

# Preventing a Neighborhood Tragedy When Responding

By Michael P. Dallessandro – [www.respondsmart.com](http://www.respondsmart.com)

When I first received news that a responding Kansas City engine struck and killed a young child who darted out into the street in the path of the rig my heart sank into my feet. I have a deep connection to an event like this as many of you also do if you have children or grandchildren in your family. My heart goes out to the family who lost a beautiful child and of course to the apparatus driver and crew who have had to also face this tragedy and who will have to relive this tragedy over and over in the media, then in the courts and then in the courts of their own minds. The other reason I have a connection to an incident like this is that in my RESPONDSMART apparatus driver workshops and presentations at conferences I have discussed scenarios like this hoping they would never occur. Also, in my full time role as a school transportation director transporting 3500 school children on 80 buses nearly one million miles each year I know that there is significant risk when children, possibly not paying attention get near large vehicles. My message throughout my years as a writer, speaker and consultant has been simple. Lets learn from tragic situations so they never happen again. With that theme in mind here are some basic tips for emergency vehicle drivers when responding to incidents where children may be outdoors playing in the general area.

**Watch your speed.** Children can dart out unexpectedly from anywhere! At 55 mph on dry pavement it can take a full size class "A" pumper over 400 feet to stop. There is a direct correlation between life and death when speed increases. "Slow down, save a life" is more than just a catchy slogan.

**Pay attention to route and the time of day/time of year:** First of all if you can avoid routes that take you by schools or playgrounds do so. In my opinion even if it may add a minute to your response it is worth it. If you absolutely have to travel near these areas pay attention to the time of day. Be alert for children walking to/from School or the added traffic and congestion from cars dropping or picking up kids. Also during holidays, summer and days when school may be closed due to weather any time can be child time so be alert. In colder climates drivers should pay attention to the first few weeks of spring. Children trapped indoors for a few months lose many of their "outdoor" skills like watching and listening for approaching vehicles. Use your sirens and air horns when appropriate and be alert for the child wearing an iPod or other device ultimately reducing their ability to hear you coming. Weather can also play a role in these situations. In heavy rain children and people in general for that matter will pull their hoods or jackets tightly over their heads to keep their "hair do" from getting all wet or in bitter cold or windy situations to keep warm. They are often at the same time running to shield themselves from the elements. This action not only reduces their ability to hear properly but it also causes them to have reduced visibility thereby possibly darting into your path unexpectedly.

**Adjust for neighborhood driving:** Many times our response travels main roadways and then involves us turning off of the main road and into a subdivision, development, townhouse/apartment complex or cul-de-sac. Posted speeds on the main roads may be as high as 45 mph or higher however the neighborhood speed may be less than 35 mph. Aside from the connection to stopping distance that I made earlier, lowering your speed when entering these areas will allow you and any other "eyes" in your rig to scan for random children.

Watch between parked cars and scan for shadows on the ground that may indicate a child hidden by a car may be headed your way. Be observant for dogs, balls, bicycles or other children. These are all good indicators to prepare and expect the unexpected.

**Children are erratic:** If you see a child and think that the child has recognized that your fire truck is approaching them or possibly has made eye contact with you as the driver this is not an indicator that they will conduct themselves properly and make the right decision to “stay put” until you pass safely. There are children out there playing who have learning disabilities or who could possibly be deaf or hearing impaired. Children also do not have the good speed estimation skills required to make the decision to stay or make the cross street dash in front of your truck safely. These skills only come from a long life around vehicles and from the skills one develops by actually driving their own vehicle. When a 747 aircraft is landing at the airport it appears to be floating to the ground at slow speeds when they actually doing about 150mph. The same type of illusion can happen with your apparatus. It may look like it is going slow as it approaches from a distance and a child may believe he or she has time to “beat you” across the street only to find as they leap from the curb and you are “right there on them” that their initial estimation was horribly wrong.

Clearly nobody wants to be involved in a tragedy like the one in Kansas City however a regular review of these simple tips might be all it takes to save a life. During regular driver training or safety drills include this as a discussion and ask your members or drivers to point out areas in your response area or mutual aide areas that could present these types of situations. Your thoughts, comments or feedback is always welcome to

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