

School Rules

A recent spate of van incidents that left children injured or dead should have education institutions revising their safety procedures

- Published: [6/05/2013](#) at 12:00 AM
- Newspaper section: [Life](#)

The case of Manassanan "Nong Oey" Thongphu, a three-year-old child who fell into a coma and died after being locked in a school van in asphyxiating heat for several hours, is pure horror to all parents and became a wake-up call for schools and authorities.



It hasn't been the only incident this year involving a lack of safety measures and social responsibility that has resulted in the death of children. In March, a school van in Chiang Mai rammed into a 10-wheeler, killing two secondary school students and injuring 10 more.

These are examples of recent incidents, but the problem of substandard school buses, carelessness and untrustworthy drivers have long been reported and feared, and yet somehow neglected. It's clear that safety measures and attention to detail are still lacking, and schools, as well as government regulators and traffic police, continue to face ardent calls to prevent young people from falling prey to accidents, or worse _ an early death.

Kindergarten children are at the centre of the issue. The period between when young children leave home in a school vehicle to the moment they arrive back safely becomes an anxious wait for parents. How schools pick their drivers, how each loophole is closed, and how the Thai concept of saving face often means sweeping dirt under the rug _ these are some of the big issues that require several parties to address, from the schools and the parents to the state.

Below Life speaks with people including a driver, a school administrator and traffic police about their experiences with safety measures for kindergarten children.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

For kindergarten owner Laxmi Dangmaneerat, school transport safety has always been top priority. She said that at the International School of Chonburi, which has students aged from two to seven, all school vans have child safety seats securely strapped onto the regular van seats.

The school administrator doesn't compromise when it comes to her students' well-being. As a mother, she is equally concerned when she drives with her young son, always making sure she fastens his child seat securely before driving off.

Laxmi admits that having her school driver and van supervisor understand the importance of keeping the children safe during their ride as much as she does is a crucial part of her work.

Recruiting drivers and van assistants from the close-knit community where the school is housed is convenient because it is easier to cross-check character references, which she believes is as important as experience.

When it comes to road safety in Thailand, she believes that some people can adopt an indifferent approach.

"When they travel with their kids, they're on a motorbike with three people. We think it's unsafe, but they'll say it's OK. Some people take this important issue very lightly. Parents also let their small child sit at the steering wheel and drive with them, thinking that it's fun for the kid. I don't feel comfortable with it, because it is so unsafe," said Laxmi.

She advocates campaigning for road safety for children, where a greater emphasis is put on child safety precautions in the car, to help build better awareness among adults. Another suggestion is for all school vans to contain a GPS tracking system so its speed can be monitored.

One of the best methods to boost awareness and to address such issues head-on, said Laxmi, is to reach the public through TV commercials, especially during prime-time soap operas.

On the tragic incident of Nong Oey, Laxmi said it was difficult to come to grips with the fact that nobody noticed her absence. It is her opinion that it couldn't be just one person's fault since everyone was supposed to take notice of the child _ from the driver and the monitor to the teacher in the classroom.

For her school, there's a student checklist in which the driver checks off every student they are sent off. She gets a call from parents if any student is more than five minutes late reaching home.

PARENT'S DILEMMA

For one couple, negligence by a teacher to verify which student should board the correct vehicle after school hours took a scary turn.

Wacharakorn Seemasongkroh told Life about an incident where he and his wife nearly lost their daughter.

Five years ago, while waiting for her mother to collect her from school, a teacher pushed their daughter into getting into a taxi that was meant for another girl.

When Wacharakorn's daughter's pet name was announced at the student pick-up area, the seven-year-old refused to get into the taxi, but the on-duty teacher insisted she did so because a long queue of parents' cars had began to build. It turned out the taxi had been sent to pick up another girl who shared the same nickname. When the parents of that student called to talk to their daughter, they found the taxi had picked up the wrong girl. Luckily the taxi driver turned out to be an honest man, and upon realising the mistake, he dutifully returned the couple's daughter to the school.

Wacharakorn said his wife was distraught when she was told what had happened, and was overjoyed to see their daughter unharmed and safely returned to them.

As a parent, he said that the school should have a better student verification system to ensure this incident couldn't be repeated. Instead of using the nickname of the student, it would be more preferable to have teachers announce the first name of the student whose ride home had arrived.

A more thorough check should also be conducted on the identification of the person who picks up the child.

TRAFFIC POLICEMAN'S CONCERNS

Policeman Nithat Si-sard directs traffic at the intersection of Chidlom, observing the mad rush drivers are in after school hours to get students home.

"Personally, it is upsetting to see how irresponsible some of the drivers are. Knowing that they have young children in the van should make them drive more sensibly, but unfortunately, that is not the case today. They drive like lunatics and put the lives of the young passengers in jeopardy.

"Slapping them with a fine doesn't always do the trick. They have to be better trained and experienced to oversee the well-being of the students," said Nithat.

Another worrisome observation he has made in the last couple of years has been the poor condition of some vehicles, which he says can easily cause accidents. Everything from the machinery to the rear-view mirrors should be checked before the children board, cautioned the policeman.

Safety seat belts should also be made mandatory to use and more attention should be put into keeping the number of students in each van to a limit. Seats should not be modified at the expense of a child's safety.

Nithat has watched in astonishment as students as young as four and five years old stand in their school van because there are more children in the vehicle than there are seats.



Laxmi Dangmaneerat takes the utmost of care while getting her students safely secured in their seats.

DUTIES OF A BUS DRIVER

"We check the names of the children when they get on and off the van every single time, and one assistant teacher _ or teacher who is familiar with all the kids _ is always present. Every kid has to buckle up throughout the trip. I have to memorise their names as well and I know all the kids who are on my van. There are only eight to 10 kids on each van," said a driver for an international kindergarten who prefers to remain anonymous.

"After the students are dropped off at school, I park the van on the school premises, leaving the doors open all day until pick-up time. I hang around the van throughout the day to ensure safety.

"If a child is absent, I will check with the parents and inform the class teacher. We have a sheet to keep track of the students. The principal is in charge of escorting all children onto the van and ticking the names on the list herself to make sure nobody is left behind."

_ Napamon Roongwitoo

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