

HOW SAFE IS THIS SCHOOL BUS?

BY
JOSH
GARSKOF

Each year, 17,000 kids are injured in school-bus accidents. We asked experts what you need to know to protect your child.

parents report

Some headlines from local newspapers around the country over the past year: **Blacksburg, Virginia:** A school bus slams into an SUV, sending seven elementary-school students to the emergency room.

Cosby, Tennessee: Three children are hurt after their bus veers off the road while turning and hits a tree.

Ham Lake, Minnesota: Eighteen kids from McKinley Elementary School are taken to area hospitals after their school bus hits two cars and a pole.

Thankfully, none of these children's injuries were life-threatening, which explains why these crashes never got the kind of attention given to the horrific school-bus accident that killed three Huntsville, Alabama, teenagers and injured more than 30 others last year. But it's minor accidents like these that remind parents again and again just how vulnerable their children are

as they travel to and from school.

According to a recent study of emergency-room data, published in *Pediatrics*, an alarming number of kids—17,000 a year—are injured as a result of traffic and other types of accidents involving school buses. That's twice the previous estimate by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the federal regulatory board that oversees school buses. "We've been greatly underestimating the number of injuries," says Benjamin Hoffman, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque. "But now that we're aware of the extent of the problem, I think we're going to see the push for school-bus safety gain momentum."

THE SEAT-BELT ISSUE

One of the biggest concerns—and perhaps the most surprising to

parents—is the fact that the vast majority of young school-bus passengers aren't buckled up. The federal government, which mandates the use of seat belts and car seats in passenger vehicles, has repeatedly declined to call for similar requirements for school buses. So, unless you live in one of a handful of states (New York, New Jersey, Florida, Louisiana, or California) or in a local district (such as Chicago) with its own safety mandate, it's unlikely that there are seat belts on your child's bus.

Instead, regulators rely on the tall padded seat backs required on all school buses built since 1977 to safeguard kids during accidents. But this so-called "compartmentalization" doesn't do nearly enough to protect children, says Alan Ross, president of the National Coalition for School Bus Safety, a volunteer organization based in Torrington, Connecticut. "Kids are

THE WELL-EQUIPPED SCHOOL BUS

TWO ROOF HATCHES ● Provide escape routes when a bus is lying on its side.

LAP-AND-SHOULDER BELTS ● Keep kids from being thrown from their seats.

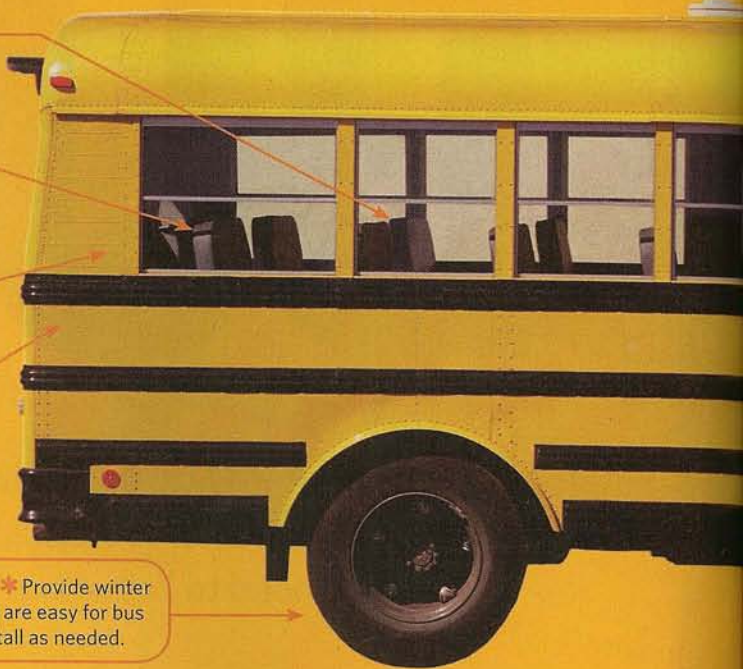
FIRE-RETARDANT UPHOLSTERY ★ Prevents spread of fire after an accident.

IN-BUS VIDEO RECORDERS ● Used to help maintain discipline if there is no chaperone.

CHILD-CHECK SYSTEM ★ Helps driver know if anyone is left on the bus. He must walk to the back to disengage it or a horn will sound when he leaves.

- Likely to be found on a school bus.
- Occasionally found on bus.
- ★ Offer optimal safety but are rare.

TIRE CHAINS ★ Provide winter traction and are easy for bus driver to install as needed.



constantly standing up to talk over the high seats," he says. "They're moving around and changing places. So if there's even a minor accident—or if a bus driver slams on the brakes—kids can go flying around the aisle."

Proof of this can be seen in a short clip of a bus-surveillance video that was posted on YouTube earlier this year (go to youtube.com and search "Ohio bus accident" to view the video). It shows young kids from a Columbus-area school being violently knocked around and thrown from their seats when their bus rolls over onto its side. (No one was seriously injured.)

Fortunately, in recent months there have been increased efforts to make seat belts mandatory. In the aftermath of the *Pediatrics* study, the American Academy of Pediatrics began lobbying for three-point restraints on all school buses. And the NHTSA is reconsidering its stance. "We are



in the process of reevaluating the potential injury reduction that would be offered by lap-and-shoulder belts," NHTSA administrator Nicole Nason told *Parents*. The agency definitely

won't require lap-only belts, she says, because they don't provide enough protection and may even increase the risk of head, neck, and abdominal injuries. The real question is how

CHAPERONE ● Supervises kids to allow driver to focus on the road.

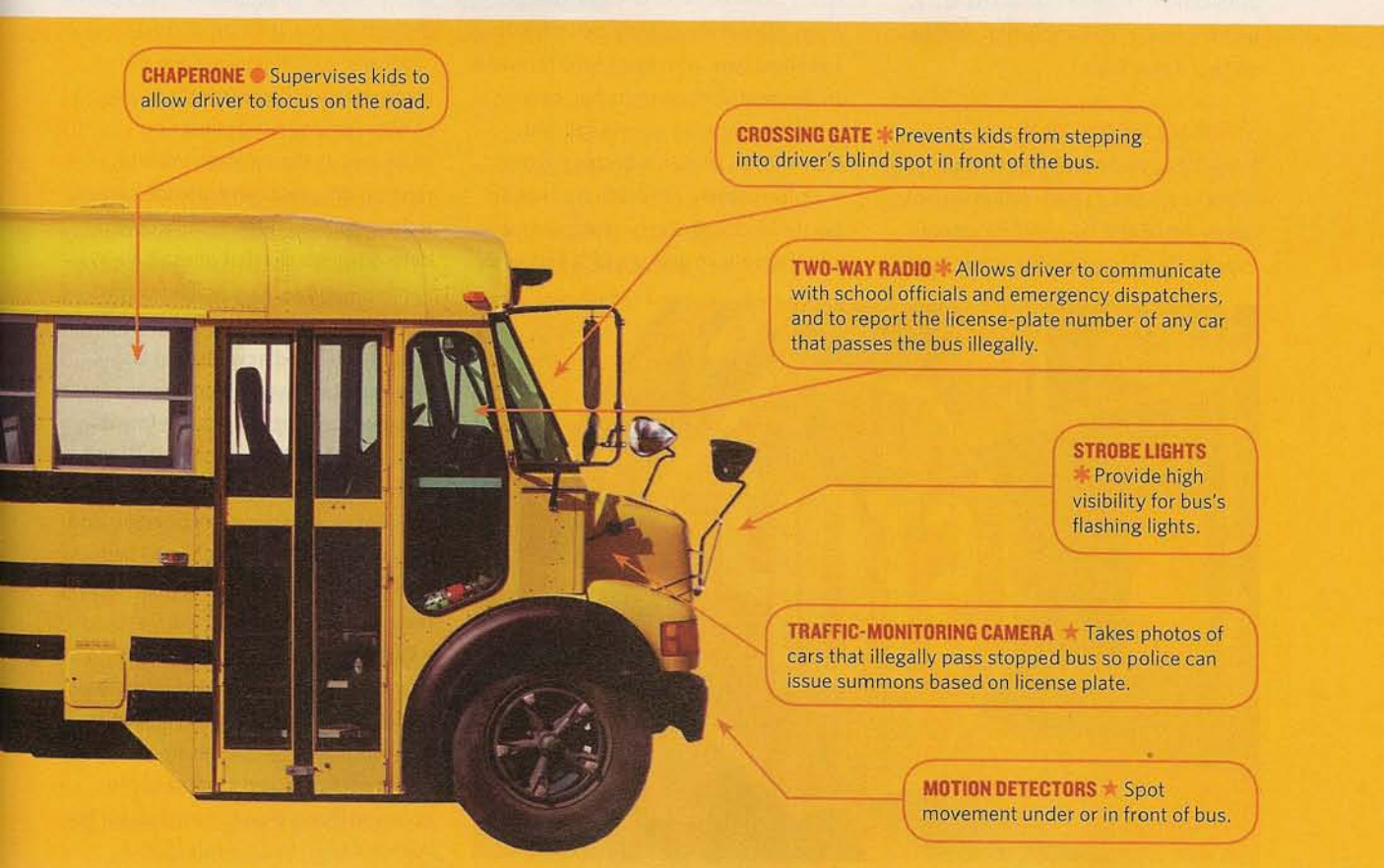
CROSSING GATE ✱ Prevents kids from stepping into driver's blind spot in front of the bus.

TWO-WAY RADIO ✱ Allows driver to communicate with school officials and emergency dispatchers, and to report the license-plate number of any car that passes the bus illegally.

STROBE LIGHTS ✱ Provide high visibility for bus's flashing lights.

TRAFFIC-MONITORING CAMERA ✱ Takes photos of cars that illegally pass stopped bus so police can issue summons based on license plate.

MOTION DETECTORS ✱ Spot movement under or in front of bus.



TOP: AGE FOTOSTOCK; PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER; BOTTOM: DAVID YOUNG/WOLFF/GETTY IMAGES

parents report

many fewer injuries would occur—and whether the benefits would be worth the significant expense.

Although seat belts add only about \$1,000 to the price tag of a new bus (which costs roughly \$70,000), that's just the beginning: Lap-and-shoulder belts reduce the capacity of a standard school bus by about 15 percent, which would turn a 66-seat bus into a 55-seater. That could mean that unless additional funds were provided by the federal or state government, school districts would have to reduce the number of children they transport or make deep cuts in other expenditures to pay for additional buses.

Still, many experts feel confident that seat belts are eventually coming to school buses. "There are a lot of senior transportation directors and regulators who are against mandating seat belts," says Bill Paul, the editor and publisher of *School Transportation News*, a trade publication. "But the tide is changing, and it's almost inevitable that seat belts will get a new look."

OTHER MAJOR HAZARDS

Even if they had seat belts, though, many of America's half million school buses would still fall short on safety, experts say. These are the other major

hazards parents should know about.

▪ **Lax standards.** The average school bus in America is roughly 11 years old, and, like cars, old buses don't have to be updated to meet new federal safety standards. Even a brand-new vehicle might not meet important safety requirements if it's not designated as a school bus. Schools are permitted to use passenger vans and SUVs instead of buses for transporting up to nine children. Because they're cheaper than mini school buses and because a coach or teacher can drive them without needing a special license, they are often used (especially by private schools) for field trips and sports teams. "If they're using minivans or SUVs, that's fine," says Ross. "But commercial-style vans have lousy safety records."

▪ **Bus-stop dangers.** On his last day of kindergarten, in 2005, 5-year-old Dameatrius McCreary climbed off his school bus and began crossing the street to his home in Oregon, Ohio, when a driver illegally passed the bus and killed him. The driver, who received an 18-month prison term, had been distracted by a cell-phone call and didn't notice the bus's flashing lights.

Unfortunately, his death was not an isolated incident. Every year, passing motorists kill an average of 11 kids who

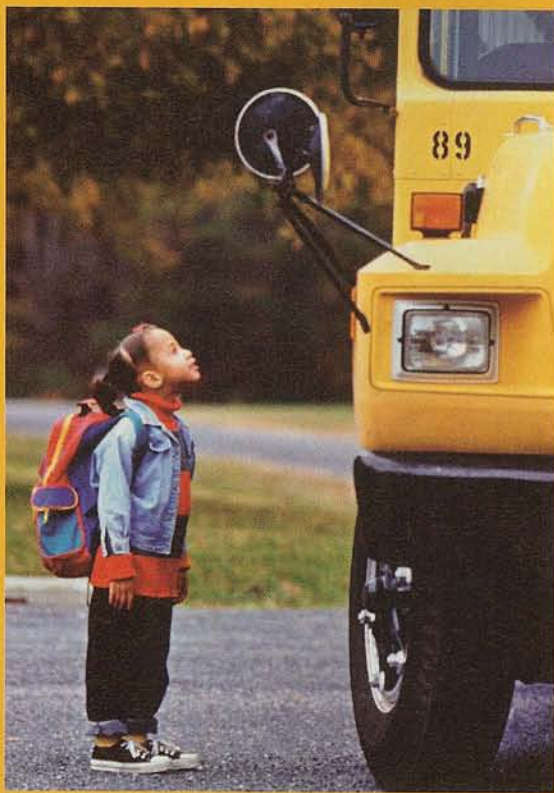
are getting on or off school buses. Driving past a school bus while its red lights are flashing is illegal in every state, but any school-bus driver will tell you that she sees it happen every day. In New York alone, state officials estimate that illegal passes happen 50,000 times a year. So, it's important to teach your kids never to count on any car stopping, to wait for the okay from their driver before crossing, and to pay attention to the traffic.

▪ **Unsafe drivers.** School-bus operators carry precious cargo in giant vehicles that are more cumbersome to drive than an 18-wheel truck (because they have no hinge point for getting around tight corners). And they do it while single-handedly trying to maintain order among as many as six dozen kids. It's a high-stress job but not a high-paying one, with the hourly wage running between \$11 and \$17, less than that of a typical grocery-store truck driver. So recruiting good drivers can be difficult for many school districts.

Ideally, your school system's transportation department should conduct background checks on all drivers. It should also mandate random drug tests and provide annual training to keep drivers' skills up-to-date. Surprisingly, that doesn't always happen—and serious problems can result. After a Connecticut school bus hit and killed a pedestrian last year and the driver tested positive for cocaine, the *Hartford Courant* found 100 convicted felons among the licensed school-bus drivers in the state, including a registered sex offender and a marijuana dealer. Another 20 had been ticketed for speeding while driving their bus.

▪ **Dirty air.** The air inside a typical school bus is contaminated by exhaust fumes, according to a study of Los Angeles buses. "We rode around on school buses and measured the pollution levels inside," says researcher Arthur Winer, Ph.D., professor of





AT THE BUS STOP

Rules for Parents:

Wait with your children at the bus stop, or take turns with other parents to ensure there's always an adult present.

- * Leave plenty of time to get to the bus stop so that your child doesn't have to run.
- * Ask a school official for a copy of the rules for student behavior on the bus, and talk about them with your child. "If you explain the reasons for the rules, your kids are more likely to follow them," says Anna Weselak, immediate past president of National Parent Teachers Association, based in Chicago.
- * Keep watch for vehicles that pass the bus illegally.

Rules for Kids:

- * Stand well back from the road until the bus is fully stopped, the doors are open, and the driver is looking at you.
- * When you get off the bus, immediately take ten giant steps away from it.
- * Never go back toward the bus after getting off, even if you realize that you forgot something.
- * Never cross the street without first getting a nod, a wave, or some other okay from the bus driver.
- * If the driver honks the horn while you're crossing the street, freeze. She may see a car that isn't stopping.

environmental health sciences at UCLA's School of Public Health. "The inside air was three to five times more polluted with harmful particles and gases than the outside air." That's because the vast majority of school buses burn diesel fuel, which produces dirty exhaust. Plus, the tailpipe is at bumper level rather than above the cabin as it is on a truck, so the exhaust can easily infiltrate the cabin. "If you see black smoke coming out of the tailpipe when the bus accelerates, its engine or exhaust system need maintenance, and you should report it to the school-bus director for your school system," says Dr. Winer.

All of these problems may make you want to blow off the bus and drive your child to school instead. But don't, says Dr. Hoffman. As imperfect as school buses may be, "kids are far less likely to get hurt or killed on a school bus than walking to school or riding in

the backseat of your car," he says. "A school bus is still the safest way for your kids to get to and from school."

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- **Know the driver.** Ask your school superintendent to bring bus drivers to the annual open house, so parents get a chance to meet them too. "You should know the people who are responsible for your children's safety twice a day 180 days a year," says Pete Japikse, state director of pupil transportation in Ohio and a member of the American School Bus Council, an industry group. "And the time to chat is not at the bus stop, when the driver needs to focus on kids and traffic."
- **Stay informed.** Ask your school-system officials if bus drivers are required to have criminal-background checks and regular drug tests, and how many hours of "in service" training they've received (20 or more is best).

And find out whether the buses are routinely inspected. "Fifteen states don't even mandate bus inspections," says Joe Scefny, a bus supervisor in Plattekill, New York, and a state delegate to a national conference on school transportation. Other states have extremely lax standards. In one, for example, a single trooper is expected to inspect 150 school buses in four hours.

- **Make your voice heard.** If you think that there should be seat belts on your child's bus—or any other safety improvements—contact your school district, your state transportation department, and state legislators to press the case for the upgrades and for the money to pay for them. Buses are funded through school budgets, so without an additional appropriation, upgrading buses could mean slashing other important expenditures, such as those for teachers. □