

Adolescent Risk Research Unit

Rise, and shine.

Nonverbal communication during the learner lesson with a professional driving instructor: A novel investigation

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Why do this research?

Learning any new skill can be a really tense time. Being a teenager can also be a really stressful time. What about learning to drive, is this a stressful time? We know a little bit about what happens during the driving lesson, whether it is a professional instructor or Mum and Dad, through analysing speech that occurs during that lesson, but is learning to drive simply about talking? Much of our messages in training, teaching, and educating are given through nonverbal communication. So what does nonverbal communication look like during the learner driving lesson?

What did we do?

Using a GoPro camera, we recorded ten lessons with ten learner drivers who were learning from professional driving instructors. We then analysed the GoPro camera footage to look at different types of nonverbal communication used during the lesson, and considered the role that nonverbal communication played.

What did we find?

Professional driving instructors use many techniques to help transfer road safety knowledge and road safety skills to their learner driver. Some of these include posture and body orientation in which they can indicate to the learner that they can be open and receptive to ideas, they can use facial expressions such as smiling and nodding and moving closer and using gestures to point at important parts on the dashboard and out in the driving environment. When the learner driver was pulled to the side of the road, eye contact was a key way to transfer messages.

We also saw a complex balance between sending messages that are important for road safety and those that build a relationship with the learner driver. This may be the first time the learner driver has met an instructor, and we want them both to be comfortable and confident in these interactions so that attention can be focussed on learning how to stay safe on the road. Professional driving instructors use a balance of teaching how to drive and maintaining this rapport, and this is regulated through their use of nonverbal communication.

What does it mean?

Sometimes we forget that learning to drive is not just learning the road rules and learning how to operate a vehicle. We tend to forget that fundamentally we are all human and we need to communicate to learn how to drive and to teach how to drive. A key component of communication is nonverbal communication. Lets think about how we are communicating nonverbally to build the impact of the verbal communication message we are trying to send.