

SAFETY FIRST

KEEPING YOUR FAMILY OUT OF HARM'S WAY WHILE TRAVELING.

By **KERRIE FLANAGAN**

You've packed up the kids or grandkids and are ready to set out on a journey in the comfort of your motorhome. The road ahead is filled with adventure, excitement, and new sites. To fully enjoy your vacation on wheels, however, safety must come first.

When traveling with children, parents or grandparents must consider precautions intended specifically for the safety of youngsters. Before the motorhome leaves the driveway, it is important for the adults in the group to understand child restraint laws, and to become proactive in establishing and implementing motorhome safety and campground safety guidelines.

Child restraint laws and safety.

Although seat belt laws vary from state to state, Nancy White with the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) said, "RVIA strongly recommends seat belts for all passengers when the RV is in motion." According to a "Tech Tip" found on the Holiday Rambler Web site, www.holidayrambler.com/service, motorhome manufacturers are federally mandated to provide the same number of seat belts in the motorhome as sleeping positions. So if the motorhome is built to sleep six people, there must be six designated seat belt locations. Parents and grandparents need to be aware that recreation vehicles are not exempt from restraint laws. Children should be safely buckled in whenever the motorhome is moving. And that includes the use of car seats for smaller children.

Brad and Amy Herzog are avid travelers who pack up their motorhome each summer and hit the road for a couple of months. This now includes taking their two children, ages 1 and



Photo courtesy of RVIA

Even after having two children, Brad and Amy Herzog continue to enjoy the motorhoming lifestyle. However, they now must consider the special demands and precautions of traveling with toddlers.

2. "The car seats are buckled in the back and the kids are never out of their car seats when the RV is moving," Brad said. "We always pull over before taking them out."

All 50 states and all Canadian provinces have laws requiring the use of safety seats for small children. Although the positioning and type of safety seat, and the age and weight of the child who should be restrained in a child seat may vary from state to state and province to province, these seats are nonetheless mandatory throughout North America. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recommends that children who weigh less than 40 pounds should always be confined to a car seat and children more than 40 pounds and ages 4 to 8 should ride in a booster seat.

The question then becomes, where should the seat be placed? Sergeant Rob Marone of the Colorado State Patrol said the safest place for children to sit, whether they're restrained in a car

seat or with a safety belt, is in a front-facing seat in the back of the vehicle. This is fine as long as the motorhome has front-facing seats in the passenger area. But what about motorhomes that have only side-facing seats in the rear?

In an RV Driving Safety article posted on the RV Alliance America Web site (www.rvaa.com), Carla Levinski from the Oregon Department of Transportation said that most vehicle and child seat manufacturers warn against installing safety seats in a side-facing passenger seat. The same goes for chairs that swivel. So, where do you put the child seat if there are no forward-facing or non-swivel chairs in the rear passenger area? Ms. Levinski said the only option is to put the child in a safety or booster seat properly restrained in the front passenger seat.

However, if your motorhome is equipped with a passenger-side air bag, make sure it is turned off before placing the child in this position. The extreme

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The first issue of Family Motor Coaching magazine debuted on February 15, 1964, and was put together by Bob and Jean Richter, L1; Dick Parece, F22; and George "Doc" and Mary Whiting, L7. The first magazine was pasted up in Bob and Jean's cellar; typesetting took place 45 miles away; and camera work was completed in a third location.

Dick Parece printed the magazine in his basement. The finished product was assembled at the Whittings' home, where volunteers gathered around a pool table to fold and collate the pages.



force of air bag deployment can cause serious injury or death to infants or small children who may be riding in the front passenger position. If your motorhome's passenger-side air bag does not have an on-off switch, you should consider having one installed if you plan to travel with youngsters in the front seat. A list of switch installers can be found at www.nhtsa.dot.gov/airbags/switch_install/index.fm.

While laws require the use of safety seats, at least 80 percent of child safety seats are incorrectly installed, because they are not fitted into the vehicle correctly and the seat belt is not properly locked in place, according to NHTSA. "Parents should check the (safety seat) manual for the proper installation of the car seat," Sergeant Marone said. "It is a violation of child restraint laws if a car seat is used incorrectly according to manufacturers' instructions." NHTSA cites several common safety seat installation or usage mistakes that can result in injury or death during a crash:

- The safety seat harness straps are too loose.
- The safety seat is facing the wrong direction in the vehicle.
- The child is not the appropriate height, weight, and/or age for the safety seat.
- The infant seat is in the path of an air bag.
- Children who should ride in a booster seat are moved prematurely to an adult seat belt system.
- The safety seat has been recalled or has been involved in a crash.

Car seat inspections by certified child safety seat technicians are available nationwide. To find a location near you, visit www.seatcheck.org or call (866) SEAT-CHECK (732-8243).

Captain Bob Parish, troop commander for the Colorado State Patrol, also advises parents to be aware of objects not secured in the vehicle. In the event of a crash, these items will move at the same speed the motorhome was traveling before impact, and these objects could cause serious injuries even if everyone is safely buckled in.

Motorhome safety. When on the road, stress and worries may be left behind, but potential safety hazards

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Mike and Lisa Rossi encourage their kids to have fun during family trips but have established rules and limits that the children are expected to follow.

may be lurking in your motorhome. "An RV is a car and a home, so it's double the risk," said Debra Smiley Holtzman, J.D., M.A., a nationally recognized child safety expert and author of *The Panic Proof Parent: Creating A Safe Lifestyle For Your Family*. "Safety has to be the top concern." It is important for adults to follow the same precautions that are used in a stationary home, such as keeping medicines, chemicals, and matches out of children's reach. Other safety recommendations from Ms. Holtzman include:

- Get down on your hands and knees and check the RV — both inside and outside — for hazards from your child's perspective.
- Install child gates, if necessary, to keep youngsters out of the kitchen or bathroom.
- Install child-proof latches and locks for drawers, cabinets, and toilets.
- To prevent strangulation, keep window blind cords and other types of cords, ropes, or strings out of the reach of children.
- Never store flammable materials near a heat source.
- Use back burners on the stove and turn pot handles toward the back of the stove.
- Keep hot food and beverages, glassware, and knives away from the edges of counters and tables.
- Be especially careful when using a campground shower, because the water heater may be set at a far higher temperature than is safe.
- Cover all unused electrical outlets.

- If firearms are transported in the RV, keep them locked, unloaded, and stored out of reach. Secure ammunition in a separate, locked location.

Fire safety is another concern while on the road, whether you're traveling with children or not. So, before setting out on any trip, do the following:

- Discuss a fire plan with everyone who will be traveling in the motorhome. Know the exits and where to meet outside the RV. Make sure everyone knows how to operate the door locks and handle, since they differ from those in a stationary home and also are different from one RV to the next.
- Test the smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors, and replace the batteries in each at least once a year.
- Check fire extinguishers.
- Keep a box of baking soda handy for putting out small flare-ups in the galley.
- Keep combustibles away from the stove, the grill, and the campfire.
- Never leave an open flame unattended.
- Check and fix fuel leaks immediately.
- Keep battery terminals and fuse blocks clean.

Campground safety. Mike and Lisa Rossi have traveled in RVs with their three children for many years. As conscientious parents, they have certain rules they expect their children, ages 9, 12, and 15, to follow. The couple explains to the kids the boundaries they are expected to stay within at each campsite. Mike and Lisa say they have

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found that most people are friendly at RV campgrounds; however, they still have concerns about their children and strangers. They insist on knowing where their kids are at all times. When using the public bathrooms and showers, the children must take a sibling or parent with them.

When traveling to areas where wildlife is present, children need to be informed about possible animals in the area and what to do if they come in contact with them. The youngsters should be warned not to feed any animals that may appear to be begging for food, no matter how cute they may be. Special precautions with food must be taken if there are bears in the area (or even raccoons). The campground host or park ranger can provide further information on what to do if confronted by a bear or other animal.

Hiking safety. Hiking is a popular activity when camping, and when done safely, it can be a wonderful experience for kids and adults. Since unexpected things can happen, however, the best way to help guarantee a good time for all is to plan carefully and follow common-sense safety precautions. The American Red Cross recommends the following:

- If you have any medical conditions, discuss your hiking plans with your health care provider and obtain approval before departing.
- Review the equipment, supplies, and skills you will use during your hike. Consider what emergencies could arise and how you would deal with those situations. What if you got lost or were unexpectedly confronted by an animal? What if someone became ill or injured? What kind of weather might you encounter? Add to your hiking checklist the supplies you would need to deal with these situations.
- Make sure you have the necessary skills for your camping or hiking adventure. You may need to know how to read a compass, erect a temporary shelter, or give first aid. Practice these tasks in advance.
- If your trip will be strenuous, make sure you are in good physical condition before setting out. If your itinerary includes climbing or traveling to high altitudes, make plans for proper acclimatization.

- It is safest to hike or camp with at least one companion. If you will be entering a remote area, your group should have a minimum of four people; that way, if one person is injured, another can stay with the victim while the other two go for help. If you plan to go into an area that is unfamiliar, take along someone who knows the area, or at least speak with someone who is familiar with the area before you set out.

- Some areas require you to have reservations or certain permits before hiking or camping there. If an area is closed, do not go there. Find out in advance about any regulations — there may be rules about campfires or guidelines about wildlife.

- Pack emergency signaling devices, and know ahead of time the location of the nearest telephone or ranger station in case an emergency occurs on your trip.

- Leave a copy of your hiking itinerary with a responsible person in case you become lost. Include such details as your destination and the trails you intend to use; the make, year, and license plate of your vehicle(s); the equipment you're bringing; the weather you've anticipated; and when you plan to return.

With a little preparation beforehand, you will have the peace of mind to enjoy your vacation with the kids. Have a safe trip!

Helpful Resources


National Safe Kids Campaign
www.safekids.org
(202) 662-0600

National Highway Traffic Safety
Administration
www.nhtsa.dot.gov

Recreation Vehicle Industry Association
www.rvia.org
(703) 620-6003

American Red Cross
www.redcross.org

National Safety Council
www.nsc.org
(630) 285-1121

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