

Lessons Learned from Accident Investigations

Child Care Providers Urged to Check Vehicle Safety, Training and Health of Drivers

A fatal accident in Memphis, Tennessee, that killed the driver of a van who had fallen asleep and four of the children he was transporting has lessons for child care centers across the country, according to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

“Our investigation uncovered a string of failures that led to this tragic accident,” said NTSB Chairman Ellen Engleman-Conners. “It demonstrates once again that everyone in the transportation safety chain, including those who transport young children, plays a critical role in avoiding crashes, deaths and injuries.”

“This accident clearly points out the need for a comprehensive safety oversight system for child care transportation. Without effective safety oversight, children are at risk,” Engleman-Conners added.

The crash occurred in April 2002, and involved a 15-passenger van, driven by a 27-year-old driver who was transporting six children to school. The van was owned and operated by a private child care center.

The Safety Board report said a witness behind the van stated that the vehicle was traveling about 65 miles per hour when it drifted from the left lane, across two other lanes, and off the right side of the roadway. The witness said that she did not see any brake lights.

The van then overrode the guardrail and continued to travel along the dirt and grass embankment until the front of the van collided with the back of the guardrail and a light pole, and finally struck a bridge abutment at an overpass, the Safety Board said. The driver was ejected through the windshield and died from his injuries. Four children were killed, and two were seriously injured.

Investigators said none of the children in the van were wearing age-appropriate restraints. A 6-year-old passenger was restrained by a lap/shoulder belt, but was seated in the front seat, a location that the Safety Board has recommended that children under 12 not sit in. Another 6-year-old passenger and an 8-year-old passenger were not restrained in booster seats, which could have protected them from such injury. The two 10-year-old passengers and the driver were also unrestrained, contributing to the severity of their injuries.

The crash report also concluded that:

- The driver had consumed marijuana on the morning of the accident and was under the influence of the drug at the time of the crash.
- The driver fell asleep before departing the roadway; probably due to an undiagnosed sleep disorder.

- If the center had used a vehicle built to school bus standards instead of a 15-passenger van, the injuries might have been less severe.
- Because the center did not comply with State laws and because the State did not provide adequate oversight of the center's operations, the accident driver was able to transport children, even though he had not had a background check or medical examination.
- Had drug testing been conducted, the accident driver's drug use may have been detected and he may have been prohibited from transporting children.
- There was a complete absence of driver and transportation oversight on the part of the center's owner.

In addition to not wearing age-appropriate restraints, the children in this accident were being transported in a 15-passenger van, a vehicle not built to school bus standards. The Safety Board has consistently found in its investigations that when transporting children to school or school-related activities the safest form of transportation is a school bus or vehicle built to school bus standards.

Fifteen-passenger vans are frequently used to transport child care students, school sports teams, van pools, church groups, and other groups. Although they are involved in a proportionate number of fatal accidents compared to their percentage in the fleet, they are involved in a higher number of single-vehicle accidents involving rollovers than other passenger vehicles.

Various factors have been associated with 15-passenger van rollovers, particularly occupancy level and vehicle speed. Because these vans are designed to carry 15 passengers, the Safety Board is particularly concerned about the relationship between the vehicles' occupancy level and their rollover propensity. Fully loading or nearly loading a 15-passenger van causes the center of gravity to move rearward and upward, which increases its rollover propensity and could increase the potential for driver loss of control in emergency maneuvers.

The Safety Board is convinced that the best way to maximize pupil transportation safety is to ensure that all vehicles carrying more than 10 passengers and transporting children to and from school, school activities and daycare centers meet federal school bus construction standards.

The Safety Board has recommended that the States implement a comprehensive child care transportation safety program. Such a program should include:

- Use of vehicles built to school bus standards or of multifunctional school activity buses.
- A regular vehicle maintenance and inspection program.
- A requirement that occupants wear age-appropriate restraints at all times.
- A requirement that drivers receive a criminal background check and have a medical examination to determine fitness to drive.

- Preemployment, random, post accident and “for cause” drug testing for all child care transportation providers; and the prohibition of anyone who tests positive for drugs from transporting children.
- Review by an oversight agency of periodic driver background checks, medical examinations and drug test results.
- A requirement that child car vehicles be labeled with the child care center’s and oversight agency’s names and phone numbers.

In the meantime, child care operators should voluntarily take these steps to help ensure the safety of the children in their care.

The full report is available from the NTSB’s Web site at www.nts.gov.