Children's safety in traffic – the responsibility of adults.

Parents of schoolchildren, ages 6-12

NTF
Safe traffic

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Your role as a parent is important

Our society is constantly changing. Towns are growing, school transport is changing, infrastructure is being rebuilt, and so are the children's own surroundings. Children have gained more influence in recent years, meaning that the role of parents is undergoing constant change. Yet there is no doubt that your role as a parent is still paramount in terms of your child's safety in traffic.

Giving children responsibility is important in order to allow them to grow into strong, independent individuals, and to learn how to make sensible decisions. But it is also important to give children a level of responsibility that they can handle.

In primary school, the headmaster is responsible for ensuring that cross-disciplinary knowledge areas – such as safety in traffic – are integrated into the various subjects taught at school. Traffic safety education at school varies a great deal from one school to another, and has also changed over the years. In the past, schools focused on "teaching children to take responsibility for their safety". These days, the work done by schools is based on helping children gain insight into the risks of the road, all based on their own experiences and maturity. At many schools, the parents are also involved in the school's efforts.

Among experts in the field of children's safety in traffic, there is considerable awareness that children's safety in traffic is always the responsibility of adults. It is important that you remember this as a parent.

Children's safety in traffic is the responsibility of adults!

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Physical and mental abilities and requirements.

It's hard to define a specific age by which most children are able to handle being in traffic on their own.

The traffic environment is highly variable, but children are also different. A rough rule of thumb is that children can walk to school in areas of moderate traffic at age 9-10, and are able to bicycle in traffic at age 11-12 – but of course there are traffic environments that no children should navigate on their own. At the same time, younger children can bicycle to school on their own if there are safe, secure and unbroken bike lanes. Another factor is whether or not children are used to being in traffic; being able to bike alone does not happen automatically, but requires training and experience.

Small children do not know much about cause and effect. Children have neither the experience nor the understanding needed to be able to navigate traffic on their own.

They can learn to handle many situations, but often lack judgement. Children up to age 8-10 are also not entirely consistent. They may engage in safe behaviour in traffic one day, only to suddenly rush out into the street after a ball the next day, completely oblivious to traffic.

In the past, we saw things from the perspective of an adult motorist and thought that we could train children to exhibit safe behaviour in traffic simply by teaching them the rules and the meaning of road signs. Now we know that we need to improve children's understanding of how traffic works. Many parents teach their children how to behave when crossing the street: "Look left, then right and then left again." This means that children know what to do when crossing the street from a young age, yet it is not certain that they know why, making it easy for them to forget.

The traffic environment is often too complex to be understood from a child's position, given their height and their limited ability to survey their surroundings. In other words, children lack both the physical and the mental requirements to cope with the complex traffic environments we have created. After all, the little green fellow at a pedestrian crossing means that you can cross. The idea that cars would drive through when the green fellow is showing is completely illogical to the child.

Simply crossing the street requires a number of considerations that many children cannot handle. Children are not miniature adults; children are children! And children...

...do not have fully developed peripheral vision until they are 15-16 years old.

...cannot tell whether a sound is approaching or retreating.

...cannot see over cars the way adults can. And they are small and harder to see in traffic.

...bring their playing out into the road.

...cannot judge speed or the distance to cars the way adults can.

...cannot multitask – they do one thing at a time.

...do not have the capacity to engage in fully formed abstract thought before they are 10-11 years old.

Child safety in cars.

The car and the car's safety systems – seatbelts, airbags and seats – are adapted to and sized for an adult body.

Children are smaller and their proportions are different to those of an adult. This means that children are more vulnerable during a crash and need special protection designed for their age.

In Sweden, it's the law that everybody in a car must use seatbelts, in both the front and rear seats. Children who are shorter than 135 cm must also use a special restraint: a baby seat, child safety restraint, booster seat or booster cushion.

The restraint must bear an E-approval marking or an i-Size approval. It must be suitable for the child and must be installed and used as intended.

The driver is responsible for ensuring that passengers under 15 use seatbelts and/or other restraints.

It is of utmost importance that children use booster seats or booster cushions up to age 10-12. Not until puberty has the child's body developed to the point where it can keep the belt in place against the thighs without the help of the booster cushion.

The booster seat or booster cushion helps adapt the car's three-point seatbelt to the child's body. You should make sure that the belt is tensioned correctly – close to the neck, across the sternum and down across the thighs (not across the stomach). If the belt is placed across the stomach, there is a risk that the child will sustain internal injuries in a crash. The closer to the body the belt is fitted, the better the protection it provides. Never let your child place the belt under their arm or behind them!

Booster seat or booster cushion?

The difference between a booster seat and a booster cushion mainly comes down to the booster seat's backrest. If the child is sitting in a seat without a headrest, the booster seat is your best option. Both restraints are just as safe if the child is seated fully upright, and the belt is fitted properly. The booster seat is also better on long drives where your child falls asleep, as it guides the diagonal belt properly and keeps the child in an upright position. On the other hand, the booster seat is less safe if your child keeps wanting to lean forward to see past the booster seat's side edges. The child should sit with their back to the backrest, and with the belt running snugly against their body.

New booster cushions, approved after February 2017, may only be used by children taller than 125 cm. However, older cushions are approved for shorter children.

Airbag

The passenger airbag is designed primarily to protect people who are at least 140 cm tall. For passengers under that height, under certain circumstances an inflating airbag may cause life-threatening injury. For this reason, if the car is equipped with a passenger seat airbag, no one under 140 cm should sit there unless the airbag is deactivated. Some modern car models have an airbag that also enhances safety for forward-facing children under 140 cm; contact your car manufacturer to find out more about your particular model.

Side airbags do not present a hazard to children.

School transport.

Every day, many children go to school on school transport because of the long distances involved, or due to unsafe traffic conditions on the route to school. Children have the right to competent drivers, safe vehicles, safe stops and safe routes to and from the school transport stops.

Taking school transport is environmentally friendly and safe. As a parent, it is important to keep in mind what the safety situation is like on the way to and from the stop, around the stop and on the school transport itself. By law, vehicles used for school transport must have a sign or similar identifying them as such. In addition, it must not be possible to open the doors on the left side of the vehicle.

Many children take the bus to school, either on a bus chartered to serve as school transport, or on regular public buses. Passengers must use the protective equipment on the bus, i.e. the seatbelt. By law, everyone over age three must wear their seatbelt while seated in a seat with a seatbelt. Passengers must be informed by the driver of their obligation to use seatbelts.

It is the responsibility of the driver to make sure that passengers under 15 wear seatbelts.

Important for you as a parent to keep in mind!

- What are the conditions at the stop where the children are picked up and dropped off? Do they have to cross the road?
- What is the speed of traffic where the children wait?
- Do all the children have seats with seatbelts?
- Do the smaller children have a booster cushion to sit on?
- Does the child use the seatbelt on the bus? Does the driver remind them to?
- Does the driver maintain the right speed?
- Does the school transport have a breathalyser lock?


HÅBO
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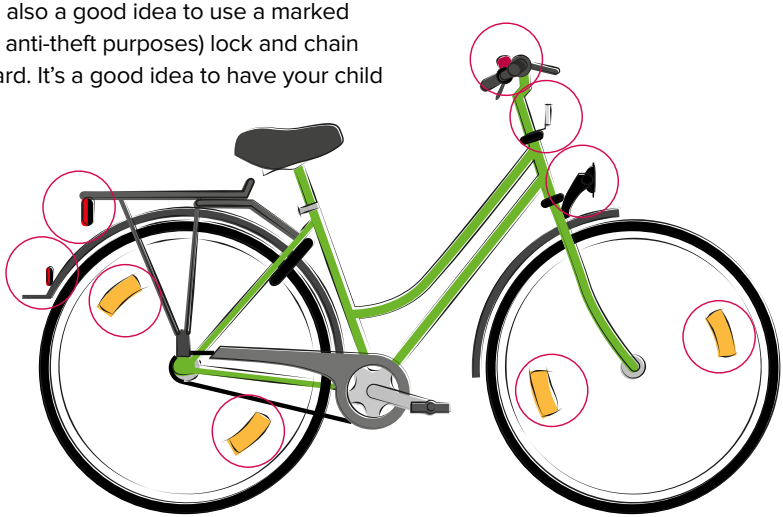
Bicycling.

Bicycling is a good thing in many different ways, both for the individual child and for society at large; but the traffic environment is frequently poorly adapted to child cyclists – and to adult cyclists, for that matter.

Children under 12 often do not satisfy the basic requirements for bicycling in complex traffic environments. In a moderately trafficked environment, a parent or other adult can accompany the child to school on a bicycle once the child is 7-8 years old. However, you should opt to get off your bike and walk across the road at crossings. For cycling in a more heavily trafficked environment, you should wait a few more years.

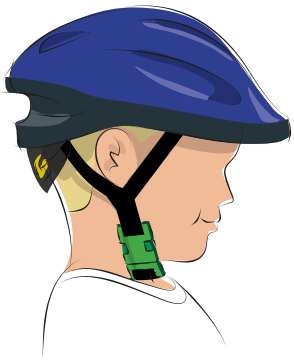
A bicycle is considered to be a vehicle. By law, it must be equipped with a bell and a brake. It must also be equipped with lights on the front and back, as well as reflectors on the front, the back, and on the sides of the wheels, if the bicycle is to be used after dark.

It is also a good idea to use a marked (for anti-theft purposes) lock and chain guard. It's a good idea to have your child use a bicycle equipped with a foot brake for as long as possible. When purchasing the first bicycle with a hand brake, it is important for the brake lever on the handlebar to fit the child's hand. Wait to buy a bicycle with several gears until the child is a few years into their teens.



Bicycle helmet

The head is very delicate, and even a moderate impact can cause brain damage. Skull injuries are the most serious type of injury; they primarily affect cyclists who do not use a helmet.



The law says that all children and young people under 15 must use a helmet when riding or being transported on a bike. Everyone, regardless of their age, should of course wear a bike helmet when cycling.

A bike helmet has a service life of around 10 years, provided that it is not subjected to a powerful impact – in which case it must be replaced immediately. Buy a helmet that fits your child, not a helmet for your child to grow into.

Many of the accidents in which cyclists hit their heads involve impact to the forehead and temples. That's why it is important for the helmet to sit straight and fit the head snugly, and that it cover the forehead, the back of the head and the crown. Make sure that the helmet is CE marked.

Where should pedestrians walk and where should cyclists ride on a shared footpath/bicycle lane?

Pedestrians on a shared footpath/bicycle lane should keep to the left side in the direction of travel wherever possible, so that they can make eye contact with oncoming cyclists. This rule is formulated in a legislative bill that may be passed in 2018. Swedish road traffic regulations currently state that pedestrians using the verge or the roadway should keep all the way to the left in the direction of travel, if possible.

Cyclists should keep to the right side in the direction of travel.

Walking.

More and more children, especially young ones, are being driven to school. Driving children to school creates even more traffic around the school and further amplifies parents' concerns for the safety and security of their children.

Combined with less time spent playing sports, less exercise on the way to and from school has led to more and more children becoming overweight and in some cases dangerously obese. Although the practice of driving children to school may be based on the best of intentions, it can turn into a vicious spiral. Parents drive their children to school to keep them from being run over by other children's parents, yet in so doing contribute to heavier traffic and a less safe environment around the school.

Walking school bus

An easy way to get more parents to walk to school with their children is to start what is called a walking school bus. A few families who live close to each other on the way to school take turns walking to school and picking up the children along the way. This way the children walk in the company of an adult every day, and you can take turns in terms of who is responsible for taking the children to school.

Make demands of your child's traffic environment

Talk to your neighbours or to your child's classmates' parents and discuss what you would like to improve when it comes to the traffic environment. You probably have different wishes and ways of seeing things. Discuss how you can make the traffic environment better for everyone.

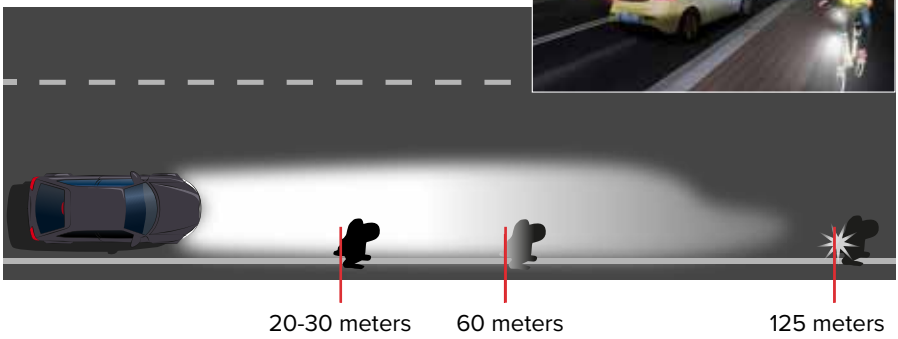
- Walk the route together and discuss how the traffic environment works. Document, draw and take pictures of what you want to fix. It's very important that you include the children in your discussion. They have their own highly important opinions to contribute about what they would like to see change and what they perceive as being unpleasant in the traffic environment.
- Find out who is responsible for the road. It could be the Swedish Transport Administration, the municipality, the property owner, the housing cooperative or the community.
- Draw up an open letter setting forth your views. Send it to the entity responsible for the road. Follow up and make sure that your letter has reached the right person, and find out when the matter will be attended to.

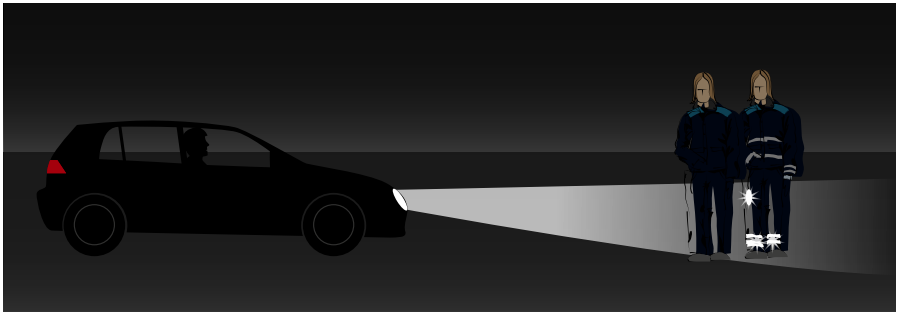
Reflectors

Wearing reflectors makes it easier for people to see you, reducing the risk of an accident. Reflectors are for more than just dark country roads. It is important to wear reflectors in urban traffic, despite the streetlights. Most accidents involving pedestrians occur in urban areas with street lighting. One reason for this is probably that many pedestrians believe they are visible, even if they are not actually visible to motorists. A good reflector is visible in the dark, or in poor visibility conditions, when it catches the beam of a headlight. The reflectors reflect the strong light that hits them. Wear them low enough so that they will be caught in the headlight beams.

The reflectors should also be visible from several directions. If you are wearing dark clothing, a driver using his low beams will detect you at a distance of 20 to 30 meters, whereas if you are wearing light-coloured clothing he will see you at a distance of 60 meters. However, someone wearing reflectors will be seen at a distance of 125 meters.

A lot of children's outerwear comes with reflectors permanently sewn into the garments. Keep in mind that after being put through the wash a number of times, the material wears out and its reflective properties reduce. Even reflectors carried in a jacket pocket will lose their reflectance over time, often due to keys or other objects that rub against them. This is why you should replace the reflectors on a regular basis.





Ride-on toys and hoverboards.

Ride-on toys
Ride-on toys are defined as vehicles that cannot or may not be operated at speeds in excess of 6 km/h (about walking speed).

If the vehicle is equipped with a motor, it must be an electric motor. A ride-on toy is intended for children up to age 14. The most common types of ride-on toy used outdoors are scooters and skateboards.

A child who uses a ride-on toy has the same obligations as a pedestrian in traffic: that is to say, they must keep to the footpath, or to the left side of the road if there is no footpath. For this reason, a child on a ride-on toy should be supervised by an adult.

The rules governing walking also apply to those who use in-line skates or similar. However, someone travelling faster than walking speed should keep to the right side of the road where doing so is more appropriate. A scooter equipped with an electric motor capable of speeds faster than 6 km/h is not a ride-on toy, nor is it suitable for children.

Hoverboard
A hoverboard is a self-balancing board with two wheels and an electric motor. The board resembles a skateboard, but is ridden with the long side facing forward. Its maximum speed is limited to 20 km/h.

A hoverboard is classed as a bicycle, meaning that it is subject to the same traffic regulations as regular bicycles. For example, it must come equipped with a brake and a bell (it's fine to hold the bell in your hand). A hoverboard must be operated in the bicycle lane, where available, or else on the verge. Children under 15 must wear a helmet.

A hoverboard that exceeds 20 km/h for example, falls under the heading of "other vehicles," meaning that it may not be operated in traffic.

Photo: Shutterstock/ Dreams Come True

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