

# Children at Play Signs

## *Seldom Effective, and Usually Unnecessary and Confusing*

Warning signs call attention to unexpected conditions on or adjacent to a road. Conditions might require speed reduction or other actions in the interest of safety. Therefore, sign messages must be clear. *The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)* the standard for placing traffic signs ensures clear messages. It also emphasizes that drivers must respect traffic signs. This article will focus on Children at Play signs, which are often unclear and drivers tend to disrespect them.



Citizens often demand that Children at Play signs be installed on their street. They argue that the signs will reduce the risk of potentially tragic accidents. There is some merit to their concern. In a NCHRP study of pedestrian accidents, researchers found that over 40 percent of the accidents involved children. Almost two-thirds of those accidents occurred in residential areas other than intersections. The Children at Play sign, however, is rarely an effective solution.

The MUTCD requires that use of warning signs be based on an engineering study or on engineering judgment. Such a study could draw the following conclusions.

1. The Children at Play sign has little effect on driver behavior, which is seldom the cause of accidents. The NCHRP study reported that nearly 80 percent of the collisions involving children resulted from an unsafe or illegal act by the child. From that study, an ITE Traffic Control Devices Handbook author concluded that no traffic control device could be expected to protect a child.
2. Signs give parents and children a false sense of security. By relying on the sign, parents might monitor their children less closely. Children might interpret the sign to mean they can play in the

street. Thus, a Children at Play sign can contribute to the very accidents parents seek to avoid.

3. One Children at Play sign can lead to many such signs throughout a town. Nearly every block has children living on it. As stated in the MUTCD, “The use of warning signs should be kept to a minimum as the unnecessary use of warning signs tends to breed disrespect for all signs.”

4. Installing a Children at Play sign in response a citizen’s

request is based on political reasons rather than on sound engineering judgment.

5. Signs need to be maintained. They are expensive to purchase, install, and inspect.

Because they are confusing and fail to meet any recognized criteria for good signing, placing Children at Play signs can open a municipality to tort liability claims.

There are situations where road managers should consider signs to protect children. The MUTCD describes signs for school zones, pedestrian crossings, and playgrounds. It also contains signs for children with disabilities. The MUTCD signing for such areas conveys a clear message to drivers.

Children at Play signs, on the other hand, are usually ineffective, unnecessary, and confusing. For the reasons given above, they should not be used.

### Sources

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