

The Route of Safety

Getting children to and from school safely is every parent's concern. Keeping a few guidelines in mind can take a lot of the worry out of the journey for you and your children.

By Sam Gaines

School safety begins before children arrive at school, and it doesn't end until they arrive safely back home.

"Congress said back in 1974 that school transportation should be held to the highest level of safety," says Phyllis F. Agran, M.D., MPH, FAAP, lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics' newly updated policy on school transportation safety. "It is very important that parents, pediatricians, and school districts work together to ensure that all children can get to school safely."

One fact adds some urgency to that need: 815 students die annually and 152,250 are injured during regular travel between school and home, figures that do not include special activity trips and other school-related journeys.

But what steps can parents take to make sure the journey is a safe one for a student? A good place to start is to consider how your child gets to school — from the moment she walks out the front door of your home to the moment she sets foot inside the front door of her school and vice versa on the way home. Even children who live within walking or biking distance of school need to learn how to avoid hazards along the way, whether on foot or in the bicycle seat.

Many children take the school bus to school. What may come as more of a surprise is that this has been shown to be the safest way to get to school. That's not to say that there aren't important steps to take to make sure your kids stay safe while boarding, leaving, or riding the bus.

Of course, students who take a car to school — as passengers or, even more so, as drivers — face the common dangers of the American road. Teen drivers,



in particular, cause a disproportionately large number of crashes across the country each year.

Regardless of how the students in your home get to school, there are steps you should take to help them make their safety their priority, whether coming or going.

The Bus

Of all the vehicles that travel on our nation's highways, none are safer than the school bus, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). But that doesn't mean school buses don't have risks all their own.

The most dangerous part of the school bus ride for a student is not actually the time spent on the bus, but getting on and off the bus, reports NHTSA. This "danger zone" accounts for about three times as many school bus-related deaths as the ride itself does, even though there are more non-fatal injuries during the ride than there are during the loading and unloading of students.

These serious injuries and fatalities during loading and unloading can occur when children:

- Are in a hurry getting on and off the bus

- Don't pay attention to surrounding traffic
- Move out of the bus driver's sight

To avoid these potential dangers, you should teach your child to make safe habits a priority by teaching them to take the following simple yet potentially life-saving precautions:

- Walk to and from the bus stop with a friend or family member.
- Get to the bus stop five minutes early, so you don't have to hurry.
- Never move toward the bus until it has come to a complete stop, the door has opened, and its safety lights are flashing.
- Never cross a street without checking both ways for traffic, looking left, then right, then left again.
- Always stay within the bus driver's view.
- Walk in front of the bus only.
- If you drop something near the bus, tell the driver. Don't try to pick it up until the driver knows you've dropped something.
- Never move around on the bus. Take a seat and stay there. If the bus has seat belts, always wear one.
- Obey the driver, and speak quietly so the driver can concentrate.
- Never stick anything out of a bus window.

How Safe is School Transportation in Your Community?

As a parent and citizen, it is important to learn more about school transportation safety where you live. The AAP issued revised recommendations for safer transportation to and from school in July of this year. Get to know these recommendations (available for free download at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/120/1/213>) and compare them to existing requirements in your community. Among the key recommendations are:

- All new school buses should have lap/shoulder seat belts that can also accommodate car safety seats, booster seats, and harness systems.
- National standards for school bus driver selection, training, and regulation should be developed.
- All states should adopt and enforce graduated driver licensing laws to reduce fatal crashes.
- School zones should be improved for child safety with tougher speed limit enforcement and safer routes to school, including bike and walking paths.

On Foot

For children who live close enough to walk to school, going on foot offers some real benefits. At a time when childhood obesity (and the serious diseases linked with obesity) is at an epidemic level, walking to school helps to ensure that children regularly get some form of exercise on a daily basis. Indeed, walking to school can become a healthy activity parents can share with their children, time permitting. “Communities need to look at their local areas and see what issues are keeping kids from walking to school, where that’s feasible,” Agran says. “We’re looking at the first generation of children in the U.S. who aren’t expected to outlive their parents because of obesity-related illnesses. Walking is a great way to combat this epidemic, but it must be done safely.”

Make sure your child has a safe route before allowing him to walk to school. Also:

- Consider whether your child has the skills necessary to walk safely to school. Can he stay alert to the dangers of traffic? Can she stay focused on getting to school without getting distracted and delayed?
- Walk the route yourself before taking your child along. Be sure that the route she will take offers good visibility, is relatively free of hazards, has plenty of pedestrian room at a safe distance from traffic, and involves no dangerous crossings.
 - Make sure there are well-trained crossing guards at every intersection your child must cross.
 - Consider available daylight when your child will be walking. Regardless of visibility, be sure your child is wearing brightly colored clothing.
 - If extremely hot or cold weather or bad weather conditions are a concern, have a backup transportation plan. For hot days, pack a water bottle for your child to take with him. For cold days, make sure she’s wearing warm clothing.
 - See if there are other neighborhood children your child can walk with. There is safety in numbers.

If you live close to your child’s school and are interested in organizing a regular school-walking group, there are plenty of resources to help you do just that:

- The Federal Highway Administration has a program, **Safe Routes to School**, which offers plenty of guidance for starting your own community walk or bike to school program. Find out more at www.saferoutesinfo.org.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has its own program, **KidsWalk-to-School**, that also offers materials to help you organize your own community program: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/.
- Wednesday, October 3, 2007 is **International Walk to School Day**. You can learn more about using this day to kick-start a school-walking program where you live at their Web site: www.walktoschool.org.

By Bicycle

As with walking, riding a bicycle to school offers wonderful health benefits for your child. Cycling to school is another way that you can share the trip to school and good exercise with your child, as well.

In addition to being exposed to traffic, bicycles present some specific safety concerns. But taking basic safety steps can help lessen the risks that bicycles present to students who ride them to school.

- A bicycle helmet is a must. Make sure your child always wears one to ride a bicycle, no matter how short the ride may be. The helmet should be approved by the Consumer Product Safety Commission.
- Brightly colored clothing helps drivers see cyclists more clearly. Be sure your child’s clothing makes her more visible.
- Children should only be allowed to ride when there is plenty of daylight. Riding at dusk or at night should never be allowed.
- Young children (up to age 9) should only ride with adult supervision, and never on the street.
- Use your judgment about allowing older children to ride in traffic, depending on how heavy road traffic is where they’ll be riding; how mature the children are; and how able they are to follow the rules of the road.
- All bicycle riders should follow the basic rules of the road:
 - Ride with traffic.
 - Stop and look both ways before entering the street.
 - Stop at all intersections, whether marked or unmarked.
 - Before turning, use hand signals and look in every direction.
- Teach your children to check their bike’s condition on a routine basis. Tires, brakes, and seat and handlebar height should be checked annually.

In a Vehicle

Many teens drive to school or ride along with a sibling or peer who does. This is by far the riskiest way to get to school. Teens driving other teens account for 55 percent of school travel-related deaths and 51 percent of injuries, according to figures from the National Research Council. Agran is blunt about teens driving teens: “This is the least safe option, and it is important for parents to put strong restrictions in place,” she says. At least, parents should take care to decide how appropriate this is for each adolescent, mindful of the risks involved with teen drivers.

That said, many parents opt to drive their children to school. Taking the time to be a safe driver is all the more important when children are in the vehicle, especially during the morning and evening rush hours, when traffic is often at its heaviest. Here are more helpful tips:

- If your state has a graduated driver’s license (GDL) law, find out what it is and be sure your teen is obeying the law.
- Discourage your teen from driving other teens to school, or riding with a teen driver, especially in the first six months after licensure even if your state licensing laws allow this. After six months your teen may be ready to start driving with one passenger.
- Insist on seatbelt use at all times. No exceptions.
- Be clear with your child about your policies for safe driving, and make sure you model those policies yourself. Keeping distractions (loud music, cell phones, conversation, food and drink) to a minimum is a must.
- Consider creating a written agreement with your teen about the rules of safe driving, and be clear and firm about enforcing it. (See sample contract as part of the AAP Teen Driver statement at www.aappolicy.org.)
- If you’re driving children to school, be sure to follow safe practices for your young passengers:
 - All passengers should wear seat belts, or the age- and size-appropriate car safety seat or booster seat.
 - All children under 13 years of age should ride in the rear seats. ●