

## Parents: A School Zone Hazard?

Did you know that the most dangerous part of anyone's day is the time they spend in traffic? And that this is even more dangerous for school-age children and teens than for adults. That's because motor vehicle crashes claim more young lives than any other cause of accidental death.

As parents prepare to send their children and teens back to school this fall, they're urged to set aside 10 minutes to watch a new video (available at: [http://www.nj.gov/oag/hts/downloads/video/Crossing\\_08062010.wmv](http://www.nj.gov/oag/hts/downloads/video/Crossing_08062010.wmv)) that calls attention to the dangers in and around school zones. "School Zone – Danger Zone," the second in a three-video series dubbed "Street Smart is Street Safe" developed by the Municipal Exchange Liability Joint Insurance Fund (MEL), points out through interviews with school principals, parents, crossing guards, and police officials, how important it is for parents to know and follow their school's student drop off plan, understand and convey to their children the function of school crossing guards, and serve as positive role models by adhering to and reinforcing traffic safety laws. While parents should watch the video with their children, the message is particularly important for parents who often unknowingly create traffic hazards as they drop off or pick up their children from school. Accompanying the video is a downloadable tip sheet that is sure to prompt plenty of discussion around the dinner table.

"We've got to think beyond ourselves when it comes to traffic safety," stressed Pam Fischer, Director of the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety, who appears in the video and is the mother of a school-age child. "As parents, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the dangers associated with our transportation system -- particularly when it comes to the mix of cars and pedestrians on our roadways. All of us must work together as a community to ensure our children's safety in and around school zones."

Young children are particularly vulnerable in traffic because they lack, until about age nine, auditory localization skills – the ability to hear and anticipate oncoming traffic. Additionally, young children are impulsive and have trouble judging traffic and finding an acceptable gap to cross. Between 2007 and 2009, nearly 2,000 New Jersey children between 5 and 15 years of age were injured in pedestrian/motor vehicle-related crashes and 19 were killed. Boys accounted for nearly 64% of those injured and killed, but both boys and girls are vulnerable to pedestrian crashes which typically occur on a week day, during daylight hours and in dry weather conditions.

Teaching children about the importance of always using crosswalks and obeying pedestrian signs, signals and crossing guards is essential. Parents, however, must also brush up their traffic safety skills to ensure that they are not committing infractions, particularly when behind the wheel. It is imperative that parents refrain from double-parking, speeding, talking on cell phones or texting, and rushing off after dropping off their children. Parents should also follow the directions given by crossing guards and others stationed in school zones; failure to do so could not only endanger those who are providing a valuable service to the community, but the children they're helping to protect. Consider this, in the past ten years crashes involving school crossing guards in New Jersey have increased 65%. This is a statistic that should not only alarm parents, but provoke them to make safety their top priority when traveling in school zones.

*The Municipal Exchange Liability Joint Insurance Fund, provides excess insurance and services to 19 local Joint Insurance Funds (JIFs) representing over 60% of all local governments in New Jersey. The membership includes 384 municipalities, 73 utility authorities, and 88 housing authorities. Schools and PTA chapters are encouraged to show the DVD at back to school nights and chapter meetings, to post it on their web sites, and include the link noted above in all parent correspondence discussing the school's student drop off plan.*

## **“School Zone...Danger Zone” Tip Sheet**

*Traffic in and around school zones can create significant hazards for children and teens, as well as crossing guards, school officials, and volunteers. Parents often unknowingly create traffic hazards as they drop off or pick up their children from school. To ensure everyone’s safety, be sure to do the following:*

- Carpool with neighbors or friends to minimize the number of vehicles in the school zone or at the bus stop.
- Review and always follow your school’s student drop off plan. That means obeying all signs (i.e., no parking, stopping or standing) and/or individuals directing traffic, including volunteers. If your school does not have a plan, contact school officials and suggest one be developed.
- Drop your child off on the school side of the street, next to the curb. If that is not possible, park your vehicle legally (never double park) and accompany your child (using a crosswalk or at the corner) across the street to the sidewalk in front of the school.
- Follow instructions provided by school crossing guards -- remember they are there to help protect your child.
- Slow down and comply with the posted speed limit not only in school zones, but where children are walking or biking along the road. Research shows that neighborhood residents typically drive 10 mph faster than the posted speed limit in school zones.
- Resist the urge to “drop off and dash.” Pull out slowly and look not only ahead, but along-side and behind your vehicle for pedestrians, bicyclists, cars, and buses.
- Eliminate all distractions -- particularly cell phones and other electronic devices that reduce your ability to react quickly in driving situations involving young children and their spontaneous actions.
- Teach your child to look all ways before crossing and to cross only in crosswalks or at corners (this is essential in communities that do not have crossing guards).
- Make sure that everyone in your vehicle is properly restrained in the appropriate child safety seat or booster seat or seat belt. New Jersey law requires all children under 8 years of age or who weigh less than 80 pounds to ride in a properly installed car or booster seat. All children between 8 and 18 years of age and all adults must wear a seat belt.

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