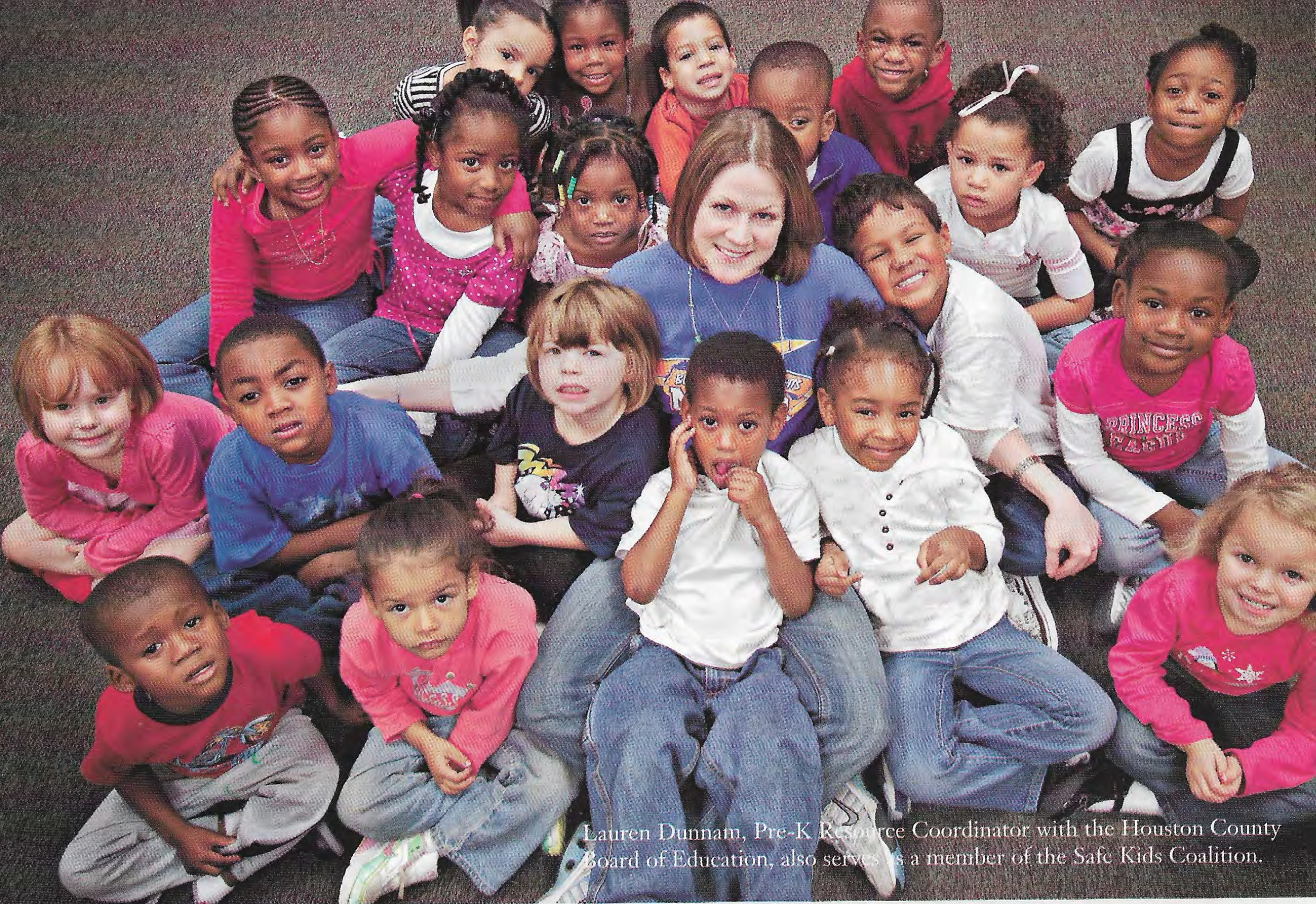




**KEEPING
KIDS SAFE
IN HOUSTON COUNTY**



Lauren Dunnam, Pre-K Resource Coordinator with the Houston County Board of Education, also serves as a member of the Safe Kids Coalition.

Helping children to avoid accidents is the number one priority of Houston County's Safe Kids Coalition, a group of dedicated volunteers throughout the community focused on educating parents on child and infant safety. Knowing that the number of children dying from an accident has decreased gives Safe Kids thousands of reasons to celebrate.

"For every single child who was saved from a serious or fatal injury, there's a reason to celebrate," says Patsy Zoumberis, RN, coordinator of Houston County Safe Kids and Health Educator for Houston Healthcare. "But we're still losing too many children in this country to unintentional injuries – injuries that could be prevented. That's why Safe Kids of Houston County supports national efforts to make child injury prevention a priority here in Houston County."

Educating parents is paramount to keeping children safe, says Tian Foss, a volunteer certified child passenger safety

technician for Safe Kids of Houston County and prevention programs director at The Rainbow House Children's Resource Center. "We try to educate parents through our car seat checks about the importance of car seat safety," she explains. "First, we check to see if their particular car seat has been recalled and no longer safe to use. Then we check to see if they have the seat installed correctly, and nine times out of ten, it's not. Car seats save children's lives in an accident, but only if they are installed correctly. So we show parents the right way to install their child's car seat or booster seat in their vehicle and then make them practice so they know how to do it in the future."

For parents, the one-on-one instruction from the car seat technicians is extremely beneficial not only for them, but for their children's safety as well. "We wanted to be sure our baby was secured properly and safely in the car seat," says mom-to-be Carrie Sargent of Warner Robins. "They [certified child

passenger safety technicians] teach everyone the safe way to install car seats."

Diana and Santiago Jara of Warner Robins agree. Technicians at a recent car seat check in Perry showed them the correct way to install their eight-month-old son's car seat. "We didn't know how to do it," says Diana.

Fewer children under the age of 14 are dying because of accidental injury today than 20 years ago, according to a new national report released by Safe Kids USA. Yet, accidental injury remains the nation's leading cause of death among children. Overall, motor vehicles and traffic-related accidents are the number one killer of children in the U.S., followed closely by drowning and unintentional fires. But nonfatal accidental injuries are a serious threat to the health and well-being of children.

"More children are treated in hospital emergency rooms for accidental injuries than any other reason," explains Zoumberis. "Children are naturally curious and like to

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explore their environments, which can get them into trouble. Pills from the medicine cabinet look like candy to them, or they want to play with their favorite ball that's floating in the middle of the backyard pool. Young children also don't have mature physical coordination and cognitive abilities, so they tend to fall off bicycles and playground equipment more easily. They also don't have good perceptual motor skills, so they aren't able to judge the distance or speed of an oncoming car when crossing the road.”

Safe Kids, the first national non-profit organization dedicated solely to the prevention of unintentional childhood injury, was launched in 1988 to address what was then a little recognized problem – more children under the age of 14 were dying from “accidents” than from any other cause. Believing there is no such thing as an “accident,” the organization's founders

enlisted the support of corporations, government agencies and the health and safety community in a nationwide effort to reduce the incidence of childhood injury.

Founded in 1992 and led by Houston Healthcare, Safe Kids of Houston County is one of 22 community coalitions operating in the state of Georgia. These coalitions work closely with law enforcement, firefighters, paramedics, health and safety experts, professionals, educators, businesses, foundations, governments, policymakers, volunteers, parents, and most importantly, children to educate and protect families. Through the efforts of these coalitions, the unintentional injury death rate among Georgia's children age 14 and under has declined by 36 percent in the last 10 years.

Zumberis and her group of volunteers work year-round in Houston County and surrounding communities to educate parents

and children on safety issues. In 2007, volunteer certified child passenger safety technicians checked more than 120 car seats for proper installation and distributed an estimated 25 infant and booster seats at various car seat checks and health fairs. Members also distributed more than 350 free bicycle helmets to students in local elementary schools through the Pennies for Helmets initiative, where children collect pennies in exchange for a properly-fitted bicycle helmet. As part of this year's national Safe Kids Week, held annually in May, volunteers with the coalition visited the after-school program at Eagle Springs Elementary School in Centerville where they educated students ranging in age from pre-k through fifth grade on water, wheel, play and home safety issues.

Unfortunately, the message about safety education is not spreading quickly enough. The National Highway Traffic Safety

Gretchen Taylor, a Safe Kids Coalition volunteer, properly fits a bicycle helmet



Patsy Zoumberis conducts a car seat check.



Administration (NHTSA) reports that of the 1,451 American children ages zero to 14 who were killed as passengers in motor vehicle crashes in 2005, nearly half of them were unrestrained. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, of all children ages one year to 14 years of age who died in 2005, nearly seven percent died from drowning – the second-leading cause of unintentional death for children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention listed unintentional pedestrian accidents as the sixth leading cause of injury death in 2004 for children between the ages of one and four-years-old.

“The great strides made in the last 20 years in reducing accidental childhood injuries is good, but we all can do more to create a safer environment for the children of Houston County and Central Georgia,” states Zoumberis. “For example, drowning is the

number one killer of children in Houston County, followed by motor vehicle accidents. But it’s not just backyard pools that are the danger. We have children drowning in septic tanks and construction retention ponds.”

At a recent meeting, Safe Kids volunteers expressed their concerns and frustrations about the lack of attention they see being given to safety issues by parents and children alike. “We see children who need to be in a booster seat in the back seat of a car getting into the front seat and cars with no car seats all the time,” says Lauren Dunnam, pre-k resource coordinator with the Houston County Board of Education and member of Houston County’s Safe Kids Coalition.

Gretchen Taylor, substitute teacher and Safe Kids volunteer, says her pet peeve is seeing children riding bicycles without helmets. “I consider myself the ‘helmet police’ because I will roll down my window and stop kids and ask

them where their helmet is. They just don’t realize how important it is to wear one every time they ride a bicycle,” she says. “I tell my kids they can’t ride unless they wear their helmet.”

Celena Wilson of Byron says she volunteers with Safe Kids to help spread the message about safety to both parents and children. With help from Zoumberis, she is working with her daughter’s Girl Scout troop on a project focusing on bicycle and car seat safety that will hopefully earn the girls a safety award. “Our children are our future. I see too many discrepancies among parents about safety issues, and I want to make a difference,” she adds.

For Rosemary Kuder, retired children’s librarian, Safe Kids is a passion. “I have grandkids in this age range now. I volunteer because I believe in Safe Kids and its mission,” she says.

The coalition unanimously agrees that educating parents about the importance of

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children and safety is top priority. “Safety is an everyday concern,” cautions Taylor. “It’s not just car seat safety, but all safety. If you’re not sure about a safety issue, find someone to teach you. You can never be too careful.”

Since its launch, Safe Kids and its grassroots network of more than 300 state and local coalitions have successfully lobbied for the passing and enforcement of key safety legislation at the federal, state and local level – safety legislation such as bicycle helmet laws, which existed in only one state in 1988. Today, 19 states and the District of Columbia as well as several communities now require children to wear a helmet while riding their bicycles, resulting in a 40 percent reduction nationwide in the bicycle injury death rate. In addition, Safe Kids has helped to pass, strengthen and enforce child occupant protection laws and smoke alarm laws as well as mandatory playground safety guidelines in communities across the country.

“The primary goal of Safe Kids has been, and continues to be, prevention of unintentional injuries in children,” adds Zoumberis. “A large part of prevention involves educating parents, caregivers and children about safety and simple changes they can make in their behavior – changes that can prevent needless tragedies.”

Safe Kids of Houston County meets the third Tuesday of each month, except for July, at 12:30 p.m. at the Houston Health Pavilion in the Houston Mall in Warner Robins. For more information or to volunteer with Safe Kids of Houston County, call 478.923.9771.

Tara Poole

Photography by Ken Krakow