



“Children Playing” Signs

Spring is rapidly approaching and kids should be playing outside more as the weather warms up. It is not unusual for the phone to also warm up as parents call in for children-playing signs. It makes sense to parents – we have children playing, so we need a sign.

When counties get a request for a sign the first thing we should do is check the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). In Kansas and every other state, we are required by law to follow the MUTCD. So, we look in the MUTCD for a children-playing sign and in what situations it is warranted. Then a problem arises as there is no children-playing sign in the MUTCD. Imagine that, an 864-page sign manual and there is no children-playing sign. The MUTCD has been in existence since the 1930s and you would think at least one engineer during that 80 year period would have thought about putting that sign in the manual. Well, engineers have thought about the sign and determined that children should not be encouraged to play on or near the road. The sign has long been rejected since it is a direct and open suggestion that this behavior is acceptable. So now what do you do? The short answer is you call the parent back and say you cannot put up a children-playing sign because it is not in the MUTCD and will not make the road safer for children.

Most authoritative sources summarize the research and common sense into the following points on children-playing signs:

- Does not give clear and enforceable guidance to the drivers.
- Provides a false sense of security to parents and children that may increase risk.
- Gives the false impression that areas without signs do not have children.
- Represents an unnecessary cost that then propagates as additional signs are requested.
- Violates the principle that signage should be based on engineering principles.

From my experience most collisions involving children are not actually caused by driver behavior, but by unsafe, erratic actions by children. It is inherently unsafe for any child to play on or near a city street where the traffic speeds are relatively low. It is outright dangerous for children to play on or near a county road where speeds are much faster than in the city. The message to children should be to stay away from the road.

Where do parents get the idea of a children-playing sign? As far as I know no county or larger city installs children-playing signs. I have seen children-playing signs in some small cities. Maybe the small cities only have children in certain areas, but my guess is the small cities do not have anyone on staff that thought about the issue or even bothered to check the MUTCD.

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FIGURE 1. Children playing sign where kids are not very fast. (Do not use this sign.)



FIGURE 2. Children playing sign where kids can run faster than 25 MPH. (Do not use this sign no matter how fast the kids can run)



FIGURE 3. *Deaf Child sign is not in the MUTCD but can be used.*



FIGURE 4. *Blind Child Sign is not in the MUTCD but can be used.*



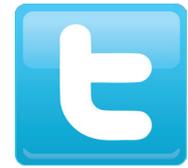
FIGURE 5. *Playground sign is in the MUTCD but should only be used near playgrounds or parks.*

Sometimes the installation of a children-playing signs becomes a political issue. I know of one county that advises parents that they can purchase a sign from a signing company and install the sign just outside of the right-of-way. This then gives the parent an option if they feel strongly about the sign, and keeps the county out of endorsing or paying for the sign.

On occasion we get a request for a sign that notifies drivers of a child with some type of disability. A typical request is for a Blind Child or Deaf Child sign as pictured in Figures 2 & 3. These signs are also not in the MUTCD, and there is no evidence that these signs are effective. We could easily deny installing the deaf child and blind child signs, but they do have more merit than the children-playing sign. The sign does warn the driver of an unusual situation. Unlike the children-playing sign, these signs do not condone children playing near the road. Also, since these requests are rare, there is no sign proliferation issue. Some parents might not like the notice that their child has a disability, so these signs should only be installed at the request of the parent.

The playground (W15-1) sign (Figure 4), which is in the MUTCD, is not a children-at-play sign. The playground sign may be used to give advance warning of a designated children's playground that is adjacent to the road. The playground sign would only be used rarely in a rural area. Research in Minnesota and Wisconsin found that the playground sign did not reduce vehicle speeds, so the effectiveness of this sign is also questionable. ■

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