

Streets in America are unsafe and unforgiving for kids

Speeding cars, children darting into traffic, and streets without sidewalks place youth at risk on America's roads

"We don't go walking on our street," says Evelyn Moe. "I don't even allow my kids out in the front yard unless I'm out there."

Moe and her husband, Mike, live in the county outside Sumner, Wash., about an hour and a half drive south of Seattle. Tulips and rhubarb grow in the fields near the 3-bedroom home where they are raising their two young boys: Kevin, 4 and Lyle, 2.

"The area that we live in is mostly a rural area with lots of farming nearby," 30-year-old Moe said. "Often, large trucks go by with rhubarb on the back and when that happens, basically, the whole house shakes."

The speed limit on the narrow two-lane street in front of the Moe's home is 35 miles an hour, but often vehicles whiz by exceeding 45. The street has no sidewalks nor shoulder for walking.

"There's just enough room for the cars to go by," Moe explained. "If you wanted to walk there, you'd be walking out in the muddy fields along the side of the road."

"The road winds too," she added, "so there are a lot of blind curves and cars can pop out all of a sudden going pretty fast."

David Perez lives on the other side of the United States from the Moe's but has a similar problem: his street isn't safe for his kids either.

The street in front of his home in a tree-lined neighborhood in Durham, N.C. is used as a short-cut for commuters trying to gain a few extra minutes going to and from work.

The speed limit is 25 but people often exceed it, 37-year-old Perez said.

"This year a car ran into the front of the house on the opposite corner of where we live," he said. "The guy was going so fast that if it wasn't for a big tree in the yard, he probably would have ended up in the house."

These street conditions understandably make Perez and his wife, Melannie, nervous about allowing their 5-year-old son, Jordon, to play in the front yard. And unless something is done, the situation is only going to be worse when their 5-month-old daughter, Gabriel, learns to walk.

Making America Walkable

The complaints of the Moe and Perez families are not isolated examples. Rather, they are practically the norm in neighborhoods all across the United States these days.

But how does one person or one family or one community go about making the changes necessary to make our streets safer for our children and for pedestrians in general?

According to Jerry Scannell, president of the National Safety Council in Chicago, national awareness of the problem is the seed of change.

"I think people tend to think of themselves primarily as drivers and only incidentally as walkers and because we're not aware that we're pedestrians and that we deserve consideration, we accept conditions we shouldn't accept," he said. Priority needs to be given to providing places where we can walk safely."

Scannell is the chairman of the "Partnership for a Walkable America" -- a coalition of private, state and federal organizations from all across the United States who have come together with the common cause of increasing public awareness about the unquestionable need for our communities to be safer and more accessible for walkers. Another focus of the Partnership is to emphasize the healthiness of walking -- both the physical benefits it provides for those who do it and the social benefits communities reap from this activity.

In order for change to happen, the public is going to have to ask for it, said Partnership member Bill Wilkinson, who is also the director of the Pedestrian Federation of America in Washington D.C.

"The only thing that's going to make pedestrians be a priority is people getting out there and saying: "This is not okay in the community I'm going to be living in. I want a place where I don't have to worry about my kids walking to school or me having to drive everywhere I want to go," he said. "The public doesn't have to have the answers. They just have to have the indignation to say: 'Excuse me, this isn't what I want. I want a transportation system that is a whole lot friendlier toward the community.'"

Children At Risk

The members of this growing partnership, which includes private, state and federal groups, are particularly concerned about the safety of child pedestrians.

According to figures from the U.S. Department of Transportation (US DOT), 806 children, ages 15 and younger were killed in pedestrian crashes in the United States in 1994. These data also show that on average, 10 boys and 5 girls, in that same age bracket, died each week in a pedestrian crash in 1994.

The incidence of injuries among children due to pedestrian crashes is even higher. Many of these injuries are also quite grave. The USDOT figures for that year show that 30,833 children, ages 15 and younger, were injured in pedestrian crashes. Those figures also show that 340 boys and 250 girls, ages 15 and younger, were injured each week in pedestrian crashes.

The injury and fatality rates for young pedestrians are troubling, but they can be changed, said Partnership member Dr. Alfred Farina, a research psychologist in charge of pedestrian and bicycle safety research for the USDOT National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

Dr. Farina said kids need to be taught to be more careful around moving vehicles. He added that many programs to educate children to stop and look left, right and then left once more before entering the street have

been successful in reducing the incidence of injury and death in young pedestrians.

"Kids are unacquainted with the dangers of the road and they also tend to think of adults as people who take care of children and that attitude may extend to how they think of drivers," Dr. Farina said.

"We did a study one time about the street crossing behaviors of kids, ranging in age from kindergartners to third graders," he said. What we found was that about 90 percent of the crossings made by young children were in error. "

One of the most common errors young children make, Dr. Farina said, is to "dart out" into the street without first checking left, right and then left again for traffic. In fact, 46 percent of the pedestrian crashes involving children, ages 5 through 14, can be attributed to "dart out" behavior.

Another factor contributing to child pedestrian crashes is that many parents tend to overestimate their child's ability to deal with street conditions, said John Moffat, director of the Washington Traffic Safety Commission.

Moffat is a member of the National Association of Governors' Highway Safety Representatives, which is a member of the Partnership.

Pedestrian crashes are one of the biggest killers of children ages 5 to 9," he said. "That's because children often dart out into the road and by the time a driver detects them and is able to stop, it is often too late."

Parents Often Overestimate Cognitive Abilities Of Children

Allowing children to play unattended near a street is also dangerous, according Partnership member Richard Blomberg, the president of Dunlap & Associates in Stamford, Conn., a research organization that specializes in pedestrian safety research.

Parents often say to their children: "Well, you can play outside, but don't leave the driveway," Blomberg said. "We tend to look at children as little adults and forget that they aren't fully developed yet. Their ability to localize sound isn't fully developed. Their judgement isn't fully developed. Their vision isn't fully developed. We as adults have to have an understanding of the limitations of a child."

Children are often so focused on their play activities that they don't notice cars, said Partnership member John Fegan, the bicycle and pedestrian program manager for the Office of the Secretary of the USDOT.

"If a ball or something rolls out into the street, they just run out after it without thinking about the cars," he said.

"Kids also don't have an appreciation for the dynamics of how cars work," he added. "A car obviously just can't stop on a dime and kids don't have an understanding of that. I don't think they have a sense of the danger that a car could hit them. And they're rewarded for that belief and that behavior because most likely, they have run across the street many times and have not been hit by a car. But it only takes one time."

Changes That Can Help

Cars parked on streets are another safety hazard for children, according to Fegan.

"We know that children dart out and with parked cars, drivers can't see them," he said. "There are several things we can do to limit that hazard. One would be to change how cars park. Engineers could eliminate street parking or switch to angled parking on one side of the street. Another would be to lower the vehicle speed so there is more time to detect a child and reduce potential injuries if there's an unfortunate crash."

But lowering the vehicle speed assumes there will be adequate enforcement of the law. And removing parked cars from streets assumes developers and engineers will offer different kinds of housing and street designs than they do now.

Both these things and more can be accomplished, according to Partnership member Carol Tan Esse, program manager for pedestrian and bicycle safety research for the Federal Highway Administration.

"If people want a walkable community, they need to let the engineers and architects and developers know," she said. "In the end, the consumer dictates the market."

In Praise Of Sidewalks

According to Blomberg, many community developments these days simply aren't safe for children.

"I consult with several school districts to help make their school busing safer and some of the problems are zoning laws that don't make any sense," he said. "One of those laws is if you build 13 or fewer homes, you don't have to put in sidewalks. And if you add homes later, you still don't have to build sidewalks. So guess how many homes each developer builds initially? And then two years later, they're building another 5 or 10 homes and meanwhile, they're grandfathered and there are no sidewalks."

Many of these neighborhoods later have problems transporting children to school, Blomberg said. The roads there are narrow and winding with lots of blind curves and since they don't have sidewalks, children are forced to walk and wait for the bus in the road.

This problem is not isolated to Connecticut, said Partnership member Charles Zegeer, who is associate director of roadway studies at the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill, N.C. He also is a member of the Institute for Transportation Engineers, a Partner organization.

"In many areas of the country, sidewalks are kind of an exception rather than a rule and children are expected to walk to school or to the bus stop in roadways or ditches," he said.

Making our communities more walkable is a shared responsibility, according to Scannell.

Maybe one of the best messages that something like the Partnership can

bring forward is that we all have got to come together and share responsibility for this, he said. "If parents did their part and schools did their part and traffic engineers and developers did their part -- all of that over time would create a better environment and one in which our children would not only be safer, but come to value walking more."

This article was written for the Partnership for a Walkable America by Emily Smith of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center

Phone: (919) 962-2202

FAX (919) 962-8710

No permission is needed to reprint this article in whole or in part.