

Weller Health Tip for Kids: Staying Safe in the Car and on the Bus

Whether you're on your way to soccer practice, your aunt's house, or the science center for a school field trip, you're probably getting there by riding in a car or a school bus. Most kids spend some time in a car or a school bus every day.

Cars and buses can be great because they're faster than biking, walking, or skateboarding. You'd be pretty late to practice if you didn't get a ride, and it would be hard to get to that soccer game in the next town without a school bus!

But riding in cars or school buses comes with some responsibility: You need to ride safely. Luckily, it's not hard to do. Keep reading and you'll learn the rules of car and bus safety.

Seatbelt Basics

Whenever you ride in a car, wear your seatbelt every time. No matter how short the trip is — even if it's only around the corner — you still need to buckle up. This is so important because if the car you're riding in gets into an accident, the seatbelt restrains you. (Restrain is a fancy word for holding you back.) Even if the car is moving slowly, you can still get thrown around if you're not wearing your seatbelt.

When you get into a car, always buckle up right away. This means locking both the lap and shoulder belts. Some cars have a shoulder belt that comes across your body by itself when the car door shuts, but the lap belt still needs to be locked in place by hand. Other cars have a lap and shoulder belt that are connected as one piece, and the whole thing needs to be locked by hand.

Older cars might have two separate belts or no shoulder belt, but just a lap belt. Whichever kind of seatbelt you come across, the directions are the same: Buckle every belt.

If you're wearing a seatbelt correctly:

- The lap (lower) part of the belt should be sitting low and tight across the upper part of your hips. It should never go across the upper half of your belly.
- The shoulder part of the seatbelt should fit snugly across your chest and shoulder, not under your arm or across your neck or face.

Sometimes seatbelts need to be adjusted to fit a kid correctly, so ask an adult to make sure your seatbelt fits right.

Riding in a friend's or relative's car is no excuse to skip the seatbelt. Even if your friend or friend's parents don't wear seatbelts, always wear yours. And don't ever share a seatbelt with a friend — it might look like fun to buckle up as a pair, but you could both get hurt in an accident.

Booster Seats

If you're a kid 8 years or under, you also need a booster seat. Booster seats help you sit up high enough so the shoulder part of seatbelt fits properly across your chest.

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Any kid who weighs between 40 pounds (18.1 kilograms) and 80 pounds (36.3 kilograms) should be in a booster seat. Kids should continue using the booster seat until they are 4 feet, 9 inches tall (1.4 meters) and weigh at least 80 pounds (36.3 kilograms). Once kids reach that height and weight, they can safely ride in a car with just the seatbelt. So check with your parent to make sure you're big enough to ride safely without a booster!

Get in the Back

Here's another important safety rule: Sit in the back seat. Kids 12 years old and younger need to be sitting in the back. Period. It's simply the safest place to be. If the car you're riding in gets into an accident, you have much less chance of hitting something hard like the windshield if you're in the back. You also won't be injured when the airbag inflates rapidly during a crash.

If you're in the back seat with friends or brothers and sisters, everyone needs to keep their seatbelts on and not horse around. It can be hard for the driver to concentrate on driving and see what's going on outside the car if you're jumping around back there. Short story: It can be dangerous and everyone could get hurt.

What About Air Bags?

You might know a little bit about air bags because many car commercials on TV talk about them. If a car with air bags is in a front-end accident, the bags burst out of the steering wheel and dashboard and — whoosh! — blow up like big balloons. This happens very quickly — in the blink of an eye. Air bags cushion passengers during an accident to keep them from hitting the dashboard or windshield.

But even though the bags have saved many adults' lives, kids 12 years and under should never sit in the front seat of a car that has air bags. That's because air bags are made to protect a bigger person's body, and when they open they can hurt kids.

But what if you're going to ride in someone else's car and you're asked to sit in the front seat? First, make sure the adult driver knows the rule: No one age 12 or under in the front. If you have no choice but to sit in the front, follow safety rule #1: Wear your seatbelt!

Air bags do not — and should not — take the place of seatbelts. Have an adult help you push your seat all the way back so you'll be as far away from the air bag as possible. And keep your back against the seat — don't lean forward or wiggle around.

Busing It

The school bus is a little different from a car because in addition to being a careful passenger, you need to think about how to get on and off the bus safely. Whether you ride the bus to school every day or just to field trips or band concerts once in a while, it's important to follow these rules.

- When you see the bus driving up, everyone waiting should get into a line. The line should start about five giant steps (or around 10 feet, or 3 meters) from the curb and go back from the street, rather than down the side of the street.
- Wait until the bus stops and the driver opens the door and says it's OK to step onto the bus. This is important! The driver is the only one who can really see all the traffic out on the road and make sure that it's safe for you to get on the bus. (If you must cross the street to board the bus, be sure to wait for the bus to come to a complete stop and for the driver to flash the red lights.)
- Once aboard, be sure to listen to the driver's instructions, and even if you're in a hurry to grab a seat with your friends, don't rush and push.

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Rules for Bus Safety

As with riding in a car, the best thing to do on the bus is buckle up (if the bus has seatbelts). That's because it's just as important to be restrained when you're on the bus. If the bus is in an accident, the seatbelt will keep you from bouncing all over the place. And play it cool when you're on the bus: No jumping, running around, or throwing things. This can make it hard for the driver to concentrate, and kids might get hurt.

So, a short bus ride later, you arrive at your band concert and you can't wait to blow that tuba! Not so fast — you have to pay attention as you're getting off the bus, too. When you step down, hold onto the handrail and be careful that your backpack or book bag doesn't get caught on the rail or in the door.

After you exit the bus, never walk behind it. If you have to walk in front of the bus, walk on the sidewalk next to the bus for at least 10 feet (3 meters), make sure that the driver sees you, then cross. If you drop something as you cross the street, don't ever bend down to pick it up — the bus driver might not see you. Instead, tell the driver you dropped something.

See how easy it is to be a safe passenger? Following these simple rules means you'll be more protected during a car or bus trip — and have more fun! So pack your bag, buckle up, and get on the road!

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit www.wellercenter.org.

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