



Breaking down the barriers

The Olympian hurdles faced by children in walking to school

A report to mark the launch of National Walking Month
May 2011

LIVING STREETS
PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

To mark the start of National Walking Month 2011, national charity Living Streets has surveyed over two thousand children and young people between the ages of seven and 14 from across the United Kingdom to find out first hand how they view walking to school. The survey has shown in stark detail the barriers that children and young people face, which prevent them from walking to school:

- **Over a third (36%) are scared about walking to school because of speeding traffic.**
- **One in five children and young people are concerned about the lack of safe crossing points on their journey to school.**
- **Many children report being scared of walking to school alone, with nearly one in five secondary school pupils worried about being bullied on the walk to school and 39% scared by the risk of stranger danger.**
- **One in five primary school pupils don't walk to school because their parents don't have time to walk with them.**
- **62% of primary school children claim to be unable to walk to school as it is too far away, yet government figures show that the majority of families live within a 20 minute walk of the school gates.**
- **52% of primary school aged respondents are not allowed to walk to school without an adult walking with them. This drops to only 14% of secondary school pupils.**

In this short report we have explored these findings further and included existing research and data to take a comprehensive look at how our children and young people have lost the walking habit. We look at how our streets have shifted from vibrant social spaces which encourage walking, to car dominated places that push people out.

With this research Living Streets hopes to highlight the barriers that stand in the way of children walking to school. We hope to encourage parents and families to consider the ways in which they can include more walking in their daily lives to improve health, wellbeing and bringing back that sense of community. The final section of the report sets out positive steps for action.



Getting out of the walking habit - the dominance of traffic and perceptions of distance

The shift away from walking to our local shops, services and schools did not happen overnight. It has been a gradual process, accelerated by a huge increase in car ownership and planning decisions balanced in favour of vehicle traffic and placing community facilities outside of walking range.

We have seen a huge increase in the number of motor cars on our streets, from 1.5 million in 1934 to over 30 million today.¹

In a Living Streets survey in 2009, we found that 92% of pensioners we talked to walked to primary school when they were children. Of those aged between 30 and 40, 86% walked to school². Today, only 50% of primary school pupils and 38% of secondary school pupils currently walk to school with the number of children travelling to school by car doubling in the last 20 years³.

Driving children to school is often seen to be the most convenient choice for parents with busy lives. Many parents take the view that by driving their children to school they are keeping them safe. Yet the combination of each individual decision means a contribution to the increase in vehicle traffic - particularly at the school gates - with the associated problems of congestion and pollution this causes. And by acting on the perception that our children are safer in the car, we risk wrapping children in cotton wool and causing them greater harm later in life.



Our survey - backed up by our conversations with children through the Living Streets Walk to School campaign - shows one of the major factors contributing to less habitual walking is perception of safety. **The survey showed that a high proportion of 36% of children are afraid of speeding cars on the walk to school, and one in five felt there were not enough safe crossing points on their journey.**

We have had a few near misses with cars driving too fast and even one car not stopping at the traffic lights, which is enough to put anyone off really. Mel, Suffolk

1 Department for Transport 2010

2 No Ball Games, Living Streets, 2009

3 National Travel Survey, Department for Transport, 2009

While the number of pedestrian deaths in the UK has been steadily declining, the UK level of child pedestrian deaths is still high compared to its European neighbours. According to the Audit Commission in 2007, casualty rates, especially for child pedestrians, are among the worst in Europe. The UK rates 11th for child pedestrian deaths among 19 EU countries, and a child pedestrian is three times more likely to die in the UK than in Italy and twice as likely than in France⁴. In 2009, the House of Commons Transport Select Committee pointed to the “scandal of complacency” in accepting such high rates of death and injury on our streets⁵.

Many children now miss out on the opportunity to develop vital road safety skills with their parents on the walk to school. They fail to build up their confidence and ability to manage risks in walking in their local neighbourhood.

62% of primary school children surveyed said the main reason they did not walk was because it was too far. While the survey did not pick up the actual distance from their school for each respondent, we know that the majority of primary schools are within a 20 minute walk (about a mile) from most pupils’ home - an easily walkable distance⁶. The contrast between the number of children who want to walk to school and the amount who believe it is too far despite the relative short distance, could imply a distorted perception of distance.

“My two year old walks long distances and amazes me when some children who live closer complain about walking to school because they get “tired”.”

Gisela, London

For secondary students, there is a more complicated picture as average distances travelled are longer for this age group, reflecting the fact that there are fewer larger secondary schools. The difference in distance travelled between primary and secondary schools is clearly shown through the survey. **59% of primary school pupils are willing to walk up to 20 minutes on their journey to school, yet only 37% of secondary school pupils are willing to do the same.**

The greater choices parents have in selecting their children’s school has brought negative consequences as more children need to travel further each day. This is undoubtedly a factor - particularly for secondary age pupils - in reductions in walking levels. But changing perceptions of what is an acceptable distance to travel could also play a part. Through our work we often hear from today’s parents and grandparents who say they used to walk for much longer than 20 minutes on their way to and from school. Have we instilled in our children a feeling that walking for longer than 20 minutes is now too much to ask? Are busy lifestyles now restricting the time we set aside for walking, even though widespread traffic congestion means often walking is the quicker and more reliable way of travelling?

Safety in numbers - our streets as social spaces

The social use of our streets has deteriorated over recent years through a shift in society’s perceptions of danger and the steady increase in the priority given to motor traffic over the needs of people on foot.

A decline in the number of people walking in an area can contribute to negative perceptions about the safety of a neighbourhood and decrease engagement within the local community. There is a vicious circle of fewer people walking leading to increased fear and therefore a further decline in people walking. Conversely, a virtuous circle exists where vibrant well used streets can give people more confidence in making walking their natural choice for journeys.

4 ‘Changing Lanes’ The Audit Commission, 2007

5 House of Commons Transport Committee, Ending the Scandal of Complacency: Road Safety beyond 2010

6 Transport Trends, Department for Transport, 2009

Our research has shown a big concern from children for 'stranger danger,' with 39% suggesting this is their main fear when considering walking to school. Girls especially appear to feel threatened on the walk to school, with over a third of girls concerned about walking in the dark, and 46% citing stranger danger as a concern on the walk to school. By contrast, 39% of boys surveyed said there was nothing that scared them about walking to school.

This contrasts with the low risk of possible abduction and related dangers for children for several decades. Such fears from children surveyed could demonstrate a willingness to take on fears from their parents, a reaction to widespread media coverage of the rare abduction cases in the population, and a lack of familiarity with the people in the local area and confidence in navigating the community at large.

In the Living Streets report 'Backseat Children' in 2008⁷, we discovered that children who walked to school were more engaged with their local communities than those who did not. By asking children about their journey to school and asking them to draw maps and pictures, our researchers found that children who walked to school could show demonstrable social bonds they had formed while on their daily walks, whereas children driven in cars would often describe the objects they saw on the way, and could only reference people by their jobs, i.e. 'the lollipop lady.'

Walking regularly and being taught good road safety from an early age could help to reduce fears of stranger danger and of unruly traffic by allowing children to get in touch with the physical landscape of their local communities.

Expanding waistlines

As we gradually shift to more sedentary lifestyles, there are obvious increased health risks for all members of the family. In our view, it is everyday activity – walking to school, leaving the car at home when nipping to the shops – that holds the key to getting sedentary people more active and helping to reduce the risk of obesity. Gym membership and organised sports are excellent for those with the access and the motivation, but simply aren't realistic as a first step to active lives for the great majority of people.

The NHS estimates that only 39% of men and 29% of women currently get enough exercise⁸, and half of parents surveyed in a YouGov poll commissioned by Living Streets in 2010⁹ underestimated how much physical activity their child needed to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The Government recommends that children should have 60 minutes of physical activity every day, but in fact 68% of boys and 76% of girls are not currently meeting this recommendation¹⁰.

The Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) Annual Report for 2009 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'¹¹.

Walking can improve overall fitness dramatically in children and adults. It is a cheap, low impact way to exercise and according to the Department of Health, just half an hour of brisk walking can burn up to 150 calories¹². Diet has a big part to play, of course, as do other forms of activity and sport. But tackling our sedentary culture and getting activity built into our daily lives has the potential to make a big impact in the fight against obesity.

7 Backseat Children, Living Streets, 2008

8 Health Survey for England, NHS, 2008

9 Is it safe to let our children walk to school? Living Streets 2010

10 Health Survey for England, NHS, 2008

11 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2009

12 Department of Health, 2004

“At first I found it just as quick to walk as I did to get all three children in the car, get to school, get the pram out etc. I then decided it would become part of my weight loss/exercise. Walking to school helped me lose four stone in eight months.”

Adele, South Yorkshire

And the journey to school is important in building activity into children’s everyday routines as well as starting healthy habits early. 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 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.¹³

“I get to walk two miles a day which I wouldn’t otherwise have an opportunity to do, and this has kept me fit at times when I haven’t been able to do any other exercise.”

Caroline, Hampshire

And it’s not just the health benefits of walking to school which should be noted. In a Department of Transport survey, nine out of ten teachers considered that the walk to school makes children brighter, more alert and ready for the first class of the day.¹⁴

The benefits of the walk to school are clear for both a child’s health and wellbeing. Our local environment can also be improved with fewer carbon emissions and less local congestion. As we can see from the results of our survey of children, the barriers they face in building activity into their lives are preventing them from seeing these benefits. There are multiple factors that can affect how an environment may encourage or discourage walking – from speeding traffic, to unsafe crossing points, to bad lighting and fear of bullying, making some streets no go areas for children.



13 The Contribution of Playing and Walking Children and Society Volume 22, 2008
14 Department of Transport, 2001

Breaking down the barriers - steps for action

The case for safe, attractive and enjoyable streets has never been greater: but concerted action is needed. In the past we have surveyed the views of parents about the school run, and our new survey of children themselves show that there are clear barriers that need to be tackled to bring our streets to life and make walking to school once more the natural choice for families.

The choices the young people interviewed in this study make now will shape their behaviour for life.

We need to turn around perceptions so that walking is a choice young people want to make for themselves if we want to ensure happier, healthier families and communities in the future.

Parents clearly have a responsibility to encourage activity to their own children; schools should encourage a shift towards walking in their student body; and local authorities and communities have a responsibility to make sure streets are safe and pleasant to walk in. A coordinated approach is needed to bring down the barriers that prevent people from walking more.

Living Streets wants to see a dramatic increase in the number of walking trips under 2km. Our vision is that every child who can walk to school does so. We have run the national Walk to School campaign since 1995 and have a variety of projects and events which get more children and young people walking. We have also identified a number of steps to break down the barriers which this survey has identified.

Making walking the natural choice – getting back in the habit

Promoting and celebrating walking is an important part of getting back in the habit and we coordinate activities throughout the year and during Walk to School Week in May and Walk to School Month in October every year. Local councils and schools can take part in a range of Living Streets projects which are outlined on the back cover of this report.

Government at national and local level must continue to maintain funding for school travel planning and staff and local councils must recognise the cross cutting benefits of prioritising action on sustainable travel to school.

To stop ever-increasing average distances to school, schools admissions authorities should adopt distance between home and school as the primary tie-breaker criterion for oversubscribed schools. Admissions authorities must ensure that the methodology for calculating distance between home and school takes account of all suitable walking routes including footpaths (whether or not these are adopted by the local authority).

Government at national and local level should promote more walking-friendly neighbourhoods to get everyone back in the walking habit. Not being able to walk for everyday journeys, such as to school, can lead to isolation, lack of physical exercise and neighbourhood decline. We want to see:

- reforms to the UK's planning system take into account the importance of walking-friendly neighbourhoods to individuals and communities
- national planning policy which ensures that new housing is located within reasonable walking distance of essential shops and services such as schools
- communities given a voice in what shops and services they have in their area.

Addressing safety concerns

Existing 20 mph zones around schools need to be extended so that 20 mph becomes the default speed limit wherever people live, work and play.

Local authorities should implement car free zones around the school gates preventing parents from parking, dropping their children off or waiting in their cars. This would limit the amount of congestion and pollution around schools, and make it safer for children who won't have to dash in between moving cars to get to their classrooms.

Local authorities should support 'park and striding', where parents drive their children some of the way to school, park and walk the rest of the way. This reduces congestion around the school entrance, making it safer for children to enter their school.

Local authorities should improve the quality of our streets in general, by ensuring safe crossing points on the journeys to school, removing unnecessary street clutter, preventing pavement parking, improving maintenance of streets and good quality lighting.

Local authorities should be given a statutory duty to ensure safer routes to schools are provided for all schools.

And what can individuals do?

Give walking a go this National Walking Month: take part in our annual Walk to Work Week (9-13 May) and also take part in our annual Walk to School Week (16-20 May). We think you'll be surprised about how simple it is to build walking into your daily routine, and you'll feel great.

If you live a long way from your child's school, then why not work with other parents or the school to **set up a "park and stride" scheme**? This works by agreeing a dropping off/parking point a walkable distance from the school and parents can walk with their children or arrange to meet other families there. Schools can make agreements with local businesses (e.g. cinemas, pubs, shops) to allow parents to use their parking.

If you want to take part in the WoW (Walk Once a Week) scheme as a family, but your child's school doesn't participate in the scheme, we now have special parents' packs available to allow you to **take part in at home**. See www.walktoschool.org.uk for more details.

If you're concerned about traffic safety on the journey to school, why not work with other parents or your school to ask the local council to improve safety by installing safe crossings and introducing 20 mph speed limits. If you've got a bit of free time, you can **start a local campaign** and join or set up a Living Streets Local Group. See www.livingstreets.org.uk/take-action for more details.



About Living Streets

Living Streets is the national charity that stands up for pedestrians. With our supporters we work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk.

We have been the national voice for pedestrians throughout our 80 year history. In the early years, our campaigning led to the introduction of the driving test, pedestrian crossings and 30 mph speed limits. Since then our ambition has grown. Today we influence decision makers nationally and locally, run successful projects to encourage people to walk, and provide specialist consultancy services to help reduce congestion and carbon emissions, improve public health, and make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets and public spaces.

Living Streets' Walk to School campaign was established in 1995 and is funded by grants from government bodies, income from sales of resources and donations/partnerships with commercial sponsors. We encourage parents, pupils and teachers to make the journey to and from school on foot. The campaign has the support of the majority of local authorities in England, reaching 1.6 million children and their parents and carers every year. The campaign brings together a number of projects, events and activities, including:

Walk to School Week / Walk to School Month

Every May and October thousands of schools take part in our annual walk to school events to promote the benefits of walking and helping parents and children give walking a go. Resources to promote the campaign in schools can be bought from Living Streets and every year free resources (for example lesson plans for teachers on walking to school) are available for download from our website.

WoW (Walk Once a Week)

The WoW scheme is our popular incentive scheme which increases walking levels in primary schools. WoW rewards children who walk to school at least once a week with collectable monthly pin badges, which have a special theme every year. The badges are designed by children through an annual art competition. For the school year 2011-12 we received 1600 competition entries on the theme of sport in the run up to the Olympics in 2012. An independent evaluation has shown that the walking rate in WoW schools is 10% higher than the national average, proving the scheme works and is great value for money.

Free Your Feet

This scheme for secondary schools is a national whole school walking challenge which lasts for one week in the school calendar. Schools which took part last year saw walking levels increase by up to 15%, proving how effective the scheme is.

Campaign in a Box

Our citizenship scheme for secondary schools which provides everything needed to work with students to give them the tools to campaign for better walking conditions around the school gates and to find solutions to the barriers their fellow pupils face in raising walking levels.

Outreach in schools

Our strand of intensive activity which concentrates on working directly with schools and parents in a local authority area to promote walking and break down the barriers to walking.

Supporting local authorities

We provide a variety of service to local councils to Improving walkability around schools and help with sustainable travel planning. Commissioned services include auditing safe routes to school and developing travel plans.

www.livingstreets.org.uk

email: info@livingstreets.org.uk

tel: 020 7377 4900

Living Streets (The Pedestrians Association) is a Registered Charity No. 1108448 (England and Wales) and SC039808 (Scotland), Company Limited by Guarantee (England & Wales), Company Registration No. 5368409.

Registered office 4th Floor, Universal House, 88-94 Wentworth Street. E1 7SA

