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How to Slow Down Traffic in Residential Neighborhoods: Cameron on Transportation

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You've seen the signs in many neighborhoods, "Drive like your kids lived here" or "Slow down in town." They're probably as effective as bumper stickers that say "Drive now, Text later," in other words, not very.

In our own neighborhoods we want everyone to chill behind the wheel. But when we are driving in someone else's area, it's pedal to the metal, the kids be damned. When the major roads are jammed, quicker shortcuts through the back roads seem attractive, often at higher speeds than may be safe.

First of all, why is it that kids are playing in the streets anyway when they have perfectly good lawns and nearby parks? Do they think they're living on the Lower East Side, playing stickball? C'mon parents! Get

your kids off of the streets!

Recognizing that persuasion doesn't seem to help, traffic engineers are finding ways to get folks to stay safe using what's called "traffic calming," forcing them to drive slower. And believe it or not, one of the first cities in the country to develop a master plan for traffic calming was Hartford. Stamford isn't far behind.

You've probably seen these calming devices, but cursed their presence because they physically force you to slow down or risk damage to your car's suspension.

Speed bumps: You can't drive around them, so you better slow down driving over them.

Speed tables: Like speed bumps on steroids, these have a six foot long ramp up onto a ten foot flat table and down another six foot ramp.

Roundabouts: The guys at Mythbusters have proven that these traffic circles can move more cars through an intersection than a four-way stop, but they're confusing enough that you're going to slow down and keep wondering "Who has the right of way? (Answer: the car in the traffic circle). If it's me, does that other guy know it? Will he slow down and let me in?"

Chicanes: Usually seen only on private streets in ritzy neighborhoods, these stubby looking sections of gates placed alternately on the right and left hand sides of the street make drivers slow down to zigzag down the street. Really annoying, but effective.

Bulb-outs or neck-downs: These make the sidewalk extend into car parking areas at corner crossings. That way folks who want to cross a street are more visible and already closer to the other side.

Crosswalks: Nothing empowers a pedestrian like stepping up to a crosswalk and stopping all oncoming traffic as they saunter across the road. This assumes, of course, that the drivers know they must yield and that there is sufficient signage to tell them so. Otherwise, it's a messy scene.

But believe it or not, one of the most effective safety devices is also the most common.

Sidewalks: Still, it's amazing how many suburban towns don't offer sidewalks, leaving nervous pedestrians walking on the same roadways as cars. You'd think that would encourage motorists to slow down, but it doesn't. Getting the walkers (and joggers) off the road and onto the sidewalks may not stop speeding but it does save lives.

None of these physical solutions to traffic safety is cheap, but they have proven effective in saving us from our own worst instincts as we rush to our destinations. So, slow down in town, and in the 'burbs. What's

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your hurry?

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