



CYCLING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This briefing identifies significant potential for increased levels of cycling amongst young people and emphasises the many benefits of encouraging this. In particular, it focuses on the importance of cycling to school and outlines possible methods through which cycling to school can be promoted, providing case-studies of successful European school-focused schemes.

Young people are increasingly leading sedentary lives, with physical activity playing little or no role in their everyday routine. Childhood obesity is of significant concern in many areas, and increasing in others. Approximately 17.6 million children under five worldwide are estimated to be overweight (WHO, 2003). "Parental concerns over safety mean that many youngsters are restricted from exploring their surroundings on foot or by bike, and instead spend increasing amounts of their leisure time watching TV or playing on the computer" (Cavill and Davis, 2003). Young people's mobility is becoming more car-based, with fewer cycling and walking, especially to school.

- UK data shows that in 1998/2000, 36% of 5-10 year olds were driven to school, in comparison to 22% in 1985/1986 (Cavill and Davis, 2003).
- In the UK (1998), just 1% of journeys to school were made by bike. In the Netherlands (1995) this figure is 52%; in Denmark, 50% (cited in Osborne, 2000).
- 20% of journeys in rush hour periods in towns are school journeys (EC, 1999).
- In many European countries, car use on the school journey has been increasing for the following reasons:
 1. "Increased car ownership (including more cars per household) leading to increased car use;
 2. An increased number of families in which both parents work, and an increase in the number of working single mothers, means that children are brought to school by a parent on the way to his or her work;
 3. Greater distances to schools;
 4. The ease and comfort offered by the car for transporting both children and goods;
 5. The low status of the bike, compared to that of the car;
 6. Ever-increasing car traffic meaning less safe roads to school" (Zomervrucht *et al.*).
- Car use in general has been increasing due to:
 1. An ever increasing ethos of 'the need for the car', encouraged by car manufacturers;
 2. The design of infrastructure specifically for automobile mobility;
 3. The influence of advertising enforcing the ideology of the car.



- As children are increasingly transported by car, traffic danger increases, conditions for cycling or walking (e.g. to school) are made increasingly unpleasant and fewer children walk or cycle to school. This serves again to discourage cycling and leads to greater car use which provokes parents into further thinking that roads are too dangerous. Hence a vicious circle is created (Osborne, 2000).
- There has been a decline in independent child mobility during the last three decades and although the figures vary, the trend is the same in many European countries (ECF, 1999).
- There are many benefits in encouraging cycling by young people:
 1. Encouraging cycling to school can reduce traffic on the roads and provide opportunities to improve quality of life (Zomervrucht *et al.*).
 2. Parents do not have to spend time escorting their children to school.
 3. Research has shown that independent mobility and being able to be outdoors without supervision is essential for children's personal and social development. (Zomervrucht *et al.*).
 4. A Swiss study has shown that independent mobility helps makes children more active and self-confident, and helps them learn vital road sense (ECF, 1999)
 5. Regular cycling increases activity levels of children. The World Health Organisation recommends young people aim to be active for over an hour per day (Cavill and Davis, 2003). 40% of young males and 60% of young females (14-18 years) are not active for the recommended hour a day (Cavill and Davis, 2003). Children who do not exercise regularly risk becoming overweight or even obese (Zomervrucht *et al.*). Cycling is a good way of encouraging children to do regular exercise. Evidence has shown that taking part in physical activities is a habit formed mainly at school. Hence the importance of encouraging cycling to school, in this context, cannot be underestimated (European Commission, 1999).
 6. Patterns and habits of adult life are often formed during childhood (Cleary, 2001). Research suggests that when children are encouraged to cycle from a young age, they often continue to cycle as adults (Osborne, 2000; Cleary 2001). Encouraging cycling in youngsters provides an opportunity to modify travel behaviour and alter the travel habits of the next generation (Sustrans, 2001).
- There is huge potential for increased levels of cycling to school. 50% of schoolchildren state that their favourite way of getting to school would be by bicycle (EC, 1999). Similarly, the UK Internet-based project 'Young TransNet' has quantified a significant latent demand for cycling by school children, showing that although only 3% currently cycle to school, a third of all children surveyed would prefer to travel by bicycle.
- Furthermore, distances between homes and schools are generally less than 3 km, making cycling a feasible option (EC, 1999).



- Schools should be targeted accordingly with cycle routes, facilities and education. This includes the provision of safe and secure cycle parking and storage facilities, dedicated cycle routes/friendly infrastructure and supporting safety measures such as traffic calming schemes (Cleary, 2002).
- For cycling to become an accepted activity among young people there is a need to allay the fears of parents through the provision of safe routes to schools and other facilities. Cycling must also become the customary way for young people to travel, i.e. accepted by youngsters and their peers, and negative attitudes on all sides must be tackled.
- Cycle training and education schemes can help improve the safety of children, as they gain knowledge and experience of how to deal with road conditions. Relevant issues to cycling can be raised through the school curriculum. Police talks on theft prevention can also encourage awareness.
- Cycle-to-school schemes can be successful. In the UK, where the average rate of bicycle use is very low (2% of all journeys), an secondary school in Ipswich has achieved a cycling rate to school of 61%, providing a network of cycle tracks and routes, linking the school to its catchment area (EC, 1999).
- 'Safe Routes to School' projects across Europe have incorporated a number of varying measures, with success:
 - In *Munich, Germany* the 'Sustainable Mobility for kids' (MOBIKIDS) project aimed at reducing travel to school by car, introducing measures such as drop-off areas for children in dedicated zones, 'walking buses' and 'cycle trains' (adult-guided timetabled travel to school).
 - In *Flanders, Belgium*, bicycle pooling, in which children cycle to school in small groups under adult guidance, has been introduced.
 - In *Graz, Austria*, a number of initiatives based on child mobility were introduced, e.g. mobility diaries and 'collecting' kilometre schemes. In the three year trial period, the number of pupils driven to school fell from 74% to 46%.
 - In *Odense, Denmark*, numerous changes were made to the traffic environment so as to improve it for children in the 'Safe Routes to School' project. The project was one of several features which within twenty years changed Denmark's child casualty rate from the worst to among the best in western Europe (CTC, 1995). Measures included slow-speed areas, road narrowings, traffic islands and combined foot and cycle paths. This resulted in an 82% reduction in accidents. Furthermore, 21% of the children now travel by car to school, 14% by bus and the remainder walk or cycle (Sustrans, 2001).

Other Relevant Briefings:

- Education and Training
- Cycling and Promotion



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