

Play it safe!

Before you take children out on journeys by foot, it's best to make sure they have basic safety knowledge to build on. Charlotte Atkins, childminder from Hertfordshire, uses a range of activities and routines to prepare her children for contact with traffic.

Photos by: The National Childminding Association (NCMA)

Using role play

Using role-play can be a great way to ensure that children have really grasped the meaning behind messages, and Charlotte uses this method to test children's understanding of safety issues.

Charlotte says: 'We ask children to sit down with us and talk about how they think they should cross roads. Then we get them to show us what they would do – by walking us through the situation on an imaginary road. We ask them to talk us through the different things they do, and explain why they are doing them.'

'Of course we are not encouraging our children

to try these activities without an adult, but making sure they are aware of why we do things like holding hands near traffic, or why we stop at the kerb. So they can build on them as they get older and become more independent.'

These exercises are most effective with the older children – usually from about four upwards – but younger ones can also benefit from being present while they happen. Little ones can watch the older ones doing this or can join in by holding the older one's hands – as they would in a real life situation where children hold one another's hands in a group setting.



Safety in toyland

Charlotte finds that creating real-life in miniature can be effective in teaching children basic notions about road safety. 'We use a Happy Land Village from the Early Learning Centre, which has roads, cars, and traffic lights. We set these up with the lollipop lady and

from interacting with this, children start to learn what concepts like traffic lights and crossings mean. This lays the foundation for their knowledge that the only safe place to cross is at a pedestrian crossing, and why they always need to look for the lollipop lady outside their school!'



Useful resources

Charlotte also has a range of books and stories about car and road safety, which she uses during story time. She also picks up lots of helpful information from the road safety officer who visits her local library. 'Children love the shiny hedgehog stickers and they can be a great way to reward – and reinforce safe behaviour. We give our children lots of praise by saying things like: "Well done, you remembered to stand at the kerb and press the button". You have to reinforce these messages constantly and never assume that children will remember them,' Charlotte advises.

Safe routines

Whenever possible Charlotte likes to get her children out and about, and often joins forces with another childminders to do this. For all outside trips, Charlotte and her colleague have devised routines to keep their children safe. They explain their routines to all new parents and liaise closely with parents about any problems relating to safety issues.

High visibility

For all journeys Charlotte ensures that children are highly visible. 'We have purple hats with a clownfish on them – which really stand out. We also have high visibility wristbands which are great for trips out. These wristbands also have my details and mobile in them in case the children ever get separated from us. I teach them to approach a person in uniform – and not to give their name, but to ask the person to contact me, on their behalf.'

'Most of our parents use buggies but when there are two adults and a small group of children, it's easy to have some of them walking. This means that a walking child must hold onto someone's hand or onto the buggy at all times. That is our routine.

'If new children are difficult about this we explain that they have only one chance – either to hold the buggy or someone's hand or to go onto reins or in the buggy. We find they are usually very good and get into our routine very quickly.'



A chance to let off steam

Charlotte says that all children need a chance to let off steam sometimes as they are more likely to 'run off' on roads if they are constantly cooped up. So it's important to get the balance right and show them that there are safe places to do this.

'Children need to have a degree of independence to learn how to over-come some risks for

themselves – but these need to be assessed and managed risks which are appropriate to their age. We always put them in pairs and insist they stay together, and tell them where the boundaries are. And where they can find us. Of course we observe them and keep a particularly close eye on the smaller ones,' Charlotte explains.

In return for being trusted with this degree of freedom, Charlotte expects the children she looks after to be able to demonstrate a sense of responsibility by following her safety routines. 'Even our two-year-olds know they can run around when they get to the park – but must hold hands and walk sensibly on the way to and from the park.'