

ARTICLE REPRINT

Street Smarts: On Their Own In NYC

How Old Should Our Kids Be Before They Go To School Alone?





STREET SMARTS: ON THEIR OWN IN NYC



How old should our kids be before they go to school alone?

Although this question faces every NYC parent, no definitive answer exists. Child safety remains an ever-present concern, regardless of the child's age; consequently, the crucial answer to this question must be based on the child's readiness to make this step.

Barbara Boisi, Parents League Safety Program Coordinator, led the PL workshop, *Street Smarts: On Their Own in NYC*. Ms. Boisi suggested that parents take the following points into account when preparing children to negotiate the streets on their own.

- (1) Parents are the single most important influence on how safe their children can be.
- (2) If they have done their training properly, they can be confident about their child's safety.
- (3) Children, especially teenagers, think that they are invincible.

Accordingly, Ms. Boisi outlined a number of pedestrian safety guidelines:

- (1) Cross when the light is green and the WALK sign is on.
- (2) Look in all four directions before crossing, as cyclists might not be following the traffic flow.
- (3) Cross only at the corners with the green light. Do not cross in the middle of the block.
- (4) Walk. Do not run.
- (5) Do not stand at the curb. Stand 18"-24" inches from the curb.

Ensure that you, as a parent, always follow these rules. Set a good example for your children.

Ms. Boisi suggested that parents should start training their children early. Let them know that on any given day 1,000,000 cars enter NYC and over 100,000 cyclists ride the streets. They should not count on a car to stop for them just because the driver is an adult. Talk about situations as they occur – cars skidding on wet pavement, buses coming too close to the curb, cars going through red lights or speeding up when approaching a yellow light.

Begin with a small trip to the corner, perhaps at the end of your block. After a few trial runs, let them try it alone. Experiment with several trial runs of the trip to and from school. Discuss the safest streets (safe corridors) on which to travel. Ensure that they are aware of the independent school Safety Patrol. Your child should also know the Patrol route, and that it is comprised of parent volunteers. Point out the Safe Haven signs in store windows. Your child should always carry I.D, know his home, school and your office and cell phone numbers, his home address, his school address, and the police precinct where both his home and school are located. Your child should also know to call 911, but only in an emergency, and that no quarter is needed.

In preparing your child to navigate the streets alone, you should point out potential problems that may arise. Play the "what if" game. Most importantly, you must insist on knowing where your child is at all times. Let him know where you are as well. Tell your child, "If you are the only one who knows where you are, you are lost." Teach her about strangers. Trust her to trust her instincts. If your

child feels threatened in anyway, advise her to run away or scream "You're not my mother, or "You're not my father." If the person has bad intentions, they will leave.

One of the biggest concerns for parents of middle school students is muggings. Most attacks are on 6th to-9th graders and are student vs. student. Teach your children they are targets if they flash any valuables, such as expensive jewelry, Sony Discmen, palm pilots or money. There is safety in numbers, so encourage your child to walk with a friend, an older student or sibling, or in a small group.

If your child is mugged, sympathize with him. Tell them a mugging is not a fair fight; that he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. **DO NOT** blame, punish, or lecture him. Report all incidents to your police precinct. Remember—an unreported crime is a crime that never happened.

Tips for teens:

1. Walk with a friend or in a small group (3-4 children)
2. Always be alert
3. Stay on busy, well-lit streets
4. Never walk on the Central Park side of 5th Avenue or Central Park West
5. Keep your money out of sight; don't carry large bills.
6. If you are mugged – give up your possessions. Don't risk getting hurt.

Making your child aware of these potential dangers when walking alone, and teaching him or her these basic safety guidelines will help to ensure that he or she will be protected.