

attractive are hard surfaces for wheeled toys or bicycles, areas where other children gather, well equipped playgrounds, pools, ponds or streams of water, vacant lots, areas with loose sand or dirt and vacant dwellings. These locations may be either safe or unsafe, and getting there may involve crossing streets. From the point of view of young children, safety is not a distinguishing characteristic. Their criteria are activity and companionship. When they find little to do in their own yards or in areas that have been designated for them, they are likely to seek more desirable locations.

In summary, young children in traffic are in a very difficult position due to the normal process of growing up. They are curious, adventurous and act impulsively. They alternate between affection and aggression, independence and dependency, competency and limitations. They lack knowledge and experience in making judgments about space (distance) and the time necessary for safe street crossing. Their reasons for crossing a street have nothing to do with safe or dangerous actions. They still do not have concepts of what is safe, dangerous, or illegal. They give most of their attention to play, family or friends, and it is unlikely that they will think about or respond to traffic at the same time, unless properly guided.

(Adapted from "Preschool Children in Traffic," a Parent's Guide to Action. Prepared by the AAA Department of Traffic Engineering and Safety. Stock #3260.)

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Funded in part by a grant from the New York State Governor's Traffic Safety Committee

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4/04 IB#7

Developmental Characteristics That Influence a Child's Behavior as a Bicyclist



It is commonly held that bicycle crashes in traffic involving children are usually caused by the children themselves, who are called careless or lacking in caution. It would appear as if people, without realizing it, equate the physical and psychological abilities of children, their attitudes and their experiences, to those of adults. This means more or less that the same requirements are made of children as of normal adults.

On the contrary, it must be accepted that:

- Young children have completely different prerequisites compared to those of the normal adult.
- That they act in a manner determined by their age and degree of development. No child can act in a more sophisticated manner than this.
- The rate of development in early childhood is so rapid that there are considerable differences, not only between adults and children, but also between children of different ages. The experiences of the two year old in a traffic situation differ from those of the four, six, eight, or ten year old.

This basic approach means that it is the children who are the victims of accidents but it is we adults who are to blame. As adults, we have failed to appreciate the situation of the children and in many circumstances to

adapt ourselves to this situation in order to ensure that many of these crashes never happen.

Any attempt to reduce bicycle crashes must consider the characteristics of young children. Let's examine why children behave as they do around streets and traffic.

During the preschool years, from the end of toddlerhood to age six, children make tremendous strides in physical, mental, emotional and social growth and development. They discover themselves, other people and meet the world with exuberance. Play is their business and they are constantly active. They are naturally curious and eager to learn.

Physical Development

The height of young children places them at a distinct disadvantage. The eye levels of three to five year olds, for example, range from 35 to 40 inches above the ground. In contrast, adult eye levels generally range from about 60-69 inches. To gain a better perspective of this crucial factor, stoop, sit or kneel to get an idea of what the traffic environment looks like from a child's level. You will find it impossible to see as much, and the perspective will be quite different.

In addition, visual development is not yet complete. Children under six years of age are typically farsighted, peripheral vision is not well developed. Their eyes are not well coordinated, and focusing requires more time than is generally true of adults. Some youngsters may see only part of a situation; at other times, what they see is a blur and they may be unable to focus or identify important items. In addition, they do not localize sound as well as adults.

Mental Development

Young children are generally unaware of traffic laws and how they, as individuals, fit into the traffic system. Their thinking is a combination of reality and fantasy, knowledge and miscomprehensions. They usually think of only one thing at a time (they are particularly poor at any task which requires divided attention), have short attention spans, are

impulsive and inherently curious. Furthermore, children under six rarely understand the true nature of dangerous situations. They can understand a situation from their point of view only and are unable to assume another person's perspective. In particular, they have no concept of the problems facing a motor vehicle driver. Children's thinking is typically based on what they see, rather than reasoning, and their experience base is small. However, they can begin to develop skills for using their eyes and ears to gather details concerning traffic if they are guided to do so.

Emotional Development

Children often act on the basis of emotion rather than logic. Fear, excitement, anger or jealousy may intensify as children engage in activities that bring them in contact with traffic. Children are often unpredictable due to strong emotions associated with situations, such as a birthday party, family fight, even something as simple as buying ice cream. Under such circumstances a child's spontaneous reaction may be to bolt straight for or away from a particular person or object with total disregard for traffic. Many children even forget that they are entering the street.

Social Development

A fourth factor is that between ages three and six, children are attempting to become sociable, somewhat self-reliant and independent. Playing with other children becomes important, and it seems very reasonable to a young child to join other children. Around age three, youngsters show interest in being near children their own age; however, they prefer to play beside rather than with other children. Typical four-year-olds wish to expand their world more quickly than parents generally anticipate. They seem to have few self-constraints and are constantly on the move. At about age five, children become interested in their community, more independent and self-sufficient. Friendships can become strong, and they prefer to play in small groups.

When playing, young children are drawn to locations where they can be active and play with other youngsters. Areas that are particularly