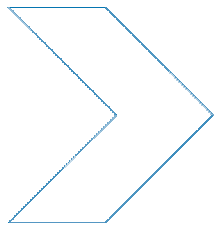


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Impediments to the use of child restraints

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ABSTRACT

A focus group was conducted in June 2005 with a small group of five participants recruited at Adelaide metropolitan preschools to explore the social, educational and economic impediments preventing South Australian families from age-appropriate child restraint use. The participants had a total of five children less than seven years of age who were using an adult seatbelt. All participants considered themselves to be low income earners. The participants completed a brief pre-focus group questionnaire, covering the themes to be discussed during the focus group. Children in the booster seat age range had progressed to an adult seatbelt prematurely, however, participants endorsed the use of a booster seat at times where they perceived a high risk situation. The major reasons for premature progression to the adult seatbelt were safety (adult seatbelt was perceived as safer than the booster seat), knowledge and size of the vehicle. Further catalysts were to foster the child's independence, the perceived maturity of the child, frustration, convenience, height and weight. Generally, the participants felt that information on child restraint use and related legislation is not readily accessible to the public. The findings are in conjunction with the results of our larger driver survey.

KEYWORDS

Child restraint, Public opinion

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Summary

A focus group was conducted in June 2005 with a small group of five participants recruited at Adelaide metropolitan preschools. The focus group was undertaken to explore the social, educational and economic impediments preventing South Australian families from age-appropriate child restraint use. Participants were parents of children less than eight years of age (the age child restraints are used for) who self-reportedly were not using an appropriate restraint for their child. The participants had a total of six children less than seven years of age (one child was an infant using an infant capsule whose sibling was inappropriately restrained).

The participants completed a pre-focus group questionnaire, covering the themes to be discussed during the focus group. Responses to the pre-focus group questionnaires provided information that suggested participants voiced their own opinions during the group session, rather than conforming to any group norm.

Children in the booster seat age range had progressed to an adult seatbelt prematurely. During the recruitment phase of the study all of the participants reported that their children (in the 4-6 year age range) were transported using the adult seatbelt. However, during the focus group session they reported that a booster seat was used at times where they perceived a high risk situation.

The major reasons for premature progression to the adult seatbelt were perceptions related to safety, knowledge related to correct use and the size of the vehicle. Participants reported that the most important reason for correct restraint use was safety of the child, however, the adult seatbelt was perceived as safer than the booster seat. Furthermore, fostering of the child's independence, perceived maturity of the child, frustration and convenience, height and weight were catalysts for premature progression to the adult seatbelt.

Once participants realised they may not have been restraining their children according to the guidelines, there was a consensus that they lacked the information to make appropriate choices. Generally, the participants felt that information on child restraint use and related legislation is not readily accessible to the public which results in making a "judgement call" as to the most appropriate child restraint to use. Interestingly, despite all families considering themselves to be low income earners, only one participant, following prompting, mentioned cost as a barrier to child restraint use.

The findings are in conjunction with the results of our larger driver survey.

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1 Introduction

This study explores the social, educational and economic impediments that prevent South Australian families from full access to, and/or use of, age-appropriate child restraints. Some parents do not use an appropriate type of child restraint when transporting young children and many restrain children with an adult seatbelt alone. We attempted to explore the reasons for inappropriate selection of restraints for young children through a focus group. The group consisted of parents who reported an inappropriate method of restraining their children. The aim was to uncover participants' reasons for not restraining their children appropriately, their opinions about, and understanding of child restraints, and particularly to determine what barriers there are to child restraint use.

2 Procedure

The Directors of 10 preschools in suburban Adelaide, South Australia were contacted and asked for their consent to recruit participants at their sites for a focus group study. Two Centre for Automotive Safety Research (CASR) research officers visited the preschools and approached the parents entering or exiting the site. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet that explained the study (Appendix A), and were asked a series of structured questions to determine if they met the selection criteria for inclusion in the study (Appendix B). The selection criteria for this study were:

- That the participant was a parent of a child less than 8 years of age (the age range that child restraints are used for);
- Did not use an appropriate child restraint for that child (on the basis of their response to a question).

Individuals who reported that they used age-appropriate child restraints were not recruited for the focus group because the aim of the study was to investigate the impediments to using age-appropriate child restraints.

A CASR research officer telephoned the parents who met the selection criteria and invited them to attend the focus group session.

On arrival to the focus group session, participants were provided with an additional copy of the information sheet that they had been given at recruitment, and discussed the study with two CASR research officers who were conducting the focus group. Participants then completed a consent form and a brief questionnaire (Appendix C & D, respectively). The questionnaire consisted of four hypothetical scenarios relating to the transportation of young children in motor vehicles, and participants were instructed to select their answer from a list of multiple-choice responses. The questionnaire was designed to cover the same themes discussed in the focus group, to get the participants' individual thoughts about the topic prior to being exposed to the influence of others in the group, and to promote thinking about the issues to be discussed. It was assumed that having already stated their beliefs, participants may have been inclined to voice those thoughts rather than conforming to the group norm. The participants included one couple, who completed a single questionnaire.

The focus group was facilitated by two CASR research officers experienced in group facilitation. They used a prompt sheet to guide the session. The facilitators encouraged participants to speak openly and honestly about their thoughts on child restraints.

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were given a \$30 honorarium and a range of brochures published by the Department of Transport, Energy and Infrastructure regarding child restraint use.

3 Results

This section provides a detailed description of the focus group discussion. The participants' responses are included verbatim, in italics and in quotation marks.

3.1 Participants

Two-hundred-and-twelve individuals at 10 preschools were approached. They were asked if they were willing to attend a focus group session to discuss issues pertaining to travelling with children in cars. Of the 212 individuals approached, 77 were willing to participate (many were not available due to time constraints), and 14 individuals met the study's selection criteria. Upon telephone contact only five of the 14 agreed to attend the focus group. The focus group was conducted at The University of Adelaide on the 17th June, 2005 at 10 am. Four of the five participants arrived for the session. One participant brought his partner and she was also invited to join in the focus group. Consequently one focus group was conducted with five participants (two males and three females).

All of the participants considered themselves to be low income earners. The participants had a total of six children: three were four years of age, one was five, one was six and one was six months. At recruitment all participants reported that their children used an adult seatbelt when travelling in a vehicle (with the exception of the six month infant who used the infant capsule).

3.2 Knowledge of child restraint use

While discussing knowledge of child restraint use, the participants were presented with photos to clarify the restraint types that were under discussion.

Question. What age do you think is the correct age to use a rear facing infant capsule/convertible?

All participants believed that a rear facing capsule/convertible should be used for a child from birth. One participant stated incorrectly that having a premature baby negated this, as the child would be too small and therefore had to be carried.

There was a general distinction between the capsule and convertible, with the majority of participants believing (without foundation), that the convertible was safer than the capsule. Furthermore, the convertible was considered more cost efficient than the capsule as it could be used for a greater time period.

There were differences in opinion as to when the rear facing child restraint should be ceased. The responses were:

"9 months"

"9 kilos, so about 0-6 months depending on the size of the baby"

"Till able to sit up"

"10 months"

According to the Australian/New Zealand Standard on child restraints, rear-facing infant capsules and convertibles are designed for infants up to 9 kg, and 700 mm in length. These dimensions correspond to a child of about 6 months of age.

Question. What age do you think is the correct age to use a forward facing child safety seat/convertible?

All participants reported that they had used a forward facing child restraint for their children. However, the ages of the children when using the restraints were inconsistent, and the participants' responses indicated that their use of the child safety seat was, in some instances, ceased prematurely.

"As soon as my little boy could sit up quietly and support himself, he was in there until he was 4"

"She was in it till she was 4"

"As soon as she could hold her head up"

"Started using at 10 months and stopped using at 2 years"

" [I] hurried it up to get them out. Those [forward-facing child restraint] seatbelts are just impossible. They jam up as [the child grows] - [I am] looking forward to getting [my child out] out of that because it's just a nightmare. I used them [until the child was 2 years old] but [it] would have been good to have stopped before or to have better seatbelts - they just jam up."

Question. What age do you think is the correct age to use a booster seat?

The participants' responses on booster seat use varied. There was some confusion about the appropriate stage to use booster seats and participants were unable to clearly specify the relevant age/size group. At recruitment all participants reported that they were using the adult seatbelt for their children (who were still in the booster seat age range). However, during the focus group discussion there were some comments indicating that they did use booster seats for their children, at least some of the time.

"In the last few weeks, [I have] been letting him sit in the seatbelt because he's tall enough for it to go across here" [signals across chest] "because I feel that this part here is not touching" [signals that the seatbelt doesn't fit tightly across the chest as the high back and sides of the booster makes it sit out away from child's body] "but I know [the booster is] supposed to protect him but I just feel like he could just go out over the top and move forward. Because of the sides [of the booster seat, the belt is] not touching his body."

"We always use the booster with [the high] back. If you've only got a couple of kids they fit in but if you try to put a third person you can't fit child restraints for all of them so [we] put the booster with the high back in the front [seat]."

"Probably [one should start using a booster seat for child who is] about three and a half [years of age]."

3.3 Recommendations for child restraint use

The recommendations for the appropriate use of child restraints was presented to the participants at this point in the session. The recommendations were the weight

and height limits used in the Australian and New Zealand Standard on Child restraints. The participants were generally unaware of the recommendations.

The ensuing discussion revealed confusion regarding the protocol for child restraint use when children are under the weight range recommended for a restraint, but tall for their age.

"[I had] trouble back in Tassie when I wanted the upright of the reversible seat turned around. I [went to] the RACT which is like your RAA, to get the man to show me how to put it in properly and he wouldn't do it because he said she was too small. Um, she didn't weigh nine kilos, that was a fact, but she could hold her head up so I figured that she could turn around [but the RACT] wouldn't do it."

"[I] Wanted to turn it around [to forward facing because I] figured if they could see me, then in theory [they] would be happier"

"[Rear facing seats are] dreadful [...] as the child can't see you"

"So because it says up to 18kg should you really keep them in there until they're 18 kg?"

"Low on the weight but tall, so what do you do?"

"But the thing with one of those [referring to booster with high back and sides] - the bad point is that if you have a child either side because they're so high they tend to sit forward to talk to the child next to them"

"I will never ever drive anywhere without everyone in the car having a seatbelt"

3.4 Appropriate child restraint use

How essential do you feel correct restraint use is for your children?

All participants said that safety is the most important reason for correct restraint use for their children. Two participants stated that their children panic about not having their seatbelt on.

Thinking back to when your children were two years old, how essential was it to use a correct form of child restraint for them then?

There was a clear response from all participants that a two year old child is too small to safely use the adult seatbelt.

"The seatbelts just don't cover them properly"

However, as mentioned above, the participants were unable to nominate the correct weight and height ranges for each restraint.

For those of you who have 5 year olds, how essential would you say using a booster seat is? Is it necessary, do you think, to use a booster seat?

There was a perception that the booster seat is used to help the child to look out of the car's windows, that a child can manage booster seat use themselves: that because the child is "good" or "mature" they therefore know what is best for them (e.g., that such children know to buckle themselves up). Furthermore, there was

uncertainty regarding the use of the booster seat based on the child's weight and height.

The participants did not appear to understand how booster seats aid in the restraint of the child.

"[Booster seats are] necessary with a 5 year old [...] then they get over that little growth spurt and then [they are able to] get into the car seat [itself]"

"They can't see out the window and they tend to hop on their knees to look out the window if you're not watching"

"I've always checked where it came across here [signalling across chest], but my concern is weight [...] I don't know if he's heavy enough for [the belt] to be enough support but [I don't] I don't feel that safe with [the high back booster seat] either" [because of the gap between the seatbelt and the chest].

"We don't use it because he's so tall that he doesn't need to use the booster. He's really very good by himself, always buckles up [...]"

Think back into the past when your children were younger. Let's assume you were going on a long trip, to Melbourne say, or some long distance like that, and you realised that you should have been placing your children in a child restraint. Let's assume that for some reason it wasn't available, what would you do?

Participants were unanimous that if the appropriate child restraint was not available for use on a long trip that they would not make the trip. The risk associated with a long journey was considered to be too dangerous to embark upon without the appropriate child restraint.

"The longer you're in the car the greater the chance of something happening"

"Very dangerous on long trip"

However, there were differences of opinion with regard to short trips. Participants' answers varied from having makeshift techniques to satisfy themselves in the safety of transporting a child in the car to preferences for substituting walking for driving.

"On a real short trip you can bodgy something up like bung them on a pillow, just to go down the shop - you can do that, but you wouldn't do it over a long trip. You make sure you've got the right seats."

"[In response to the above] [it's] just not safe. If you're just going down the shop and you think God, haven't got the seat, and you bung a couple of pillows or something under them so it boosts them up that's just not desirable"

"I've never boosted my child up though, the only thing I've ever used is the harness that you strap through the seatbelts"

"See, I've got a six year old girl who I take with me sometimes and she's tiny and I let her sit in my younger boy's high back booster seat and he'll sit with an adult seat belt purely because that makes more sense to me, safety wise, I won't even let her sit in an adult seatbelt see it's not just an age"

thing. [At] three or four, [...] there's no way you can seat them in an adult belt and I've never boosted 'em up on anything to do that either, so yeah, you just wouldn't do it"

"Only if it was too far that you couldn't walk, but if the child was smaller you wouldn't risk it. Unless for emergency."

"I mean what do you absolutely need that you can't wait"

The speed limit and types of roads that one would be planning to travel on was also raised as an issue of concern, as opposed to simply the distance of the journey.

"I still have concerns because I have to drive to Mawson Lakes for family day care when I'm on Main North Road when it gets to 80 [km/h speed limit], him being in an adult seat belt but at the same time he has been in it a few times as well but even usually if I know that I'm going to be going in those zones, he'll be in the booster seat. So not just distance but speed of the car as well."

"[It] depends on where you live. If you go up across main roads and things like that, where over where I live it's all blocked off, I know the road, basically, it's just driving down a straight road and nothing can enter. Yeah, but you know if I was going to have to drive on a main road, I wouldn't do it"

What would be the age where, if you didn't have the appropriate child restraint, that you would still go on that long trip?

While one participant stated that at approximately four and a half to five years of age they would transport a child on a long trip without using a child restraint, there was disagreement from others. There was a message from the remaining participants that the decision is dependent on the height and size of the child, and also about the ability of the child to fasten their own seatbelt.

"Yeah I agree with 5, 4 and a half, they're far more sensible about [it.] They want to wear their seatbelt - yours is still only 4, so they've got to have that comprehension of their own safety as well. But then it's got to be size as well, like some five year olds aren't big enough some six year olds aren't big enough."

What about going on trips where say family or friends came to pick up the children and they didn't have any child restraints, what would you do then?

All participants voiced their concerns with their children travelling with others without appropriate child restraints, essentially that if they did not have an appropriate child restraint they would lend their own or the child would not be permitted to accompany them on the journey.

"If they haven't got one they have ours, and if they don't have one well they're not allowed to go"

"We've gone off and bought stuff for them to keep at their house"

3.5 Barriers to child restraint use

If you realise that your child now, or in the past, hasn't been restrained in accord with the recommendations why you would say that had happened in the past or is happening now, what issues are you faced with?

One participant whose child was five years old reported that they used the adult seatbelt as they felt that it was safer than the booster seat with a high back and believed that it enhanced the child's independence.

"By the recommendations my daughter should be in a booster seat for way longer, what is it up to 26 kg in theory for her weight she should be 100% in a booster seat"

Another participant agreed:

"I am aware weight wise that he's not that safe in an adult seat belt but again I have concerns the safety of the high back so I will have to go out and get a small booster because I do actually every time I hop in the car think of the safety issue. That's also an independence thing as well, um, being able to hop in on his own, put his own seatbelt on, make sure he's facing the right way and all that sort of stuff as well, um, and sort of speed and convenience as well"

"None, basically we always make sure they're seatbelted up. Right chair, if they need one, it's also positioning in the car too [...] the worst offenders for undoing seatbelts should be [...] sat in a position where I can see"

"That was the best thing about the baby seat, don't you think, that they couldn't undo the seatbelt and then that next year where they get that transition to a booster seat - you've got those concerns and whether or not they're undone or where they're undone until their brain's a little bit bigger and they can comprehend it's their own safety involved, yeah"

One participant raised the issue that depending on the size of your vehicle it can be difficult to fit all of the necessary restraints in it.

Can you explain how you made the decision to cease using the booster seat?

There were various catalysts for moving a child from the booster seat to the adult seatbelt. Of importance was the fostering of independence, the level of perceived maturity of the child, the frustration for not being able to do up their own seatbelts when sitting in a booster seat and convenience.

"She cannot do the seatbelt up in a booster seatbelt. She can't reach around far enough to do it up. So it's an independence thing and a convenience thing. If she's in an adult seatbelt, (never the lap seatbelt, its always the [lap-]sash), she can do it up, she can undo it, and in a booster seat she can't. If she's in a booster seat she gets frustrated and annoyed and 'cos the seatbelts go down behind them and she can't reach them"

"When they're at that age where they start freaking out if they haven't had their seatbelt on or whatever you sort of figure that they are responsible enough then, he was never in an adult seatbelt ever before, when he, y'know, wouldn't take responsibility for it, but like I said weight wise, [he is too small]. The child's independence and the convenience of me not having

to do it for him and him getting grumpy at it [when they can't plug it in]. The high back for a start, the seat belts only just reach around and then they're behind them and they can't see them as well in a booster seat, and um it's very frustrating for children when they're at that age where they want to go and do everything on their own"

"Convenience and height and weight, what was best, as I said you know just trying to fit them in, you know you'd say 'yeah, is that safe?', but you'd also be trying to get convenience out of it too."

It was evident that participants were perplexed regarding the most appropriate method of child restraint to use for their child. Participants were still accommodating to the recommendations as presented previously in the session:

"She should be in there 'til, crikey, she's small and she only weighs, y'know what 16 kilos, and she's nearly five, we'll she'll be like 10 and still can sit in the booster seat in theory"

" At 20 or 20 and a half [months], he's 116 cm, he still seems so much bigger than the other kids, but he's still way under the requirements"

Are there any other things that came into play in the decision to cease using the booster seat ?

In response to this prompt, three issues were raised: safety, comfort and height. Again, the responses indicated that the participants did not know how booster seats helped restrain children properly.

"It is a safety thing though with booster seats isn't it. Y'know sometimes, like I said about the high back one it not touching him, I don't know with the lower one, I mean, the seatbelts going through it isn't it, Yeah, I dunno, when you've got your child perched on something y'know, I still don't know about the safety of that"

"Not comfortable in [booster] seat"

"Height is still an issue for me as well"

We're interested to know if any of you had the information to make the technically correct choice; if the information wasn't available, or if it was available. How do you feel about how the information that is out there? Do you have access to it? Do you know about the recommendations?

Participants felt that information relating to the appropriate choice of child restraints is not readily accessible. The general message was that participants had to rely on their own judgements about appropriate child restraint use.

"It's what you read on the boxes"

"If you're being given one [second hand] you don't have that information, so no, you don't always know"

"You don't have that, and its not really out there to be, I mean if you go searching for it [you will find it] but y'know sometimes that's not what you do. You've got your seat so you put it in, you think you're doing it right, and.... Yeah I would not have known the weight for a booster seat and I bought this booster seat, I wouldn't have known the weight"

"I mean [when the child is] smaller, you'd think of the weight and height, but when they're taller you just think they're OK"

"You tend to think they're big enough"

How would you make an informed decision about what is good for your child to be using?

Participants continued to respond about having (or not having) the information necessary to make an informed decision. Particularly, they felt that the information was not readily accessible relative to other safe-driving campaigns such as campaigns on speeding and drink driving.

"[The judgement of correct restraint was based on] how they look [when] you put them in"

"Yeah, if you put them in a seatbelt and they look too small, and it doesn't come down their chest properly then you'd know that's not acceptable and you'd have to change to something else"

"You can see that"

"Just make a judgement call"

"They don't advertise it on television [...] enough. So unless you're researching it yourself, you're not going to [find out]. As a parent, we researched discipline, sleep – [we] researched every other thing [...] It's not that you're not working really hard to be a parent, but [...] you trusted that is the right thing because it looks right"

"Of course the government tends to, like most people, don't think much about these things. The government just seems to be [talking about] drink-driving [and] speeding." "[The watermelon advertisement] doesn't tell you anything, It just says wear one, it doesn't say which one, what [kind of restraint]."

"It should be essential to have that information, and not just when the child's born, because the first two years, there's no point giving you any information, you know what I mean? You should have it there but it should be given to you again and then it should be given to you again when they go to school"

"Plus signs are good now [referring to signs on the roadside, or in car parks, that remind drivers to wear a seatbelt], at least you look at that and every time I see one I just make sure, I mean I already know that everyone in the car's got one [is wearing a seatbelt] but I still look and I hope that other people who don't have seatbelts on [referring to people in other vehicles] look at it and feel guilty"

Are any other barriers you see as stopping you from say using child restraints in the past or now, in using booster seats are there any other things?

One participant mentioned that the cost of purchasing the restraints was a barrier while the cost of having them installed was a barrier.

"The new car seats are very expensive"

"The older your car, [the more likely you] have to get the whole lot installed [top tether anchorage and seat] which costs more."

Do the children ever refuse or not want to use the child restraints, don't want to sit in booster seats or child safety seats, has that ever come up as an issue?

There was no evidence to suggest that the participants' children refused to use child restraints, and the participants felt that if the child was asked to use one, they would. Having said that, the majority said that they hadn't been faced with the issue of other children not using them and may have found resistance if doing so and driving the children to school.

"Basically the kids know."

"If I said sit in the booster, she would."

"But I think what we are finding is that our children are correcting other people in our cars so y'know it's different the children are very well informed"

Do you think that anything should be done to increase the wearing of child restraints?

All participants believed that increased advertising would assist in promoting the use of child restraints. Television and radio were suggested as the appropriate medium to convey this message. Television was thought to be beneficial as children absorb any televised message, and the radio beneficial for getting messages to adults.

"More advertising"

"TV and radio, people [will respond to] that."

"Radio's for your adults. Kids are so absorbent of what they watch on television if all the kids on telly have to wear a seatbelt on the ads then they're more likely to go "we have to wear a seatbelt 'cos [it's] on the telly."

"My children can recite adverts from goodness knows what products and if seatbelts was one of them well then that would just be another product that they would know.... when I was a kid there was one "click-clack from and back" well they don't do that one any more. That was at least acknowledging that you have to put your seat belt on front and back."

"That thing about the watermelon one OK it's good to know, like that little boy knows if he doesn't have his seatbelt on what will happen."

"that's great, that's not too shocking for any child, but knowing which one they should be in, [the ad] doesn't say it, does it? And our children would know, you know; they would never want to hop in the adult seat belt if they could see [...] that's not what you do"

Do you think there is anything that would make it easier for yourselves or for other parents to use child restraints other than advertising?

There was some discussion regarding the child's ease of removing the adult seatbelt while sitting in the booster seat.

"For that one year, that one year where you're going from a child seat to a booster seat and they're undoing their seatbelt, yeah, I don't understand why they don't have like flight seat belts, y'know, the ones that go across both shoulders and do up in the middle, or I just think it's a strange design. There should be something that makes it safer that the child can't get out of the seatbelt on their own. Why they can't be locked, why you can't do that. For that one year. But that one year is a really hard thing for responsible parents, y'know, it's really really hard. There's nothing safe from a child seat to a booster seat, the child seat should last y'know until they're five, four and a half, but it doesn't"

"It's very exciting to suddenly go from a seatbelt where no matter how hard you try and push the red button you just can't get out -"

"To be able to just push the button and you're out"

You said before there was a feeling that cost was an issue with child restraints. Is there anything that could make that easier?

There was neither a strong nor consistent message regarding the cost of child restraints as being a barrier to child restraint use. For example, participants did not suggest decreasing the cost of restraints, nor to supply them free of charge (although, after prompting one participant mentioned that a government rebate would be helpful). Rather, participants said that assistance should be in the form of information related to the safety of not using the correct restraint, and ways to overcome problems that lead to incorrect restraint use.

"A brand new car, y'know, the beep comes on when the seatbelts are undone." [participant indicating that similar warning devices would be useful for child restraints]

"Rebates, company rebates, government rebates"

3.6 Child restraint legislation

What are the relevant road rules for child restraints, and for travelling with young children in cars?

The participants identified that there is a gap in the legislation. The fact that there is no clear and concise wording that ensures the children are using the correct child restraint concerned the participants.

"Seatbelts must be worn where they're fitted. They're supposed to be correctly positioned - effectively, that's it! Well, there's no direct actual wording as to what you should be using for what child. Basically, from what I understand, it's just [that] restraints should be fitted properly and worn. But they leave it blank as to what method."

"The ones that have to be bolted in have to be bolted in correctly, but even then I have to say, I don't know about positioning, where they should be positioned, you bolt them in to wherever there's a bolt hole."

"I think in Tassie it actually says something along the lines of a child must be effectively restrained until 12 months in an approved child thing but from 12 months on, it's blank [...] You do what you want to do from there on and it's y'know, 8 year olds must sit in the back, til 8, sit in the back."

"When you're in South Australia they don't have to be in the back, they are allowed in the front, there isn't an age limit for them being in the front, as far as I'm aware."

Are there are any penalties for not using child restraints, would the police pull you over if you weren't using one?

The participants expressed some confusion regarding the penalties for not using child restraints and even questioned the relevance of the police knowing what the most appropriate form of child restraint is for a given child.

"Oh, there would be, yeah. May not get penalised by police fine but you can certainly get penalised in relation to not getting compensation if the child's injured."

"If it's not proper, even secure."

"But law, what's the law? That you just make sure they're restrained in what seems applicable but I don't know what the law is."

"I know you'd be in trouble if it's not [correct], but you don't know, it's a fine line. I mean [...], they don't have a set of scales in their car. [The police would] have to take your child out and weigh your child and go tsk tsk tsk wrong seat [...]"

Do you think there should be more information out there about the law?

The participants' consensus was that there ought to be a greater amount of information available about the law for transporting children in cars. The fundamental problem was that participants believed that they did not have a great understanding of the law and that the law does not specify the requirements precisely enough to aid interpretation.

"That's a grey area .. what's specific and what's not"

"It needs to be worded far more specifically"

" [Does the law] mean a seatbelt, [does it] mean a seat, [does it] mean a booster [...]"

How would you feel if the road rules were toughened up. Say if you were told that you had to have a child in a booster seat until they were seven years of age?

There was a clear consensus that there needed to be specific legislation regarding child restraint use, but that penalties were not the answer due to the difficulty in judging the most appropriate type of child restraint for a child due to variations in height and weight. Participants asserted that the law must be able to be obeyed.

"I'm just sick of governments bringing in rule after law after law 'cos it's just, my personal opinion, we're just getting over-governed. Too many laws and rules are being brought in. But I'd have to agree, something should be a bit more specific."

"As [for] penalties [...], I'd have to disagree"

"For all the restraints [prior to] the booster seat, absolutely [there should be] penalties, without a doubt, if they're not in the right one [...]. Once you get to the booster seat, [...] the children are so varied in their height, their

weight, their independence [...] I don't think an age limit will work once you get to a booster seat. I think for all the ones before there should definitely be strict stricter penalties for [non-use]."

3.7 Qualitative information from pre-focus group questionnaires

You are away on a family holiday in Victoria with your 4-year old son and another family. You're getting ready to leave to drive back to Adelaide. Your four year old son desperately wants to drive back in the car with your family friends. Their car is very full so your son would sit in the back seat with the adult seatbelt instead of using his booster seat that is too big to fit. What would you do?

Three participants answered that they would:

- "always make him travel with me in his booster seat"

While one participant answered that

- "I'd be reluctant to let him go with family friends without the booster seat, but would let him if I couldn't convince him to come with me".

You're at home, you're running late and the children were meant to be at school 5 minutes ago. You get to the car and remember that the child restraints (child safety seat or booster seats) had been removed and are in your partner's car (which isn't there). You remember that it's only about a five minute drive to school. What would you do?

There was a lot of variation in response to this question. With each participant responding differently:

- It wouldn't worry me, I would use the seatbelts in the car.
- I would decide that because it's only a short trip, using the seatbelts in the car would be ok.
- I ensure that this happens very rarely, but would reluctantly use the seatbelts in the car.
- I ensure that this never happens, I would only drive the children in their child restraints.

The final two scenarios were responded in the same manner for all participants.

You pick up your child from a friend's house and he jumps into the boot of the station wagon and wants to travel home in there so that he has more room to play with his toys. Much to your attempts to make him sit on the car seat, he refuses and begins to cry. What would you do?

- I would never let him ride in the boot and would only drive once he was in the car using a seatbelt.

You are on your way to the shops when your child gets into her booster seat and places the seatbelt across her lap and then behind her back and plugs it in. What would you do?

- I would never let her have her seatbelt behind her back and would correct the belt every time.

4 Discussion

This small focus group was conducted with five participants recruited at Adelaide metropolitan preschools. Recruitment proved to be difficult; the majority of parents approached were unable to attend the focus group due to time constraints. Due to the limited sample size and the qualitative nature of data obtained the study should be considered exploratory in nature. The results of this report should also be considered in conjunction with the findings of a quantitative survey that we conducted with drivers transporting children at preschools and primary schools (Edwards, Anderson & Hutchinson, 2005).

The findings of the present study are consistent with results in the driver survey. In our earlier study, children in the booster seat age range had progressed to an adult seatbelt prematurely. We recruited parents of children who fitted this description. During recruitment for the focus groups, the participants all reported their children (in the 4-6 year age range) to be using the adult seatbelt, however, during the focus group session parents did report that a booster seat was used at times where the parents perceived the crash risk to be higher than normal (e.g., long distance travelling). Participants' answers were more varied with regard to short trips. In particular, the speed of the car and the type of roads travelled on were important determinants of the decision to use a child restraint.

Premature progression to the adult seatbelt may increase the risk of being injured and increases the seriousness of the injury should the vehicle be involved in a crash (Winston, Durbin, Kallan & Moll, 2000). Focus group participants had little understanding of how child restraints protect a child in a crash. In the driver survey report, we suggested that premature progression to the adult seatbelt may have resulted from two factors (Edwards et al., 2005): firstly, due to the parents not recognising the need for a booster seat, and secondly, the children wanting to conform to peer norms. Results of the focus group study propose that child refusal is not a major contributor to the non-use of a booster seat (however, parents stated that they had not yet been in such situations). Rather, the parents reported that ceasing child restraint use was related to their belief that their child was ready for the adult seatbelt. Readiness was described in terms of the perceived maturity of the child, fostering the child's independence and self-responsibility, the alleviation of the child's frustrations, convenience for the parent, and a sense that the child's height and weight were compatible with adult seatbelt use.

It appeared that participants viewed the child restraint's role as being one of keeping the belt on, at an age when the child wanted to remove the restraint, and that the cessation of this behaviour in the child was sufficient reason to move them to an adult seatbelt. After further prompting, two additional issues were raised: safety and comfort. In conjunction with our driver survey, participants in the focus groups reported that the most important reason for correct restraint use was safety of the child. As with the survey, parents in the focus group study believed that child safety could be achieved with an adult seatbelt, regardless of the child's age.

There was no evidence to suggest that booster seat use was ceased prematurely due to child refusal to use the restraint. The participants stated that if they needed to ask their child to use one, that the child would obey. However, they acknowledged that they had not been in a situation where another child in the vehicle was not using a child restraint. In our driver survey there were anecdotal reports that children were concerned that booster seats were for babies and perceived the adult belt as more "grown up" (Edwards et al., 2005). This had not been encountered by parents in the current focus group (and may be due to the fact that we only recruited parents from a pre-school population).

Barriers to child restraint use were discussed. The main themes that arose were safety, knowledge and difficulties with fitting more than two restraints in one vehicle (related to the number of children in the vehicle). In particular, there was a belief by one parent that booster seats were unsafe when equipped with a high back and sides as the seatbelt did

not sit firmly across the child; it was assumed by the parent that the adult seatbelt provided a safer alternative in the event of a crash.

Parents identified that their lack of knowledge regarding appropriate booster seat use was a barrier to use. After further prompting, one participant stated that the cost of child restraints, and the fitting of child restraints, was a barrier to their use. In our driver survey, cost was almost never mentioned, similarly in the focus group cost was only mentioned after prompting, despite the fact that all families perceived themselves to be low income earners.

Levels of knowledge about child restraint use were similar in our driver survey and in the focus group. Parents were confused about age/size appropriate restraint use, especially for older children. Beyond infant capsules, there is only limited knowledge about correctly choosing the method of restraint for children. Knowledge about the correct use of booster seats was the most limited. Responses changed somewhat over the course of the session. Once participants realised that maybe they had not been restraining their children according to the guidelines, there was a feeling that they lacked information to make the appropriate choices.

Generally, the participants felt that information on child restraint use and related legislation is not readily accessible to the public. Furthermore, that the lack of information results in making a "judgement call" as to the most appropriate child restraint to use. Increasing advertising on the radio and television for child restraint use was recommended in promoting the use of child restraints. Regarding the current legislation, it was perceived that the information was not specific, the wording was not clear nor concise enough to aid interpretation and understanding of their legal responsibility whilst transporting children in cars.

Responses to the pre-focus group questionnaires provided information that suggested participants voiced their own opinions during the group session, rather than conforming to the group norm. Essentially, the responses were homogeneous, with exception of the question relating to driving children on a short trip without a child restraint where answers were varied. This difference was also evident during the focus group session.

While the focus group was conducted with a very small number of parents of pre-school aged children, the results are consistent with our larger driver survey. The results suggest that parents feel that they are less informed than they should be regarding the recommendations and legislation relating to the use of child restraints for transporting children and, as such, have limited knowledge. However parents report an intention to provide the safest method of transportation for their children.

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