

Is it OK to Install “Children at Play” Signs?

Traffic signs are installed on our highways for many reasons. They may inform us of the need to stop, the speed limit, street names or which direction to go. Warning signs alert us to unexpected hazards on our roads. Signs help us obey the laws, find our destination, and keep us from running off the road. They help us to be safe whether we are a motorist, bicyclist or pedestrian.

Many agencies receive requests for “Slow Children”, “Children at Play”, or “Slow Children at Play” signs. At first glance it seems logical to install these signs. After all, children play in or near the road and shouldn't there be some warning given to drivers? But do they really help? Are these signs ok to use?

The first place to look for advice is the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). This is a federal document that provides guidance on how to use traffic signs and which signs are appropriate. North Dakota law requires the use of this manual for traffic control.

Part 2 of the MUTCD discusses the function and purpose of acceptable signs on all types of roads. Communities are to only use standard signs that are found in the manual. “Children at Play” signs are not listed therefore are **nonstandard and inappropriate to install**.

There are several reasons why “Children at Play” signs are nonstandard and not to be used on roadways. Here are a few of them:

- The Traffic Control Devices Handbook from the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) states, “Caution-Children at Play or Slow Children signs should not be used since they may encourage children to play in the street and may encourage parents to be less vigilant.” “Children at Play” signs give parents a false sense of security in letting their children play in the streets.
- Motorists should expect children to be at play in all residential areas, and the lack of signing on some streets may indicate otherwise.
- These signs have no legal basis for determining what a motorist should do. They are unenforceable and act as another roadside obstacle to pedestrians and errant motorists.
- Use of these nonstandard signs may imply that the involved jurisdiction approves of streets as playgrounds, which may result in the jurisdiction being vulnerable to tort liability.
- These signs do not provide guidance to motorists as to a safe speed.
- “Children at Play” signs may be designed to look like warning signs, diamond shaped and yellow with a black legend. However, in many instances, this sign has a non-standard shape and color. Warning signs provide information on the specific location of the hazard

(pedestrian crossing, curve, etc.). “Children at Play” signs do not give a specific location. They merely tell the driver that kids may be in the road somewhere.

- Studies have shown that “Children at Play” signs do not reduce traffic speeds or make drivers more observant.

There are some alternatives that can work in many instances. The playground sign is an appropriate sign alongside parks or playgrounds. Also the pedestrian crossing sign should be used to warn motorists in those locations where children and others frequently cross the road.

Nearly 30 percent of tort cases filed against roadway agencies pertain to signs. When installing signs that do not follow the guidelines in the MUTCD, agencies are increasing their liability should a child be hit on these roadways.

It can be difficult to say no to residents when this sign is requested. Yet, by following the MUTCD and not installing “Children at Play” you may be improving safety for everyone in your community.

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