

“CHILDREN AT PLAY” SIGNS CAN CAUSE CONFUSION

Road signs give messages to drivers. If the messages are unclear, unnecessary, or confusing, they can cause danger to motorists and others. *The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)* is the standard for placing traffic signs and markings to give clear messages to motorists.

According to the report *Maintenance Management of Street and Highway Signs* by the Transportation Research Board, improvements in traffic signing have the highest benefit-cost ratio of any highway safety improvement. About 29 percent of tort liability lawsuits against highway departments are related to traffic signing. For these reasons alone it is worthwhile to install road signs according to the MUTCD.

Citizens often demand that the town install Children at Play signs on their street to reduce the risk of automobile-pedestrian accidents. Officials ask, “What does the MUTCD say about Children at Play signs? If we install a sign on one street, won’t we get requests from other neighborhoods in town to do the same? What’s the town’s liability?”

The short answer is: “Do not use Children at Play signs.” The long answer is a bit more complicated. First, the Children at Play sign is unclear and unnecessary. It suggests to the driver that, if no such sign is present on another street, children are not playing there, and it is OK to be less careful. Another driver might interpret the sign to mean that children are playing in the road. “Always? What time of day?”

Second, it gives the parents and children a false sense of security. By relying on the sign, parents might moni-

tor their children less closely and children might interpret the sign to mean it is acceptable to play in the street.

Third, one Children at Play sign leads to a proliferation of signs throughout town. Nearly every block has children living on it. Would there have to be signs on each one? The effect of too many signs is that they become ineffective. The proliferation of signs breeds disrespect, not only for the specific signs, but for all signs.



Fourth, to use Children at Play signs in response to one request usually generates similar requests, thereby basing sign placement on political reasons rather than on sound engineering judgment.

Fifth, because they are confusing and do not meet specific criteria for good signing, placing Children at Play signs opens a municipality to tort liability.

Sixth, since all signs need to be maintained to be effective, the proliferation of unnecessary signs places an undue burden on maintenance crews. Purchasing, installing, and keeping these signs in good order is expensive.

For these reasons, the MUTCD discourages the use of Children at Play signs. However, municipalities can and should post signs for school zones, pedestrian crossings, and playgrounds. The MUTCD makes specific reference to these situations. Signing such areas gives clear messages to drivers about the kind of zone they are entering. Children at Play signs, on the other hand, do not meet a specific criterion.

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