

## **Bad Carma**

**By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog**

In our elementary school, where the gym doubles as the cafeteria (collective shiver of revulsion just thinking about sweat and sandwiches), parents are encouraged to ease crowding by picking up their kids for lunch (a tribute to a bygone era) and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders are permitted to go out to lunch by themselves with their parents' permission. In contrast, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are not allowed to leave their building.

I don't know about your kids, but mine have had little practice crossing the street by themselves, and I'm convinced can't do so safely. When my daughter started going out to lunch with friends once a week, my worry was not about creeps in vans with puppies and candy, but crossing the street.

How and when did we learn to cross the street as kids? Practice, I think. For one thing, we walked to school alone. There must've been crossing guards, but I can't say as I remember them. For another, we had long stretches of summer and time after school with nothing in particular to do, free to roam about town. As often as not, no one was even home, much less driving us to myriad extracurricular activities. And the term "playdate" had certainly not been invented yet. Just "go play with your friends," and how we got there was pretty much up to us.

So if I could do it, why not my kids?

Here's why. People in their cars are doing a lot more than just driving these days. Equipped with heated seats, iPod docks, navigation systems, dual DVD players, a collection of cup-holders, and generous lighted mirrors, there are plenty of things we can do in our cars besides drive.

In the era before cup-holders, I admired my mother for her ability to put on mascara while drinking (but not spilling) a lidless cup of coffee as she deftly rolled her stick-shift through town. Compared to the multitasking now happening inside an average 7-passenger SUV, my mother's three-point coordination (four, if you count the driving) seems quaint.

To further expand the options in our tricked-out cabins, we have cellphones. And when we step on the gas, the urge to talk and text—maybe check our email or Facebook—is even stronger than it was when we were stationary. We've all heard that talking on a cellphone while driving, even if hands-free, is a really bad idea; in fact, roughly equivalent to driving drunk. It affects reaction time and our ability to pay attention—things a driver should theoretically value more than the latest news from Cousin Carol.

Unfortunately, this knowledge doesn't stop us from calling, texting, posting, googling while driving because [your excuse here]. Ask any crossing guard how often she wonders if some car barreling towards her is going to stop. Seems the flashing lights, neon jacket, handheld STOP sign, position in the crosswalk, and gaggle of children at the curb don't provide sufficient cues to some drivers that stopping is expected and required. I guess they're busy with other things. The NJ Department of Health and Senior Services reports 14 crossing guard deaths and 121 injuries resulting from motor-vehicle-related accidents occurred in the state from 1993-2008.

Besides increasing the likelihood of mowing down the crossing guard, media multitasking is associated with a lack of self-control and a tendency to be distractible, according to researchers at Stanford (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=multitasking-mind>). Which might help explain the excessively large coffee specialty drink and breakfast sandwich to our right. The perceived need to eat and drink in the car seems to be as great as the need to consume and exchange words. In the car, we're suddenly famished.

When we get where we're going, we might sit at the curb with our engines running while we finish our conversations and croissanwiches. Idling is bad for our cars, not to mention the environment. There are even laws against it, just like there are laws against talking/texting on a cellphone while driving. But our office/entertainment center/breakfast nook on wheels has its own code of conduct, and limits-on-our-choices-in-consideration-of-the-risks is not one of its underlying principles.

What to do about it? Put our hands at 10 & 2, keep our eyes on the road, and now that we can see the signs: STOP!