



Safety on the roads back to school

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer



Back to school also means

'back in the car' for most families. It seems that the

days of idly walking to and from school have pretty much passed us. Without going into the reasons for that trend, we should consider what it means for kids, and for drivers.

Some kids might complain about going back to school (all that homework) but in fact, most are excited to be back with their friends, new clothes on their backs and a bagful of brand new school supplies. That excitement translates to inattention and extra dangers around vehicles. Motorists can do their part by realizing this and taking even more care on the road, even more so around schools where other parents are dropping off or picking up their youngsters.

Parents can start their kids off safely by teaching them proper road safety rules like making sure drivers can see you (make eye contact) before crossing streets and to watch for turning traffic. And if travelling by school bus, remind them to look to the driver for a signal that it is safe to cross and to always watch for traffic, even if the bus has its flashing lights on.

That takes care of the people on the road. But what about inside the vehicle?

Cars are not really built for kids; certainly the front seat isn't what with those 'supersonic-speed' air bags ready to deploy and the proximity to injury in a front end crash. That is why the rear seat is called the 'kid zone' for those under 12. Statistics show that children are 25 percent safer in the

rear seat of a vehicle, but the only way to protect them from the dangers of collision or sudden stops is to restrain them properly.

Infants until about a year old need a rear-facing car seat. It should fit properly and be appropriate for their weight and height. These types of seats cradle a baby's head (they are rather large and have weak neck muscles at that age) in sudden stops and hard turns. They are installed 'backwards' so that the back takes the force of an impact.

From about age one to 4½, a forward facing seat suits a child weighing 10 to 18 kg. Properly installed and tethered, this seat provides the best protection... always in the 'kid zone' of course.

By the time your child weighs around 18 kg, usually just before five years old, he or she is ready for a booster seat. Again, the seat should be in the 'kid zone' and used as intended. Make sure the seatbelt is positioned properly across the hips and the shoulder belt across the chest.

Eventually, your child will have grown enough to be protected by front seat measures such as the airbags. This is usually around age 12, but caution is always necessary. Shorter front seat passengers—and not just 12 year-olds— can be injured by a deploying airbag.

In all cases, read and follow the instructions that came with the seat. They will tell you when to use which seat, how to best buckle in the child, and how to maximize its effectiveness to protect your child.

[Kids' back to school] excitement translates to inattention and extra dangers around vehicles.