

Walking to School



Information for parents and schools

INFORMATION SHEET FS13

Introduction

More than half of children in the UK live close enough to their school to be able to walk.⁽¹⁾ For young children, walking to school with their parents is an excellent opportunity to learn road safety skills and awareness. Children who walk to school with parents and friends build up their pedestrian skills over time so that when they start making journeys alone they are better prepared for coping with traffic. Although it means allowing a little extra time in the mornings, many parents value the daily walk as quality time when they can share experiences with their children.

Once children are ready to make their own way to school, the journey on foot is a chance to gain independence and self-confidence. Children who walk to school are more aware of their neighbourhood, recognise street names and places and are less likely to get lost. Children and young people also enjoy the freedom of being with their friends.

Getting children into the habit of walking is an excellent way to encourage lifelong healthy habits, and to reduce car-dependency. Once children are used to walking to school, they will naturally be happy to make other short journeys on foot, rather than always relying on someone to drive them.

Health benefits of walking

Children need to take part in regular physical activity to stay fit and to develop active lifestyles for their future health. The government recommends that young people should have a minimum of one hour's moderate physical activity each day, to keep healthy and help prevent serious illness in later life.⁽²⁾ Walking to school regularly is officially recognised as a way of achieving this.

For more information see the 'Health Benefits' information sheet.

Teachers find that children who walk to school are more alert when they arrive than those who are driven by car, and more ready to learn.



Department for
Transport

The **Safe Routes to Schools** project is co-ordinated by Sustrans and provides support to local authorities, schools and parents. Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity and works on practical projects to encourage people to walk, cycle and use public transport to benefit health and the environment.

National Cycle Network Centre, 2 Cathedral Square, College Green, Bristol, BS1 5DD



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Environmental benefits of walking

Many children who live within walking distance of school are nevertheless brought by car. As a result, one in five cars on the road in the morning rush hour are involved in the school run.⁽¹⁾ Fewer cars would mean significantly reduced air pollution, less traffic noise, and fewer accidents, especially near schools.

If more children walked, the roads would be clearer, creating a safer and more pleasant environment for pedestrians, and thereby encouraging more people to walk.

Incidentally, children driven to school are not protected from car fumes as it has been found that car passengers are exposed to pollution levels two or three times higher than those experienced by pedestrians.⁽²⁾

Switching to walking is a cost and hassle-free way of doing your bit for the environment, not requiring any special or expensive equipment, apart from safe streets.

Safety

Most local authorities offer pedestrian training for young children, often together with their parents and usually arranged through the school. Ask your school or local road safety department for more information.

Sustrans is supporting local authorities in providing suitable walking routes for children, such as wider footpaths, safe crossings, better street lighting, and traffic calming to reduce vehicle speeds. Where improvements to routes are needed, it is best for parents to work with the school and local authority to devise a school travel plan. This can highlight any walking related concerns and propose ways to resolve them.

For more information on school travel plans see Developing a School Travel Plan information sheet and visit our website.

Dark winter coats and school uniforms are not easily seen by drivers. Especially in winter months, reflective stickers and badges on bags or clothing are an important safety feature for walkers. They are often available from the local road safety department. Schools sometimes buy them in bulk to save costs and encourage their use.

Incentives to encourage walking

Some schools have developed very creative ways of encouraging pupils to walk to school. A few successful ideas are given here but many more are waiting to be invented!

Greening the Tree

Draw or make a giant tree without any leaves. The leaves of the tree will show travel modes for each of the pupils so assign colours to modes eg, green = walking, yellow = cycling, brown = car. Ask the pupils to draw a leaf on the colour card that represents their normal mode of transport, cut it out and stick it on the tree. Repeat the activity each term and watch the colours change.

Golden Boot

Each day record how members of each class travelled to school. At the end of a given time period e.g. half a term, present the golden boot to the class that have made the greatest number of walking journeys to school.

Land's End to John O'Groats

Each pupil will need to know the distance from his or her home to school. Keep a running total for pupils of how many days they have walked to and from school and convert this to number of miles walked. The winner is the first class or individual to have walked from Land's End to John O'Groats.

Record Cards

Give each pupil a record card, which they can have stamped each time they walk to school. Give small prizes on a regular basis to the pupils with the greatest number of stamps.

Park and stride

Families who live too far away to walk may have to use a car if there is no bus transport but it is still possible to ensure that children benefit from a daily walk by finding an appropriate parking place at a suitable walking distance from the school. Many schools have agreements with a local community hall, sports ground, supermarket or pub that parents can use the car park while they walk their children to school. 'Park and Stride' schemes can also be a way of including children from further afield in a walking bus (see below).

Walking bus

It is natural for small groups of parents and children to walk and talk together as their routes converge. Quite often parents take it in turns to escort each other's children to or from school. At many schools groups of parents have developed this idea into a regular, formal arrangement called a 'walking bus'.

A formal 'walking bus' is a group of children walking to or from school with a minimum of two adult escorts, following a set route, with agreed pick up and drop off points at or near pupils' homes. The walking bus allows parents to share responsibility, and even enables some young children to walk whose parents are unable to accompany them on foot. It also becomes a conspicuous local advertisement for walking. The participants usually wear high visibility tabards, for safety and to publicise the pro-walking message. Because the escorts are responsible for other people's children, and because larger groups of children need more care, a

number of checks and safeguards are undertaken.

Walking buses have been successful and popular with parents and children at many infant and junior schools. If thinking of starting one, first check with your local road safety department or school travel adviser / co-ordinator. They may have local guidance and support materials, and they will be able to advise you on risk assessment, insurance, training and vetting of volunteers.

Setting up a 'bus' route would typically include the following:

- get parents together to explain benefits and generate interest
- find out where people live and plot routes
- start small, perhaps one morning a week, and allow things to progress slowly
- speak to the council Road Safety Officer about risk assessment, insurance, traffic calming, and pedestrian crossings
- seek funding for things like reflective clothing and a trolley - a local business might be prepared to give you sponsorship
- recruit volunteers - the more the better - and organise police checks
- set up a rota and training for volunteers
- agree contracts for pupils' behaviour and parental responsibility eg. being at the 'bus stop' on time
- list emergency contact numbers
- encourage small schemes amongst local families
- start a travel noticeboard in school to share information



- set up a walking bus committee to sustain it
- give pupils recognition in assembly
- seek local publicity with photo opportunities
- remember to thank your volunteers and find ways of acknowledging them publicly - this will help to maintain their involvement and encourage other parents to get involved.

For more information on walking buses visit www.walkingbus.com

Sometimes a number of parents have come together informally, walking together in a larger group with their children, perhaps to draw attention to the need for a new road crossing.

To find out about how one of these informal groups functions, visit www.stanfordcrocodile.org

Promotional events

Schools and local authorities have had tremendous success in encouraging more walking to school by setting up special events or campaigns, usually with incentives for children, and local or even national publicity.

A regular walk to school day, like WOW (Walk on Wednesdays) promoted in assemblies and through parent newsletters is a good way to start.

The national Walk to School Weeks are very well supported and effective. Ask your school travel adviser / co-ordinator what is organised in your area. (Email us for contact details of school travel advisers at your local authority.)

For more information visit www.walktoschool.org.uk

Case studies

Visit the Case Studies section of our website to see examples of ways in which schools have been able to encourage more walking.

References

1. DfT (2004) National Travel Survey 2003, London: DfT
2. Health Education Authority (1998) 'Young and Active?' A policy framework for young people and health-enhancing physical activity.
3. Environmental Transport Association Trust (1997) 'Road user exposure to air pollution: Literature review'.



Further information

Visit the Safe Routes to Schools website www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk for:

- latest news and information on Safe Routes to Schools
- specific information on each of the UK regions
- downloadable resources including other information sheets
- case studies, curriculum materials and newsletters

For Safe Routes to Schools enquiries call 0117 915 0100 or email schools@sustrans.org.uk

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