Impact of family communication patterns on parent and teen risky driving behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose: Steering Teens Safe (STS) is a parent-focused program that teaches parents effective communication techniques to encourage their teen to engage in safe driving behavior. The randomized controlled trial to evaluate this program collected information about risky driving behaviors from parents and their teens. This analysis examines the impact of the intervention on risky driving reported by parents and teens, examines if parental communication styles influenced risky driving, and measures concordance between parent and teen risky driving behavior.

Methods: STS was evaluated through a randomized controlled trial with 145 parent-teen dyads (70 intervention and 75 control); 138 dyads with complete data were included in this analysis. Intervention parents received a 45-minute training session with four follow-up phone sessions, a DVD, and a workbook. Control parents received a standard brochure about safe driving. The 16-item, previously validated Risky Driving Score was the main outcome measure, which is a sum of the number of times each participant performed risky driving behaviors in the past week (e.g., talk on phone while driving) and was collected at 6 month follow-up. Family communication was measured through parent responses to the 10-item validated Family Communication Pattern Scale, which asks about the frequency of things.

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the parent may say to their teen during safe driving discussions (e.g., Say that he/she shouldn’t argue with adults).

**Results:** Approximately one quarter of parents were in each of the family communication pattern (FCP) groups (pluralistic = 23.2%; protective = 19.6%; consensual = 26.8%, laissez-faire = 30.4%). The highest risky driving scores were among the protective FCP (Mean = 7.8, SD = 16.4) for parents and the laissez-faire FCP (Mean = 10.6, SD = 16.3) for teens. Parent and teen risky driving scores were not significantly correlated, with the exception of control group families with protective FCPs (r = 0.72, p < 0.01). Families with protective FCPs have parents who focus on obedience by the child and emphasize that the child should avoid social conflict and give in on arguments. Intervention families with protective FCPs (Parent Mean = 3.8, SD = 4.3; Teen Mean = 3.5, SD = 3.5) had average risky driving scores much lower than control families with protective FCP (Parent Mean = 11.1, SD = 21.4; Teen Mean = 6.3, SD = 9.0). Additionally, protective FCP families were the only ones with higher average risky driving scores for parents than for teens.

**Conclusions:** Following our intervention, the only parent and teen reports of risky driving behavior that were correlated were among the control group parents and teens with protective FCPs. Teens in the intervention group with protective FCPs did not have risky driving scores that were significantly correlated with their parents, but the control group families did. This result suggests that teens accustomed to a protective FCP may give more weight to what they are told by their parents, rather than their parents’ actions. This research shows that protective FCPs influence risky driving and interventions with a focus on positive safe driving communication can reduce risky driving.

**Keywords:** communication—teen driving—parental—family—risk