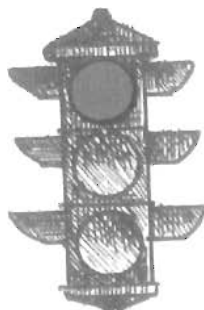




Early Childhood Traffic Education



PARENTS' GUIDE FOR ACTION

**preschool  
children  
in traffic**



preschool children in traffic . . .



## **Reducing young children's pedestrian accidents**

When small children are near any street or motor vehicle traffic with you, with other children, or by themselves, their safety becomes a special consideration. Certain questions need to be answered. How much supervision do children need? Where should they play? How far from home should they be allowed to go? Can they deal with street traffic? How?

If allowed complete freedom—when walking with adults, in selecting play locations or moving to and from play areas—children will take actions beyond their capabilities to handle. They tend to run across the street, play in driveways and streets and, in general, disregard traffic.

It is essential, therefore, that preschool children be protected and—to the extent their capabilities allow—helped to cope with the problems of vehicle traffic. The AAA has designed a series of booklets to assist you in providing for the traffic safety education of children three to six years of age. Simple pictures about traffic form the basis for real-world child and parental experiences. By using the booklets you can help your child to assume pedestrian responsibilities progressively as his or her capabilities increase.

The booklets are sequential in nature. The first booklet should be used until children consistently demonstrate the desired behaviors on their

own in the real world. If a parent starts to use the program with a two- or three-year-old, the activities illustrated in booklets 1 and 2 may require several months of practice before the child consistently demonstrates the desired behaviors. In contrast, a five-year-old may need only a few weeks. Each child differs in the length of time required to learn to accept more responsibility. However, most children under four will have difficulty consistently performing the activities presented in booklet 3. Similarly, most children under age five will have difficulty with booklet 4.



The primary objectives of the program are twofold. First is to reduce the incidence of "dart-out" behavior (running suddenly into streets) and playing in streets. Second is to help youngsters develop habits necessary for safe performance in the traffic environment. The approach employed in these activities does not rely on punishment, scolding, scare tactics, or memorizing a list of safety rules. Emphasis is placed on *LEARNING BY DOING*, and the repetition of *ADULT-DIRECTED* experiences.

**"When I Go Outside"—Booklet 1 (Ages 2½ to 6)**

—helps children learn to stay out of the street. They learn where to play and walk outside and how to tell when a car is coming, going or backing.

**“I Listen and Look For Cars Coming” – Booklet 2 (Ages 3 to 6)**

– helps children learn what actions to take and explains why those actions are necessary when they are near streets. It encourages children to assume *some* responsibility for their own actions on residential streets close to home while with adults.

**“How I Cross a Street” – Booklet 3 (Ages 4 to 6)**

– shows children what actions to take when crossing streets and explains why these actions should be taken. It illustrates typical traffic situations that young children encounter in their expanding areas of movement.

**“The Traffic Signal Light” – Booklet 4 (Ages 5 to 6)**

– helps children learn how to use traffic signal lights.

The rationale for this preschool pedestrian safety program is based on the following considerations:

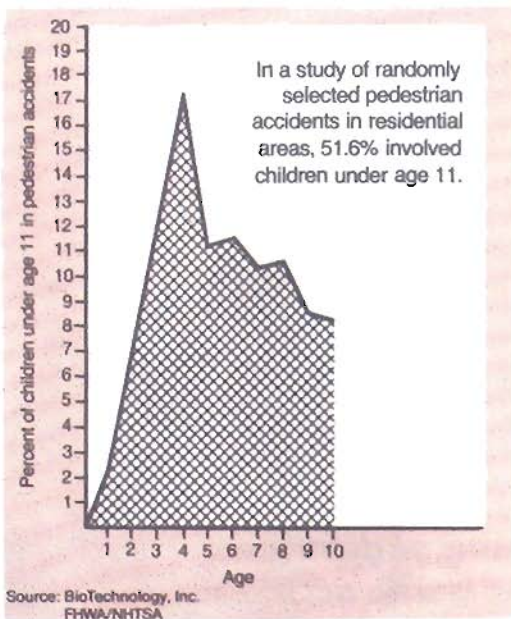
Each year there are about 130,000 pedestrian deaths and injuries.

Approximately one half (60,700) of all pedestrian injuries involve children under 15 years of age.

*Even more alarming is the fact that children from two to six years of age are estimated to be involved in from 18 to 25 percent of all pedestrian accidents. Yet this age group represents only about 6 percent of the total population.*



**Young pedestrians  
and traffic accidents**



## ***Developmental characteristics that influence a child's behavior***

In short, young children are pedestrian accident victims much more frequently than any other segment of the population.

The "typical" preschool child pedestrian accident occurs when a youngster attempts to cross a street within two blocks of his or her home. The accident happens on a straight stretch of residential two-lane roadway with two-way traffic, during the day when the weather is either fair or cloudy. The vehicle involved is typically a car traveling straight ahead at a speed of less than 30 mph. As far as the driver is concerned, the child appears suddenly, dashing across the street without looking for approaching vehicles. The child is usually alone and on the way to or from a friend's house. This type of accident is called "dart-out." The child is most likely to be a four-year-old male. In fact, more than two out of three preschool pedestrian accident victims are males.

In addition to darting into streets, the familiar childhood action of playing in streets, on driveways or sidewalks also can lead to accidents. (Each year, over 300 children are killed playing in their own driveways.)

Any attempt to teach traffic safety must consider the characteristics of young children. Let's examine why children behave as they do around streets and traffic.

During the preschool years, from the end of toddlerhood to age six, children make tremendous strides in physical, mental, social, and

emotional growth and development. They discover themselves, other people and meet the world with exuberance. Play is their business and they are constantly active. They are naturally curious and eager to learn.

The height of three-to five-year olds places them at a distinct disadvantage. Their eye levels range from 35 to 40 inches above the ground. In contrast, adult eye levels generally range from about 60-69 inches. To gain a better perspective of this crucial factor, stoop, sit or kneel to get an idea of what the traffic environment looks like from a child's level. You will find it impossible to see as much, and the perspective will be quite different.

In addition, visual development is not yet complete. Children under six years of age are typically farsighted and side vision is not well developed. Their eyes are not well coordinated and focusing requires more time than is generally true of adults. Some youngsters may see only part of a situation; at other times what they see is a blur and they may be unable to focus or identify important items. In addition, they do not localize sound as well as adults.

Young children are unaware of traffic laws and how they, as individuals, fit into the traffic system. Their thinking is a combination of reality and fantasy, knowledge and misconceptions. They usually think of only one thing at a time, have short attention spans, are impulsive and inherently curious. Furthermore, children under six rarely understand the true nature of dangerous situations. They can understand a situa-

## **Physical Characteristics**



## **Mental Characteristics**

tion from their point of view only and are unable to assume another person's position. Children's thinking is typically based on what they see, rather than reasoning. However, they can begin to develop skills for using their eyes and ears to gather details concerning traffic if they are guided to do so.

## **Emotional Characteristics**



Children often act on the basis of emotion rather than logic. Fear, excitement, anger or jealousy may intensify as children engage in activities that bring them in contact with traffic. Children are often unpredictable due to strong emotions associated with situations such as a birthday party, family fight, even something as simple as buying ice cream. Under such circumstances a child's spontaneous reaction may be to bolt straight for or away from a particular person or object with total disregard for traffic.

## **Social Characteristics**

A fourth factor is that between ages three and six, children are attempting to become sociable, somewhat self-reliant and independent people. Playing with other children becomes important and it seems very reasonable to a young child to join other children. Around age three, youngsters show interest in being near children their own age; however, they prefer to play beside rather than with other children. Typical four-year-olds wish to expand their world more quickly than parents generally anticipate. They seem to have few self constraints and are constantly on the move. At about age five, children become interested in their community, more independent and self-sufficient.

Friendships can become strong and they prefer to play in small groups.

When playing, young children are drawn to locations where they can be active and play with other youngsters. Areas that are particularly attractive are hard surfaces for wheeled toys, areas where other children gather, well-equipped playgrounds, pools, ponds or streams of water, vacant lots, areas with loose sand or dirt and vacant dwellings. These locations may be either safe or unsafe, and getting there may involve *crossing streets*. From the point of view of young children, safety is not a distinguishing characteristic. Their criteria is *activity* and *companionship*. When they find little to do in their own yards or in areas that have been designated for them, they are likely to seek more desirable locations.

In summary, young pedestrians are in a very difficult position due to the normal process of growing up. They are curious, adventurous and act impulsively. They alternate between affection and aggression, independence and dependency, competency and limitations. They lack knowledge and experience in making judgments about space (distance) and the *time* necessary for safe street crossing. Their reasons for crossing a street have nothing to do with safe or dangerous actions. They still do not have concepts of what is safe, dangerous, or illegal. They give most of their attention to play, family or friends and it is unlikely that they will think about or respond to traffic at the same time, unless properly guided.



## WHAT ACTIONS CAN PARENTS TAKE?

The two basic approaches for insuring your child's safety as a pedestrian are: (1) Isolation from traffic unless the child is supervised. (2) Teaching your child to cope with traffic to the extent of his or her ability. It is impossible, impractical, and undesirable to completely isolate children from traffic; therefore, positive action to teach the child to deal with traffic must be taken to reduce the likelihood of accidents.

What does this involve?

### *a. Set boundaries and rules not to cross streets alone or with other young children.*

The first step is to establish boundaries beyond which your child cannot go. When you set boundaries you must be *willing to enforce them*. Such boundaries obviously depend on individual circumstances and should typically expand as follows: When children first begin to play outside it is reasonable—with an adult nearby—for them to play in their own yard or next door. By the time a child is three or four, he or she will generally be able to go to nearby homes alone. This, of course, depends on the volume of traffic on a given street. The boundaries will have to extend further by the time your child starts school. At this point, most children must assume responsibility for crossing some streets by themselves.

The transfer of responsibility from parent to child should occur gradually, with you guiding your child's actions. Your child should demon-



strate to you consistently over a period of several weeks that he or she knows and can follow safe procedures before being allowed to cross any street alone. At this point, it is reasonable for a child to cross designated streets in residential areas where the volume of traffic is low. Bear in mind, however, that even children who have entered first grade need adult guidance when selecting routes, crossing busy residential streets and/or crossing any main traffic artery.

***b. Provide safe play areas that children find desirable.***

The second suggestion is designed to minimize the possibility of children playing or darting into streets. Remember, the primary criterion children use to identify a good play area is that it always offers "something to do." A sand box will provide such activity. Add buckets, shovels, sifters and containers and young children can be happy for hours. Something to climb, a couple of hiding places, boxes and boards for making things and a swing will give days of productive and enjoyable play for young children.

Another major ground rule to establish is where young children will use wheeled toys such as tricycles, bicycles or wagons. Children prefer to use wheeled toys on hard surfaces because of the difficulty of riding on grass, a fact that children recognize very early. However, most paved areas are either streets or connect with streets. Whether it is safe for your child to use a wheeled toy on a sidewalk or in your driveway will depend on individual circumstances.



Your preschooler should not ride wheeled toys in or play in the street under any circumstances. If you do not have a sidewalk or driveway that is suitable for wheeled toys, what alternatives are available? Allow your child to have wheeled riding toys, but restrict their use to an area that you consider safe, such as a basement or backyard patio. Another alternative is to supervise children's riding at nearby playgrounds or parks.

***c. Make arrangements for children to get back and forth across streets when necessary.***

Having boundaries necessitates making plans for crossing streets when your child desires to go beyond previously established limits. In some cases, it may be possible to move about the neighborhood without crossing streets. Whatever the conditions, decide on the places your child can go alone and the route to be used to get there and back again. Whenever possible use backyards, sidewalks, and common areas or cul-de-sacs. Obviously, such a plan will meet with better results if all nearby parents follow the same guidelines.

When children must cross the street to reach friends or playgrounds, walk with them until they have demonstrated the ability to cross by themselves. This is the time to show your youngster how to cross a street and make sure that he or she practices safe behaviors. During these brief moments, children can demonstrate how well they understand traffic.



Before taking children across a street and leaving them to play with others, consider certain situations. What will they do if they get into an argument, get hurt, want a drink of water, another toy, or have to use the toilet? Is your child likely to dash for home, disregarding traffic? Until you know your child can handle crossing the street in such situations, make arrangements with an adult the youngster can contact if necessary.

***d. Teach children to deal with traffic to the extent that their capabilities allow.***

The above three suggestions have as their intent separating children from traffic unless supervised. A fourth suggestion is to provide *supervised* learning experiences that will help your child learn to deal with traffic. The traffic picture booklets mentioned earlier can help you and your children with the *whats*, *whys* and *hows* of residential traffic. The pictures provide a basis for you and your child to talk about street traffic and then practice the same ideas when walking.

**• *Show your child what actions to take***

All children need practice in actual traffic situations. It is not enough to tell your son or daughter to "be careful" when they are near streets. They need to experience crossing streets with you, before they can safely cross streets alone. You are their model. For that reason, *your use* of safe, consistent and accurate pedestrian behavior is critical. Cross the street with your child only when there is a safe



***Actions for parents to follow when guiding child pedestrian activities***



gap in traffic. Your child will copy your actions. If you run or rush or take other high risk actions in traffic, your child will think he or she should do the same thing.

- ***Talk WITH children rather than AT them***

Explain to your son or daughter what actions they are to take and why. Listen to their comments and questions. In addition you can ask questions to help your children clarify their thinking. Some model questions that help children learn to think are as follows:

Could that be because . . . ?

When should we . . . ?

What happens when . . . ?

Would you like to . . . or . . . ?

How would . . . work?

- ***Mistakes are a natural part of learning***

Sometimes your son or daughter will misunderstand your directions or make a mistake when dealing with traffic. When a mistake is made, rather than scolding, encourage talking, thinking and problem-solving. No one likes to be made a fool of and told he or she is wrong. Your tone of voice or facial expressions can convey this message as well as your spoken words. If mistakes are used to make children feel inferior, they will soon give up trying rather than risk being wrong. In addition, it is not a good idea to simply teach children "*the* right answer." This teaches children to please you or be "cute" rather than learn to deal with changing traffic situa-

tions. Finally, it can be very comforting for youngsters to realize that their parents sometimes misunderstand or make mistakes too.

- ***Deal with straight sections of streets before intersections***

Children should understand how traffic operates on straight sections of streets before they attempt to cope with intersections. They can understand and cope with two directions easier than four or more, plus turning vehicles, signs and signals. For this reason, straight sections of streets are used exclusively in the first two booklets.

- ***Individualize the booklets***

Roadway layouts and pedestrian facilities vary tremendously in residential neighborhoods. As a result, you should tailor your discussions and walking habits to the actual traffic environment that you use. For example, traditionally intersections have been designated as the appropriate and safe place to cross streets. That standard should be followed when walking in downtown sections and areas with city blocks, sidewalks, and marked crosswalks. However, many suburban communities have streets with loops, dead-ends, cul-de-sacs, long stretches, few intersections, no sidewalks or marked crosswalks. It may not be safe or practical to walk to an intersection to cross the street in this type of neighborhood when the child's goal is directly across the street. Use the booklets to compare the similarities and differences of the streets you actually use.



*The Preschool Children in Traffic program was developed by AAA to meet the critical problem of pedestrian accidents involving children under 6 years of age.*

*Need for such a program is demonstrated in these statistics: children age 2 to 6 represent just over 6% of the total population, but are involved in up to 25% of all pedestrian mishaps.*

*It was determined that the most promising approach to improving preschool pedestrian safety is to provide parents with concepts and materials needed to assist their children in learning to deal with real-world traffic environments. The problem also is suitable for use by nursery schools, day care centers and other educational systems for the very young.*

*This program was created by AAA Department of Traffic Safety.*

Stock #3265—Includes the Following:

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN TRAFFIC: Parent's Guide for Action

WHEN I GO OUTSIDE—Booklet 1

I LISTEN AND LOOK FOR CARS COMING—Booklet 2

HOW I CROSS A STREET—Booklet 3

TRAFFIC SIGNAL LIGHTS—Booklet 4

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