

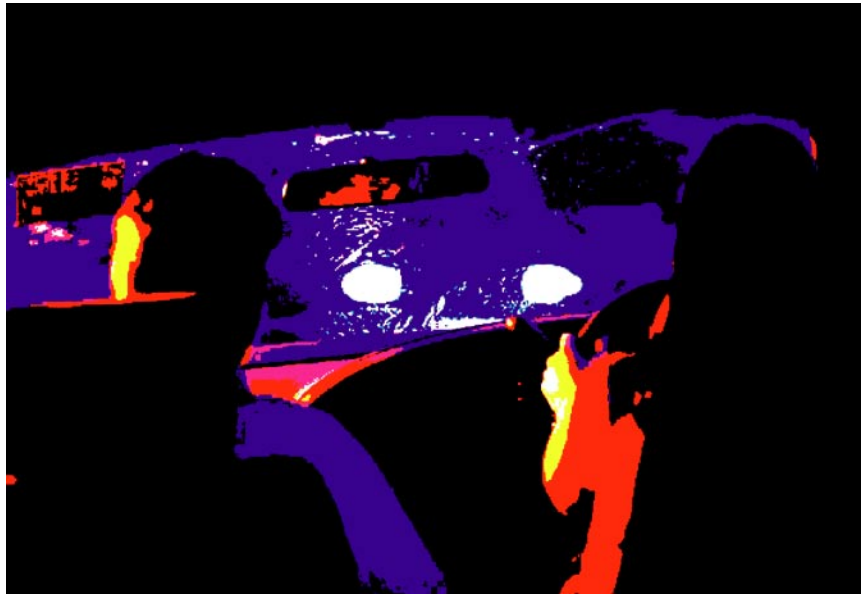
USE OF FEAR AND SHOCK TACTICS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

arrive
alive!

What do we know about young people and their road use?

Young people are over-represented in those killed and seriously injured on Australian roads.¹ Despite the evidence about their crash involvement, it must be noted that:

- The majority of journeys made by most young people are made safely and responsibly.
- Young people are not all the same – they are not a homogenous group.
- Some groups of young people do participate in risky behaviours when using the road².
- Those high risk taking young people, who are most in need of being convinced about their vulnerability, are least likely to be persuaded by fear and shock communications and will be the most resistant to change³.
- For young people who participate in risky behaviours, mostly young males, this risk taking behaviour is linked/tied into their self concept. They have low self efficacy and don't believe they have the capacity to change their behaviour⁴.



Those young people who are more likely to take risks on the road can be the most resistant to changing their behaviour.

- Young people view risk differently to older adults, and generally focus on the gains, such as to their self-esteem, rather than the potential losses^{3,5}.
- Some young people are very likely to have strongly held attitudes which prevent them from feeling fear, in particular, the “it won't happen to me” mentality.
- It is difficult to change ingrained behaviour patterns of young people for whom risk behaviour is part of their self image⁶.

Using fear and shock tactics to change behaviours of young people

In trying to persuade young people to use the roads safely, some campaigns and educational approaches centre on the harmful consequences of risky behaviours through fear and shock. Any approach classified as a fear/shock approach contains graphic depictions of negative consequences of such risky behaviours, and attempts to arouse fear or anxiety².

This use of fear/shock assumes that young people's attitudes and behaviour can be manipulated simply by injecting messages into them or exposing them to gruesome images³. However, research indicates that messages that are intended to arouse a high level of fear or anxiety are unlikely to actually do so⁷. One of the problems associated with the use of fear/threat to effectively bring about a behaviour change is that there is no one measure of fear. What is a 'high' fear level in one situation for one person could be judged as 'moderate' or 'low' by another. Even if a fear response is aroused, or is highly motivating, intentions to change rarely ever result in real world behaviour change⁸.

Use of fear and shock tactics, such as a simulated crash scenes, are unlikely to have the desired reaction in most young people.

The factor most likely to influence attitudes, intentions and behaviours is not the level (severity) of threat, but the individual's perception of their own vulnerability to the threat. Young people are generally sophisticated in recognising the intended message and don't become personally involved with or persuaded by the threat. Frequently they find such communication attempts not to be personally relevant. Many young people simply do not feel vulnerable⁹.

Do fear and shock tactics bring about the required behaviour change?

Fear/shock messages have only been found to have an effect in experiments conducted in a laboratory, not a real life situation. There is no evidence of success when the research is conducted in the field with members of the general public, particularly with young people^{10,11}.

While using fear/shock tactics have been found to work in the laboratory, there is no evidence that this works in the real world, especially with young people.

Messages designed to arouse a high level of fear or anxiety in young people are unlikely to actually do so.

Fear arousing messages are more likely to be effective with those people who are already equipped to act on, and benefit from, the message. Typically, those most in need of the message have lower self efficacy than those less in need of the message and somehow manage to inoculate themselves against the threat.



In the research literature two types of fear are identified:

Inhibitory fear – where the audience makes an effort to reduce the anxiety caused by the horror.

Anticipatory fear – related to the perceived likelihood of experiencing the threat, where the aim is to deal with the threat rather than avoid the anxiety.

Some programs inappropriately use graphic stimuli in an attempt to arouse inhibitory fear (shock and horror) but fail to arouse anticipatory fear ("this will happen to me if I don't change"). Arousing inhibitory fear via graphic appeals achieves little and can be counter productive since the focus is on removing the fear. It is anticipatory fear that matters^{10,11}.

On very rare occasions fear can be a stimulus to change behaviour, but it depends on the audience's response to the fear. The response is unpredictable because what could be regarded as a potentially 'high' fear approach may be regarded by another audience as a 'low' fear appeal. It cannot be assumed that a threat appeal will always evoke a fear response.



Do fear arousing messages ever work?

For people who have risky behaviour as part of their self image, it is difficult for them to change this behaviour. Such people are aware of the threat and have developed defence mechanisms to avoid feeling fear⁶.

A fear/shock approach does not often result in perception of fear. Rather than eliminate the threat, the individual chooses to discount the severity of the threat, and especially the probability of the threat occurring to them. This is what is known in the literature as a maladaptive response and it can include:

- Fatalism (“Nothing I can do about it”)
- Religious faith reliance (“It’s God’s will”)
- Avoidance (“If I don’t think about it, it will go away”)
- Inaccurate information beliefs (“I’m a better driver than the average person”)
- Denial (“It won’t happen to me.”)

For most young people, high levels of fear increase the maladaptive response and avoidance, and influences the individuals’ perception of their vulnerability to any threat¹².

The key to getting young people to consider their risky behaviour is firstly to establish their own personal vulnerability to the perceived serious threat. Then they need to be shown the required action to remove the serious threat.

If any fear/shock approach is to be used there is a need to determine the difference between:

- Threat and fear
- Inhibitory and anticipatory fear.

Threat messages need to be carefully designed and should attack maladaptive behaviours and false learned information¹³.

Using positive reinforcement and modelling desired behaviours has been shown to be more effective in changing behaviour in young people, than using fear /shock tactics.

Fundamental to getting younger people to consider their risky behaviour is to first establish their own personal vulnerability (ie. it is likely to happen to them, rather than people their age group, or passengers or drivers per se) to the perceived serious threat and then show them the required action to remove the serious threat. Vulnerability is more important than consequences.

Whilst it is important to inform young people of the dangers associated with specific behaviours (serious consequences), once they are made aware then it is unlikely that repeating this information will change anything.

Strong arguments about risky behaviours need to be perceived as new, relevant and in the right direction. Most road safety arguments and threats are already in the public domain, so it is difficult to make the message appear new.

Any behaviour change approach needs to focus on modelling the desired behaviour and, where possible, use positive reinforcement and be easy to carry out¹⁴.

Appeals to adolescents should be norm based, and should convey severe social disapproval of the risky behaviour.

Finally, if the campaign cannot work with those who are low in self efficacy as well as those with high efficacy, then such campaigns should be avoided altogether.

It is important that young people are helped to understand that they are personally vulnerable if they engage in risk-taking behaviour on the road - that it can happen to them .



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