

# Teach kids school bus etiquette before classes start

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

School safety is always important, but what about safety before your child gets school? I recall my daughter once commenting that riding the bus to Sunridge Middle School was like being in a monkey cage on wheels. Having taught junior high at one point I could appreciate the analogy; however, it is much more disconcerting as a parent to realize that children are running around and acting out on the school bus. Certainly, out-of-control children on a bus pose a greater danger than they do at school.

In a car, the kid-to-adult ratio is usually no less than about 3 to 1. A standard school bus holds between 72 and 90 passengers, so the ratio of children to adults is significantly higher. While ensuring the safety of perhaps 80 youngsters, a school bus driver is navigating roads in a vehicle nearly three times the length of the average car and about 30 inches wider. According to Matt Yoshioka, with the Pendleton School District (PSD), Pendleton's buses average 35 riders per run. Mid-Columbia Bus Company does have all buses fitted with video and sound recording devices; this allows the company and the district to work together in identifying issues or potential issues on each bus.

Oregon law does not require seat belts on standard size school buses, so it's unlikely your child will have a restraint to keep them in their seat. For younger children this is often a very new experience and potentially dangerous – it's important to discuss with children



the importance of sitting on their bottom, facing forward throughout their ride.

PSD provides annual training to every student regarding bus safety and etiquette. This training is typically done during the first two weeks of school and is conducted by both the bus company and the school district. It's helpful if parents reinforce this training by reminding their kids of their expectations for behavior on the bus. According to Matt, "The little ones, especially, will sit on their knees to talk to someone in front of or behind them or to see out of the window." In the event of an accident the safest position for a child is sitting flat on their bottom.

Though drivers spend eight to twelve weeks training to drive a school bus, they do not receive extensive training in student behavior management. This year before school starts, PSD is providing bus drivers with an in-service on deal-

ing with behavior issues on buses. They are hopeful that this will help drivers understand and be able to address issues at the onset. The biggest challenge the bus company faces is driver turnovers. About four bus drivers quit every month last school year, Matts says, because the job is part-time, with low wages and no benefits. When drivers leave for full-time positions elsewhere, the company has to fill in with new drivers and that lack of stability makes it difficult for everyone.

Parent complaints about buses running late is an issue that's being addressed. Bus drivers contend with traffic, road repairs, accidents and, in Pendleton, trains. If a school holds buses due to a late return from a field trip or other unavoidable event it starts a domino effect for all who ride that bus. Currently there is no effective way to notify parents that a bus is running late.

Additionally, rural school districts

including PSD often encompass large geographic areas, meaning some children in outlying areas may be on the bus for a half hour. Ensuring these children have something to keep them occupied during the ride is important – sitting still that long isn't easy for a child with nothing to do. Parents can help by providing children with quiet, unobtrusive projects to do on the bus. Some suggestions might be a book, comic book, coloring book, electronic game and the like.

The U.S. Department of Education suggests that parents discuss and practice bus etiquette and safety with

children, to ensure they have a safe and secure ride to and from school. Appropriate school bus behavior includes:

- If seat belts are available, use them.
- Speak with a quiet "inside" voice to keep from distracting the bus driver.
- Remain in your seat, keeping your hands to yourself.
- Do not put hands, feet or head out of the bus window.
- Keep your possessions out of the aisles.
- Do not stand up until the bus comes to a complete stop.

Together we can make the ride to and from school a safer experience for all children.

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*Pendleton home economist Virginia Justice and her husband have two college-aged daughters.*