

Safe Routes to School

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Summary

Safe Routes to Schools is a practical initiative to reduce traffic danger on school journeys by encouraging more walking and cycling and reducing car use. The initiative involves children, teachers, traffic engineers, road safety professionals and public health workers. Several countries around the world are now implementing safe routes to schools and establishing strong links between transport, education and health policies.

Sustrans is a UK based civil engineering charity which builds safe cycling and walking routes. Over the last 5 years, it has been pioneering safe routes to schools projects in the UK in collaboration with schools and local authorities. This paper gives a brief overview of the policy background in the UK and describes some of the key reasons why school journeys are a vital place to start to encourage cycling, especially in countries where cycling levels are low.

One prerequisite for a successful project is the close involvement of young people. Three students from the UK and Denmark will describe how they came to become involved in the project, their own school journeys, their school exchange visit and subsequent presentations to traffic planners and local politicians which was the catalyst for changes at their schools. They will also describe latest best practice in the UK and Denmark and give their views on the importance of this work.

1.0 Introduction

This paper is an introduction to the important and fast developing Safe Routes to Schools initiative. It gives a brief overview of the rationale for such projects and an introduction to the policy background in the United Kingdom (UK) where many projects are now underway. Whilst most of the references and examples derive from work in the UK and Denmark, the principles can be applied to projects around the world. The single most important message which the young people joining me in this presentation wish to share with you, is:

'We all have much to learn from each other'.

2.0 Why Safe Routes to Schools?

When I was interviewed for my job as Safe Routes to Schools Project Coordinator, I remember asking 'What happens if a child at the school I'm working at has an accident on their way to school?' I remember too the answer – 'Don't let yourself think like a typical local authority, you have the opportunity to be different!' This was my first clue about the unique nature of this work. Safe Routes to School Projects involve taking risks... but the bigger risk is in not doing them! There are too many opportunities which will be missed, and the big problems such projects attempt to solve, will only get bigger.

Schools are an ideal place to start to encourage cycling (and walking) and tackle the big, bad trends of increasing congestion, pollution and physical inactivity at the same time. This is because:

- Good habits are learnt at a young age
- Traffic danger is reduced
- Children want to cycle
- School journeys are compulsory
- Most school journeys are short
- Safe Routes to Schools projects are popular

2.1 Good habits are Learnt at a Young Age

When children are encouraged to cycle from an early age, they continue to cycle as adults. National school and work journey comparisons illustrate this point. Denmark and the Netherlands have a high proportion of cycling commuters, but these numbers are only sustained by even higher numbers of children cycling to school.

Country	Journeys to work by bike	Journeys to school by bike
Netherlands (1995)	27%	52%
Denmark (1998)	22%	50%
United Kingdom (1998)	2%	1%

Table 1. Cycle journey comparisons by trip purpose.

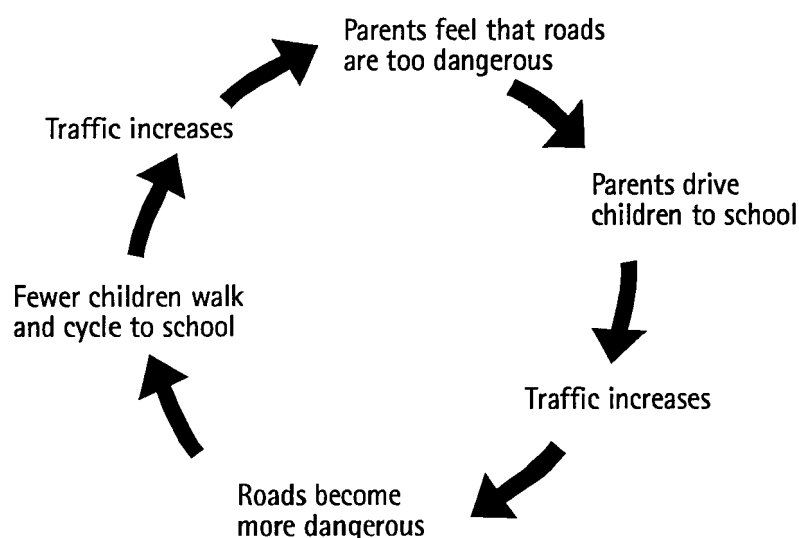
2.2 Traffic Danger is Reduced

As adults, we all care about the welfare of children... we want them to enjoy good health, we want them to enjoy life, we want them to be safe... so increasingly, we put them in cars.

	1985/86	1995/97
Walk	59	49
Cycle	3	<1
Car	16	29
Bus/Other	22	21

Table 2. UK journeys to school (5-16yrs)

The irony is, that as we transport more children by car, we make conditions more unpleasant for other children walking or cycling to school. A vicious circle is created, more car journeys are made and traffic danger increases. (see diagram below)



But this danger is not borne out by casualty statistics which show that around one fifth of child casualties take place on the school journey. It is the increased traffic and vulnerability as people leave the streets that most often determines the parent's decision to drive. Likewise, Safe Routes to Schools can never be truly 'safe', but the perception of increased safety is the key requirement that can help us turn the vicious circle into a virtuous circle.

2.3 Children Want to Cycle

Surveys in schools have revealed significant suppressed demand for cycling. This demand tends to peak at around age 9/10 years when many children receive cycle training and seek more independence. This is also the age when they need most encouragement to cycle to school (given safer routes to school) because their interest in cycling starts to fall and by age 14, many would prefer to travel by car.

The following data from nine schools in the United Kingdom and two schools in the United States illustrates these preferences.

	Cycle now	Want to cycle	Travel by car now	Want to travel by car
UK (age 5 to 10)	2%	73%	44%	11%
US (age 5 to 11)	0%	38%	66%	24%
UK (age 11 to 16)	7%	35%	22%	22%
US (age 12 to 14)	1%	14%	56%	56%

Table 3. Existing and Preferred Means of Travel (Sample of UK. and US. schools)

2.4 School Journeys are Compulsory

Within most countries, children have a right to a good education and parents have a responsibility to send children to school. Millions of children throughout the world travel to school each day. Schools (unlike many governments) are in a unique position to issue directives to pupils and parents since they are charged with the overall welfare of *all* their pupils. In the UK, schools are now being encouraged to adopt school travel plans, many of which make reference to Safe Routes to School.

2.5 Schools Journeys are Short

Although school journey distances are slowly rising in the UK, the vast majority of these journeys are short and could easily be walked or cycled. This is also significant because it enables route improvements to take place in a concentrated area, benefiting a large number of users. For comparison with school journey distances shown in Table 4, the average commuting distance in the UK is 8.0 miles (12.8 km).

	School journeys less than 1 mile (1.6 km)	School journeys less than 3 mile (4.8 km)	Average journey length
Primary School (up to 10yrs)	59%	89%	1.3 mile (2.1 km)
Secondary School (up to 16 yrs)	30%	66%	3.1 mile (5.0 km)

Table 4. Journey Distances to School

2.6 Safe Routes to Schools are Popular

There are many powerful arguments for Safe Routes to Schools and it is difficult to argue against the project's objectives or the means of achieving them. In York, a city in the UK which has a long record of providing for cyclists, typical traffic calming schemes win 40-50% support from residents. When traffic calming was presented as part of a Safe Routes to Schools Project, this support had risen to 80%.

3.0 Progress in the UK

In the UK, transport, health and education policy now highlights the importance of the school journey. Transport policies are in place to 1) reduce car use on journeys to school by encouraging walking and cycling; and 2) cut accidents on school journeys. Health funding in deprived areas is now supporting the work of school travel officers. Changes to the National Curriculum in England mean that there will be more classroom work on road safety, sustainable transport, citizenship and links to the Healthy Schools Programme.

There is cross department support for Safe Routes to Schools work because:

- Roads in UK urban areas experience up to 20% extra peak hour traffic as a result of car journeys to schools

- Schools see the potential for links with the curriculum, they recognise the benefits for the well being of pupils, and wish to resolve traffic problems with their neighbours.
- 15% of children in UK are overweight, primarily through lack of exercise. Obesity costs the UK economy approximately £3.5Billion each year. The UK lags just 12 years behind the US, where almost one quarter of the population is clinically obese and where, it has been estimated, obesity kills 280,000 people each year.

The UK government has issued new guidance on school travel strategies and plans, and has increased funding for Safe Routes to School projects. As a result, between 1998 and 1999, the percentage of local authorities actively engaged in Safe Routes to School projects had increased from 10% to 44%. The results of this work will emerge over the next few years but, as the Danes have found, these projects should be evaluated over the long term.

4.0 Sustrans Demonstration Project

In 1995, Sustrans set up a demonstration project working with four local authorities and ten pilot schools in England. We were keen to learn from Denmark and disseminate appropriate best practice on policy, surveys, engineering measures and work undertaken in schools. We also established an information service for schools, campaigners and school travel professionals. You can contact Sustrans at www.sustrans.org.uk

The key to a successful project is the involvement of children. To that end, three young people from York (UK) and Odense (DK) will now describe how they came to be involved in the demonstration project, their school exchange and some of the practical measures which have been taken at their schools.

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