Educating the educators – the key to child road safety

BY CAROLINE MILBURN

Parental confusion about using the safest, age- and size-appropriate car seats for children could be reduced if family day care services were better equipped to pass on safety information to families, according to a new study.

A recent study has found that family day care services are a vital but underused resource for educating parents about how to safely transport children in cars.

Parents see early childhood educators as good, credible sources of general health information about children, and keeping children safe in cars is a health issue, says the study's senior researcher, Dr Julie Brown of Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA), an independent, not-for-profit medical research institute.

Family day care educators have lots of close interactions with parents, so there is great scope for utilising educators as delivery points for health promotion. We've shown in other studies that the quality of child restraint use in cars can be improved if we provide good, coordinated support to educators about child restraint information, so that they can pass that knowledge on to parents.

Family day care educators are registered with a family day care service to care for children aged from 0-12 in the educator's home. Family day care is the fastest growing area in the early childhood sector. In 2015, the number of family day care services in Australia increased by 20 per cent within a year.

Educators regularly use their own cars to take children to and from school, to kindergarten or other activities.

The study by Brown and her colleagues is the first to investigate child car restraint safety practices and knowledge among family day care educators, and the extent to which this knowledge is being passed on to parents.

Eighty-two educators and 142 families from 32 family day care services across urban and regional Victoria were surveyed as part of the study by the research team from NeuRA, the University of New South Wales and Victoria's Road Safety Authority.

The study found that 70 per cent of educators gave parents advice about child restraints in cars, and 88 per cent of educators said that they had received training about the correct use of child restraints; however, only nine per cent of families surveyed said that their family day care educator was a source of information about child restraints.

A more structured approach to training and support for family day care services is required to ensure consistent and effective information exchange with parents, the study said. 'While family day care educators are a potential health promotion delivery point about child restraint use, this potential is currently underutilised.'

Among those educators who advised parents about the correct way to use restraints, most gave the advice verbally or in brochures, says Brown. Brown says that it was unclear why there was such a discrepancy between the high number of educators giving information to parents and the low number of parents reporting that educators were a source of information about the correct use of child restraints in cars.

Parents don’t cite educators as a source of information, and we don’t know why that is,' Brown says. 'It could be that they don’t recognise the informal transition of knowledge that the educator is passing on, or that it isn’t passed on through a brochure from a local road safety agency, the parents see the agency as the source of information rather than the educator.

'The type of information being passed on, and the way that it is being passed on to parents is very variable. We need to ensure that educators get the best information, and that there is more consistency between services in delivering the information.'

The study’s findings were published recently in the prestigious International Journal of Health Promotion and Education. Most of the families that chose to respond to the survey were highly educated and came from high socio-economic backgrounds.

When asked if they knew Australia’s laws for children travelling in vehicles, 67 per cent of the families surveyed said that they were confident about their level of knowledge, but few could correctly state the minimum age when children can use forward facing child safety seats and booster seats.

The biggest area of confusion for parents is the age at which children are legally allowed to graduate from their booster seat to an adult seat belt or allowed to sit in the front seat.

Under Australian law, all children aged up to seven are required to use appropriate child car seats when travelling in a motor vehicle. The law’s minimum standards for transporting children in vehicles require that:

- children aged up to at least six months old must use a rear-facing child car seat
- children aged up to at least four must use a forward-facing child car seat
- children aged up to at least seven must use a booster seat
- children aged over seven must use a booster seat or an adult seatbelt.

Brown says that family day care educators generally had good knowledge about appropriate child restraints in cars, but there was room for improvement in educator and parental knowledge, particularly about when it is safe for older children to graduate from using booster seats, and when it is safe for them to sit in the front seat. This was especially important for parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, as previous studies had shown that these families were more likely to transport children unsafely.

Families from non-English speaking backgrounds have problems with the way they restrain children in cars, not because they don’t want to do the right thing, but because they have difficulty accessing the level of detail they need to understand how to use the appropriate child restraints,' Brown says.
For example, there may be a brochure in three different languages saying that a child up to seven must use a restraint. But the level of detail about what sort of restraint for children of different ages may not be in the brochure, and you may have to go elsewhere to find that information. That’s when these families have difficulty accessing the more detailed information.

Family day care is popular among families and educators from diverse cultural backgrounds. Many of Victoria’s newest family day care services are located in population growth areas whose new residents include large numbers of migrants and refugees. Nationally, about 38 per cent of family day care educators speak a language other than English, according to federal government figures.

In Victoria, almost half of family day care educators are from non-English speaking backgrounds, according to previous research cited in Brown’s study.

Zora Marko, an early childhood road safety expert with Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA), agrees with the study’s conclusion that the demographic profile of family day care means that the services are ideally placed to reach out to parents from non-English speaking backgrounds to improve their understanding of how to transport children safely.

Marko has been working with VicRoads and the sector’s peak organisation, Family Day Care Australia, over the past few years, examining the needs of family day care educators and service providers.

This work has since led to the development of a best practice road safety policy, Safe Transport Policy (Family Day Care), for the family day care sector, with tailored training and resources to improve educator and parental knowledge about the safe transportation of children.

An information brochure, Travelling with Children in Cars, has recently been produced in 22 languages by ELAA, funded through TAC’s Community Grants program. Audio file versions of the brochure have been created in 10 languages, with more languages planned. This translated material complements work that ELAA undertakes in delivering Victoria’s early childhood road safety education program, Starting Out Safely, funded by VicRoads.

This is the first time that something so comprehensive in a range of languages has been developed about the use of child restraints, Marko says: “We’re providing these new resources and structured training for educators to help overcome the issues that the sector and the study have highlighted.

“If educators are more confident about the quality of the information they’re receiving on child restraints, then they’ll be more confident relaying this information more effectively to parents. This is really important for families from non-English speaking backgrounds because they often feel more comfortable seeking information from educators from the same cultural background.”

ELAA is a peak organisation, representing parents and early learning services, including kindergartens, childcare centres and family day care.

In August, the organisation and VicRoads launched a website (www.childroadsafety.org.au) containing online versions of the new brochures and other new resources for home-based and centre-based early childhood services.

Marko says that the website was developed to provide a central location for educators and parents to get clear, easily accessible information about early childhood road safety education and the safe transportation of children. Most of the website’s material was relevant for use throughout Australia and New Zealand, and can be downloaded for free.

The website includes practical tips, such as an easy five-step test to judge when a child can safely graduate from wearing a booster seat to an adult seat belt. The test, devised by road safety experts, is based on a child’s height and best practices that are higher than the minimum standards required under current road safety laws. #

**Safest fit: When a child can use an adult seat belt or sit in the front seat**

The five-step test:

Use this test to judge whether a child is big enough to be safely restrained by an adult seat belt. The child should be able to:

1. sit with their back against the seat back
2. bend their knees comfortably over the front of the seat cushion
3. sit with the seat belt across their mid-shoulder
4. sit with the lap belt across the top of their thighs
5. remain in this position for the whole trip.

Source: www.childroadsafety.org.au

Visit the Child Road Safety website, childroadsafety.org.au.

Developed by Early Learning Association Australia, this website includes:

- Resources for educators and parents
- Information about training sessions for Victorian teachers, early childhood professionals and students
- ThongieToodle visits - education sessions for Victorian pre-schoolers
- Road Safety Education Policies for early childhood services and Family Day Care
- Child car seats - information on keeping children safe
- Child car seats - multilingual information
- Research and publications about road safety

childroadsafety.org.au

Starting Out Safely, Victoria’s early childhood road safety education website

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