

Building knowledge – safely

How do you help develop a child's sense of responsibility for themselves on the road – while keeping them safe at the same time? Mark Shepherd, who runs Minding Creative Minds, in New Cross, London, explains his approach to this tricky issue.

'Learning about road safety is a rolling process – and I believe in developing children's sense of responsibility rather than making them fearful about crossing the road. You want them to be safe – not afraid,' he says.

Mark believes that while it's important to recognise that most children can't accurately judge speed and distance under the age of 9, you can lay strong foundations that will help them make safe decisions for when they are able to cross by themselves.

'I use every opportunity to talk to the children about road safety,' Mark explains. 'You can't expect the little ones to grasp the actual concept but you can start teaching them routines to keep them safe while they are learning about it. So, for example, my children know that they never cross the road without holding a grown-up's hand and that it's important to check that there are no cars coming towards us!'

Explaining decisions

Mark says that if you simply tell children to look right and left for cars, it's very hard for two and three year-olds to grasp the all-important difference between a parked car and a moving car. So you need to help them learn to tell the difference, by talking to them all the time and explaining why you are making certain decisions. 'You have to keep repeating these things on a daily basis, and gradually they start to



click into the child's mind,' he says. As children get older, Mark believes it's important to give them a little more responsibility – but under the close supervision of an adult. 'If I have five year olds with me then I might allow them to hold each other's hands as I walk along beside them – talking to them about finding a good place to cross, why we need to walk not run, and why we need to keep looking out for cars.'

Mark says that as children learn about road safety, it is essential to have in place sound methods of controlling their behaviour. 'That's where discipline comes in,' he says. 'I never shout at my children



and if I need to reinforce behaviour I'm prepared to repeat something as often as it takes – calmly and in a normal tone. But then if a child tries to run out into the road, I raise my voice – and that stops them in their tracks. They know that if I raise my voice something very, very serious is happening.'

Whilst it is important to know your individual children and be able to predict their likely behaviour, Mark warns that you should never take a child's behaviour for granted – and that you must remain alert at all times.

Testing independence

Mark says: 'Sometimes parents tell me that their child would never do something like run off, but you have to recognise that children are testing out their independence and want to start pushing the boundaries as they get older.

'I had one boy who was always perfect about remembering to hold hands when crossing the road but then one day he tried to run off on his own. I was very surprised and shaken by this... The thought of anything happening to a child in my care makes me feel terrible... But I wasn't going to let the child see how shaken up I was.

'When I asked him why he did it he said that "the snake" told him to do this. I didn't make a big issue of this or say "don't be silly there isn't a snake" because in the child's head he thinks this is what is happening. Instead I said: "The snake is not in charge of you crossing the road – I am. So you only cross the road with me!"

Learning from play

Mark is trained in the Rudolf Steiner method which believes that adults shouldn't get involved in children's play – unless children specifically ask for this. 'Otherwise it becomes adults' play,' Mark explains. 'Children want to play out what they've recently seen so things like going to the park and crossing the road will come into their play.

'If I hear a child getting something wrong about road safety while they're playing, I won't interrupt their play to correct this – but next time I'm out with them, I will spend some time focusing on that child and building their knowledge of road safety,' Mark says.

