

## **Roads must be safer for everyone**

By Janani Srikantharajah, Oakland  
(Oakland Tribune, March 18, 2009)

Traffic injuries are never accidents (“Boy’s death, girls’ injury have Berkeley focused on street safety,” March 9).

Yes, understanding what the walk signal means is important, but if we are really committed to preventing these unnecessary deaths and injuries, we should focus on what really matters: reducing the number of cars on the road in the first place.

The data are clear: In communities where more people walk or use public transit for travel, there are fewer pedestrian injuries. When roads are designed to have safety features such as bike lanes and curb cuts, not only are people more likely to walk and bike safely but drivers are cued to drive more safely around bicyclists and pedestrians.

There is clearly a strong role for parents and children in traffic safety, but we also need strategies that ensure that roads and communities are designed for the safety of all travelers, not just drivers.

## **Original article: “Boy's death, girl's injury have Berkeley focused on street safety”**

By Kristin Bender and Katy Murphy  
(Oakland Tribune, March 10, 2009)

Sometimes it takes a tragedy to make people pay attention.

Before a 6-year-old student of Malcolm X Elementary School was hit and seriously injured by a vehicle in a South Berkeley crosswalk in late January, a parent-organizer at the Berkeley school had struggled to drum up support for ready-made pedestrian safety programs for youngsters.

But since the accident, "That school has booked everything we have to offer," said Nora Cody, director of the Alameda County Safe Routes to Schools program.

Weeks later, 5-year-old Zachary Michael Cruz, a kindergartner at another Berkeley school, was hit and killed by a work truck in an intersection near UC Berkeley.

It seems the two incidents have shaken everyone — from motorists and parents to teachers and city officials into action.

"It's sad that it takes tragedy like this to get everybody focused on safety," said Cody, whose program works with 50 schools in Alameda County.

Zachary, who attended Le Conte Elementary School in Berkeley, was approaching his sixth birthday, which will be Thursday. Instead he was buried over the weekend, joining the estimated 5,000 other pedestrians nationwide who are killed each year across the country, according to the Federal Highway Administration, a branch of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

During the last decade roughly 63,000 pedestrians died and more than 1 million others were injured in pedestrian-vehicle crashes, the agency says. About 17 percent of those were under 21. A pedestrian is injured or killed every seven minutes in the United States, according to the highway administration.

On Feb. 27, Zachary was struck after stepping off a curb at Warring and Derby streets. He had been with a teacher and other children who had been walking from an elementary school to an after-school program on the Clark Kerr Campus, about six blocks southeast of the main UC Berkeley campus, police and school officials said.

The boy died at the scene.

The driver of the 2½-ton work truck was not arrested or cited, and preliminary reports indicate that excessive speed, drugs or alcohol were not factors in the fatal collision, though the investigation is not complete, Sgt. Mary Kusmiss said.

The boy's death came less than month after the 6-year-old girl from South Berkeley had her skull fractured and was hospitalized for about a week after she darted into a crosswalk in front of her elementary school. The driver was not cited or arrested in that case, either, because authorities said he was not at fault.

The girl returned to class last week, Berkeley school officials said.

The two collisions involving small children, just weeks apart, were a tragic coincidence and "absolutely the exception and not the rule," Berkeley school district spokesman Mark Coplan said.

The city of Berkeley takes numerous steps to help prevent pedestrians and bicyclists from being injured or killed, officials said. For example, police officers regularly issue citations to jaywalkers, schools teach children about safety and parents are encouraged to participate in "walking school buses," where children link hands as an adult guides them to class.

In addition, the city has formed a pedestrian safety task force and created a \$20 million master plan to improve 100 dangerous intersections over the next decade. It also regularly hands out free bike helmets to children.

As part of a community service program, UC Berkeley students routinely slap pedestrian safety reminder stickers on traffic poles around the city.

Berkeley is among only a few cities with a designated bike route through city streets.

Still, there were 79 collision deaths in Berkeley between 1984 and 2008, police statistics show. Of the 35 involving pedestrians, 16 were deemed the pedestrian's fault. Of the four fatal collisions involving bicycles, all were deemed the biker's fault, police statistics show.

No one can blame a 5- or 6-year-old for trying to get to class on time or stepping off a curb accidentally. But police, city and school leaders say everyone in every city, every day needs to take more responsibility for teaching children about safety.

It's important to realize that children see traffic differently than adults do, Cody said. For example, they have difficulty judging distances and the speed of cars. It's also hard for drivers to see youngsters, she said.

Because children don't always learn good pedestrian behavior at home, some schools but not all set aside time to teach traffic safety. Although Safe Routes to Schools offers ready-made safety lessons for children, Cody said, it competes with the growing number of demands on a school's time.

"It's very difficult for us to get any time in the classroom," she said.

Police agree it takes tragedies to show the importance of teaching children and parents about pedestrian safety.

"Despite our best efforts to educate both pedestrians and drivers, we continue to see continuous violations of pedestrian, and in some cases, vehicle (right-of-way)," Berkeley police Officer Andrew Frankel, a department spokesman, said. "Part of that is (people aren't familiar with) the nitty-gritty parts of the vehicle code that aren't covered in driver's education."

For example, under the state's vehicle code, it is the pedestrian's responsibility to be safe in the crosswalk and never delay traffic while in the crosswalk, he said. Pedestrians also are not supposed to leave a curb and make a dash for the other side once the flashing red crossing sign begins to count down.

People generally don't know these rules, Frankel said.

"I only learned about the countdown from becoming a police officer," he added.

Berkeley is not the only city teaching children about safety.

Each fall in the Alameda school district, police and civic groups put together Safety Town, a miniature and portable city in which children learn basic safety rules. It includes lively characters and videos highlighting the dangers of running after a ball that goes into the street. More than 35,000 children have taken part since it started 35 years ago.

Cycles of Change, an Oakland-based organization that promotes bicycle use, runs a physical education class to show older children how to ride safely in the street. Safe Routes to Schools uses puppet shows to teach children throughout Alameda County about pedestrian and bike safety.

Last Thursday, children at Oakland's Franklin Elementary School sat cross-legged on the auditorium floor and laughed as a puppet named Jun Rollalot crashed his bicycle on the way to school while attempting an ill-advised jump.

The school is in the East Lake neighborhood, where a recent survey found that the majority of students walk to school. Many of them must cross the busy East 15th Street or Foothill Boulevard to get there, said John Stangl, Franklin's parent liaison.

"We've been fortunate we haven't had many serious accidents," he said.

While the puppeteers might not have delivered new information to the children, Stangl said, they probably reinforced what they already knew, or what they might have forgotten. He said it's important for safe behaviors to become second nature.

"They can be so fast to act," Stangl said. "Sometimes they don't have time to make the best decisions unless it's ingrained."

There have been plenty of collisions, some accidents, some not, involving children walking or biking on Bay Area streets over the past few years. It seems almost every community from Danville to Martinez to Newark to Oakland has had at least one incident.

Last March in San Ramon, an upscale suburban city of 50,000, two children riding bicycles were struck by vehicles in less than a week. A minivan driven by a man who was arrested for drunken driving struck and seriously injured a 13-year-old girl riding her bicycle. That collision came just a week after 10-year-old Daniel Pan was killed when he rode into the path of a bus while riding home from school on a residential street.

That collision happened just a few miles from where 10-year old Troy Pack and his sister Alana, 7, were killed in October 2003 by a drunken driver while the boy was on a scooter and the girl on a bike on the sidewalk in Danville.

Last summer, Dylvan Gonzalez, 14, of Newark was killed after a driver apparently lost control of his car leaving a gas station. The teen was on a sidewalk with another boy, who was critically injured, when the driver drove onto the sidewalk and hit them.

A Martinez boy died last April after being struck by a pickup truck on Alhambra Avenue. The 13-year-old boy was riding his bike home from school in Pleasant Hill when he was hit.

While the number of children 14 and younger who are killed as pedestrians has dropped dramatically in the past decade, tougher safety campaigns are needed to further cut the toll, a safety advocacy group says.

According to data released recently by Safe Kids Worldwide, the number of children in this age group who died as pedestrians fell 40 percent from 1995 through 2004.

The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group attributes much of the drop in deaths and injuries to a decline in the percentage of children who walk to school from 42 percent 40 years ago to about 15 percent these days.

Nationally, bicycle fatalities and injuries appear to be on the decline. In 2006, the most recent year for which data are available, 773 people were killed while riding a bike or unicycle, according to National Center for Statistics and Analysis. The death toll was about 7 percent lower than a decade earlier.

Safe Routes to Schools in Alameda County is a partnership between TransForm, the Alameda County Public Health Department, and Cycles of Change. For more information, call Cody at 510-740-3150, ext. 323.

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What parents should be aware of:

- Children have a narrower field of vision than adults, and often have trouble judging distances and the speed of cars. It's hard for them to see over parked cars, and for drivers to see them.
- Children tend to imitate the behavior of others, especially older children, teens and adults, so it's important to teach by example when crossing the street or riding a bicycle. C
- Children achieve independence in small steps, from playing in front of the house to playing on the block, to crossing the street.

Source: Safe Routes to Schools, Alameda County

Safety tips for crossing a street:

- Stop at the curb (or first edge). If there is a second edge, walk to it and stop. If there is a visual barrier, like a car, find a better spot to cross.

- Look to the left, to the right, and again to the left for traffic. Cross only when it is safe, and scan to the left and to the right for vehicles as you cross.
- Walk in a straight line to the other side of the street, until you are out of the way of traffic.
- Use the crossing button if the intersection has a traffic signal (and if a button is available). Wait for the walking person or "WALK" symbol before crossing. Look to the left, to the right, again to the left, and then BEHIND you before crossing.
- Scan to the left, right, front and behind you as you cross. Stop if you see a car turning into the crosswalk. Do not try to beat it. Stay in the crosswalk, if there is one.
- When finished crossing, step up onto the curb. Don't run across the intersection. Wait for turning cars to pass. There is more room behind the car than in front of it.

Do's and don'ts for crossing the street:

- Don't chase a ball into the street.
- Don't cross from between two cars.
- Don't cross alone.
- Don't cross at an angle.
- Don't run.
- Do wait if a car passes while you are looking left and right.
- Do cross with an adult.

Source: Safe Routes to Schools, Alameda County Text for infobox

