

Spotlight on Safety



Helping your child be a safer pedestrian starts with seeing the world through your child's eyes

What does your street look like from the viewpoint of your child? The answer to this question can tell you a lot about helping your child be safer around traffic, according to the members of the *Partnership for a Walkable America* — a coalition of private, federal, state, and local organizations from across the country united with the common goal of promoting walking and the changes needed to make America safer for walking.

“It’s important to observe where your child will be walking from two perspectives — that of your child and that of drivers out there,” said Lauren Marchetti of the UNC Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill, N.C. “Being aware of how children interact with traffic — how mature they are, how responsible they can be — is also very important. That all boils down to spending time with your child.”

One important way that parents can help their children be safer pedestrians is to carefully plan the safest walking routes to school, to the bus stop, and to any other place their children walk, said Maria Vegega, Chief of the Safety Countermeasures Division at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in Washington D.C.

“Parents should be looking for routes with the least amount of congestion and with safe places to walk and to cross streets,” said Vegega, who works in NHTSA’s Office of Traffic Injury Control Programs.

Good crossing places for children are crosswalks with crossing guards, crosswalks with “*Walk*” and “*Don’t Walk*” signals, and crossing locations where motor vehicle drivers can easily see pedestrians, Vegega said.

Marchetti agreed: “The shortest distance is not always the best. Parents should keep an eye out for obstructions that might keep drivers from seeing their children.”

Sidewalks or grassy paths with adequate room for walking are an important consideration when planning safe walking routes, Marchetti said. Driveways are another important consideration since research has shown that they are places where child pedestrian injuries are more likely to occur.

“The best thing to do is to walk with your child to the bus stop looking at it from the perspective of the child,” Marchetti said. “If there are some driveways that seem particularly hazardous, think about taking an alternate route. If there is no alternate route, then you have to impress upon your child that here is where you stop and look. This shouldn’t be a negative thing. It shouldn’t be: ‘If you make a mistake, bad things will happen to you.’ It should be: ‘We haven’t done a perfect job of making the world a good place for kids. You need to help us keep you safe.’”

Vegega noted that neighbors should be advised to look for children in their driveways when they are pulling out to go to work and when they are coming home in the evening. Drivers can also help children be safer by driving slower in residential areas and school zones, and by stopping for stopped school buses that are loading or unloading children.

Teaching children to look left, right, and left again before crossing any street or driveway is an important safety rule that needs to be taught early and reinforced often, Vegega said.

“Parents have to realize in providing this information that a child may be able to repeat what he or she is supposed to do but may not actually do it when necessary, which is why children also need supervision,” she said. “We recommend that children under age 10 be accompanied by an adult.”

Setting a good example for your child is also important, Marchetti noted.

“Children learn by watching,” she said. “Parents need to cross streets in the way that they would want their children to cross streets.”

If children are walking in early morning light or at dusk, visibility is an issue to consider, Vegega said.

“If children are walking when the light is not optimal, they should not be wearing dark clothing,” she said. “They should be wearing retro-reflective gear because that reflects back the light and is more visible.”

School bus safety

Pedestrian safety around school buses is another consideration for parents, Vegega said.

“It’s important to get to the bus stop early so that you’re not running to the bus and to stay 10 feet — or in a small child’s terms, 10 giant steps — away from all sides of the bus,” she said.

“Children should wait until the bus stops, the door opens and the driver says it’s okay to board the bus. If they drop something, children need to tell the bus driver so the driver can either retrieve the item for the child or watch as the child retrieves the item. We also tell children never to go behind the bus because the bus driver cannot see them there,” Vegega said.

Walk with your child

Walking with children to the bus stop can give parents opportunities to help them develop good safety habits, Marchetti said. It can also give parents opportunities to find out just how walkable their neighborhoods are.

“The *Partnership for a Walkable America* in conjunction with NHTSA has developed a checklist by which parents can take a walk in their neighborhoods with their children and by filling out five questions, they can identify the types of problems they may have on their street. Is the problem the behaviors of the drivers? Is it street design? Are there obstacles that can be easily removed? The checklist provides suggestions of things you can do right away and things you can do with a little time to make your community a better place to walk,” Marchetti said.

“A lot of people find out they have a good place to walk, they’ve just forgotten to walk,” she added.

Walking with your child to the bus stop or to school also provides opportunities for parents and children to spend time together. In fact, even if children are driven to school by their parents, Marchetti said that parents might consider creating opportunities to walk with their children.

“Maybe occasionally, if you’re driving your child to school, you can park a few blocks away and walk with your child to school just as a way of having a few quiet moments together before school gets started,” she said. “Walking is a great form of exercise and a great way of getting someplace while observing the wonders around us that we too often overlook. Even if we have to create an opportunity to walk someplace, there are tremendous benefits to enjoy.”

For more information on ways to make your community walkable see the Web site of the *Partnership for a Walkable America* at <http://www.nsc.org/walk/wkabout.htm>

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Original publication: 1998