



SIGN INSTALLATION POLICY

“Special Needs Children” Signs

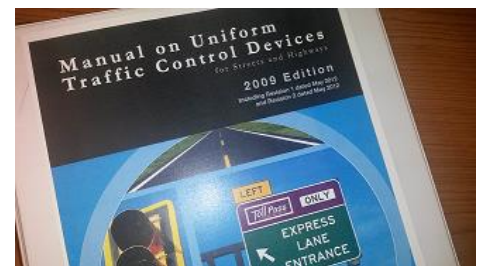


Although not as commonly requested as “Children at Play” signs – or variations on that same message: “Slow Children at Play”, “[running child image] at Play”, “Watch for Children”, etc. signs have been asked for by parents concerned about the safety of their children with vision or hearing impairments – or, children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

The Federally-adopted Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) states the following about warning signs:

“The purpose of a warning sign is to provide advance warning to the road user of unexpected conditions on or adjacent to the roadway that might not be readily apparent.”

Section 5.01 “Introduction” Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways, 2009, Federal Highway Administration



Signs that convey the message “Blind Child Area,” “Deaf Child” or “Autistic Child” are not recognized by the State of Alaska or the Federal Highway Administration as official traffic control devices – and are no longer installed on public streets in Anchorage. These signs have been installed in the past in a few locations in the Municipality of Anchorage; however, the signs that are installed in neighborhoods are being left in place until they are no longer serviceable (as is permitted by the MUTCD), or we become aware that the family in question has moved from the neighborhood. At that time, the signs will be removed.

Public agencies across the United States have a variety of policies on these types of signs. Some agencies will do so upon request since a compelling point can be made that a motorist – in a residential neighborhood – may not be aware that a special needs child is living in the area – which meets the ‘purpose’ criteria for a warning sign, as noted above.

Even those advocacy groups for individuals with these issues have mixed opinions on the use of these signs. Some even object to the notion of defining a child by their disability: “Blind Child” or “Deaf Child” – which is partly forced by the need to convey a readily-understood message that can fit on a standard-sized street sign.



The need to convey a readily-understood message also does not account for the possibility that any particular child may have several issues: they may have impaired vision and impaired hearing, for one example. In addition, not only there is no quantifiable ‘standard’ of any of these impairments (a child may have very poor vision, but still be able to discern some objects, another may be able to hear some sound frequencies, but not others), but, some impairments are progressive – becoming worse, or better, with time and medical care.

Lastly, there is the real issue that the families of these children may move – without notice to the public agency responsible for the installation, maintenance, and – ultimately – removal of the sign.

Many of the public agencies that will install these signs require the following from the family:

- 1) A physician’s statement identifying the extent of the disability
- 2) Concurrence from the parents of their understanding that the sign will be removed when the child reaches a specified (often, 13 years) age. That may include a sworn statement of the child’s date of birth.
- 3) Written acknowledgement from the parents of their understanding that the sign provides no guarantee of their child’s safety – and that they remain responsible for monitoring their child’s activities.
- 4) A commitment to notify the public agency – in a timely manner – of any positive changes in their child’s impairments (for example, cochlear implants, use of hearing aids, etc. for children with hearing impairments).
- 5) A commitment to notify the public agency – in a timely manner – of any relocation to another place of residence.

This requires a commitment of personal information that many parents are unwilling to provide. And, it requires close tracking from the public agency.

Municipal Policy on “Special Needs Children” Signs:

“Blind Child,” “Deaf Child” or other variations on signage for special needs children are not recognized by the State of Alaska or the Federal Highway Administration as official traffic control devices, and will not be installed on those streets over which the Municipal Traffic Engineer has jurisdiction.

There is no evidence that the signs provide any benefit to the safety of children. There is no evidence that the signs result in any behavioral changes by drivers. Reports from the National Cooperative Highway Research Program have indicated the “**Non-uniform signs....should not be permitted at any time... and the removal of any non-standard signs should carry a high priority.**” In addition, nearly 80 percent of the crashes involving children resulted from an illegal or unsafe act by the child. In reality, no traffic control device could be expected to protect a child.

Pediatric trauma physicians have cited the studies, and concur that children – particularly young children – should actively be discouraged from playing near, or on, streets and that adults have the primary responsibility for ensuring the safety of their children in/near their homes.

Even into their teens, and even without accounting for impairments, children have difficulty judging the approach speeds of oncoming vehicles. Association of Psychological Sciences, based in London, <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/22/4/429.full.pdf+html>, make a finding that “*Our study is the first to demonstrate that the neural mechanisms for detection of looming [on-coming traffic] are not fully developed until adulthood.*”

Addressing the Safety of Young Children:

Unnecessary signs confuse and annoy drivers and foster a disrespect for all signs. Signs used in accordance with the Federal MUTCD can and should be posted for school zones and pedestrian crossings, as well as near established playgrounds and other recreational areas, where a need exists.



The Muni has an active Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program, however, to determine if motorists are driving at an inappropriate speed, or if there is a significant amount of non-local traffic using the neighborhood streets. This program can be an effective means of addressing the concerns that parents and families may have.

Parents have a vital role in providing for their childrens’ safety – and may, in fact, be the most effective means of addressing safety concerns. They have the ability to teach children that it is not safe to play in/near the street, and to discourage children from doing so without adult supervision.

Parents, however, should resist the temptation to purchase these signs from on-line sources, however, and install the signs in or near the public road. Under Alaska State law, it is illegal for anyone other than the Municipal Traffic Engineer to post signs – whether on public or private property – that attempt to regulate or control traffic on an abutting public roadway.

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