



Dear Educators,

Many children will read and view the wonderful story of *The Polar Express*, by Chris Van Allsburg, this holiday season. *The Polar Express* story is about a fantasy train. Many of the scenes in the movie show behavior that would be unsafe around real railroad property and trains.

The following lesson focusing on problem solving encourages children to discuss the problem of how to be safe around real-life situations at railroad crossings and helps them come up with solutions.

Visit www.oli.org for more safety information on highway-rail grade crossings and pedestrian safety tips. Additionally, there are integrated math, science and language arts lessons with measurable assessments; each lesson teaches one or more safety messages about safe behavior around highway-rail grade crossings.

All of the lessons have been written by Operation Lifesaver, Inc., a non-profit national safety organization teaching the public how to be safe around highway-rail grade crossings and rights-of-way.

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

Respectfully,

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Do You Hear Me?

A Lesson Plan for 1st – 3rd Grade
to accompany *The Polar Express*

Thinking Skill: Problem Solving

Materials: *The Polar Express*, by Chris Van Allsburg, or familiarity
with the story
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 and warning sounds at railroad crossings.
- List or draw safe behaviors around railroad crossings which allow people to 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 one of the bells from the harness of the reindeer and he 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 look at the bell and try to ring it, they believe the bell is broken, for they cannot 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 there are many trains that travel through the country, towns and cities all over America. Trains that travel where you live have a bell on them that warns people 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 look and listen whenever they are near railroad tracks. Trains that travel near your house take a LONG time to stop. It is our responsibility to 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 sad face? (Sad) It has a sad face because people near the railroad 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.”*

Remember, the parents in the story did not hear the Christmas bell, but why wouldn’t people hear the warning bell on a real train? (For younger children, discuss some reasons as a class.) I want you to draw or write 3 reasons why people may not hear the bell on a train that is coming down the tracks.

Some possible answers: radio too loud in the car; 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

After allowing students some time to draw/write their answers.

3. *Now, I want you to turn your paper over. Is this bell happy or sad? (Happy) It has a happy face because people were doing the right things around the railroad tracks and they HEARD the train bell telling everyone the train was coming. Let’s read what this bell has to say:*

*“Before you cross the railroad 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 EVERYONE should be able to hear the bell of a train coming down the tracks if they are doing the right things. Now I want you to draw or write three (3) correct ways people should act around train tracks so they will hear the train bell warning people a train is coming down the track.

Possible answers: no talking on cell phones around tracks; music turned off in the car around tracks; window cracked and heater/air conditioner fan off in the car around tracks; headsets off when walking across the railroad crossing; stopping conversations when approaching a railroad crossing; a bus driver telling the students to be quiet at a railroad crossing

4. Option: Have students cut out their bells and paste the backsides together. Punch a hole in the top of the bell and tie a piece of string or yarn through the hole so the bell can be hung.

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. When you are coming upon a railroad crossing you need to LOOK both ways and LISTEN for a train. Only if there is no train coming, then you can cross the tracks safely. Remember to only cross the railroad tracks at marked crossings; those are the places that cars, trucks and people must cross. NEVER cross the railroad tracks any place else.

For more information on safety around highway-rail grade crossings and additional lessons plan, visit www.oli.org.

Background Pedestrian Safety Information

- Bells are only one of the warning devices on a locomotive; horns also provide a louder audible warning.
- Railroad tracks, trestles, yards and equipment are private property and trespassers are subject to arrest and fines. Railroad property is private property.
- Cross tracks ONLY at designated pedestrian or roadway crossings.
- It can take a mile or more to stop a train, so a locomotive engineer who suddenly spots you ahead has little chance to miss 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 three (3) feet on either side in both directions and loose straps hanging from rail cars may extend even further.
- The only safe place to cross is at designated public crossing with either a crossbuck, flashing red lights or gate. If you cross at any other place, you are trespassing and can be ticketed or fined.
- 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 change also. **Always** expect a train at every highway-rail grade crossing at anytime from any direction.

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