

Overcoming Fear: Helping parents to understand the real risks in deciding how their children get to school (No. 109)

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Abstract:

A recent survey by Living Streets and Parentline Plus found that parents face significant barriers preventing them from allowing their children to walk to school. A combination of long working hours, a fear of strangers and the risk of abduction and dangerous traffic conditions mean that many families are driving to school and not seeing the benefits of increased physical activity, which helps children to concentrate in lessons and in the longer term can help prevent obesity. The two charities call on Government to ensure that policy interventions such as traffic calming measures and family-friendly working practices are implemented to give parents the confidence to choose to allow their child to walk to school.

Families have a tough job, trying to steer their children safely through an increasingly complex and changing world. All parents want to protect children from harm and therefore avoid situations that appear risky. This behaviour is certainly true about walking to school, which has been steadily declining for decades, and is now at an all time low. Less than half of primary school children now walk to school, with 43% travelling by car (ONS <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1576>, 2010)

Parents' choices on school travel seem to be heavily influenced by the perception that driving their children to school is 'safer'. We believe that parents are reacting to what they understandably see as immediate risks to the safety of their children. However, there is also a very real risk to children in the form of the health implications of the declining rates of physical activity.

This paper examines the reality behind parents' perceptions and shows clearly that the issues that parents worry about such as road deaths, abduction and murder remain extremely low risks and in some cases have declined in recent years. By choosing to remove their children from perceived risk as far as possible, by driving their children to school, parents unwittingly expose their children to real and increasingly urgent risks to their health and well-being.

We believe that parents should be helped to understand the reality of the risks and benefits to their children of walking to school and should be encouraged to play an active role in teaching road safety skills to their younger children in real life situations, such as the walk to school. This will give children the confidence and skills they need to find their way through the streets safely when the time comes for them to gain independence

Giving children the opportunity to walk to school not only reduces the risk of obesity but also helps them develop independence and teaches them important life-skills such as road safety and route-finding.

Biography of authors:

Tony Armstrong, Chief Executive

Before becoming Living Street's Chief Executive in 2008, Tony led the Cross Government Obesity Programme. He has held senior policy adviser roles in Government on neighbourhood regeneration. He was a founder member of the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and worked on a New Deal for Communities partnership in East Brighton.

Living Streets

Living Streets is the national charity that stands up for pedestrians. We work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk. We influence decision makers nationally and locally, run successful projects to encourage people to walk, and make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets.

Parentline Plus

Parentline Plus is the UK's leading parent and family support organisation. We encourage parents to see that asking for help is a sign of strength, and work with them to offer practical solutions and suggestions. We deliver this support through an innovative range of free, flexible, responsive services.

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The health benefits of walking to school

Recent evidence highlights the health benefits for children from walking regularly:

- 'Children who walk rather than use the car tend to be generally more active than other children, and children tend to be more active when they are out of their homes than when they are in them'...walking is one of the best forms of physical activity that children can do, and that for some children walking to and from school can consume more calories than the recommended quantity of physical activity and games lessons. Walking has the advantage that it requires no preparation, no special equipment or venues, and no expenditure of money. (Roger L. Mackett* and James Paskins The Contribution of Playing and Walking Children and Society Volume 22, 2008).'
- The Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) Annual Report for 2009 also drew attention to the importance of physical activity to our health: 'The potential benefits of physical activity to health are huge. If a medication existed which had a similar effect, it would be regarded as a 'wonder drug' or 'miracle cure' (Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2009):

The CMO goes on to highlight the issue: 'Levels of inactivity amongst children are startlingly high. Amongst 2–15 year olds, 68% of boys and 76% of girls do not meet the minimum recommendation of an hour of moderate physical activity per day. As a result, children are being exposed to health risks including obesity, weak bones and future heart disease (Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2009).'

Walking to school brings a number of wider benefits as well; these include:

- Reduced congestion at the school gates with improved local air quality and road safety
- Saving CO2: the 'school run' is responsible for generating around 2 million tonnes of CO2 per annum (Sutton Trust No More School Run Report, <http://www.suttontrust.com/news/news/national-school-bus-network/>, 2005).
- Recent Australian research found 'overwhelming evidence that when children walk or cycle to school, they are better off physically and, importantly, in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing' (VicHealth, ACER Walking Kids Report, http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ResourceCentre/MediaCentre/PartnerMediaReleases/090410_ACER_WalkingKids_Final.ashx, 2010)
- Teachers report that children who walk to school are frequently more alert, relaxed and ready to start the school day compared to those arriving by car (Department of Transport: Effect of travel modes on children's cognitive development , 2003)
- Walking to school can save the average family £400 per year in motoring costs (Living Streets: <http://www.walktoschool.org.uk/content/facts.php> 2009)

Of particular importance for this paper is the help parents can give to their children by walking with them to school in their early years in terms of learning important life skills such as road safety and route finding, that help them to gain independence at an earlier age than children who only travel to school by car .

The trend towards the school run

Many socio-economic factors, including rising car ownership, urban decentralisation and increasing participation of women in the workforce, have influenced the trend for more parents to drive their children to school, but there is also evidence that parents' fears about the safety of their children – particularly around walking to school independently, plays a significant role in persuading them to drive their children to school by car.

Our Survey

Living Streets and Parentline commissioned YouGov to survey parents' attitudes to certain risks. We asked parents to tell us which of the following they feared most for their children:

1. They are injured or killed in a road traffic accident
2. They are abducted or murdered
3. Poor health in later life due to your child's current levels of physical activity

The poll contacted 1244 parents of primary school aged children and found that whereas 60% of all answers highlighted either 'road accident' (30%) or 'abducted or murdered' (30%) (from a given list) as their greatest fear, only 5% of parents cited poor health later on in life due to current levels of physical activity. We also asked parents to tell us how much physical activity their children need to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The survey found that nearly half of parents (49%) underestimated how much physical activity their child needed. We examine the reality behind parents' fears in the sections below.

Road and traffic danger

On the face of it parents are quite right to be concerned about the dangers posed to their children by fast cars and busy roads. Indeed the UK's record on the number of children killed or seriously injured has been poor compared to other European countries (NAO: Improving road safety for pedestrians and cyclists in Great Britain.

http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/improving_road_safety_for_ped.aspx, 2009). However since the 1970s there has been a steady downward trend in the data:

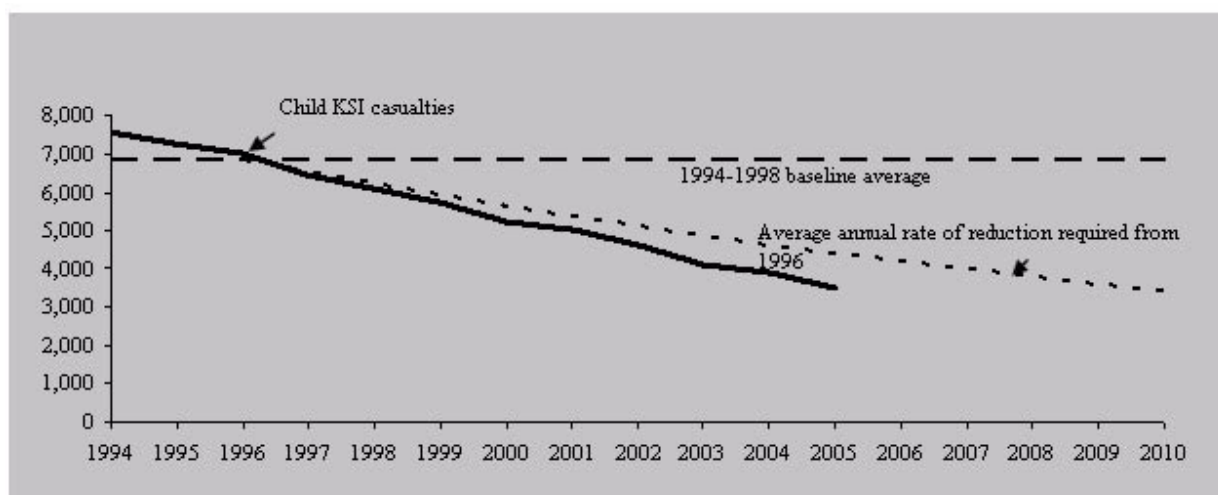


Figure 1 Killed or seriously injured child casualties: 1994 – 2005
Source: DfT Road Safety Strategy 2007

In 2007 the Department for Transport published its Road Safety Strategy aiming to half the number of children killed or seriously injured compared to a 1994-8 baseline. As figure 1 above shows this target has largely been met and this would suggest that the risk of children being involved in a serious accident is indeed reducing.

It is important to see these statistics in the context of the great reduction in the number of children using the streets independently, particularly travelling to and from school. In 1971, 80% of 7 and 8 year-olds travelled to school without an adult but by 2006 the figure had dropped to 12% of 7 to 10 year-olds. At the age of 11, almost every child used to walk to school alone; now it is down to 55% (Hillman, Adams, Whitelegg One False Move...A Study of Children's Independent Mobility, 2000)

So in one respect parents are correct to believe that, in the short term, their children are safer in their cars on the school run; in 2005 82% of children killed or seriously injured on the way to school were pedestrians and only 6% were car users. Importantly though when all child casualties for all journeys are considered, the risk between driving and walking are equalised as shown by figure 2:

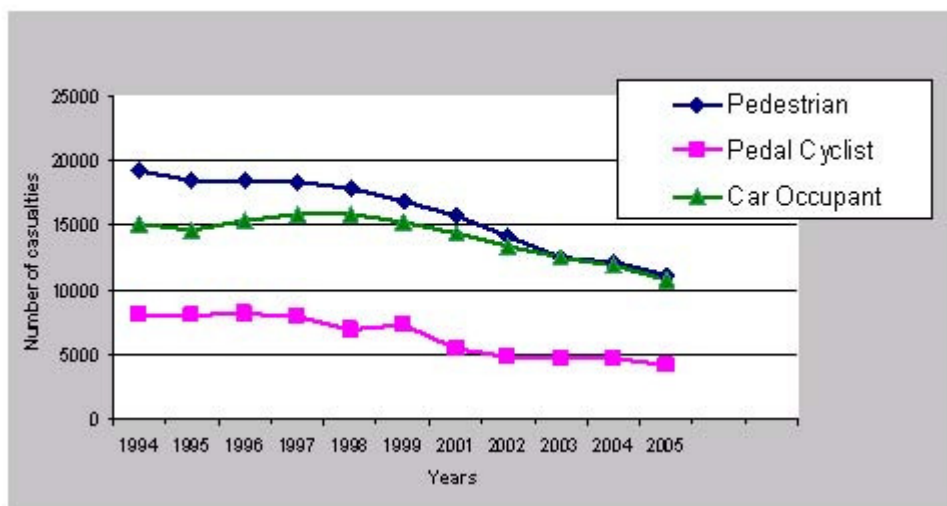


Figure 2 Child casualties by road user type: 1994-2005
Source: DfT Road Safety Strategy 2007

We can therefore say that children are no more likely to be injured as a pedestrian than as a passenger in a car.

The Dangerous Transition

When the statistics for children killed and seriously injured are analysed by age an important 'spike' is identifiable as shown by figure 3:

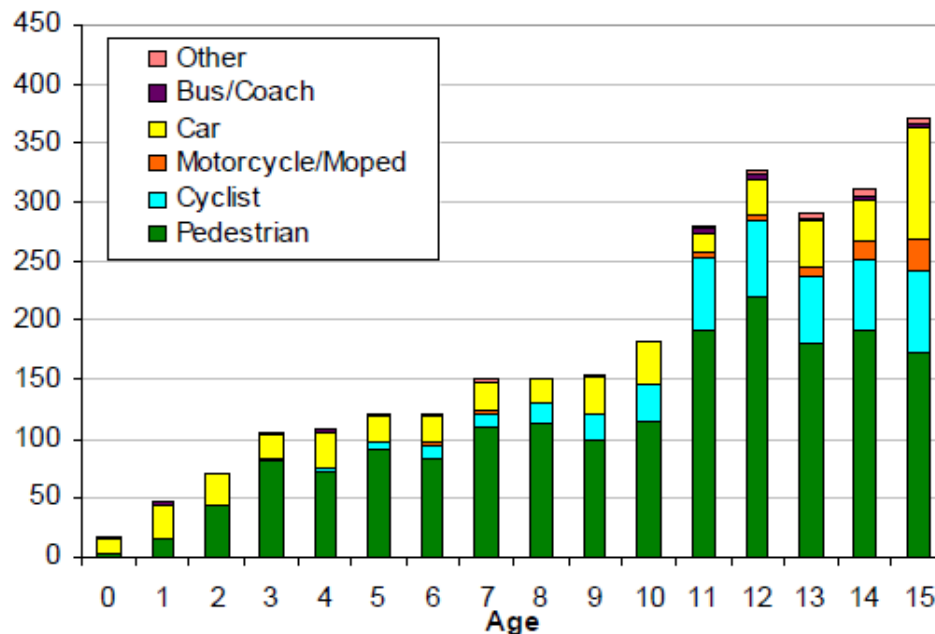


Figure 3 Children killed or seriously injured 2007 by age
Source DfT 2008

The number of children killed or seriously injured as pedestrians rises markedly around the ages of 11 and 12 as they move from primary to secondary school, before declining somewhat from 13 onwards. It is known that children's spatial awareness does not fully develop until they near adulthood making them more vulnerable on the roads.

We believe that this statistical 'spike' highlights the crucial role that parents can play in helping their children to learn road safety skills *before* they reach this dangerous transition. Whilst children's cognitive abilities develop at different rates, in most cases appropriate road safety skills can successfully be taught to children from early years upwards by driving their children, to school, parents miss opportunities to pass on vital road safety skills in a real life setting, as recommended by RosPA:

"The most effective way of learning about road safety has been found to be experiential, out on the road, in real situations – for example, practical child pedestrian training. Children need to be involved in their own learning process and be given opportunities to discover solutions and strategies for themselves rather than be told what to do or learn processes by rote (Rospa <http://www.rosipa.com/roadsafety/assemblies/introduction.pdf>, accessed March 2010)"

Managing the Transition

We believe that while parents are of course right to be concerned about road safety, the best approach is not to avoid the risk altogether by resorting to driving their children to school, when they could otherwise walk, but to help to equip their children with the key life skills they need from an early age. An ideal way to do this is to accompany children to school during early years, passing on route finding and road safety skills until parents are confident that their children can make the journey unaccompanied. We do not believe there is a set age by which children should be able to walk independently; rather we feel that parents should be helped to understand the learning process that their children need to complete in order to gain their independence safely.

We believe that parents can be reassured and supported through a number of policy initiatives including:

- Making 20mph the default speed limit wherever people live, work and play;
- Investing much more substantially in providing safe walking and cycling routes to school;
- Creating parking and drop off exclusion zones around schools in order to reduce traffic danger in the immediate school vicinity.

Attack or Abduction

Any case of abduction or murder of children provokes widespread despair and revulsion across the population and heightens the natural fears that parents feel for their children when they are away from the home and unsupervised. Such incidents also tend to attract extensive and prolonged media coverage, which in extreme cases generates a climate of fear among parents.

Most parents are aware that the risk to their children is low, but there is a lack of good quality information on the subject and this no doubt contributes to parents' difficulties in assessing the nature of the risk to their children. Work by the NSPCC highlights 'There is no single source of statistics for the number of children who are killed by another person in the UK.' However Home Office statistics that show that between 1998/9 and 2008/9 an average of 11 children were killed each year by strangers in England and Wales (Home Office: <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb0110.pdf>, 2010). This is about 12% of all homicides involving children of which there were about 75 per year over the same period. Children of school age also appear to be at less risk than any other population group 5-16 year olds facing a risk of about 3 offences per million of population, compared to 14 offences per million for the whole population (Home Office: <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb0110.pdf>, 2010).

It is a stark truth that children are much more likely to be killed by someone they know rather than a stranger. According to the Home Office in 2005/6: 'Of the victims who were under 16 years of age, 24 (44%) were killed by their parents and a further 13 (24%) knew the main suspect (Home Office Statistical Bulletin: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb0207.pdf>, 2007).

With regard to abduction, according to the Home Office: 'In 2002/03 there were 59 cases involving a stranger successfully abducting a child or children, resulting in 68 victims/offences (9% of all child abductions recorded). In all offences where information was available the abducted child was recovered within 24 hours of being taken. (Home Office: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r225.pdf>, 2003)' In the same year there were 361 cases involving a stranger attempting to abduct a child or children, resulting in 377 victims/ offences

The hidden risk

By not encouraging children to walk to school where possible, families may be missing an opportunity to increase the amount of physical exercise that their children take and in turn reducing the likelihood of that child becoming overweight or obese. There is a very real and increasingly apparent risk to children's long-term health posed by obesity, which is partly caused by insufficient levels of physical activity. The government's National Child Measurement Programme showed that in 2008/9 almost a third of children in year 6 were either overweight or obese. These children are at increased risk of suffering type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart and liver disease in later life. Obese people typically die younger and experience reduced quality of life (NHS, <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/ncmp>, 2009).

Putting Risks into context

The evidence set out in this paper suggests that in making decisions about risks in letting their children walk to school parents should be aware that:

- 1) Based on 2005 figures their children face a risk of about one in three thousand of being killed or seriously injured in all circumstances as a pedestrian or cyclist. Clearly this is a comparatively low risk, but nonetheless one that parents should not ignore. Taking an active part in passing on road safety skills is the best response to this risk.
- 2) Based on the average number of children killed by strangers between 2001-6, their children face a risk of about one in a million of being killed by a stranger (Home Office: <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb0110.pdf>, 2010). This is an extremely low risk and whilst it is understandable that parents should be concerned about this issue an appropriate response would be to ensure children are given confidence, skills and tips which will help to keep them safe, rather than deny them the benefits of independence.
- 3) Based on the National Child Measurement Programme in England for 2008/9 children face a one in three risk of suffering all of the adverse health and quality of life impacts from being overweight or obese (NHS, <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/ncmp>, 2009). Walking to school could help to raise a child's activity levels to meet the recommended 60 minutes per day and help them to maintain a healthy weight.

Conclusion and recommendations

Parents' natural instinct towards their children is to protect them by shielding them from risk. However in the context of walking to school, we believe that this can lead them to misunderstand certain risks (attack and abduction) and, by failing to help children to manage traffic risks at an early stage, exposing them to greater risk as they approach their teenage years. Conversely, the risk that children face from being overweight or obese is not being sufficiently averted, with high levels of obesity and low levels of physical activity in children.

Parents need help to understand these relative risks in order to develop a balanced view so that they can draw an informed conclusion about whether to let their child walk to school. For many parents a deeper understanding of the comparative risks may mean that they are inclined to encourage and support their child to walk to school at an early stage.

We believe that the best possible approach that parents can take is to invest their time in walking with their children to school during their early years at primary school, gradually passing on the key road safety skills and awareness of "stranger danger" that will protect them when they reach an age at which they can be given independence.

We recognise that there are many other barriers that prevent more families from walking to school; many parents have time constraints, live or work too far away or have mobility issues of their own. Parents may have children at different schools or in different areas and parents of children with disabilities such as autism and ADHD may face particular challenges preventing them from allowing their child to walk to school. Local initiatives such as Park and Stride and Walking Bus schemes can be useful, though many parents find informal arrangements with friends, neighbours and older children that are simple to arrange. There is also much more that Government needs to do to create a more supportive environment for parents, in which they can feel that allowing their children to walk to school independently is the safe and natural thing to do. Some of the key policies needed are:

- National governments to introduce guidance to promote car free zones around schools; local government to introduce car free zones around schools; schools to promote car free culture;
- Areas with high childhood obesity levels should integrate walking to school as a central part of their health improvement strategies, linking to initiatives such as the National Child Measurement Programme and Child Health Systems Programme
- Adequately invest in effective walk to school promotion schemes, recognising that walking is the easiest way of getting children active
- 20 mph to become the default speed limit wherever people live, work and play;
- Support and advice to parents to equip their children with appropriate road safety skills well before the transition to secondary school;
- Local Authorities to ensure safe, walkable routes to schools that encourage active travel.
- Stronger laws and enforcement against pavement parking

Parents, schools, local authorities and children themselves all play an important role in creating an environment where children want to, are encouraged to and are prepared to walk to school. If families recognise our streets as a safe place to be, they will feel confident in giving their children the skills to walk to school independently earlier. There is however a crucial role for central government and local authorities in ensuring that our streets are fit for purpose and encourage walking. Too many of our streets and public spaces are poorly designed, cluttered and inaccessible with inadequate speed limits – designing our streets from the perspective of people should be a priority for all local authorities. The introduction of 20 mph speed limits where we live, work and play, ensuring that streets are well maintained, clean and green, that crossings are sufficient and fit for purpose and streets are designed with people in mind are all vital factors in creating an environment where people want to walk.

Further Information

The national Walk to School campaign encourages primary school pupils, parents and staff to incorporate regular physical activity into their daily lives by walking to and from school wherever possible. Visit www.walktoschool.org.uk for more information.

Living Streets' Walk to School campaign is supported by the Department for Transport, Transport for London, ACTravelwise and Modeshift, and delivered in partnership with local organisers throughout England.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 8959 adults of which 1244 are parents who have a child in primary school education. Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th to 13th May 2010. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).