

Making school vans safer

By Muhammad Bashir Chaudhry

SCHOOL vans come in many shapes, sizes and colours. There are the coaster type large vans, smaller high-roofs, and even mini-pick-up trucks, converted into vans by fixing seats in the luggage section and adding a roof for protection from the elements.

Some of these vans have protective grills to hold children safely inside. However, many have no such grills and children travelling in them are always exposed to the danger of falling off if the vehicle breaks hard. The absence of a door may also tempt some students to stand on the edge or on the footboard, and this too is something that could lead to an accident.

Sometimes, older students stand on the footboard when the van carries more students than it can hold. Most of these vans are in bad condition and many times children have to miss school, or go on their own, while the owner is trying to get his vehicle fixed.

In the not-too-distant past, many children used to walk to school. Some still do, but in most cases and because of the rapid increase in population, that is no longer a viable option.

The advent of expensive private schools changed things. Some students had parents who could afford to pick and drop them. But many chose the more economical option, especially with the constant increase in fuel prices, of arranging for their children to be taken to school by a van. This is not to say that van charges are cheap but many parents had no cars and it was cheaper to just hire a school van. And even if they do have a car, it is often used by other family members, especially if both parents have jobs.

The other compelling reason why parents would rather that their children travel in a school van is that our public transport system leaves a lot to be desired. Though, some cities like Lahore and Karachi have clean air-conditioned buses which are driver relatively safely, they charge around Rs 20 for a single ride and also don't go everywhere. Besides, a school van operator will, or at least will promise to, drop the child right at the school, pick him up from the school and drop him back straight to his residence. Parents will obviously find this a safer option because it will not involve any walking for their children.

Students spend anywhere from one to two-and-a-half hours daily in school vans, depending on how far they live from their school. Some students are picked up for school as early as 6.30 in the morning so that they can make it in time for their first class at eight. Similarly, if a school gets off at say 1.30 then many students come home by around three in the afternoon. After this tiring journey they are expected to complete the tons of homework that their



Photo: Fahim Siddiqi

teachers give them. The resulting fatigue and tiredness, which affects younger children even more, affects their health as well as learning capability. This is the trade-off parents have to make in sending their kids to school in a van.

Many of these vans are driven at high speeds with school bags dangling outside posing a danger to passersby. In their enthusiasm to reach the schools in time, some van drivers ignore traffic rules and safety precautions. Many vans do not have a protective grill or a door at the back. Moreover, since many children by nature are naughty and like to play pranks we have all the makings of a potential traffic accident.

One is not trying to unduly criticize those who operate school vans. In fact, they provide a very useful service but someone in a position of authority needs to regulate them and ensure that the lives of the children they carry are not unduly threatened.

In this regard, the local governments and the traffic police can play a major part by initiating an awareness campaign to educate van owners and drivers, parents and the schoolchildren on the possible dangers of riding in a school van. It should be ensured that all vans have protective grills, that they are registered, that their drivers have full knowledge of traffic rules (and follow them as much as they can), and that they know how to behave with young school children. In addition to this, efforts must be made to rationalize van charges and to require them to have a unique distinctive colour (like yellow in America). ■