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Traffic safety bulletin

City Driving Smarts

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Mobility signifies maturity. When a child is old enough to put on her own shoes, it means a whole new part of the world has been made accessible – the part that requires shoes. Shoes allow the child to runaround and play outside, within boundaries set by the parent. For a while those boundaries are defined by the roadway. A three year old child who is old enough to put on her own shoes isn't yet ready to cross the street alone.

After a few years of hand-holding, parental warnings and learning from parental example, the six or seven year old will have learned to look both ways repeatedly, until it is safe to cross a lightly traveled residential street. I will leave it to parents and developmental psychologists to debate the correct age, but it does take a while for children to learn road-crossing judgments. Although almost nothing surprises me anymore, I don't think parents counsel their children at any age to run willy-nilly into the street and let the court settle the outcome.

A few years later, older kids learn to look both ways repeatedly and cross busier streets only when it is safe, even if the light is green. Again, crossing willy-nilly and hiring a good lawyer isn't in the advice given in better parenting books.

At driving age, parents and driving schools should be continuing to present the same message. Check both ways repeatedly and proceed only when it is safe. That is the question for this week. "What does a green light mean?" Most people will say that a green light means "GO". In reality it means, "Check the intersection first and THEN go if clear."

Somewhere along the line, when a person becomes a driver, a dozen years of training that teaches them to look both ways before stepping off the curb, is erased. Intersection collisions are the third most common collision type in Ontario, after single-vehicle and rear-end collisions. Consider how many intersections you travel through, stop at and start off from on a typical city drive.

Thirty years ago, this idea of checking intersections was much more difficult to get across. The usual response was that being hit in an intersection when the other driver ran a red light only happens in Hollywood chase scenes and driver's education movies. It is actually easier to get

drivers to respond positively to being coached about intersection checking today because we do see drivers run red lights almost on a daily basis.

Although tailgating and speeding is so common that we almost expect it to happen, drivers have a universal loathing of the carelessness or lack of awareness of the red light runner. We can't have police at every intersection although we could have photo-radar cameras. However, these are only remedies that apply after the fact. To prevent being involved in someone else's mistake, we have to go back to the instructions that worked for children crossing the street. Look both ways and only move if it is safe.

This is fairly easy to do at an intersection where you are stopped at a red light and it turns to green. Only the impatience of a cab driver would be taxed if you took the time to check both ways before moving into the intersection. It gets trickier when you are approaching the green light at normal traffic speed but a necessary procedure to minimize risk. At Skid Control School this is one of the habits that we stress because many drivers either don't check at all or do it far too late to make a difference.

An intersecting driver can be distracted or impaired enough to blow the red. You need to spot this driver while you are still far enough away from the intersection that you can perform an emergency stop. It doesn't do any good to check the intersection so late that you can't do anything about the red light runner in the stolen car. If you have a car close behind, the checking has to be done even earlier, so you can stop smoothly enough that the driver behind has a chance to stop too.

The final scenario is where a driver is waiting in the intersection to make a left turn. The light goes to amber, but it doesn't look like the approaching driver will stop. Even if the light turns red, don't move until the approaching driver either stops or runs the light. When it is safe to move, inspect the cross traffic and proceed carefully to clear the intersection.

The front line is your first line of defence against any collision involvement. In driving, the front line is you!

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