

Teaching Young Men to Drive

(How to make novice drivers crash, part 5)

Stephen Haley (Jul 2013)

If young males have such a high crash risk, should we teach them differently?

For drivers age 17-24, males have nearly four times the fatality rate as females in Great Britain¹. These young men are the highest risk group for deaths, injuries and damage.

This article examines why this problem is so predominantly male, and what could be done about it. Although nothing here is sexist, talking about gender differences is often resisted as being politically incorrect in modern times. But nothing is solved by denying what the problem is, and we should definitely not accept a taboo that kills people.

Teaching all drivers in the same way has always produced a more 'defective product' in young males. The traditional process is badly tuned to the raw material that is put through it.

Crucially, driving on public roads is far more about how we think than about our hands-and-feet skills². So at the heart of the crash rates is the way that young males are thinking differently.

Relevant to this is the accumulation of research in neuroscience over the past forty years, which has found significant gender-related brain differences³. This helps to explain how the male and female brains are formed by nature, and then function in life.

The pre-wired traits in males and females are typically different. These are the natural aptitudes and preferences we all have. Not that the genders are totally different, there is a lot of overlap. But the averages are far apart. Social conditioning such as how children are raised plays a part too, but the research points increasingly to nature being the stronger factor. In truth though, the fact that the traits exist is the key point, more than whether nature or nurture plays the leading role in creating them.

A set of 'typically male' traits emerges, which confirms in terms of nature and biology a lot that has been known intuitively for a long time. Fiction writers, for example, routinely weave these traits into their characters to make them more convincing to us. The traits also explain many of the reasons why the sexes misunderstand each other. And might affect how different people read this article too.

One of the clear effects on young males is in their driving, where it currently increases their risk.

This does not, of course, give an excuse for their crash record. Just being male could never do that. But, if we fail to help where we could, then that in itself becomes part of the problem.

For the future, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is already committed to 'client-centred' learning⁴. And this is an existing umbrella aim under which training could be tailored for this group.

As we go through the traits below, we will see:

- more useful insights into how males want to drive
- why the current test can point young men towards high risk
- how to harness the male traits to reduce their risk instead.

It becomes clear that men and women will usually have quite different mental routes to safe driving.

Inside the male brain

For millions of years, our male and female ancestors evolved with different biology, to match their separate roles in helping the human race to adapt, survive and develop. In the brain, different hormone chemistry and circuit wiring gave them different ways of thinking.

¹ Department for Transport Statistics Office figures, May 2013

² "Mind Driving", Stephen Haley, 2006

³ several published books and their research references, such as: "The Essential Difference", Simon Baron-Cohen, 2003; "What could he be thinking?", Michael Gurian, 2003; "Raising Boys", Steve Biddulph, 1997; "The Male Brain", Louann Brizendine, 2010; etc

⁴ "[Safe and responsible driving syllabus \(categoryB\)](#)", DSA, March 2013, p3

In the modern world, nature still installs these evolved blueprints as it creates our brains in the womb and through childhood. And even as we learn new skills throughout life, the core of pre-wired aptitudes and preferences is robust and changes little.

The main male hormone is testosterone, which makes men bold, inventive and ambitious. Whatever we feel about it, this propelled mankind to reign supreme over the planet. Everyone has testosterone, but men tend to have much more of it. Women who enjoy and pursue things that are more typical of men usually have more than the female average.

The 'typically male' traits are simply the ones that most (not all) men tend to show more strongly. All of the traits have a wide range and everyone is on the scale somewhere - with women usually at the less zealous end. Equally vice versa, men are usually at the weaker end of 'typically female' traits.

So no one should feel praised or defensive. The observations just mean different, not better or worse.

It is a broad topic, and traits merge into each other, but the typically male ones that most affect driving fall into five groups.

1. High spatial ability - males tend to have a good aptitude for controlling space, objects and motion. Boys and men enjoy using and testing these skills, and are more reliant on them.

This is one of the most defining male traits, and explains their natural love of cars, motion sports and ball games. Also aiming things at targets with guns, golf and darts, etc. It helps them to 'feel alive'. Young men instinctively feel that becoming good at controlling space and motion is part of the journey to manhood.

They have an intuitive mechanical and practical ability, with an interest in (and empathy with) machines, gadgets, tools and building things. Men tend to want to know how spatial things work.

With these spatial skills, males generally find it easier to master physical car control and pass the practical driving test. They also find it easier to understand and fit in with complex traffic movements at junctions, roundabouts and on multi-lane roads.

2. Physical and action-oriented - right from childhood, boys tend to have more raw energy to be physically active. They feel compelled to be more boisterous, and to move faster and for longer. This continues as they develop and grow, and has a strong influence on what they like to do.

Men are more likely to respond to action signals than verbal ones. And they bond more by doing physical tasks than by using words. Men typically rely less on talking.

Males have a more action-oriented fight-or-flight response, and are more likely to meet threats with action than with listening and talking. Importantly for driving, the male reaction to stress is more likely to include taking action that increases the physical risk. They also tend to look for a physical activity as an outlet for emotions that are painful or hard to express.

However, boys can achieve high self-control when allowed freedom to be physically active, and find their own internal rules and limits. Denial of the freedom makes them frustrated and erratic.

At the extreme and when combined with anger, some males are more likely to be physically violent. Though this nearly always has a definite trigger - even if it comes from previous events.

3. Adventurous and experimental - men like to test themselves and their environment, and are more likely to do things just to see what happens - often for no other reason at all. This may involve taking risks, and often uses their favourite spatial skills. The adventurous spirit and need to explore are part of a profound seeking of purpose.

This can raise real concerns for driving, but note that it does not have to be destructive. The constructive and creative side of this trait is responsible for nearly all the pioneering discoveries and inventions that shape modern life. Especially those involving machines, structures and technology. It is interesting that over 90% of patents have been granted to men. Exercising this trait only rarely involves the extreme physical events that it conjures up.

Importantly and nearly always, the aim is to gain some sort of control skill. It is not to lose control, or get hurt or create harm. It is rarely about being 'reckless' (wilfully dangerous), and only a tiny minority of males will accept that label. The vast majority will reject and resent the label as simply misunderstanding them. This is still true when they are pushing hard at some boundary, which to an onlooker may seem to involve unnecessary risk.

Men can create a strong camaraderie around exercising this trait together. But it also explains a lot of the things men do that women see as hard to understand or pointless.

A real danger arises if young men are led to believe that taking wilful risks is a sign of manhood. Nature has not programmed them to be self-destructive, but they can be steered towards it.

- 4. Strong, brave, competitive and protective** - the urge to be strong and brave is perhaps the clearest biological remnant from millions of years of treacherous hunting and combat. And is still central to the common, though distorted, image of manhood. This is probably the most feared part of men in modern times, when they display this trait to pursue self-worth or defend territory.

Video games and movies exploit this expertly. Pushing the young male's buttons is easy with words like hero, quest, warrior, vanquish and conquest. They are keen to try out fighting enemies. Within this, a defining part of action heroes is often their violent driving, and this creates lethal role models and pictures of manhood. Combat sports and road rage are mainly male things.

Men tend to be less sensitive to the idea of being injured, and are more easily led into danger. Females are less inclined to rush into danger, although many are attracted to heroic men.

Bravado also plays a vital role in young men, and posturing can be as important as reality. They do not, for example, actually believe they are indestructible. But talking and acting as if they do can be a valued layer of the mask. Significantly, acting tough is used to hide the insecurities of fear, weakness and self-doubt. So feeling genuinely more capable can reduce the need.

Males are also wired to be more competitive and ambitious - often as a loner. They have a greater need to win or reach the top of something to earn significance. In the car, they are more likely to be territorial, or to see their driving as a testing ground for their self-worth. They feel more compelled to accept challenges such as, "I bet you can't...".

Men are more likely to adopt high internal expectations, to spend time reflecting on performance, and to base self-image on their activities and success. But placing high value on personal achievement can carry increased anxiety and a heavier fear of failure.

A man is usually more concerned with legacy and making his mark on the world. And would rather be remembered in a good way, than for example as a driver who killed someone.

Importantly, most males want to be a competent provider and protector - for loved ones and weaker dependants. This is a major purpose of the urges to be strong, brave and competitive.

- 5. Logical, abstract-thinking, problem-solving and decisive** - this trait is intertwined with the spatial skills. Men prefer to think more logically and spatially than emotionally, and they have a more developed ability to construct abstract models in their mind. This gives a natural aptitude in areas like mathematics, chess and architecture. So as they try to understand how things work, they need things to make sense at the abstract level too.

Males see situations in terms of problems to be solved, and tend to be more decisive to fix them. They love to tackle problems they can solve, especially spatial and logical ones, but hate problems that they cannot control or will make them fail. This includes getting into danger on the road which is resolved by other people or by luck, rather than being able to control it themselves.

Men want to be resourceful, self-reliant and capable of solving their own problems - working things out for themselves. And will trust logic more than emotions as they do this. They tend to focus on the big picture rather than on individuals, unless they know someone involved.

Men don't follow rules as easily as women. They need the rules to make logical sense first, and even then are more likely to test the boundaries of how the logic works. In driving they look for their skills to be defined by something more than rules.

This is how nature designed males, and defined their sense of reality and sense of self. Thinking about driving and these traits together gives a more useful insight into male drivers. It is more constructive than headlines about 'reckless testosterone', or blaming them for being male.

In young men, the chemistry and energy of youth equips them to use these traits vigorously. But as they watch men do manly things, the feelings and urges are new and mysterious. They have little understanding of their inner traits or what they mean - or even if they are normal. So they do not know how to use or control them, which makes young males even more exposed to bad influence.

Alongside this, the adolescent journey includes wanting more control over their lives, being obsessed with peer opinion, and having to cope with the long-term decay in good adult role models.

More positively, adolescents have a huge ability to learn, and a craving to do something significant and useful. They also have a deep desire to please adults - even if it is fiercely masked.

In driver training, we should see the male traits as a toolbox. They are available to be used, as we guide young men to become skilful on the road. There are a lot of positive levers, and clues about interacting with them. Even the fact that the traits often pull in different directions is very useful. Trainers are likely to have already found clear points in this section that they could employ.

Current training and high risk

Young males are pointed towards higher risk by two of the main areas in the L-test system.

Physical car control - there have been increasing calls in recent years for the concentration on physical car control to change. It omits large and vital areas of safety skill. And new drivers of all ages are high risk, until they discover some of the missing skills for themselves.

But for young men, presenting driving skill as centred on physical control has another effect which is even stronger. It fires up their spatial skills, action-orientation and need for adventure - and challenges them to show bravery and courage. These traits all welcome the chance to be tested, and perhaps to do something daring to show how good they are.

Also, if the skill is about car handling, then higher skill will logically mean mastering more difficult handling. Whereas the exact opposite is true, and real higher skill should make handling simpler.

In addition, presenting driving in such physical terms makes it much easier to glorify speed, and to bestow grand respect on action hero antics and reckless examples.

It also points peer pressure to be on the same physical level. And because the male spatial skills find basic car control so easy, major distractions are more likely to be accepted too.

Rules and regulations - rules are necessary, without question. But this is 'external control' at a time when adolescents want more control over their lives - and will fight for it if they feel they have to. Every generation does it, and has a healthy suspicion of adults. Alongside the rules they want to make their own decisions too. Otherwise the balance is sought by rejecting some rules.

Learning to use internal control has a high value in adulthood and taking responsibility generally.

For young men, the density of rules also denies them the feelings of real control and self-reliance in solving their own problems. This stirs the male brain into looking for ways of doing the task that will present some problems to be solved - especially spatial ones. Men naturally want to make passive tasks more active. This is likely to be pursued more strongly if any of the rules seem to be illogical. And it might appear to be reckless to others if it involves taking risks.

So traditional L-test training plays on some very powerful buttons. But in the wrong way, and without understanding the dangers that are set in motion.

This will not be addressed by simply telling young men to be different, or trying to hammer them into shape. Working with nature is likely to be far more productive than working against it - or ignoring it.

And this leads into the next section.

Male-oriented driver training

Seeing the male traits as a trainer's toolbox opens a lot of major opportunities. They play such a big part in driving. Indeed, if we were looking for an activity that would engage with young men on self-awareness and control, then driving would be an excellent choice. Provided we used it properly.

The aim for training should be to use these traits and connect the pupil with the satisfaction (and even status) that comes from the control of events at a very fine level. And also to present a more worthy quest than speed and bravado. As the spatial brain naturally seeks a challenge, the action-hero impulse will only be removed by something that still has a valued reward.

Such training would feel very different - more trusting and inspiring, and more engaged with the core of the pupil. It would also feel more relevant to growing towards adulthood. Exercising good control of risk would be more natural - and requiring that control would seem to be fairer too.

In addition to the basic test skills, we can help young male drivers by telling them two 'big secrets'. The first is about themselves, and the second is about driving.

Tell the male secret

It's no surprise that most young men are a mystery unto themselves, with little insight into what makes them tick. So efforts in self-control tend to miss the target of where the impulses start.

But they have enough potholes in their adolescence without us keeping secrets that are easy to tell.

So we should reveal to young men the traits they could find in themselves. Give the opportunity to recognise them and be more in command. Even to head off trouble by predicting when it will happen.

This buffer between impulse and action can defuse rash triggers earlier and at a deeper level. It makes self-control more possible, and therefore also a more reasonable and practical expectation.

This understanding would help young men to see and accept that the modern role of 'provider and protector' means not taking risks that threaten injury. The world is no longer a brutal hunting ground. Times have changed, and the ancient warrior is too dangerous to be out on public roads.

It is important in addition that self-control is seen as making logical choices, and not about being blamed for being male. Success is more likely if the male nature is accepted before it is redirected.

Explaining the traits would show young men:

- the real roots of high-risk male driving
- the tendencies they must have the strength to control
- that the key male traits all have a very positive side.

Effective self-reflection is a cornerstone for achieving good self-control and high levels of skill. And adult drivers, too, find that discussing these gender traits is very enlightening and useful⁵.

Tell the driving secret

Driving after the test can be quite a shock for novices. It is so different from their pre-test lessons and practice - even with recent changes. So they sense that something important was missing in what they were taught, and might even start to suspect that test skills have little to do with real driving or true competence⁶.

A real danger comes when young males fill this vacuum with the idea that driving is a 'natural talent'. This appeals to their spirit, but leads directly to feeling they know more about driving than the test system does. This should ring loud alarm bells. But the 'talent model' will thrive while the void exists.

The long history of high novice crash rates also heightens such doubts about test training.

⁵ Mind Driving seminars and workshops 2007-2014

⁶ "The Good, the Bad and the Talented", DfT Research Report 74, Jan 2007; "Young People's Forum on Learning to Drive", DSA/SHM, Jan 2008; "Feeling Safe, Itching to Drive", DfT Research Report 86, May 2008

More positively, all new drivers, including the young males, actually reduce their high risk very steeply after the test⁷. With the safety net of a supervising driver removed, they must think more for themselves. And they begin to gain some of the 'thinking skills' that govern hazard *control* (which is quite different from the hazard *perception* in the test). This stage is often called "just gaining experience", but this implies it is not teachable or about specific skills. Neither of which are true.

Critically, this is exactly what is teachable, but not covered in current test training. It also aligns with the concern that new drivers are left to discover too much for themselves after the test.

When it is still common to say, "You really learn to drive after passing the test", the stark reality is that the specific missing skills are very teachable. And this holds the key to a quite different approach.

So this 'secret' should explain that:

- real driving skill is in how drivers think - and make decisions that manage risk
- the missing 'thinking skills' can be readily taught and learned
- car control and the rules of the road are only a very basic start point
- a sign of good thinking skills is that controlling the car becomes very simple.

The approach in Mind Driving achieves this⁸. Although aimed initially at drivers in general, it is ideal for young men because it stimulates the male traits to enjoy driving while at the same time using tools and challenges that make it safer. The techniques are also designed to create a high level of self-reflection, and higher levels of natural attention to the task.

... including about risk

Within this it is vital to connect with young men on 'risk'. This means explaining not lecturing. And giving a realistic and more engaging story on what causes risk, how it works and how to control it.

The 'Speed, Surprise, Space' model⁹ does this explicitly. And many trainers use it as a robust and simple tool, to show that driving danger has three factors, which must be kept in balance. So for example, high speed is unsafe where there is also high uncertainty (surprise) and/or not much space to deal with it. Things like drink, drugs or peer pressure etc affect how a driver judges the balance.

These three factors are the driver's 'levers of control' to manage risk and prevent collisions. Even putting the three words together is a big step forward in understanding and handling risk. And other key teachable skills align naturally to the speed-surprise-space structure.

The tool works so well because it sets an achievable challenge to hold high control over risk - including the effect that other people's danger is allowed to have. It is compelling to the driver's spatial ability, logic, problem-solving and decision-making, and directly raises competence. It lets the driver feel they are constantly 'winning' - but without having to create high risk first. Having a clear control of risk also earns them a lot more respect from most other people.

This model of risk gets very high acceptance as being more valid than a focus on speed alone.

In all of this, we should not be concerned that the adolescent brain (both sexes) is still developing till age about twenty five. This is 'frontal lobe development', but is not the limiting factor for good driving that it was first feared it could be. Referring again to how sharply young novices reduce their own crash risk, it is at least as fast as older new drivers do it¹⁰. The real issue is the high risk point they start with, rather than their ability to lower it. In fact, the right type of driver training is exactly the sort of stimulation at this age that will help them develop a 'better brain' for their whole life.

To further underline this, some children are successfully taught long before they reach driving age¹¹.

This outlines how a training approach could be 'male-oriented' to engage directly with how the male brain wants to work. The young male pupil would feel that he:

- has been shown how driving really works

⁷ "Road Safety Research Report No. 87, Learning to Drive: The Evidence", DfT, May 2008, p16 Figure 1.1

⁸ with a new and well defined skills map, and full description of each skill

⁹ "Mind Driving", Skill 2: Sense of danger, p65-67

¹⁰ "Road Safety Research Report No. 87, Learning to Drive: The Evidence", DfT, May 2008, p16 Figure 1.1

¹¹ eg The Under 17 Car Club, www.under17-carclub.co.uk

- is being taught a more competent level of control
- is thinking for himself, and solving his own problems
- is making his own decisions, and is more independent and self-reliant
- can enjoy driving without guilt, and with less need for bravado.

The higher level of command is a more credible way of showing that he can handle himself. And is more rewarding than starting to copy poor role models or being controlled by peer pressure.

Wrapping up

Young men would be steered less into high risk driving if their training was more connected to who they are. They already have natural abilities and traits that they enjoy to use, which could be harnessed to keep risk well under control.

For these pupils, the traditional test system is like pushing a square peg through a round hole. It is uncomfortable for both, and creates predictable problems to be dealt with later.

Male traits have an impressive record in the history of human progress. Yet traditional driver training triggers their negative side. Other factors in society contribute too, but the training lets it happen.

If we understand the male traits, their power is available to be used positively. Past attempts to wrestle with high-risk male drivers have focused on everything except matching the training to the core nature of the pupil.

As always, some young men will be difficult to reach, but these are not the only ones who are crashing. And to focus on a minority should not deny the majority the help that could be given. Neither should gender differences to be a taboo topic, when the opportunity is reducing casualties. This includes any overspill from the EU gender directive, which has forced equal insurance premiums, and now sends wrong and dangerous signals that young men are not higher risk after all.

For driving instructors, they do not need to become psychologists. But they are professional teachers, and most would want to understand their pupils enough to connect with them effectively.

For the training system, it is time to understand young men. Time to align with how their brain functions, and to stimulate them in more constructive ways.

For 'learning-to-drive' to be fit for purpose - and genuinely about "Safe driving for life" (rather than test passes), it must recognise and utilise the traits that are inherent in the group with 80% of the fatalities.

There is no justification for young males being disadvantaged in safety by the driving test system.

Importantly, we do not need different tests for males and females. It is the training that needs to change. And even there, much of what is most urgently needed by young men (and termed 'male-oriented' training above) would have great benefit for females too. They still need fine control of risk, even with their often quite different mental routes to safe driving.

In addition, discussing male traits could help more widely in how young men grow up, and make the search for who they are a bit easier. As nurturing adults, this is part of our job too. Learning to drive gets their attention, because they want it to change their lives. But a longstanding mistake is to treat it as an isolated task and ignore the common ground with broader life skills.

Taking this forward should not be left to individual driver trainers. Addressing young male risk at its source should be at the heart of DVSA leadership. And they should 'modernise' the training syllabus and instructor competencies to be specifically fit for teaching young men.

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