



## Hernando County Sheriff's Office

A STATE ACCREDITED LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY

P.O. BOX 10070 – BROOKSVILLE, FL 34603-0070 FAX 352 796-0493 PHONE 352 754-6830

### Media Release

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**From:** Corporal Wendy McGinnis  
Public Information Officer, 352-754-6830

**Re:** Back to School Safety Tips from Sheriff Al Nienhuis

**Date:** August 18, 2011

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As children return to school on August 22, 2011, Sheriff Al Nienhuis would like to remind drivers to drive slow and use caution. With the elimination of transportation for students living within the 2 mile area around each school in the district, the Hernando County Sheriff's Office is anticipating heavier than normal traffic.

“Keeping Hernando County's youngest citizens safe on their way to and from school is a zero-fail mission for the Sheriff's Office. We are going to do everything we can to keep them and the county's drivers safe,” said Sheriff Al Nienhuis.

Extra deputies, with marked and unmarked patrol vehicles, from the Hernando County Sheriff's Office will be assigned to strictly enforce traffic laws in and around school zones. Several School Crossing Guard positions have been added to ensure the safety of the children at the major intersections that are now in the “walk zone”. As a courtesy reminder, speeding fines in a school zone within Hernando County range from \$154 to \$1104; some fines also have a mandatory court date. In addition, failing to stop for a school bus while the red flashing lights are activated can result in a \$269 fine. Making sure the children get to school and return home safely is the responsibility of EVERY driver who operates a vehicle on the road.

With many children walking or riding bikes to school, parents are encouraged to teach their children proper pedestrian and bicycle safety. Here are a few tips to consider for those who have to walk or ride bicycles to school:

#### *For Walkers*

- Walk with an adult or responsible older child at all times.
- Children under 10 years old should cross the street only with an adult.
- Walk on sidewalks when available.
- Walk facing traffic, as far from the road as possible, if no sidewalks are available.
- Use traffic signals and marked crosswalks if available.

- Stop at the curb or edge of the road and look left, right, and left for traffic before crossing the street.
- Walk -- don't run.
- Give drivers time to see you before crossing the street.
- Keep looking for cars while you are crossing if you have to cross the road.
- Wear light colored clothing or reflectors when walking in the dark or in low light.

#### *For Bicyclists*

- Remember that bicycles are vehicles too; therefore, riders must follow all Florida traffic laws.
- Always wear a helmet that is properly fitted.
- Whenever possible, ride with an adult or responsible older child.
- Always obey all traffic signs and signals.
- Ride on the right side of the road or trail in a single file (one bicycle behind the other).
- Ride in the same direction as other vehicles.
- Go straight across railroad tracks.
- Always use proper hand signals when turning and stopping.
- Yield to pedestrians and alert them with a bicycle bell or your voice when passing.

Another concern parents are facing is the number of sex offenders along any given two mile route children may be traveling while walking or riding their bicycles to school. The higher the residential population, the higher probability a child will have of walking in close proximity to a sex offender's residence. We encourage parents whose children are walking, or riding their bikes to school, to research the FDLE website and [www.sexoffender.net](http://www.sexoffender.net). Visiting the website allows parents to enter their address to see if there are any sex offenders living within a certain radius of their residence or their child's schools.

"Parents should note an important distinction when perusing the list," Sheriff Nienhuis said. The designation of "*offender*" results from convictions for attempting or committing crimes ranging from possession of child pornography to procuring a child younger than 18 for prostitution. This designation is also given for lewd and lascivious acts with a child, including an 18-year old boyfriend who has consensual sex with his 15-year old girlfriend. A sexual "*predator*" has been convicted at least once for sexual battery on a child or for repeat sexual offender convictions.

Based on the search results, parents can plan the safest route in an effort to reduce the likely encounter of a sex offender. The Sheriff's Office Deputies are being vigilant in the neighborhoods where school children are walking and will have an increased presence in both marked and unmarked patrol vehicles, as a result of the new school board transportation policy.

Here are a few safety tips for children to consider when walking or riding bicycles to school:

- Stay away from any unfamiliar person who is trying to trick you or force you to go with him or her.
- Let your parents and other trusted adults know about any suspicious persons or situations.
- Learn to describe people and vehicles.
- Know where to run and how to forcibly resist being captured.
- Scream to be seen and to scare a stranger away.
- Report anyone hanging around or passing by regularly.
- Walk or bike only along a route that your parents have determined is safe.

School should be a safe environment where children learn about our world and how to become productive citizens. The Hernando Sheriff's Office strives to ensure that our most vulnerable citizen's have an opportunity to remain safe no matter where they are in Hernando County.

The safety tips used in this article were obtained from the Florida Department of Education, School Transportation Management Office, and Safe Schools Office brochure "Are We There Yet?: Staying Safe Between Home and School".