

# Five Questions to Ask Before Launching a Transportation Program

by Brent Chenoweth



Before you begin your transportation program, you need to be aware of many aspects when transporting children. We know you love and care for the children and are concerned for their safety. The objective of this article is to prompt you to ask the the right questions — not to give you specific answers. You will gain clarity regarding the dangers, risks, and benefits of child care transportation. Although state regulations are ever-changing, this article will give you the most important questions to ask to avoid making costly blunders in choosing and acquiring proper transportation for children.

## Who Do I Feel Comfortable Doing Business With?

Does your bus dealer have a devoted Child Care Bus team? Working with a professional, focused team will help you navigate the complexities of child care transportation. What is the greatest nightmare to avoid in acquiring a child care bus? Ending up with a bus that you cannot use or that will not pass inspection in your state. After you acquire

a child care bus, it must meet every regulation required in your state. Most child care business owners consult the Department of Transportation (D.O.T.) in their state for the requirements and regulations. These regulations can be vague and/or confusing. However, the expectations of the D.O.T. are not the only entities that regulate child care buses. The Department of Family or Social Services also has a full slate of regulations and requirements. Additionally, the Department of Education gets in on the act if you receive state funding for your center. One of the issues that may arise is that these three organizations may not consult one another when creating and implementing their requirements. It takes a lot of monitoring and research to remain current and cover all the regulations that apply to any one state.

There are many dealers who sell or lease cars, vans, trucks, or even school buses. As a business owner, you are wise to:

- Find a dealer with an experienced sales representative that specializes in Childcare — Multi-Function School Activity Buses (MFSAB).
- Ask your sales representative whether they deal exclusively with these buses

and if they are aware of the regulations.

- Ask for detailed specifications for the bus you are considering.
- Review the specifications sheet provided by your sales representative so all the amenities you need and/or want on your bus are included, and there are no additional fees upon delivery.
- Expect thorough information so that you can make a decision on the best course of action for your business. Your provider should have your best interest at heart. Ultimately, you want a solution that will work for your unique set of circumstances.

## Additional considerations when choosing a bus dealer:

- The length of time the dealer has been in business.
- The inventory they keep in stock and the availability on new and used vehicles.
- A large parts department.
- Reliability, professionalism, honesty, and attention to your needs.



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## What Type of Vehicle Should I Use to Transport Children?

The best option for your child care facility is a “Multifunction School Activity Bus” (MFSAB). It is designed to meet all of the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) that are found on a traditional school bus, but without the stop-sign arm and warning lights that traditional school buses need for frequent pick-up and drop-off at school bus stops; and they are not required to be painted a specific color (i.e. school bus yellow). Check with your particular state concerning these vehicles because each state has the power to establish requirements that supersede the federal requirements. For example, California requires Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) for all MFSABs that are classified as 10 passengers or larger. Other states generally allow MFSABs to transport up to 14 passengers without requiring a CDL.

A great source for consultation concerning state licensing requirements is the State Highway Patrol in your area. If you plan to transport students between your center and the local public schools for a Before- and After-School program, you will want to consult with the school to see if they have any restrictions concerning the vehicles that can deliver and pick-up children on their premises. For more information on the MFSAB, visit the NHTSA website ([www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)) and search MFSAB.

### Do I Want 24/7 Advertising for My Child Care Center?

Some of the most effective advertising you can get comes from driving your bus around town with your well-designed and highly-visible company brand. Remember, every time you leave your center to go on a trip, whether it is a field trip to the zoo, a park, or a before- and after-school program, you are advertising your brand. It is a rolling billboard! The more people who see your bus, the more they will remember your business, and ultimately call to enroll their children. Never underestimate the power of a good impression.

## Does My Vehicle Need Car Seats, Booster Seats, and Lap Belts?

School bus seats are the preferred option as the seats are specially designed and stringently tested to provide the greatest safety for young children. Effective October 21, 2011, the federal guidelines were updated to require three-point (lap and shoulder) seatbelts in all vehicles/ buses rated under 10,000 pound GVWR (Gross Vehicle Weight Rating). (Prior to 2011, some states had differing requirements regarding seatbelt use in small buses; this required constant monitoring for updates.) The new law did not change the rules for the buses rated over 10,000 pounds which state, “. . . the use of lap and lap shoulder belts will continue to be permissible for buses over 10,000 pounds.” When preschool children are transported in a school bus, The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recommends the following guidelines be followed:

- Each child should be transported and properly secured in a Child Safety Restraint System (CSRS) that is suitable for the child’s weight and age that meets Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 213. This standard specifies requirements for child restraint systems used in motor vehicles and aircraft as well.
- The CSRS should be properly secured to the school bus seat, according to the directions of the CSRS manufacturer.

According to NHTSA, the minimum requirements for lap and shoulder belt consideration is that a child is a minimum of four years old, weighs at least 40 pounds, and is at least 40” in height. The 3-point lap and shoulder belts meet the FMVSS 213 built-in booster seat requirements because they are adjustable to fit the child.

Activity seats are individual seats like you might find on a transit bus or aircraft. They are comfortable for transporting adults, although due to the construction and functionality they are not a great choice for young children.

## Are There Any Other Important Factors to Consider?

**Drivability.** The child care buses with single rear wheels are just about the same width as a standard 15-passenger van. They are, however, taller than a van by approximately 19 inches, some are taller than others. If you are dealing with low overhangs, or building drop-off areas, be sure the bus you are looking at will fit under the area: the lower the better as kids do not need the headroom.

**Comfort.** What comfort factors should I consider in transporting children on a daily basis? Air conditioning and heating in the front and rear of the bus are essential, regardless of your local climate. In the hot summers and the cold winters, make sure you can adjust the climate to keep children as comfortable as possible.

**Safety.** Child Checkmate System developed and patented a unique alarm system that acts as an electronic reminder to drivers. This reminder ensures that all children have safely disembarked the vehicle upon the completion of each trip.

**Availability.** The bus dealer should have adequate inventory and be able to meet your timetable.

**Warranty.** It is very important to work with a supplier that has a team that will take care of all your needs. A full-time warranty department is a great addition. In the event you have an issue with your bus, a warranty administrator can get you the help you need to keep your bus operational.

**Service after the sale.** Along with the warranty department, you will want a service and parts department devoted to keeping your bus running with minimal downtime. A bus is a large investment; make sure you schedule regular maintenance.

**Driving your buses.** Your bus driver is an extension of your business. It is important to hire safety-minded, courteous, and professional individuals; make certain they have all the proper training required by your state.

Take time to wash your bus on the inside and outside, including beneath the vehicle. Remember, the condition of your bus is a reflection on your business!

## In Sum

Whether you are starting a new transportation program or managing an existing program, remember the five questions listed here and partner with a bus dealer who is trusted, honest, and working in your best interest. After all, you have many things to deal with when running a successful child care organization.

## Resources

Choosing the Correct School Bus for Transporting Pre-SchoolAge Children  
[www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/buses/choosing\\_schoolbus/pre-school-bus\\_04.html](http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/buses/choosing_schoolbus/pre-school-bus_04.html)

Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards: Definition of Multifunction School Activity Bus  
[www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/rulings/buspedsafety/SchoolActivityBus.html](http://www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/rulings/buspedsafety/SchoolActivityBus.html)

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration  
[www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)

