

Crossing The Street

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

If it were not for the street in front of their houses, Erin and her best friend Katie would be inseparable. On summer days, the girls can be seen standing on their respective curbs talking across the great asphalt divide about whatever it is four-year-olds talk about.

This used to be a matter of great concern for the girls' mothers. The street, although residential, at times resembles the Daytona Speedway.

Then, the mothers got together and gave their daughters a crash course in street safety.

For young children, this is risky. A few lessons in crossing the street safely may not be enough to prevent a young child from stepping in front of a car.

Learning to cross the street safely under every circumstance may take years for a child to accomplish. Parents should take a step-by-step approach and not expect too much too soon.

Initially, be restrictive. Children under four years old should never go into the street unless you are carrying them or holding their hand tightly. If you carry them, emphasize that they are never to go into the street on their own.

Children can begin to learn how to cross when they are between the ages of four and six years. It's okay, maybe even wise, to teach them in an exaggerated way.

Stand on the curb, holding your child's hand. Announce you're looking and listening for cars coming from one direction, then repeat the routine for the other direction. Ask your child, "Is a car coming? Is it safe to cross? We only cross together – never by yourself."

Hold your child's hand when crossing together. Practice it many times.

Children should be told to never go after anything in the street. That is an adult job. If a ball rolls into the street, use the opportunity to teach. Look and listen, turning your head in both directions, and say, "No cars coming," before you fetch the ball. And walk, don't run.

And always follow the rules yourself when your child is watching.

Most children between the ages of six and eight years should be ready to cross responsibly, if they've been properly taught. You'll need to decide for your child and your streets. Grant crossing privileges only if your child is ready, and withdraw them if your child forgets the rules. Some mistakes are too costly to leave to chance or children.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.