

# TRAFFIC AND SAFETY INFORMATIONAL SERIES FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION #1

## WON'T A "CHILDREN AT PLAY" SIGN HELP PROTECT OUR CHILDREN?

The *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (MUTCD) regulates the design, use, and placement of signs and markings in the United States. According to the MUTCD, the "Children at Play" sign is considered a warning sign with a word message. This sign is sometimes used instead of the nationally recognized "Playground" sign (see Figure 1).

Requests for "Children at Play" signs are based on the belief that these types of signs will alert drivers to the presence of children and increase safety. The purpose of any warning sign is to inform drivers of conditions that they are likely to consistently encounter. However, drivers begin to ignore warning signs when this is not true.

### **"CHILDREN AT PLAY" AND "PLAYGROUND" SIGNS**

Warning signs should be uniformly designed and often communicate their message most efficiently through the use of symbols. Warning signs that are not consistently uniform can confuse drivers. The "Children at Play" sign, for example, has several variations. These include "Slow – Children" and "Caution – Children at Play."

The MUTCD recommends that all nonuniform signs within a jurisdiction be removed. In their place, a uniform set of signs (word or symbol) should be used throughout the jurisdiction.

A sign with a message similar to that of the "Children at Play" sign, but in symbol form, has been approved for use in the MUTCD. This sign, which presents a "Playground" symbol, is shown in Figure 1. The MUTCD provides the option for this sign to be used to give advanced warning of a children's playground adjacent to the road. Therefore, the MUTCD's guidance on the installation of this type of sign is for a very specific location.



**FIGURE 1 Playground sign.**

*Reference: Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.*

## **OVERUSE OR MISUSE OF WARNING SIGNS**

The overuse or misuse of any warning sign (including “Children at Play” signs) is a major concern. The MUTCD indicates that “the use of warning signs should be kept to a minimum, as the unnecessary use of warning signs tends to breed disrespect for all signs” (MUTCD Section 2C.02). For example, if a large number of “Children at Play” or “Playground” signs are installed in a given area, the signs would become ineffective because drivers would see them constantly without any apparent hazard and eventually begin to ignore them. This would, of course, defeat the purpose of installing these types of signs, even in places where they are actually needed.

## **PLACING SIGNS DOES NOT SLOW VEHICLES**

In general, the speeds people choose to drive along a roadway are primarily determined by the roadway’s characteristics and environment and by the level of comfort and safety the driver perceives. No documented studies on the attention value and crash or speed impacts of “Children at Play” warning signs have been performed as of 2020.

However, a 2012 study of “Playground” warning signs conducted at three sites in Minnesota found that the signs produced no effect on mean vehicle speeds at one site and decreased mean vehicle speeds by 0.9 and 1.5 mph at the other two sites. The magnitudes of these vehicle speed differences, although statistically significant, are not considered significant in any practical sense. The researchers concluded that if this type of sign, which is installed next to playgrounds or similar areas, did not reduce vehicle speeds at any practical level, then warning signs with a more general message (e.g., “Children at Play”) would be likely to have a similar or even less noticeable impact.