

BANANAS HANDOUT

Red Light, Green Light: Teaching Traffic Safety To Children

The old adage *Stop, Look and Listen* is still good advice to give when teaching traffic safety to children. Here are some additional tips to assist you in discussing this very important, lifesaving topic.

For the Very Young

Begin at the beginning: very young children have no real understanding of cars, streets or traffic. Start very simply by explaining how fast cars move, how difficult it is for drivers to see children (visual aids help here – stand a small child up beside a parked car to show how BIG a car is) and how streets are off-limits. Repetition is the key – make every trip outside a traffic lesson. And, of course, never leave a young child alone near a street. For the very young, make one simple but absolute rule – *never go in the street without an adult*. Make a fuss even if your toddler steps off the curb without you. Hopefully your child will soon understand that the curb is the beginning of the street. Don't hesitate or feel guilty about being very firm.

As Children Get Older

Teach traffic safety through games and rhymes. To help a child learn to recognize and pay attention to corners, you can ask your preschooler to do something dramatic every time you come to a corner during a walk (i.e. squat down, blow a whistle, etc.). To relieve your own anxiety in parking lots, try having a child (or group of children) touch your car until you give the "password" and are ready to take hands. Holding a child's hand is always best, if possible, but if a hand isn't available, ask your child to hold on to your pant leg, the grocery cart or a younger sibling's stroller.

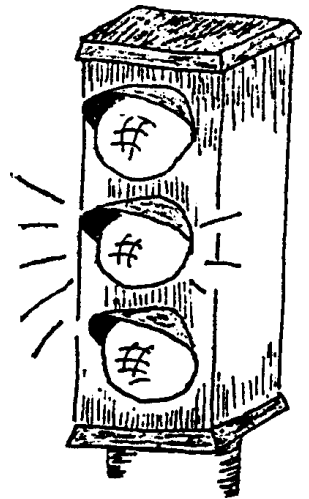
Use rhymes like these even with the very young:

*Stop, look and listen
Before you cross the street.
First use your eyes,
Then use your ears,
Before you use your feet.*

*The red's on top
The green's below
The red means stop*

*The green means go
The yellow light is in between
and it means no crossing.*

Say it over and over! Take time. Insist that your child look both ways with you before crossing the street. Let the child be the "lookout" who says when it's safe to cross. Set the example by always walking, *never* running, across an intersection. And, don't jaywalk.



Traffic Signals

Don't make a child too dependent on traffic signals. Explain carefully and often that not all drivers follow the signals and that everyone should look carefully in BOTH DIRECTIONS even when crossing with a signal. The rule "Look, Look and Look" (looking to the left, right and then the left again) is a good drill to remember. Teach your child not to cross the street if the light is already green when he or she approaches the intersection. Instead, s/he should wait for the "new green" so that there is adequate time to cross safely. Some of the newer traffic signals count down the time remaining to cross the street. Teach your child to start crossing the street before the countdown begins.

Safe Play

Teach your child *never* to go into a street to retrieve a toy. Children should wait at the curb until you or another adult comes and gets the toy. Teach "*Curb the Urge to Dash Across*" to drive home the point that children should wait at the curb, not chase balls into traffic. Make sure children play in safe places away from traffic, preferably in fenced yards or playgrounds.

Walking to School

If your child's school is close enough and you – and your child – feel ready, walking to and from school gives a child a nice sense of independence. Walking is also good exercise for youngsters and, last but not least, it benefits the environment by cutting back on car use. That said, it is important to walk with your child for the

first week or two, taking the same route each time. Working parents can practice this on weekends before school begins. Choose the safest route, even if it means walking farther to avoid a busy intersection. Discuss potential hazards on your way to school – blind drive-ways, etc. (Now is also a good time to remind children never to accept a ride from a stranger.) Stress the importance of walking the same route every day.

If there is a crossing guard on your child's way to school, introduce them to each other and tell your child that the crossing guard is "in charge." Once your child knows the route well enough, let your child "take" you to school one last day (or two) – pointing out any hazards to you. Being late to school makes some children frantic. If it's so late that the crossing guard will be gone, it may be a good day to accompany your child to school. If that's not possible, stress that walking slowly and safely is still important and that a few extra minutes won't make any difference. To reassure a nervous child, it may help to send a note to the teacher.

Strength in Numbers

If possible, have your child walk to school with friends or older siblings. It's safer and more fun. But make sure that all children, even older ones, know the safe way to school and that they cross streets together. Finally, consider monitoring your child/ren from a distance to ensure that they are following your guidelines.

Hazards Calling for Extra Caution

Obviously, children should walk on the sidewalk. But if there is no sidewalk, teach children to walk single file on the *left* side of the street, facing oncoming traffic, so they can step farther out of the way if need be. Children also need to be especially careful when visibility is poor due to bad weather or darkness. Show your child/ren how hard it can be to spot pedestrians or bicyclists while driving a car or riding a bus in the rain or dark. Discuss how wearing bright, light clothing, such as a yellow rain coat, can improve the chances of being seen. Another way to increase visibility is to attach a flashing clip-on lamp (sold at bike shops) to one's clothing.

Bicycle Safety

As children trade in strollers for trikes and later two-wheelers, they also need to learn safe bicycle practices. For starters, children need to wear helmets. California law requires youth under 18 to wear helmets while on wheels – be it bicycles, skateboards, skates, scooters or unicycles. Helmet don't prevent falls or crashes, but they reduce the risk of head injury and death in case of an accident. Be firm in laying down the "no-helmet-no-bike" rule.

Encourage compliance by:

- rewarding your child with a special treat or privilege
- pointing out that professional athletes – football and hockey players, baseball batters and race car drivers – wear helmets and so should they
- making sure the helmet fits and isn't too tight or loose
- setting a good example by wearing a helmet yourself.

Beginning Bikers

Youngsters should start out riding their bikes at a safe spot where they won't hurt themselves or others – a paved school yard on the weekend or a little-used cul-de-sac or bike path. Make sure your child learns to turn and stop properly. Supervise youngsters as they ride their bikes even in these relatively safe areas. In areas with heavy traffic, let children ride on sidewalks. But teach them to watch out for pedestrians and other sidewalk users. Children should ride slowly and look ahead for cars pulling out of driveways as motorists are not expecting bicycles on sidewalks.

Before children ride on the street, they need to know to

- stay on the right and avoid swerving in the road
- watch as they pass driveways and garage entrances
- stop at the corner and stop signs before crossing an intersection
- leave enough room on the right to avoid getting hit by opening car doors.

Advanced Bikers

Once children feel comfortable riding on the street under supervision, it's a good idea to go on joint bike trips until the child can ride on his or her own. Stay off busy streets and stick to special bike paths or "bicycle boulevards." Here is a summary of safety rules children need to master before venturing out on their own:

- Wear a helmet.
- Stop at all stop signs, red lights and obey all other traffic signs.
- Stop and look before entering the street (Don't dart out of driveways or from between parked cars.)
- Be careful when checking traffic behind you and don't swerve when looking over your shoulder.
- Ride with traffic on the right side of the street.
- Ride single file.
- Keep at least one hand on the handlebar.
- Don't ride your bike on busy streets, at dusk, in the dark or rain. (The law requires lighting – white lamp at front and red light at rear – if riding at night.)

Our children are too precious for us to relax and feel that the lesson of traffic safety is completely learned. Don't be afraid to be repetitious. And, last but not least, let's all remember to walk and drive carefully ourselves!