



School Bus Safety: Infants, Toddlers and Pre-schoolers

Background

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children who are being transported in school buses. Various federal, state, and local government programs have been established to provide young children and their families with services designed to support the child's growth and development. Additionally, in some situations and locations, school bus drivers are allowed to bring their own infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children on the bus with them.

The exact number of children under the age of five riding in school buses is unknown. However, this population includes children served in several programs for children from birth through age five. These programs include the *Early Intervention Programs for Infants and Toddlers With Disabilities*, the *Pre-schools Grant Program*, the *Early Education Program for Children with Disabilities*, *Head Start*, Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs and Teenage Parent Programs, as well as child care center.

Because current school bus designs and federal safety regulations were formulated based on child passengers in grades K through 12, infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children may be more vulnerable in a crash or sudden driving maneuver. Nevertheless, for many of these children, the school bus is the primary vehicle that provides access to the programs and services that are designed to meet individual needs of children and families.

Discussion

Transportation of infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children should be established with the mutual cooperation of parents, transportation providers and service providers. Pre-school aged children who ride school buses include children with and without disabilities. Accordingly, transportation providers need to be knowledgeable and to develop skills to provide adequately for the safety of young children while being transported in school buses. Infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children with special physical, cognitive or behavioral needs present new challenges and responsibilities for transportation providers.

These children may require a great deal of supervision during the time they are in the school bus. Some issues that must be addressed to assure safe transportation in the school bus include:

- physical handling
- communication with young children
- behavioral management

- child safety seats, restraint systems, safety vests
- wheelchairs and occupant securement systems
- special equipment management
- medically fragile and complex conditions
- confidentiality
- length of ride
- personnel training
- parental responsibilities

Because there are large numbers of children under the age of five who are transported on school buses, it is essential to recommend guidelines for child safety seats, occupant passenger restraints and securement systems.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has promulgated “Preschool Transportation Guidelines” that establish guidelines for transporting pre-school aged children. (NHTSA defines “pre-school” as children under 50 pounds.) The guidelines outline the following principles for car seat use:

- Each child should be transported in a suitable, approved Child Safety Restraint System (CSRS) certified to meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) No. 213. CSRSs include forward-facing, rear-facing, and booster child safety seats—car seats, and safety vests.
- Children should remain in a CSRS until they weigh more than 50 pounds. This recommendation focuses on weight, not age. State laws vary on requirements for children traveling in car seats on school buses.
- A bus attendant(s) should be on the bus to assist the bus driver in providing safe transportation. The number of adults on the bus should be similar to ratios required in classrooms and day car centers.
- CSRSs should be properly secured to the school bus seat by staff trained in proper securement procedures. There should be no unbelted passengers seated behind seats with CSRSs car seats.
- CSRSs should be properly fit for the school bus seating compartment and the child transported.

- Meet the special medical needs of the individual students transported as necessary.
- CSRSs should be registered with the manufacturer and any applicable recalls implemented.
- Regular cleaning and inspection of the CSRSs is necessary for hygiene and crashworthiness. Be sure cleaning solutions do not create allergic reactions for staff or children. It is important to note that repeated cleaning of fabric can reduce flame-retardency.
- CSRSs should be withdrawn from service and destroyed after a crash or at the expiration date. For seats without an expiration date, it is recommended that seats be discarded after six years.
- CSRSs should be located starting in the front of the bus to facilitate observation of transported children.
- The distance between school bus seats may be established within a prescribed range. Maximum seat spacing should be ordered on new buses to provide increased safety for child passengers and improve access to the seats for securing children in CSRSs.
- The total width of CSRS(s) and passengers on any school bus seat should not exceed the seat width.
- CSRS(s) should be placed next to the window if there is another passenger in the seat.
- Retrofitting of school buses to add lap seat belts to secure CSRS(s) or to increase seat spacing must be done to the specifications of the bus manufacturer. Generally, retrofitting is usually impractical and not recommended because of the many changes needed, such as bus seats designed to different specifications. However, if a bus is retrofitted, the owner should make sure that seat spacing is at the maximum.

School bus drivers and attendants should be trained in emergency procedures, which include:

- A written evacuation plan and evacuation drills with the children they transport.
- Seat belt cutters should be kept on the school bus within reach of the seated driver.
- CSRS(s) should not be placed next to rows of seats with emergency window or door exits.

- The local emergency response system should know the response plans for school bus emergencies.

Parents must have clear communication with schools and care providers about transportation policies and procedures. To reinforce these same safety procedures in their personal family travel, parents should insist on proper restraint system and CSRS use.