

Be a safe carpooler

It's time to put on your chauffeur's hat again! Follow these smart tips to keep backseat chaos to a minimum

The backpacks are filled, the lunches are made, and the carpool schedules are written on your calendar. When you're carting children around town—yours and other people's—safety is paramount. Use these eight strategies to discipline your precious passengers when they need it and to set an example for them by being a model of good driving behavior.

By Hillary Quinn

1 Create a carpool contract
You know you'll keep kids safe when they're riding in your car—but what about when someone else is behind the wheel? Sit down with the other parents before the school year starts and agree on a list of rules that should be followed regardless of who is behind the wheel. This is an especially diplomatic way to get lax parents to step up. When you meet as a group, they'll feel the peer pressure and you won't have to single them out. Discuss seating arrangements and booster seats, and exchange emergency phone numbers.

3 Make your kids as self-sufficient as possible

The safest drivers are those who keep their eyes on the road, not on the backseat. Stash a variety of toys, books and even catalogs in the car to occupy small hands. The less frequently you have to turn around, the better.

SAFE-MOM TIP



“We recently bought booster seats with cup holders; my kids love this because they have their drink and a snack right at their fingertips.”

—Bianca Cioffi, 41, Castaic, Calif.



2 Give your kids a boost

Most states mandate forward-facing booster seats for children between 20 and 40 pounds (or between four and eight years of age). The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) urges parents and caregivers to use booster seats until a child reaches 80 pounds, even though there are no laws that dictate doing so. (California recently changed its booster law to include children who weigh up to 60 pounds.) Go to www.safekids.org to find out the laws in your state.



4 Buckle up everyone in the car securely

Be a carpool role model: Fasten your seat belt even for short rides. Children ages four to six are skilled enough to buckle a seat belt but not to adjust it so it's secure. Make sure they stay properly strapped in.

SAFE-MOM TIP



“My seven-year-old sometimes moves the shoulder strap under his shoulder, so I check the rearview mirror often to make sure the seat belt is in place.”

—Suzanne Portnoy, 45, Montclair, N.J.

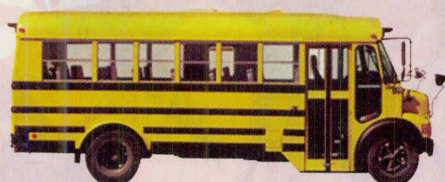
DID YOU KNOW?

* Kids ages four to seven sitting in a belt-positioning booster seat are 59 percent less likely to be injured in a car crash than those restrained only by a seat belt.

Source: Partners for Child Passenger Safety

Calm your child's fears about riding the bus

For many children, this act of independence causes anxiety and sleepless nights. These answers to common questions can help your little ones cope.



Q What if you're not at the bus stop?

First, explain that someone your child knows will always be there, and that it'll be you unless you've told her about other arrangements. Second, in case something should come up, agree with another parent to be each other's backup; tell your child to look for that person if she doesn't see you.

Q What if I don't like the driver?

Some school districts offer practice rides before school starts to help soothe young children's nerves. You can also introduce your child to the driver on the first day and have her bring a small gift—a flower, piece of candy, special note—to help your child to connect with the driver.

Q What happens if I miss my stop?

Your child should let the bus driver know. Often he will return to the stop. Reassure your child that bus drivers have radios that they can use to call the school and your home if they need to.

Q What if I can't remember which bus to get on?

Laminate a note with your child's bus information—the name of the driver, the bus number and the right stop—and pin it to the inside of her backpack.

Q What if it's a different driver one day?

Let your child know that substitute drivers are given a map with directions to each stop plus a list of names of the children and where they get on and off.

CUT OUT AND KEEP

Travel smart



Always put kids under age 12 in the backseat.

5 Make the front seat off limits at all times

The dangers of air bags are well known—air bags can injure or kill kids who are too close to them when they deploy. Though getting a child to understand that he's still not big enough to ride shotgun isn't always easy, children younger than 12 should never sit up front. If you're in a situation where an older child must ride in the front seat, make sure he's tightly buckled in and slide the seat as far from the dashboard as possible.

6 Never let them "play" at driving

Nothing makes a child feel more grown up than hopping behind the wheel of the car or sitting on your lap and vroom-vrooming in the driveway, but this sets an extremely dangerous precedent. Children who think they belong in the driver's seat may feel entitled to play with dashboard controls while you're driving, creating a potentially life-threatening situation.

+ SAFE-MOM TIP



"When my three-year-old son, Cole, wants to 'drive,' I take him to a nearby park and let him play on the toy steering wheel."
—Christie Fitzmaurice, 36, Woodway, Wash.

7 Stop the car if things get out of control

There are times when you need to make good on the threat and actually pull over when things get too rowdy. It's safer for everyone if you do.

+ SAFE-MOM TIP



"Sixth-grade boys are notorious for acting up while someone is driving. They throw food and jockstraps, play musical instruments in your ear, steal homework.... I stop the car when they get out of control and will not move until they settle down. They may not like it, but it saves lives."
—Patty Farrell, 50, Portland, Ore.

8 Be prepared for disaster

Stock your car with a variety of save-the-day supplies: a bag or bowl for a sick child, a first aid kit, cell phone, gas card, phone list, water bottles, moist towelettes and snack packets. These items will make life easier even on the toughest days.



* Only children 4 foot 9 or taller are big enough to wear an adult seat belt as the only restraint; shorter kids need a booster.
Source: NHTSA

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