



# Crossing the street

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**Glance right — a pickup** passing you and nothing else coming. Glance left — one car and a truck, but distant

and not speeding. Lots of time... cross the street. Simple, isn't it?

Actually, the complexity of what you just accomplished can be quite staggering. You balanced multiple observations, estimated speeds and distance of vehicles, estimated your crossing time and distance, and factored in the possibility of something going wrong. Yet, there you are on the other side of the street, safe and sound.

The sophistication of the 'street-crossing process' includes observation, thinking and judging skills that are often beyond the capability of most children. It comes as no surprise, then, that crossing the street is very dangerous for a child. In fact, children aged five to nine years have a higher rate of death and hospitalization from traffic accidents.

In part, this is because children spend proportionally more time as pedestrians, plus their road skills and judgement have not yet developed sufficiently. This inability to make good judgements is not due to intelligence. Rather, it comes from their level of thinking and physical coordination. This is especially true when they are nervous or scared, as they might be with speeding cars in front of them.

Some other reasons to be concerned about kids and traffic: Young children do not see out of the corner of their eyes as well as adults can; perception skills differ in children from adults. A large car seems to be moving more quickly than a small one. Children also lack a sense of vulnerability and do not understand the damage or death that can come from a collision.

*...the complexity of [crossing the street safely] can be quite staggering.*

Children also love to keep moving! They may be too restless to wait for stoplights or passing traffic, and they are easily distracted and may be impulsive. Many children also believe that adults will look out for them, thinking "I can see them, so they can see me and will avoid me on the road." Wrong!

Children under ten should always be accompanied when crossing the street or riding their bikes on busy roads. During this time, they should also be getting trained, or maybe 'inducted' is a better word, in road safety. Start the programming early and by the time they are nine or ten, they should be road-safety responsible.

Start with the five steps to crossing the street: Stop. Look both ways. Listen for traffic. Wait until clear or all traffic has stopped. Make eye contact with drivers to make sure they see you. Cross. (And don't forget to check behind you in case someone is turning into you!)

Being a good role model is another important part of helping your children to develop safe habits. You may be ready to jaywalk, but your child needs to learn to use the crosswalk. While you're at it, use the sidewalk whenever possible — that is the safest place, after all.

Drivers, parents and adults in general, all share a responsibility for keeping children safe on the roads. Drivers: stay off the phone while driving, and maybe have breakfast before getting into the car. Parents: teach your children well, and often. Everybody else: keep an eye on that little boy trying to cross main street! The amount of responsibility we heap onto a child crossing alone is high. Make sure they are ready for it.