

## Back to School Safety

Heading back to school is an exciting time but can also be a very nerve-wracking time for children and parents alike. Your child will likely be meeting new teachers, new classmates, or even starting at a new school altogether. Something that is easily forgotten in the mix are safety considerations that can be quite different than the summer months. To reduce the risk of accidents and injuries, there are some important safety considerations:

**Transportation:** It's easy to forget about something as mundane as transportation, but tens of thousands of children are seriously injured every year going to and from school. How to best reduce that risk will depend on how your child usually gets to school:

- **School Bus:** Talk to your child about always boarding and exiting the bus at designated locations and remind them to wait for the bus to fully stop before approaching. Beyond that, when crossing the street to get to the bus stop, teach them to always look both ways and make sure there isn't any other traffic coming. Once on the bus, your child should always remain seated. If a seat belt is available, teach your child to always wear it on the bus.
- **By Car:** Children should ride in a properly sized car seat or booster seat until they are at least 4'9" (typically between 8-12 years old), at which point they can begin using a normal seat belt. Children younger than 13 should ride in the back seats. Lastly, the person driving (whether a parent, older sibling, or someone else) should be extra vigilant with safe driving and obey all the rules of the road.
- **Biking:** Biking is a great way to get to school and provides exercise along the way. Practice the bike route with your child beforehand and always wear a helmet. Use dedicated bike lanes wherever possible and wear bright, easily visible clothing. Remember the cyclists need to also respect traffic lights and stop signs.
- **Walking:** Have younger children walk on the side away from traffic. Always be sure to hold younger children's hands while crossing the street and use designated crosswalks. Once your children are old enough to walk to school without adult supervision, arrange for your child to walk with a group of classmates.

**Backpacks:** Another area that is easy to forget when it comes to safety is backpacks. Children spend a lot of time wearing them and poorly packed or poorly designed backpacks can cause a lot of unnecessary strain on the body.

- Don't overpack. Backpacks should never weigh more than 20% of a child's body weight, less than 10% is even better.
- Choose a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps as well as a padded back
- Always use both straps
- Make sure the backpack is adjusted so that the bottom of the backpack rests against your child's waist



David Chen, MD  
Pediatric Hospitalist  
Hendricks Regional Health

**Infections:** Of course, it is impossible to talk about safety without mentioning infections. While COVID-19 and its variants are the first thing that come to mind for most, it's important to remember schools are a common place where many other infections spread as well and it's about a lot more than just COVID. Make sure your child knows how to properly wash their hands, especially after using the bathroom and before eating. If your child is feeling sick, it's best to stay home. Lastly, it's important to follow all the guidance from your local health department and school district in terms of physical distancing, face masks, and other infection-prevention measures (the CDC and AAP recommend that adults and children over 2 who are not fully vaccinated for COVID-19 continue to wear face masks whenever possible).

**Emergency Procedures:** Plan ahead with your child and discuss what to do in case of emergency (or even just unexpected events).

- Teach your child their home address and parents' phone numbers
- Talk to your child about when to call 911
- Make sure there is a plan in place for who your child can go to or call (family members, neighbors, etc.) if you can't be reached

Lastly, be sure you are talking to your child and their teachers about how school is going – what's going well, what isn't, and how relationships are with other students. This can help you identify problems such as bullying or other concerns early and get them addressed before they spiral out of control.

For more on this and other topics, head to [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org). This is a great resource for health tips designed for parents by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

*Should a situation arise in which your child needs to be admitted to a hospital, remember Hendricks Regional Health is home to Hendricks County's only designated pediatric unit, specially designed to treat children. Our experienced staff is available 24/7 to care for all ages from birth to 18 years.*

