

May 2008

Backseat Children

how our car dependent culture
compromises safety on our streets



**Walk
to
School!**



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Executive summary

- Living Streets believes that the UK has a growing generation of “backseat children” who, because they are being driven to school, are failing to develop an understanding of road safety, their environment or their role in the community.
- Children who have not practised walking to school at primary level have less chance to develop road safety awareness and are therefore more vulnerable when they walk to school independently at secondary level.
- Latest figures from the Department for Transport show that an 11-year-old starting secondary school is almost twice as likely as a 10-year-old at primary school to be killed or seriously injured in road collisions.
- This report details the results of qualitative research conducted in 2007 with 104 pupils in four schools in London, Glasgow, Buckinghamshire and East Dunbartonshire which found that children who are isolated in cars are not being allowed to learn road safety skills, aren’t able to play an active part in their community and are denied the chance to develop their independence. We are calling on parents and primary school children to take part in Walk to School week and other walking initiatives. We believe that pupils who walk to and from school at primary age learn how to be safe before they get to secondary school, as well as developing independence and resilience.
- The Walk to School Campaign is run by Living Streets and ACT TravelWise with funding from the Department of Transport and Transport for London. It aims to encourage parents, pupils and teachers to make the journey to and from school on foot.
- The Walk to School Campaign gives encouragement to walk throughout the year: Walk to School Week takes place in May, International Walk to School Month takes place in October and the WoW scheme runs throughout the year.

Introduction

Britain has one of the worst road safety records in Europe for child pedestrians and almost 20% of casualties occur on the way to or from school¹. Driving children to school is often convenient for parents with busy lives and, indeed, it is sometimes their only option. As the natural instinct of a parent is to protect, many young children are now being driven to school to keep them safe. Ironically, this causes havoc around many schools when a high number of cars arrive at the same time, putting these children and other pedestrians at risk.

This report suggests that there is a growing generation of 'backseat children' in the UK who are being put in more danger in the long run. Because they are isolated in cars, these children have reduced opportunities to interact with their local environment and instead experience much of it from the back seat.



Children need to be involved in their own learning processes and be given opportunities to discover solutions and strategies for themselves rather than being told what to do. Instead, children's mobility is becoming increasingly restricted, demonstrated by the increasing number of children being driven to school. Driving the

school run denies children the chance to develop road safety skills, independence and an understanding of their local environment. This report sets out our findings, linking to other contemporary research where applicable, and aims to give parents the confidence to release their children safely into the real world.



What's the problem?

The pattern of children's travel to school has changed significantly in recent years with a declining proportion of primary school children walking to school and a corresponding increase in car use. The most recent figures show that 41% of primary school children are now being driven to school and the proportion walking has dropped from 61% in 1994 to 52%². This means that at peak time, one in five cars on the road is doing the school run. This volume of traffic has a substantial impact on local communities - particularly in the residential areas where primary schools tend to be located. This, in turn, leads to fewer children walking to school as the streets are perceived as dangerous and uninviting.

Childhood today is increasingly being marked by shrinking freedoms and growing adult control and supervision. A 2007 survey concluded that "a perception that the outside world is both a more dangerous place for children and a less protected one is having a profound effect on the way that parents are bringing up their children."³ This is illustrated by the huge drop in the number of children who are allowed to walk to school on their own. In 1971, 80% of seven and eight-year-olds travelled to school without an adult but by 2006 the figure had dropped to 12% of seven to 10-year-olds⁴. At the age of 11, almost every child used to walk to school alone; now it is down to 55% and falling (see our recommendations on teaching road safety on Page 11).



"While no parent wants to see their child harmed, we cannot bubble-wrap kids forever. As a parent myself, I know that when my daughter started coming home from school without a grown-up, it was a real milestone on her path to independence. Everyday adventures like walking to school on their own, or with friends, give children the chance to be responsible and help them to feel a basic connection with the people and places around them."

Tim Gill, parent and author of 'No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society'.

"Far more people are killed by strangers behind the steering wheel of a motor vehicle than are killed by strangers on foot. Danger should be removed from children rather than children from danger."

**Mayer Hillman, One false move...
A Study of Children's Independent
Mobility, 1991**

There is a growing body of evidence that the move to later independence is one of the main causes of our high teenage road accident statistics. Figures from the Department for Transport reveal that child pedestrian collisions on the walk to school peak at about 12 years of age. Twenty-eight 10-year-olds were killed or seriously injured while walking to and from school in 2006 whereas for 12-year-olds, the figure leapt to 86 – nearly a three-fold increase. Rather than practising the walk to school during their primary years, children aren't allowed to gain their independence until they journey to secondary school when friends, peer pressure, MP3 players and mobile phones can all be dangerous distractions.

Young children perceive the world in a different way to adults, so need to be taught how to negotiate traffic. For example, they have difficulty judging the speed and distance of vehicles. They cannot distinguish between a large vehicle going slowly and a small vehicle going fast – the larger vehicle seems the most dangerous to a small child⁵.

It is not just traffic that discourages parents from letting their children walk. The sensational way the media reports tragedies involving children gives misleading impressions about the scale of the dangers they face. They are no more likely to be abducted today than they were 30 years ago. The NSPCC estimates an average of 11 children a year are killed by strangers, whereas 60 were killed travelling as passengers in cars in 2006⁶. This fear for our children, which is not aligned to the reality on the street, is illustrated by a survey conducted last year by the Children's Society which found that 43% of adults thought children should not be allowed out unsupervised until the age of 14 or over. An incredible 22% said children should be 16.



If children are to grow emotionally and into healthy, resilient teenagers, we believe they must undertake an increasing number of journeys independently as they move towards their teens, away from adult supervision. Independent mobility is also essential if children are to learn how to manage risk. A child's safety on the streets will be compromised if he or she reaches the end of primary school and his or her parents have still not invested the time to show them how to identify safe routes and teach their child road sense.

"It is important that young people learn how to stay safe when out and about from a young age – we are not doing our children any favours by always transporting them everywhere by car. Of course everyone leads busy lives, and time in the morning can often be of an essence, but to ignore this part of our children's development is leaving them vulnerable. So often children are dropped off and collected by car at primary school and then expected to cope with often quite complex journeys on their own when they start secondary school."

Ann Elledge, Suzy Lamplugh Trust

ROAD CASUALTIES GREAT BRITAIN 2006, Department for Transport.

School pupil casualties on journeys to and from school:

by road user type, severity, gender and age

Number of casualties										
	Pedestrian		Pedal cycle		Car occupants		Bus or tram occupants		All road users ¹	
	KSI	All	KSI	All	KSI	All	KSI	All	KSI	All
All pupils										
3 and under	1	16	0	2	0	7	0	0	1	25
4	9	51	0	2	1	19	0	0	10	72
5	11	87	0	5	1	45	0	8	12	145
6	22	76	1	3	0	59	0	4	23	142
7	11	86	0	4	0	53	0	9	11	153
8	19	97	1	6	1	54	0	6	21	163
9	29	142	0	14	1	77	0	9	30	243
10	28	157	1	18	1	65	0	20	31	265
11	54	384	6	67	2	67	3	51	65	569
12	86	538	10	86	4	78	4	79	104	782
13	65	406	7	66	3	68	4	31	80	574
14	58	319	6	56	4	72	1	46	70	497
15	47	273	8	60	0	69	1	56	57	465
16	17	112	2	31	4	48	2	19	32	290
All children	457	2,744	42	420	22	781	15	338	547	4,385

1 Includes other road users and cases where gender or road user type was not reported



Our survey

We were interested to know more about the way in which children interact with their local area during the journey to school, whether they do that journey on foot or by car, and what that means for their development.

We commissioned the Children's Forum in London to conduct qualitative research in four different primary schools in England and Scotland, covering a mix of urban and rural areas and with differing levels of walking and driving to school.

The children who took part in the survey were mixed sex, aged 10 to 11. They were asked to think and talk about their journey to school and draw a map showing as much detail as they could remember.

To avoid any influence, children were seated at tables with classmates who travelled to school in the same way. They were asked to complete a short questionnaire and then took part in a discussion exercise to debate the 'pros and cons' of the different ways to travel to school.



Four key reasons why children should, where possible, walk to school emerged in every class and were explored further in each session:

environmental concerns

health/fitness

sociability/meeting friends

independence

Children at the top-end of primary school were selected for this research as, in addition to their increased cognitive skills/articulacy in relation to the map task and subsequent discussion, this age group is most likely to walk to school – or use a greater range of travel alternatives. The sample was selected to provide an overview by choosing schools in broadly similar geographic locations.

Our findings

Children who walk to school are actively engaged with their community

Our researchers asked the children what they thought they would remember about their trip to school when they had grown up. Those who walked described pursuits that they could actively take part in because they were on foot, for example, “running over the bumps” or “meeting up with Lexi”. The children in cars described objects they saw: “petrol station”, “traffic lights” or “cows”.

The walkers were able to name people they met along the way, showing the social bonds they had developed: “Mrs Woods was cycling” or “Kate came out at the same time as me”. The children in cars were only able to reference people by their job, such as: “the lollipop lady”.

“Walking to school has always been enjoyable for my son as he rides his scooter most mornings and feels the benefits of the exercise as he starts his school day awake and full of energy. Another plus is the fact that we meet up with friends on the way. He is able to chat to them, feels part of the community and also feels that camaraderie that comes with sharing experiences on the way to and from school.”

Michael Junor, parent, Surrey

Children who walk to school have wider social networks

Eighty-four percent of the children who walked to school reported always or sometimes meeting up with classmates on the way to school, while only 66% of those who were driven to school had the opportunity to do so. Meeting up with friends was the most eagerly anticipated part of the school journey. This was demonstrated by the type of detail on the maps - walkers added their friends’ houses and where they met up. Our survey supports previous research which shows that regular spontaneous contact in a neighbourhood builds up levels of familiarity and trust, making people feel better about their community and their place in it – leading to the growth of social capital⁸.



As the Crow Flies – a walking map made by children showing how they see their local environment. Created by children and staff from Mitchell Brook Primary Extended School with artist Amy Plant.



Children who walk to school have better spatial awareness and road sense

The children in our survey were asked to draw maps of their route from home to school. Tellingly, those travelling by car provided detailed drawings of the areas around their home and school but frequently complained that they could not remember the “middle bit” of the journey. Children who travelled by bus provided a similar story; their maps were most detailed around the bus stops. The walkers’ maps included the most detail including pavements, crossings and shops.


Our study agrees with a much larger study conducted by University College London which showed children who walked to school were

more accurate than their driven classmates when asked to recall the location of local landmarks⁷. Spatial awareness and a sense of “place” is important as they lead to greater confidence as children grow more independent.

"I have three daughters. My eldest daughter started walking on her own to school in her first year at secondary school. However, I allowed the twins (who are younger) to start walking together during the last year of primary school. We've always walked to school so I've made sure they've got brilliant road sense – plus there are two of them. They really enjoy the independence and I feel completely confident about it."

McGhie, mother and teacher, Sussex

Hazel McGhie, mother and teacher, Sussex



"In my opinion, the children who walk to school arrive in a better frame of mind-ready to work. If the sun is shining they also seem to feel a lot happier and more settled on arrival at the gate. The children who arrive by car are often later and less organised. It does appear that these children feel more rushed each morning."

**Janet McLoughlin, Teaching Assistant,
Hurworth Primary School**

Walking to school empowers children and teaches responsibility

The children in our survey identified freedom and flexibility as a key benefit of walking; to choose to be early for school by walking quickly, to stop and chat or visit a shop. Being a car passenger was viewed as a passive activity - as one pupil who was driven to school elaborated: "walking is freedom – you can hop and skip or jump - you are in control".


According to a study on walking buses there is "very strong evidence" that walking to school improves children's social development in future years⁹. The more contact children have with their natural environment, the higher they score in tests of concentration and self-discipline – with obvious repercussions for their future employability¹⁰. Short-term and even superficial exposure to natural areas through brief walks have been found to have positive effects on mood, reducing feelings of anger and anxiety¹¹.

Walking to school teaches independence

All the children referred to the time when they would be travelling to school alone. Those that were already doing so had begun it earlier in the school year, or the previous one. They were all showing maturity by going home directly so as not to worry their parents by being late.

Others expected their parents to permit them to start walking independently later in the year, in preparation for secondary school. They all recognised the responsibility that walking to school on their own entailed.

Other research has shown that children who are driven to school overestimate the risks of abduction and 'stranger danger' while underestimating the risks of traffic¹². In our research, the walkers' attitude to their personal safety (both generally and on the way to school) was much more realistic. They demonstrated this when they were asked at what age they would be confident to walk to school on their own. The walkers were confident walking to school on their own half a year before the children who were driven.



"The journey to school is a potentially unregulated space for young people and therefore presents opportunities for independent decision-making. Young people can discover risks for themselves and decide the risks they are willing to take and those that they seek to avoid."

**Dr Lesley Murray, Making the Journey to
School, University of Brighton, 2007**

Conclusion

It's already well established that walking is a key plank in the fight against obesity and something that children of virtually all abilities can do. Our research found that walking to school is also beneficial to children in other ways - in fact it is a critical factor in their emotional wellbeing and burgeoning sense of independence. Feedback from children themselves pointed to walking being a happy social experience. The descriptive words used by the groups of children demonstrated that children pay different levels of attention to their journey depending on what mode of transport they use and that children who walk to school are more actively engaged. Children, unlike some adults, don't just see walking as a way of getting from A to B. They take part in their journey - constantly exploring the world around them, listening to the birds singing or watching the seasons change.

Not only is the journey to school a key space for making connections, it is also a perfect opportunity to teach children how to keep safe on the road. More children walking to school will have the added advantage of improving safety for other pedestrians. It limits the number of cars on the road as well as encouraging drivers take more care. According to David Engwicht, a social inventor working in Australia, a child playing on the pavement can be more effective at slowing traffic than a speed bump. The presence of children on the streets also means that parents tend to spend more time there and become more aware of what is happening in their area.



Our research shows that children who walk to school have more emotional investment in their neighbourhood than those who are driven. Living Streets is concerned that children who are driven to school are missing out on these benefits. By not connecting with their neighbourhood, they are failing to develop a sense of place, an understanding of the environment or their role in the community.

We believe that getting a lift to school every day limits horizons leading to isolated, vulnerable children. If we don't allow our children the space to learn to walk responsibly in a safe and controlled environment, we ultimately end up placing them in real danger. We are keen to encourage independent and streetwise children and believe that walking to school from an early age will foster this. Behind our campaign is a belief that walking to school regularly has some fantastic benefits, both for individuals and for local communities as a whole.

Our recommendations for parents:

Practise road safety

Road awareness should be introduced at an early age; there is no substitute for real life experience in learning to cross the road safely and, if you set a good example, your child will copy you. It is crucial to walk the route to school with children and talk to them about where the risks are, where it is safe to cross the road and why. Bend down to their eye level; this will show you exactly what the children can see and what they can't. Take the following into account when explaining what to do:

- Young children have a physical disadvantage in traffic: their peripheral vision is two-thirds that of an adult.
- Children have difficulty determining where a sound is coming from. Traffic noises and sirens may confuse them.
- Most children under six lack a sense of danger and often mix fantasy with reality. They do not always understand that a vehicle may seriously hurt or kill them if they collide.
- Children are often restless and are easily distracted. They tend to focus on the things that interest them at the moment so they have trouble waiting for things such as traffic lights or cars heading in their direction.
- Most children are unable to understand a complex chain of events.
- Children often believe that all adults will look out for them. They think that if they can see an adult driving a car toward them, the driver must be able to see them.
- Children have difficulty judging the speed and distance of oncoming vehicles. They assume vehicles can stop as quickly as pedestrians can.

For slightly older children, make sure they are aware of the following:

- Parked cars and other obstacles block the view of the road and make it hard for drivers to see them.
- Headphones, mobile phones and chatting to friends are distracting and may make them miss warnings or potential dangers.
- Drivers cannot see pedestrians clearly in the dark, rain or fog.
- Traffic movement is complex at junctions and they must take extra care.

Finally, when you feel they are ready, start letting them practise making their own decisions in a quiet area, with you by their side. The child must also say out loud what they are doing and why. This verbalisation is critical in facilitating learning. The idea is to make the children work out for themselves why some places are dangerous and others are safer. They must come to understand that a safe place to cross is one where they can see the traffic a long way ahead and where drivers can see them¹³.

Our recommendations for parents (continued):

How to teach independence

Experiment with walking

Most people underestimate the time it takes to travel by car or public transport, and overestimate how long it takes to walk. Experiment one day: time the journey to school by car, then see how long it takes on foot. You might be surprised at your results.

Find out if your child is ready

Ask your child how confident they feel about walking on their own when they are old enough to judge speed and distance. If they want to do it, make sure they know the route well by practising it with them. For your own peace of mind you could follow them from a distance for the first couple of times.

Safety in numbers

Independent doesn't have to mean alone. Find out if there is a walking bus (the kids all wear bright coloured jackets and walk together to school with a few adults) at the school or talk to other parents about creating a system that works for everyone.

Park and Stride

Some journeys are simply too far to walk. If that is the case for you, try to 'park and stride'. Find somewhere to park away from the school and walk the rest of the way. You'll save the mad rush to find a parking space, ease congestion around the school and you'll fit in some exercise for you and your children.

Help your school increase walking levels

- Ask your Head Teacher if your school takes part in Walk to School Week or Month, or the WoW scheme. If they don't, present some easy ways of promoting Walk to School that are likely to have real benefits to the individual needs of your school. Offer to help.
- You need to find out if the school has a travel plan as your local authority will employ a School Travel Adviser. Their job is to help encourage sustainable transport among pupils and help the school develop a travel plan which will usually include walking. Ask them if they offer incentives to schools which support the campaign.
- Is your school part of the Healthy Schools Initiative? If so, find out who is leading the initiative within the school and contact them about Walk to School.
- Ask your School Governors to discuss how to promote walking at their next meeting.
- Talk to other parents to see if they would like to promote walking and start a support group to assist the school.

What we want from national and local government

Our roads must become safer places for children to walk. We want to see the following:

- Wider promotion of child pedestrian training, such as the *Kerbcraft* scheme.
- Wider use of 20mph zones around schools.
- Car-free zones around school gates.
- Streets that are designed with pedestrians in mind.
- Severe penalties for speeding in built-up areas.
- Stricter penalties for parking on pavements.



Case Studies

Lorraine Lodge, Norfolk

Lorraine was spurred into action after a six-year-old boy was hit by a car on the way to her daughter's school. After being told the county council could not start an official patrol, she and a friend raised 700 signatures and organised their own crossing patrol outside the school to try to ease the traffic. Her efforts paid off and double yellow lines were painted outside the school gates and an official lollipop lady was appointed.

Lorraine explains: "When I was at school in the 70s and 80s very few people drove to and from school. I always met up with friends and walked and this is what I encourage with my daughter Katie. Katie loves walking to and from school, it helps her let off steam after being in a classroom. She often makes comments such as: Why do people drive? It's quicker to walk.

"The difference today, however, is that I take her to and from school as drivers seem to have no regard for pedestrians. Nine times out of 10 they have children in the car with them. What is taught to children at an early age carries on through their lifetime so I am hoping Katie will also walk her children to school like we have done and will continue to do so."



Dale Norton, Kent

Dale started to campaign about the traffic outside his son's school after his son was nearly run over on the pavement. "My wife and I complained to just about everyone we could think of but to no avail," he says. "I was even told that chaos outside of schools is a good thing as it means that people slow down. Unfortunately, the 'chaos' mentioned is vehicles driving, parking and manoeuvring on pavements which is strictly a pedestrian area. That's the kind of chaos that every school should be without!"

After being advised by Living Streets who best to contact, he sent out a mass email and copied in the local media. In it, he said that little was being done to encourage walking to school and asked what they intended to do about it. A meeting at the school was swiftly scheduled for the following week where the relevant representatives discussed the improvements Dale was calling for. It's still early days, says Dale, but he's now confident that he's being taken seriously and the issue is high on the agenda. "I might have upset some people through pushing so hard but at the end of the day you're doing it for the kids and it's in every parent's interest."

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About the Walk to School Campaign

The Walk to School Campaign aims to encourage children across the UK to make the journey to and from school on foot. The Campaign is run by a national steering group made up of representatives from organisations in the fields of active and sustainable travel. This report was launched on 19 May 2008 as part of Walk to School Week 2008. It is a Walk to School Campaign publication.

About ACT TravelWise

ACT TravelWise is the UK's premier network for all organisations working to promote sustainable travel. It promotes a society in which people and organisations can meet their travel needs in ways that protect and enhance the environment, improve public health and support community well-being.

About Living Streets

Living Streets is a national charity that works to bring our streets to life, with more people walking in people-friendly public spaces.

There are a number of ways to get involved with the Campaign. To find out more:

Go to:

www.walktoschool.org.uk
www.livingstreets.org.uk

Give us a call:

020 7820 1010

Or write to us:

walktoschool@livingstreets.org.uk

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