



Traffic Safety Center

Setting New Directions in Traffic Safety

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Healthier Kids, Safer Neighborhoods

Safe Routes to School encourages walking while educating kids and parents about pedestrian safety



Thirty years ago, two-thirds of all schoolchildren walked or rode their bikes to school. Today, fewer than 10 percent of children walk or bike to school, according to a 1999 U.S. Centers for Disease Control study. The study showed that for the majority of parents surveyed--55 percent--distance was the number one barrier to letting children walk or bike, followed by traffic danger, identified by 40 percent of parents as their major concern. For many parents, even if school is located just a few blocks away, in their minds those blocks stretch into miles filled with broken stoplights, unmarked crosswalks, inattentive drivers, stray dogs and scary strangers.

But recently, with news reports describing a national "epidemic of obesity," and the publication of studies that show kids spend too much time watching TV and eating unhealthy foods and too little time exercising, walking and biking are starting to be viewed as good ways to promote health and physical activity among children. The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada reports that physical exercise positively affects children's academic performance. According to the study, exercise enables children to concentrate better, improves memory, and can elevate moods. Given the risks of the sedentary lifestyle, getting to school on foot or by bike may not look so bad after all.

Take a Walk on a School Bus

The Safe Routes to School program aims to turn "not so bad" into "good." Safe

Routes to School is a multi-faceted program that employs a variety of strategies to get children walking and biking to school—educating them about traffic safety, encouraging parents to accompany children to school in "walking school buses," and getting local governments to fix broken stoplights and to put in sidewalks. Methods differ from program to program, but an emphasis on community involvement is a common thread.

"We have a childhood obesity epidemic, and we need to have our kids out and about," says Barb Alberson, Chief of State and Local Injury Control Section of the California Department of Health Services. "We need to get them out and about and active, and Safe Routes to School is a key ingredient in increasing walking and biking, because no school's going to let its kids walk if they don't feel safe."

Safe Routes to School in California

America's Safe Routes to School programs trace their roots back to 1997, when the Partnership for a Walkable America brought the international Walk to School Day to Chicago. Other cities soon signed on, but officials in the Bronx section of New York City went a step further, that same year organizing the nation's first Safe Routes to School program. In 2001, the Bronx program teamed up with the New York Department of Transportation to bring Safe Routes to School to all of the city's 1,359 schools.

In 2000, California launched its own Safe Routes to School program, after voters approved an initiative to re-channel a portion of highway safety funds into promoting Safe Routes to School in communities statewide. Eight communities were selected to develop local programs. Meanwhile, the statewide program focused on planning, education and advocacy, as well as mobilizing communities to participate in Walk to School Day, held each year in October.

Before all of that could happen, though, the program's organizers had to know how parents viewed their neighborhoods. "We did some focus groups and found that parents were worried about stranger abduction, speeding cars, and kids being snagged, which are incredibly rare events, but it's one thing we had to handle," Alberson says. "To allay some of those fears, one of the things we suggested were walking school buses."



by parents themselves, operate on the same principle as the regular school bus—an adult picks up kids at their houses along a "route" and escorts them to school on foot, teaching them traffic safety skills along the way. If the "bus" is large, several adults may participate. Some communities have formed "biking buses" as well.



As Alberson points out, the walking school bus not only gets kids walking, but it gets parents to exercise and to spend extra time with their kids, or to get to know their neighbors' kids better. "It's exercise with the kids, but it also helps connect kids to their community," Alberson says.

Safe Routes to School concentrates much of its efforts on Walk to School Day. Some communities recruit prominent local figures to walk to school with kids. Alberson says that when city council members, school superintendents and police chiefs walk with kids, they see firsthand what the potential risks are—too_wide streets, too few stoplights, lack of sidewalks.

"They really got a sense of what the issues were, and took them to heart, made changes," she says. "It's who you rally for your cause. ... Many [communities] are now doing it once a week and working with public works and school coordinators."

Safe Routes to School also surveyed the kids themselves on what makes a neighborhood safe. On Walk to School Day, kids are given a questionnaire when they get to school. They're asked how they usually get to school, how they got to school on that day, what frightens them about walking to school, and, if their parents drive them, what would make alternate modes of transportation feasible. These questionnaires allow communities to see potential risks from the viewpoint of those most at risk, the kids.

"Fears include broken sidewalks and vacant lots," Alberson says. "And dogs--stray dogs are really scary for little kids."

Safe Routes to School in Marin County

While the California Safe Routes to School program is broad in scope, a second California Safe Routes to School project, now entering its fourth year, focuses on making the communities of Marin County, located north of San Francisco, safer for kids. The Marin County Safe Routes to School, funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and organized by the Marin County Bicycle Coalition, is credited with raising the number of kids walking or biking to school from 21 percent to 38 percent in two years, earning it a 2003 Award for Public Service from NHTSA.

Wendi Kallins, the program's director, says that Marin's Safe Routes to School works to make neighborhoods safer by improving infrastructure, educating kids, fostering community involvement and offering kids incentives to walk or bike. For instance, kids who bike to school get credit for "frequent rider miles," and are eligible to win prizes.

The organizers of the Marin program have also learned that Safe Routes to School needs to be adaptable. In Marin's more rural communities, distance is often a bigger factor than traffic danger or crime when it comes to keeping kids from walking. And when distance isn't a factor, infrastructure may be. In countrified communities, it is often the case that residents don't want sidewalks, and may prefer cul-de-sacs to simple grid models, which allow children to take more direct routes.

Lori Lopin, a Marin County resident and mother of two, became interested in making neighborhoods safe for kids to walk several years ago, before Safe Routes to School came to her community. Because the residents of her town, San Anselmo, enjoy the countrified feel that comes with few sidewalks and signs, Lopin knew that changes made at the infrastructure level would have to be minimal. But she also knew firsthand the fears that parents have in letting their children walk in neighborhoods designed for auto traffic.

"It's nerve-wracking, because there are no sidewalks and no shoulders. It's more of a country road atmosphere."

Putting sidewalks everywhere was not a reality. But the community knew that something should be done about morning traffic congestion. After it was determined that about a quarter of it was caused by parents driving their kids to school, parents in Lopin's community helped expand school bus service and organized a carpool.

"The community is aware we have a lot of big cars around here, a lot of SUVs that can sit six kids," Lopin says.

Over time, the community agreed to make a few key infrastructure changes as well. And the local elementary school, Brookside, educated kids about traffic safety and gave prizes to students who came to school by bike.

In San Anselmo and in its surrounding towns, Safe Routes to School had to adapt to fit the unique needs and desires of a rural community. A positive side to the program is its versatility. Its organizers agree there is no one "right" way to decrease traffic congestion and get children out and about. For some communities, trial and error is the only way to go, especially as built environments and America's transportation habits continue to change. And indeed, if more kids become aware of the environmental and health benefits of walking and biking, transportation habits may look very different 20 years from now. So may communities.

Lopin says that her younger daughter, who was just starting school when Safe Routes to School was introduced, has internalized messages of environmental responsibility and the health consciousness. Her older daughter, then in fourth grade, is aware of those concepts but hasn't taken them to heart in the same way.

"My youngest daughter, the very first year Safe Routes to School came in, was in kindergarten, so she's been gradually getting an education on biking and riding and

being concerned with the environment," Lopin says. "So hopefully as she gets older, she will want to ride a bike. I can see already that some of the things we were teaching may not have set as well with my older daughter. You start something young enough, it will be ingrained."

Safe Routes to School is still a new program, and its participants, whether urban, suburban or rural residents, are still figuring out what works best for their communities. But with its flexibility and emphasis on parent and community responsibility, the program looks poised to respond to new growth models and changing transportation needs.

Safe Routes to School also shows that those concerned about the built environment and those concerned about public health have a lot to offer each other.

"When you revive a community by putting in sidewalks and fixing broken lights, it also takes care of an awful lot of public health concerns," Alberson says. "It helps solve a number of different health problems, such as crime, air pollution and congestion. [It promotes] community connectivity and a sense of pride, and better land use decisions."

While Safe Routes to School's strength may reside in its ability to adapt to the needs of specific communities, its organizers and participants also have the bigger picture in mind.

"It helps to reframe public health issues in a more interesting, 21st-century way," Alberson says. "People are hearing about childhood obesity education. That's the way to pull them toward your issue. We're just trying to use what is our strength, making this issue come alive for people."

Photos: Dan Burden, <http://www.pedbikeimages.org>
