

Safe Routes for Children: What They Want and What Works

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Citation: Osborne, Paul. (2005). "Safe Routes for Children: What They Want and What Works." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(1): 234-239. Retrieved [date] from <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/>.

Comment on This Field Report

Abstract

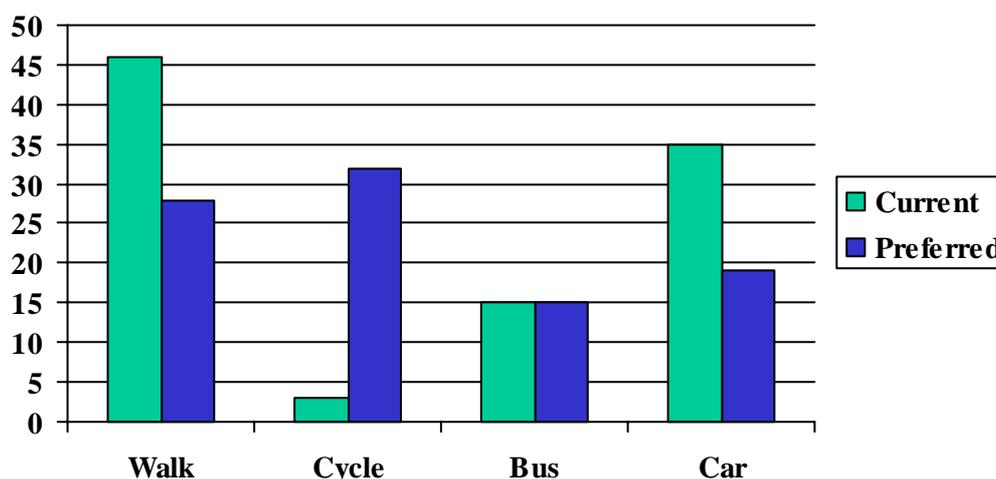
This paper summarizes some of the key trends in children's travel, health and social behavior, and the influence of the city environment, particularly on the school journey. It draws on examples of safe routes in Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, and includes a summary of policy and practice in the United Kingdom, with particular emphasis on lessons for other countries wishing to improve the environment for children and young people.

Keywords: **safe routes to schools, school travel plans, Sustrans, child obesity**

Persuading children and young people to be *more active, more often* would appear to be a major challenge for many societies throughout the world. An increasing proportion of journeys made by young people are made by car and there seems to be a firm link with the consequent reduction in levels of physical activity and rising obesity among young people. In the UK, 52 percent of all journeys made by under 16 year-olds are by car (National Travel Survey, Department for Transport 2004); there has been a doubling in the proportion of children traveling to school by car since 1985 (32 percent of all school journeys in 2002); and rates of child obesity in the UK are among the highest in the world and rising (National Obesity Task Force 2004). The reasons—and sometimes excuses—for these trends vary and include: busy lifestyles, increasing journey distances, laziness, lack of older role models and danger—both from traffic and from isolated attacks. The importance of these factors varies depending upon whom you ask; when asked about the school journey, adults are usually more concerned about safety or the weather, while young people worry more about the security of their bike or intimidation on the school bus.

Young Transnet, part of the UK-based National Children's Bureau, runs an on-line survey about children's views on transport, in particular their journeys to school. By the beginning of 2004, around 43,000 young people had entered data about their current and preferred modes of travel and the results make interesting reading for children's play practitioners, transport planners and public health professionals. Roughly one-third of the sample were driven to school and half of these did not want to travel by car. Nearly one-third (ten times the number who currently did so) wanted to cycle to school.

Figure 1. Children's Preferences for School Journeys



Influencing how school journeys are made is an important challenge for all those engaged in promoting sustainable transport, independent play, better health and safer communities. There is a clear link between good habits developed early in life and continuation of those habits in adulthood, and transport is no exception. For the purposes of this article, it is worth comparing Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, countries very different in size and population but similar in that each has developed its own unique approach to influencing the school journey.

The table below compares several key transport and health indicators between these countries. There seem to be strong links between:

- Low levels of cycling to school and higher levels of adult obesity
- High levels of car trips to school and higher levels of adult obesity
- Low levels of cycling to school and low levels of cycling to work

Figure 2. International Comparison of Transport and Health Indicators

	Denmark	UK	USA
% cycle to school	50	2	-
% walk to school	25	44	13
% car to school	12	32	49
% cycle to work	22	4	-
% adults classed as obese	8	20	23

(Sources: Danish Roads Directorate 1998; National Travel Survey, Department for Transport 2002; Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey, U.S. Department of Transportation 1995; OECD)

In the early 1970s, Denmark had the highest child mortality rate from traffic accidents in Western Europe and legislation was passed in 1976 to protect children from traffic on school journeys. Since then, Denmark has invested heavily in safe walking and cycling routes, and an early demonstration project in the 1980s in Odense succeeded in reducing school journey accidents by 82 percent. The city has taken further strides forward in its aim to become Europe's foremost cycling city and over half of all school journeys and 50 percent of all city center journeys are now made by bike. Levels of cycling to school range from 24 percent to 73 percent of all journeys in the city's schools (Andersen 2003). The **Cycle City** project, partly funded by the national government, includes promotional work in schools, including an award for the class that collectively cycles the furthest distance in one week. Trailer bikes and bike trailers are loaned for no charge to parents in kindergartens and there has been a strong emphasis on road safety training across all school year groups.

By contrast, the UK has high levels of walking to school but very low levels of cycling. The government recently announced a national Traveling to School Initiative which aims to have a school travel plan in place at every school by 2010. Among the initiatives being taken are new cycle sheds in schools, walking school buses¹, on-road cycle training between home and school, and pilot yellow school buses, along the lines of the U.S. model. Early results from a study of 40 school travel plans showed an average reduction in car use of 23 percent (Department for Transport 2005). Schools which benefited from new secure cycle storage and cycle routes away from traffic showed the greatest increase in cycling, with one high school recording 60 percent of all journeys by bike. Walk to School Week has been particularly effective at encouraging more walking journeys and is now being extended to become a once-a-week initiative called Walk on Wednesdays (WOW).

The United States has invested heavily in school bus transport, much of it free for children traveling more than one mile to school. This is clearly a well-funded and popular initiative and is now being investigated as one solution to rising car use on school journeys in the UK (Surveyor Magazine 2004, 19). Free school transport is given lower priority in the UK and Denmark where it is usually provided at three mile and five mile limits, respectively, for the 14/15 year-old age group. In spite of the investment in the ubiquitous yellow school bus, the level of car use for American school journeys remains high (44 percent at the high school level, compared to 24 percent among the same UK age group) with just 13 percent walking or cycling to school (38 percent in the UK) (Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey 1995 (US); National Travel Survey, Department for Transport 2002 (UK)). Concerned over rising levels of obesity among children, car-dominated neighborhoods and escalating school transport costs, many American communities are now importing the Safe Routes to Schools model from the UK and Denmark, such as the **California Safe Routes** program.

Safety must be at the heart of any campaign to persuade more young people (and their parents) to walk and cycle. Danish research has shown the effectiveness of investing in safe walking and cycling routes. During the period 1985-2000, the number of children (6-16 years old) killed or injured fell by 46 percent; approximately half the reduction is put down to road safety and cycle route improvements (Jenson and Hummer 2003). These improvements typically include segregated cycleways and footpaths, reallocation of road space away from cars in favor of pedestrians and cyclists, 20kph (and lower) speed limits in residential areas, and requirements for motorists to defer to pedestrians and cyclists at side roads and crossings. Research in Odense has shown that continued investment in walking and cycling infrastructure has more than paid for itself in terms of reduced school busing costs and health benefits to the wider population (Safe Routes to Schools 1998; Anderson 2003).

Sustrans² was instrumental in piloting the Danish approach in the UK as part of a pilot project in four cities. The project required a combination of traffic engineering measures and in-school initiatives to “win hearts and minds.” The involvement of young people in the political process was crucial. Perhaps the most successful intervention was youth exchanges between Danish and English schools, after which teenage students presented their experiences to local planners and decision makers (Sustrans 1999).

While the UK has a long way to go in recreating the child-friendly street environment of Denmark and other European countries, it has made a sound start at readdressing children’s transport and recreation needs. Government guidance for local councils requires that they consult widely with young people, that they collect annual data on school journeys and report progress with their school travel strategies in their five-year local transport plans. Several cities are now conducting trials of “Home Zones”—neighborhoods where pedestrians, cyclists and children have priority over cars, and increasing numbers of schools are promoting walking and cycling as part of their “Healthy Schools” programs. This year, Sustrans is working closely with local authorities across England and linking nearly 300 schools to the UK’s largest sustainable transport project, the National Cycle Network.

Lessons Learned

Cities such as York, UK now have several years experience of planning for school journeys as part of longer established walking and cycling strategies. A case study describing the city's school travel strategy is included in guidance published by the World Health Organization (2004).

Important lessons learned by planners and traffic engineers include:

- School travel policy should be part of an overall strategy to reduce traffic and promotion of alternatives to the car, especially development of a city-wide walking and cycling route network.
- Traffic engineers should be prepared to experiment with innovative safety measures (which benefit children in particular) even though they may have an adverse impact on traffic capacity.
- A thorough, well-funded road safety training program is needed to ensure that all children have at least a basic awareness of active travel, whether their school is engaged in a travel plan or not.
- Appointment of enthusiastic staff who liaise between traffic engineers, development control staff, education planning staff and schools is essential. Their task is to reduce car use as well as improve road safety.
- Linkages should be made between school travel initiatives and key education objectives, e.g., curriculum links, the national Healthy Schools Scheme, physical activity, health and safety, and alertness/readiness to learn.
- Young people should be involved in the political process, e.g., school council involvement in the school's travel plan, young people discussing traffic options, making presentations to city council, etc.
- Links should be developed between school travel planning and the planning system; e.g., travel plans can be secured through the planning process as a condition of planning consent.

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Useful Websites

Sustrans	www.sustrans.org.uk
Sustrans Safe Routes to Schools Project	www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk
UK Department for Transport	www.dft.gov.uk
UK Department for Education and Skills	www.teachernet.gov.uk/sdtravel
Young Transnet	www.yountransnet.org.uk
California Safe Routes	www.saferoutestoschools.org
Odense Cycle City Project (in English)	www.cyclecity.dk
International Walk to School Day	www.iwalktoschool.org
World Health Organization	www.euro.who.int/childhealthenv

Endnotes

1. "Walking school buses" are groups of children, escorted by adults who follow a set route to school with planned times for pick-ups.
2. Sustrans stands for sustainable transport. It is a charity that works on practical projects to encourage people to walk, cycle and use public transport in order to reduce motor traffic and its adverse effects.

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