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Monday, 06 August 2012 14:36

“If I only knew.”

The words of an anguished mother involved in a car crash in which her young child died haunt us, but also inspire us each day as we work to help make sure that every person – regardless of age – is safe on the road.

While cars and trucks today are safer than they have ever been, motor vehicle crashes remain the leading cause of injury-related death for African American children.

Adding to this tragedy is that so many of these deaths are avoidable. Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show that our kids are significantly less likely to use seat belts or properly installed car seats. In fact, in crashes involving fatalities in children under 14, seat belt use is lower among African Americans than among all other race or ethnic groups and 52% of black children in fatal crashes were unrestrained.

The causes for these results are complicated and wide ranging, but they can be – and they need to be – addressed.

This is why trauma specialists at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and vehicle safety experts at Toyota teamed up to create Buckle Up for Life, a community-based safety education effort with results that are unparalleled. It is the only national program of its kind. Building on Buckle Up for Life's initial success, we are now doubling its reach to four new locations across the country, each with substantial African-American populations: Houston, Las Vegas, Philadelphia and Orange County, CA. These locations join Buckle Up for Life programs already established in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio and the Cincinnati area, where the program began.

This significant but preventable disparity in child passenger safety in the African American community is driven by a multi-faceted set of challenges. Some are economic: certain families have difficulty affording child safety restraints or drive older vehicles in which it is harder to install car seats. Some barriers are cultural, for instance a lack of family history in terms of buckling up. And sometimes the hurdles are about access to information: quickly finding the right guidance to help ensure that all passengers are safe.

Regardless of the key drivers, we refuse to allow these issues to be overlooked. We know this problem is a complex one – that combines health literacy, economics and socio-cultural concerns. But we also know it is a challenge that can be met with great impact through education, local partnerships and innovative thinking.

Community crises demand community-based solutions. That's why Buckle Up for Life works in neighborhoods – at the grassroots – with local churches and hospitals to reach families in places they trust, are comfortable and feel safe, right where they live.

Over a six-week period, Buckle Up for Life's medical experts and trained specialists work closely with participants of all ages – parents, caregivers and children alike – to deliver critical, interactive safety information in ways that resonate personally. Participants are also eligible to receive free car seats, and they are matched with certified child passenger safety technicians to help install these car seats and ensure that children are properly restrained.

There is, of course, a lot to accomplish but we are seeing real results. One Buckle Up for Life program, for example, nearly tripled the number of children buckled up among families who participated. And the positive results have sustained over time. That's the power in linking up with trusted partners in local neighborhoods, in working with the community to develop culturally relevant information and education, and in delivering a powerful message that drives change and empowers people to take even greater charge of their and their families' well-being.

Together, all of us in the African-American community have an opportunity and a responsibility to make a tangible difference. We need to reinforce at every turn that safety is a driver's paramount concern; that buckling up is not an option; and that properly securing oneself and one's children needs to become as ingrained a part of the driving experience as opening the car door or turning on the ignition. Because when it comes to our kids, our community's collective commitment to automotive safety must know no restraint.

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More information on Buckle Up for Life is available at www.toyotainaction.com/buckleupforlife .