

Dear Educators,

Many children have read or seen the wonderful story of *The Polar Express*, by Chris Van Allsburg. *The Polar Express* is a tale about an imaginary train, however, many of the scenes in the movie show behaviour that would be unsafe around real railway property and trains.

The lesson plan suggested here, focuses on problem solving. It is intended to encourage children to discuss how to be safe around real-life situations at railway crossings and to help them come up with risk-free solutions.

Visit www.operationlifesaver.ca for more information on how to be safe around highway-railway crossings and to look over the pedestrian safety tips also included.

Operation Lifesaver, in cooperation with businesses, governments, railways and other organizations, annually produces a variety of documents, videos and miscellaneous items to assist in all stages of implementing its overall safety program.

Please contact Operation Lifesaver in Ottawa or any of the provincial coordinators listed on the *Contact Us* page of our website if you would like a presentation to be delivered to your school or organization.

Your students will take critical lessons they learn from you with them into their future; Operation Lifesaver wants to make sure that their future is a safe one.

Respectfully,

Do You Hear Me?

A Lesson Plan for Grades 1 to 3
to accompany ***The Polar Express***, a story by Chris Van Allsburg

Thinking Skills:

Problem Solving

Materials:

familiarity with the story ***The Polar Express***
by Chris Van Allsburg

Pencils

Crayons

Scissors

Glue

Hole punch

String or yarn

Do You Hear Me? worksheet

Objective

The students will:

- List or draw reasons why people may not hear the bell or other warning sounds at railway crossings.
- List or draw safe behaviours around railway crossings which will help people hear the warning sounds of approaching trains.

Directions to Children

****Children need to be familiar with the story of *The Polar Express*.****

1. *In the story The Polar Express, Santa offers the boy any gift he desires as the first gift of Christmas. The boy chooses a bell from the reindeer's harness and places it in his pocket. However, on the train ride home, the bell is lost. On Christmas morning, the boy finds the bell under the tree. When his parents see the bell and try to ring it, they believe that the bell is broken because they can't hear its sound.*

Why can't the mother and father hear the bell?

(Answer: Only those who believe in Christmas/Santa can hear the sound of the bell.)

The Polar Express train traveled to the North Pole, but many trains travel throughout towns and cities all over North America. The trains that travel where you live have a bell on them that warns people that they are coming. Trains also have horns that can give a louder warning. When a train is coming, everyone – cars, trucks, buses, people on bikes and people walking - MUST stop for the train.

EVERYONE needs to stop, look and listen whenever they are near railway tracks. Trains that travel near your house take a LONG time to stop. It is everyone's responsibility to stop, look and listen for the trains.

2. Refer to the "Do You Hear Me" worksheet, side 1.

*Look at this bell. Does it have a happy or a sad face? (Answer: Sad)
It has a sad face because people near the railway tracks did not hear the warning bell on the train. Let's read what this bell has to say:*

*"Before you crossed the railroad tracks,
The train you did not hear.
I made some sounds to warn you,
That I was very near."*

In the story, the boy's parents did not hear the Christmas bell.

*Why might people not hear the warning bell on a real train? (For younger children, discuss some reasons as a class.)
I'd like you to draw or write 3 reasons why people may not hear the bell on a train that is coming down the tracks.*

(Possible answers: radio in the car is too loud; people wearing headsets while biking, walking, running; talking on cell phones; talking to each other; heater/air-conditioning fan is on in the car; playing around the tracks and not paying attention... many other distractions can be listed.)

Give students some time to draw/write their answers.

3. *I'd like you to turn your paper over to worksheet side 2.*

*Is this bell happy or sad? (Answer: Happy)
It has a happy face because people were doing the right things around the railway tracks; it has a happy face also because the people HEARD the train bell telling everyone that the train was coming.
Let's read what this bell has to say:*

*"Before you cross the railway tracks,
Always look before you go.
Listen for the warning sounds,
And cross when it's safe to go."*

*In the story, only those who believed in Christmas/Santa could hear the bell. But, if they are doing the right things, EVERYONE should be able to hear the bell of a train coming down the tracks.
Now, I'd like you to draw or write three (3) examples of how people should act around train tracks so that they will hear the train bell warning them that a train is coming down the track.*

(Possible answers: no talking on cell phones around tracks; car radio turned off around tracks; window cracked open and heater/air conditioner fan off in the car around tracks; headsets off when walking near railroad crossings; stopping conversations when approaching a railway crossing; bus driver asking students to be quiet at railway crossings, focusing on possible dangers around the tracks... many other suggestions can be made)

4. *Optional Activity: Have students cut out their bells and paste the backsides together. Then, punch a hole at the top and tie a piece of string or yarn through the hole so that the bell can be hung.*

Students may also be encouraged to add their name and some safety messages on their bell.

Conclusion

Only those who believed in Christmas/Santa could hear the bells from the Polar Express. But, EVERYONE needs to listen for the sounds of a train so that they can be safe.

When you are approaching a railway crossing you need to STOP, LOOK both ways and LISTEN for a train. Only if there is no train coming, can you then cross the tracks safely.

Remember to only cross railway tracks at marked crossings; cars, trucks and people must only cross at these locations.

NEVER cross the railway tracks anywhere else.

For more information on safety around highway-railway crossings and additional activities, visit www.operationlifesaver.ca.

Background Pedestrian Safety Information

- Bells are only one of the warning devices on a locomotive; horns, for example, which provide a louder audible warning, are also used.
- Railway property such as railway tracks, trestles, yards and equipment are private property and trespassers are subject to arrest and fines.
- Cross tracks **ONLY** at designated pedestrian or roadway crossings.
- It can take a train up to two kilometres to stop and so a locomotive engineer who suddenly spots you in the vicinity of the tracks ahead has little chance of missing you. For your safety, it is illegal to be there unless you are at a designated public crossing.
- Trains can overhang the tracks by at least 1 metre on either side, in both directions; loose straps hanging from rail cars may extend even further.
- The only safe place to cross is at a designated public crossing with either a crossbuck, flashing red lights or a gate. If you cross at any other place, you are trespassing and can be ticketed, fined or even hurt.
- Do not cross the tracks immediately after a train passes. The view of a second train might be hidden by the first. Trains can come from either direction; wait until you can see clearly in both directions.
- Flashing red lights signal that a train is approaching from either direction. You can be fined for failure to obey these signals. Never walk around lowered gates at a crossing. **DO NOT** cross the tracks until the lights have stopped flashing and it is safe to do so.
- Freight trains do not travel on a predictable schedule; schedules for passenger trains can also change. **Always** expect a train at every highway-railway crossing at anytime and from any direction.

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