

# Keeping them safe on the way to school



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer

**Crossing guard D.H. Clements** helps students cross the street safely at Curtis Elementary School.

By Marcy Horwitz  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

You're in the car on the way to work. It's a dark, foggy morning, and it's hard to see the road. Suddenly, a rapidly flashing light attracts your attention. Then, you see another one just behind it, and one more off to the side. You slow down, giving the flashing lights a little more room.

That's a good thing, because those flashing lights – 363 of them to date – are on the backpacks of schoolchildren throughout Chesterfield County. Their purpose is to keep school-aged kids safe as they walk or bike to school each day, but you won't find these particular lights available for sale at the mall. You can only get them through "Be Safe, Be Seen," a new preventative program by the Chesterfield Police Department.

"Chesterfield has a reputation of being proactive when it comes to children's safety," says Mary Garber, child safety coordinator. No one wanted to wait until there was an accident to begin teaching children about traffic safety issues.

"Be Safe, Be Seen" begins by enlisting parents' help in keeping children safe. "A parent should be a child's first line of defense when it comes to traffic safety education and awareness," says Garber.

As part of the program, child safety officers distribute flyers to parents that include tips on how to talk with children about traffic safety. Parents are asked to walk the route taken to and from school with their children, pointing out any hazards along the way. Parents also fill out an information sheet that describes the route. When the sheet is returned to a child safety officer, the child receives a cool strobe flasher to attach to their backpack or bike.

Sandy Blankenship, assistant principal at Curtis Elementary School, says the program is "smart."

"Anytime we can keep the kids safe, we're happy," she says. "Be Safe, Be Seen" gives her students an extra layer of comfort as they learn to traverse various traffic obstacles. Equally important, the program alerts crossing guards to the hazards that the children encounter on their respective routes.

"Be Safe, Be Seen" is directed toward Chesterfield's elementary schools, especially those that face significant safety challenges. (Curtis and Bensley elementary schools, for

example, are situated on four-lane roadways.) It's also in effect at Chester Middle School, which has similar traffic issues.

The police department demonstrates its commitment to traffic safety in a host of other ways, says Garber. School crossing guards receive special training to help children negotiate the many distractions they face such as parent traffic, school buses and other children.

## What parents should teach children about traffic safety:

- Learn to obey traffic signals and signs.
- Cross the street at corners using traffic signals and crosswalks.
- Never run between parked cars or in the middle of the block.
- Always look LEFT, RIGHT and LEFT again, before crossing the street.
- Walk on the sidewalk whenever possible.
- Walk facing traffic.
- Always watch for cars.
- Hold hands with an adult while in parking lots.
- Play in safe places away from the street.
- Be alert!
- Most importantly: teach pedestrian safety by setting a good example.

Source: *Pedestrian Safety Tips, Chesterfield County Community Support Unit*

Kids wear special armbands that announce "Walking is Cool." They carry "Safe Routes to School" bags to reinforce the message of traffic safety. Informational displays at school safety fairs remind children to follow basic traffic safety procedures. The annual STEPP program – Success Through Education and Pro-Active Policing – sends uniformed child safety officers into school classrooms each year to teach basic safety tips to elementary school-aged students.

"Be Safe, Be Seen" is funded by a grant from the Virginia Department of Health's Preventing Unintentional Injuries Initiative.



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