

# **A Video Guide to Passenger Van Safety**

## Reference Guide and Test

## INTRODUCTION

**I** Passenger vans play an integral part in the school system. Aside from schools: churches, tour companies and many other organizations also use vans for transporting small groups of passengers. Whether they are being used to transport students from home or school or for a variety of other events, passenger vans have their own safety issues that drivers must be aware of.

**II** During the course of the video, we cover many of the issues relating to passenger van safety. We also cover the importance of understanding the dangers that may present themselves when driving a passenger van. The video also gives a basic idea of the responsibilities that drivers have before, during and after the operation of passenger vans. In addition, the video covers basic driving skills, that when followed, will minimize the chance of an accident taking place.

## PART 1: An Understanding of Passenger Van Safety

- 1) Passenger vans make up 0.25 % of the passenger vehicle fleet. They are frequently used to transport school sports teams, van-pools and other groups. **Potential operators of vans can include, but are not limited to:** Teachers, coaches, church personnel, transportation officials, parent volunteers and much more.
- 2) Because a variety of employees can transport passengers in vans, the board of Occupational Health and Safety recognizes this and requires certified training to all public employees who operate full size vans. They also recommend refresher training at a minimum of every 3 years.
- 3) It is important to know some basic information about passenger vans and the possible safety hazards that may be presented. Passenger vans are substantially longer and wider than your typical automobile. And depending on the amount of passengers in the vehicle, they can be extremely heavy.
- 4) Because of these characteristics, passenger vans require more space to change lanes. They also need additional reliance on the use of side mirrors for changing lanes and merging into traffic. The size and weight of passenger vans also make it so they don't respond to abrupt steering maneuvers and braking as well as conventional automobiles. In addition, many passenger vans sit higher off the ground than other vehicles, thus increasing the chance for potential rollovers.

5) It is also important to note that newer vans have implemented new safety improvements that may include stability control, tire pressure monitoring systems, side airbags, traction control, anti-lock brakes and more. However, these safety features do not address some of the main issues that concern van safety.

6) Passenger vans are not well balanced. This can not only lead to rollovers, but also, its unequal weight distribution can cause uneven wear on the tires. In conjunction with that, the center of gravity for passengers can cause even a greater risk of rollovers. Add those two issues together, with the unknown of WHO is driving these vehicles and you can see why extreme caution while driving them must be exercised.

7) **It is important that you follow state laws, school policies and any regulations set forth by your organization on the use of passenger vans.** Our job here is not to go over every law for every state, yet to provide you with important safety information and skills you can utilize if you find yourself driving a passenger van.

## **PART 2: Driver Responsibilities**

8) First of all, it will be your responsibility to make sure that the van is in proper working order by doing a thorough pre trip inspection. Whether you are going down the road or across the state, you should do a pre trip inspection each and every time you are preparing to transport yourself and passengers. Some organizations will have mechanics on hand to pre trip passenger vans. However, not all organizations have that luxury and you should know the basics of how to do a pre trip inspection.

9) There are several items that need to be checked before beginning to operate the van.

### **On the exterior of the van you will need to check for the following:**

- a) Leaks or damage to any part of the van.
- b) Lights and turn signal indicators are not damaged and in proper working order.
- c) windshield wipers and windshield wiper fluids
- d) windows and mirrors
- e) **One of the most important items to inspect is the tires on the van.**  
You will need to make sure they are properly inflated and check the tread depth.

10) **In the interior of the van, you will need to check for the following:**

- a) Check that there is no trash in the front seat area.
- b) Check interior lights.
- c) Check indicators and lights from the interior.
- d) You will need to check seats for securement. Also check that seatbelts and webbing are free of tears and damage. **Safety restraints should be accessible and available for each passenger.**

11) And finally, take the time to adjust the mirrors and drivers seat. When adjusting the drivers seat, you should be able to easily reach the floor pedals. Other controls should be within comfortable reaching distance. ***(When adjusting your seat and steering wheel, you should make sure that the steering wheel is at least 10 inches from your chest.)*** This is in the event that the airbag may deploy.

12) And before hitting the road, you should always do a brake check by slowly inching the van forward and applying the service brake to make sure it stops safely and smoothly. The same type of brake check can be done with the emergency brake.

13) Even though the driver is not likely to have the skills of a mechanic, the driver may still be called up to check under the hood for the following.

- a) Check the oil dipstick to make sure oil levels are where they need to be.
- b) Check the radiator and make sure that it has the proper amount of anti freeze or coolant.
- c) You can even do a quick check of the brake fluid.

14) The nice thing about todays technology is that you can pretty much google ANYTHING. You can use the internet to get information about certain van models and the pre trip maintenance on them.

15) And finally, do not overlook any mechanical issues that may be present. Any sign of too much wear on the tires, a loose component on the vehicle, or any other issues that appear to be a problem should be brought up immediately to the attention of supervisors and mechanics before attempting to operate the van.

16) **Make sure that you abide by state laws and organization policies. You should take the time to review state laws concerning the use of passenger vans and any special policies provided by your district or organization.**

17) Additional responsibilities for van drivers is your personal safety and the safety of passengers. That means that **it will be up to you to make sure you and your passengers wear your seat belts at ALL times.** You should also take the time to understand van evacuation policies, as well as, making sure passengers adhere to such policies.

18) So far we have covered a number of responsibilities that drivers need to address. Do not let any of these interfere with your main responsibilities. Remember, as the driver of a van you must always focus on making sure the vehicle you are driving is in good working condition and if there are any concerns, these concerns must be addressed as soon as possible.

## **PART 3: Basic Driving Skills**

19) Now that you have an understanding of passenger vans and the responsibilities that drivers should adhere to, we want to cover some basic driving skills that should be applied when you are operating them.

20) In the previous section of the video, we pointed out that mirrors are to be properly adjusted. So, I'm sure you are asking what does "properly adjusting" the mirrors entail? **Well, first you will need to adjust your drivers seat as previously mentioned. This is because your point of view to the mirrors change if your seat position changes.**

21) Once your seat is properly adjusted, you should adjust your mirrors so that you can barely see the edge of the van in the mirror. It should be done like this on both sides of the vehicle. Exposing too much of the van will limit a wider view of the roadway. **You want the widest view possible to see traffic around the van.**

22) Before we get into driving techniques, it is important to understand **not to make any sudden movements while driving the van. This includes the steering wheel, brakes and accelerator.** All movements should be gradual.

23) When operating the van you should keep both hands on the wheel at all times. Your hands should be placed at 9:00 and 3:00 positions or the 8:00 and 4:00 positions. This will also

decrease arm fatigue and possibly reduce injury.

**24) When driving passenger vans, the number one thing to be mindful of is speed.**

Reducing your speed can minimize the chance of possible roll overs. You should slow down and drive cautiously, especially on rural roads. Shoulders, ditches, embankments and even on and off ramps can create the potential for vehicle roll overs. You should keep speeds at or below the speed limit anytime the van is in motion. You should reduce your speed **BELOW** the speed limit posted for turns and poor road conditions. Remember, posted speed limits are safe for cars, not as much for passenger vans.

**25) In addition to maintaining proper speeds, proper following distances can be equally as important.** Following distances allow drivers to react if they were to encounter sudden traffic stops or an accident takes place. You should always try to maintain a cushion of safety around the vehicle. Also, drivers should drive the van in the right hand lane whenever possible.

26) Here is an effective formula that you can apply to maintain proper following distances. **For every 10 feet of vehicle, you should allow 1 second of following distance.** As an example, if you were driving a 20 ft van, the following distance should be a minimum of 2 seconds away from the car you are following. When conditions are bad, such as bad weather, visibility or bad road conditions, you should increase the following distance to nearly double than that if you were driving in good conditions.

27) Now, here is an effective method to maintain accurate following distances. When the vehicle in front of you passes a fixed object such as a telephone pole, street light or mailbox, you can count 'one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, etc. You should not pass that same fixed object before the designated count. The driver in the video is driving a van that is nearly 20 feet, so her designated count should be 2 seconds.

28) Also, remember when on freeways or highways, that you will have cars changing lanes right in front of you. When this happens, you need to be prepared to adjust your following distance accordingly.

29) You should also increase following distances when your behind larger commercial vehicles so you can see around them for potential hazards. **A little tip....If you cannot see the mirrors of the vehicle in front of you, your more than likely in their blind spot and**

**following distances should be increased.** It is important to ALWAYS leave plenty of space behind the vehicle ahead in case a last second maneuver has to be made.

30) When making merging, turning or making lane changes, you should always communicate your intentions by using your turn signal. **The turn signal should be activated at least 100 feet before reaching a turn.** Also, the turn signal indicator should flash at least 3 times before attempting to switch lanes. This gives more time to motorists to react during a lane change. Also, when changing lanes, you should always check for blind spots by first leaning forward in your seat to change your sight angle and then turning your head.

31) **Before entering an intersection, make sure to scan all directions and cover the brake.** You should scan ahead by 12-15 seconds or 1-2 city blocks. When scanning, you need to be mindful of the following: traffic signals, vehicles running red lights, or making a right turn at red lights, pedestrians, bicyclists, animals or any other obstruction that may be a hazard. Besides scanning ahead, you should be constantly scanning mirrors as well. Scan mirrors every 3-5 seconds, this allows you to get a full picture of what is happening around the van and may give you a chance to react to a possible collision.

32) When stopping at a light or stop sign, and there is a vehicle present in front of you, the driver should be able to see the rear tires of that vehicle touching the pavement. If a rear collision were to happen, this would give the driver a chance to react or it would make it less likely that it would push the van into the vehicle in front of you.

33) One more thing.....always be a courteous driver. If there is a line of cars behind you, pull over at a safe area and let the following vehicles pass. Also, there are many incidents of road rage on roadways, make sure to abide by the laws of the road and avoid driving too aggressively.

34) As you can see, there are basic driving skills and little techniques that can be applied when driving passenger vans. Being cognitive and applying them will reduce the chance for an accident to take place.

## **PART 4: Additional Safety Issues**

35) As we previously mentioned, passenger vans sit higher off the ground. When driving a passenger van, you would want to distribute the weight in the van equally to reduce the chance of a rollover. Passengers should sit toward the front of the vehicle when it is not full. Passenger

seating should be distributed from side to side. For example, if you are transporting 6 people, you would want to place 3 people on each side....You would not want to seat passengers all on one side. This would cause the van to become off balanced.

36) You should never overload the van with passengers and/or equipment. You should not tow items with the van and you should not store items on top of it.

37) There may be times where weather plays a role when driving the van. Snow, Rain, Fog and other natural weather elements can cause bad visibility, poor road conditions and more. Extreme caution and reduced speeds are necessary when driving in such conditions. Make sure to always pay close attention to the conditions of the roadway and always factor in visibility problems when driving in heavy rain, snow, fog and even high winds.

**38) When it comes to loading and unloading passengers, drivers should use good judgment in conjunction with any procedures or policies pre determined by your organization. This includes when and where to unload passengers safely.** However, it is recommended that you always pick up and drop off passengers so they do **NOT** have to cross traffic to get to their destination.

39) Here is something else to keep in mind. There may be times when you transport passengers who may develop an attitude or display behavioral issues. It is important to follow your organizations policies for dealing with behavioral issues. One thing is for sure, you should never let it distract you from your safe driving. If an issue arises, the best option is to pull over to deal with it. **NEVER try to handle an onboard problem when the van is in motion.**

40) Wether you are transporting passengers for a school event or any other type of extra curricular activity, make sure the rules of the van are known ahead of time. You never know when you may have to do some behavioral interventions and take proper steps when someone may be acting out on the van.

41) Here is another important issue. Consider alternatives to parking in a stall or area that may require you to back out. **70% of van crashes involve backing up into a stationary object.** However, if you need to back out of somewhere and if possible, back out to the left on the drivers side. This gives you better visibility around the van. Make sure to use the outside mirrors to help direct you in conjunction with moving your head to view traffic. Also, even though newer vans have a camera assist for backing up, you should not strictly rely on it. **Once**



**again, use your mirrors and move your head to see all around the van.**

42) And last but not least, there are some basic guidelines you should follow when you are operating a passenger van. One of these should be pretty obvious. That is to not use cell phones while driving. Whether a quick call or a quick text, **there is NO REASON to use the phone while driving.** If you do need to use the phone for an emergency, do so by pulling over to a safe location and make your call when the van is safely parked.

43) Eating, drinking and smoking are a distraction and you should not have any of those distractions while operating the van. Reading while driving is prohibited. And if you are using a map or navigation, pull the van to a safe area and input details or read the map when safely parked.

44) Operating passenger vans requires a clear head. Drugs and alcohol can impair your judgment and should not be used at anytime. Don't forget - prescription medications can cause drowsiness. Make sure you talk to your supervisors about any prescription medications you may be taking. Remember some medications are likely to impair motor skills and/or judgment.

45) Throughout the video we have laid out the basic foundation to drive passenger vans safely. We have shown the importance of the pre trip inspection along with a basic idea of passenger vans and their characteristics. We have provided driving skills and techniques that can be applied when operating vans on different types of roadways. We have stressed the importance of safe speeds, following distances and have brought up several other safety issues to consider when driving passenger vans. Now, it is up to you to take these skills and apply them when you get behind the wheel. Remember, it is not only your own safety, but also passenger safety that you have to always be mindful of. Stay safe.

## TEST QUESTIONS

- 1)** Passenger vans are substantially longer and wider than your typical automobile.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 2)** Passenger vans are well balanced.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 3)** There is no reason to know how to pre trip the van if you have mechanics to help.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 4)** You should adjust mirrors BEFORE you adjust the seats.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 5)** You should activate your turn signal at least \_\_\_\_\_ feet before reaching the turn.  
**a) 50**  
**b) 100**  
**c) 150**  
**d) None of the above**
- 6)** If you are driving a 20 foot van, the correct following distance should be 2 seconds.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 7)** When loading the van, you would want to keep all passengers on the same side to keep an eye on them. **TRUE or FALSE**
- 8)** When backing the van up, you should back out on the drivers side.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 9)** You can use your cell phone while driving as long as there are no passengers in the van.  
**TRUE or FALSE**
- 10)** You should always pick up and drop off passengers where they don't have to cross the street.  
**TRUE or FALSE**

## **ANSWER KEY**

- 1) TRUE**
- 2) FALSE**
- 3) FALSE**
- 4) FALSE**
- 5) b**
- 6) TRUE**
- 7) FALSE**
- 8) TRUE**
- 9) FALSE**
- 10) TRUE**