Further, the small group of high-level risky drivers contained more males than females (58% vs 42%). The combination of risky driving with a high-performance vehicle is a potentially lethal combination. These findings support the importance of road safety efforts targeting the attitudes of young men (and to a lesser extent their parents) towards vehicle choice.

However, it must be acknowledged that it may not be easy to change the attitudes of young men, as Australian culture tends to place high value on car type and motor sports, particularly among males. Examples of this are the stereotypes of young men being “Ford” or “Holden” drivers, the mass appeal of motoring events, and car advertising that shows vehicles being driven in extreme conditions, which appeals to young people's thrill-seeking tendencies. Thus, efforts to change societal perceptions will remain essential.

## Personal characteristics were linked to levels of risky driving

Our comparisons of low-, moderate- and high-level risky drivers showed that a low-risk, safe approach to driving was associated with more positive characteristics in several areas of life. Thus, the low-level group tended to be more empathic and responsible and able to see another person's point of view. Empathy and the ability to see another's point of view are likely to facilitate tolerance towards other drivers or incidents that occur on the road, while being responsible may facilitate a careful and cautious approach to driving. These findings are a reminder that what an individual is like as a person can affect his/her behaviour behind the wheel. They point to the value of helping young people gain an understanding of their inherent tendencies and how these might influence their day-to-day behaviour, including their approach to driving. Once individuals have gained an understanding of their personal tendencies, they can be assisted to develop strategies to manage these tendencies when driving.

The findings extend our earlier findings, showing that low-level risky drivers identified at 19–20 years had displayed higher social skills from late childhood onwards than moderate- and high-level risky drivers. These differences were still evident four years later at 23–24 years. They are also consistent with other research indicating that “character strengths”, such as empathy, persistence and self-control (Seligman et al., 2005), are linked to positive outcomes among young people (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

The comparisons also revealed that the moderate-level group was rather similar to the high-level group in terms of their personal characteristics. The moderate-level group tends to be overlooked, but does pose a road safety concern, given that this group did engage in some risk-taking on the road, and was much more numerous than the high-level group (261 vs 54).

## Lifestyle characteristics may be linked to level of risky driving

We also sought to determine whether having supportive relationships with others, being more “settled” psychologically, and being connected to society through prosocial attitudes or

involvement in community and civic activities would be associated with a more law-abiding approach to driving. Only some of these characteristics differentiated the low-, moderate- and high-level risky driving groups, such as better quality relationships with parents and tolerant attitudes. However, engagement in community or civic activities was not related to driving behaviour, nor was “settling down”, as indexed by occupational status, educational attainment or romantic relationship history. Thus, at this stage of life, young people’s driving behaviours were to some extent related to their interpersonal relationships and attitudes/values, but not to their material circumstances, level of maturity, or civic engagement.

There are some consistencies with other research indicating that young people’s connections to others, including partners and families are associated with positive outcomes (Seligman et al., 2005) and with previous ATP findings showing that there were more parent–child relationship difficulties among 19–20 year old high-level risky drivers compared with low-level risky drivers (Smart & Vassallo, 2005). However, there are inconsistencies with research indicating that as young people mature and begin to adopt adult roles, they are less involved in risky driving (Jessor et al., 1997), since our indicators of “settling down” did not differentiate between the low-, moderate- and high-level risky driving groups. As noted in Chapter 4, the differing pattern of results found here may reflect “era effects” (i.e., differences between young people living in the 2000s vs those living in the 1990s or earlier), or cultural effects (the other research on this issue comes from North America), such as different attitudes towards risky driving, values concerning appropriate behaviour on the road, and tolerance for acts such as drink-driving.

## Conclusions

This chapter examined two issues on which there has been very little research to date: (a) the influence of parents on young people’s vehicle purchase; and (b) connections between 23–24 year olds’ positive personal characteristics, lifestyle and driving behaviour. Most parents had played a role in their sons’/daughters’ vehicle choice, and this was more likely if relationships between parents and their young adult children were close. The importance of involving parents in young people’s vehicle purchase was highlighted. A low-risk, law-abiding approach to driving was associated with qualities such as empathy, responsibility and perspective-taking, as well as closer connections to parents and more tolerant attitudes.