

Chapter 5—Safety Training

Purpose

The Safe Routes to Schools program is **committed to preparing children to be safety smart when walking or bicycling to school**. Since our goal is to prompt many children who were not already regular walkers or cyclists to start walking and bicycling, it is especially important to ensure that they understand traffic dangers and basic rules of the road.

It takes practice before safety is second nature to a child. If a child generally has been driven to school, he/she probably hasn't gotten enough experience yet to know how to walk safely and responsibly. It's even less likely that children will have sufficient experience learning bicycle safety skills.

This chapter presents a safety-training program that can be done in cooperation with schools by teachers and Safe Routes to Schools volunteers. It is not intended to replace parental guidance but to support it. Indeed, the success of the program depends on parents continuing to reinforce these messages whenever they are out with their children.

Grade Levels

WalkBoston's Safe Routes program offers safety training to elementary school students in grades 1, 2 or 3, as determined in consultation with the school Principal. The level of challenge must be appropriate to age level, and we find a marked increase in traffic awareness and confidence sometime around 2nd or 3rd grade.

Likewise, bicycle safety training should be provided at an appropriate age to children as determined by parents and school officials considering local cycling conditions. Grades 4, 5 and 6 are WalkBoston's target group.

These walking safety lessons are based on materials graciously shared by two programs in England: "Footsteps" in Oxfordshire and "Walk and Talk" in Hertfordshire.

Walking Safety Training

Method

This practical, roadside safety training is designed to raise awareness of traffic and then get children to think through their actions. We recommend one adult trainer for every two children. After at least a brief introduction to safety topics indoors, trainers take students out of the school and practice crossing safely on local streets. Rather than lecturing students, we suggest asking students leading questions that help them discover the right — and safe — answers themselves.

- Where are the safe places to cross the street?
- Is it safe to cross between parked cars? Why not?
- What other things might make it difficult to see the street?
- Where should you go if you cannot see the road clearly?

Questions like these lead children to observe and think about traffic in a way that they do not when relying on parents to make decisions for them. (*See sample Trainers' Questions on opposite page.*)

The general skills to be covered include:

- picking safe places to cross;
- planning to cross, including stopping, looking, and listening; and
- crossing safely.

First a trainer must be satisfied that the children can pick safe places to cross, and that they understand the importance of being able to see the road in both directions (and be seen). Actually practicing crossing is the all-important next step. Here is one approach to use. The trainer says:

"I want you to get ready to cross the street as if you were doing it by yourself. When you decide it is safe to cross, say 'Now'. If I agree, I will say 'Yes' and we'll walk across together. If it is not safe, I will say 'No' and we'll stay here and talk about it."

This technique exercises the children's observation and judgment skills in a safe context.

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Trainers' Questions – Day 1

1. Safe Places

Ask children to identify road, curb, sidewalk, driveways, crosswalks.

Ask children where it is safe to walk and where it is safe to cross.

Discuss where pedestrians and cars share use. [Driveways; Crosswalks]

Is it smart to cross the street between parked cars? [No. Kids cannot see street well. And the parked cars could move.]

2. Stop

Do children understand the need to stop before crossing?

Why should they stop? [To check if it's safe to cross]

Where should they stop and wait? [Behind curb, or off the side of the road if there is no curb.] Look at examples.

When walking through a parking lot, ask where cars may be coming from. [Every direction including backing up!]

3. Look

Ask children to point to where traffic may come from at various locations. Include a location near an intersection where there may be traffic coming from several directions.

Do they need to look into driveways?

Ask how they can be sure a driver sees them? [Eye contact. Driver waves.]

Talk about "Look Left; Look Right; Look Left Again."

Ask how to make sure that all cars from both directions stop for them.

4. Listen

Identify vehicle types by sound only.

Identify direction of vehicles by sound.

Do the children sometimes hear a vehicle before they can see it? Why?

Have them close their eyes and point when they hear a vehicle approaching.

Do all vehicles sound the same? Car horns and bicycle bells?

5. Planning to Cross

Why walk straight across? [Walking on diagonal your back is to some traffic.]

Tell them to say "Now" when they think it is safe to cross.

Should they run across? Discuss why not.

Repeat "Stop | Look | Listen" before actually crossing.

6. Fast/Slow

Can they tell if a vehicle is going fast or slow?

Ask them to say if they would have time to cross the road safely when a vehicle is approaching.



Who Will Teach Children?

Trainers can be recruited from among parents and school staff. Crossing guards may be interested in participating. Student safety patrol or middle school mentors may also assist.

The participation of local police should be viewed as essential to any safety training associated with children. They can help pre-train the trainers, ensure traffic control during student training, and they may even want to participate in training with the kids.

Every training session with children should be supervised by experienced Safe Routes to Schools staff and police.

Safety Precautions

During training with elementary school children, it is a good idea for both children and adults to wear reflective safety vests for maximum visibility to traffic.

Depending on traffic conditions, organizers may want to place warning signs mid-street to alert drivers that training is in progress — although drivers may modify their behavior from the norm.

Before going out of the school for road-side practice all the students should be given ground rules:

- Obey the trainer.
- No disruptive behavior.
- No running off.

Likewise, the trainers must have permission to immediately return to school with any students who endanger themselves or others. Individual groups of children and trainers should spread out enough so they do not distract one another.

It is probably a good idea for a few of the training supervisors to have walkie-talkies or cell phones.

That being said, we can happily report that we had no risky student behavior during walking safety training at any of our four participating schools, even after multiple training sessions, and even with the few kids who were disinterested. On the whole students were amazingly well behaved.

Assessment

It is useful for trainers to record notes on each child's progress. Subsequent training sessions can address issues identified in prior trainings. Reports to parents can praise particular skills—or highlight weaknesses.

A sample assessment sheet is included in the "Forms" section.

Fitting Walking Safety into School Day

Physical Education classes may be a good time to schedule safety training. Often Phys Ed teachers support and participate in Safe Routes to Schools programs in order to encourage kids to be physically active.

Alternatively, training can be offered as part of the health curriculum, in after-school programs, or in weekend workshops.

How Much and How Often?

Twenty minutes is about the right amount of time for each roadside training session. Preceded by an introduction, and followed by a brief discussion of what the class has learned, safety training can be made to fit a typical class schedule as needed. An effective walking safety program would include a total of four training sessions — of increasing challenge — for each student, perhaps two in the autumn and two in the spring.

Reminder to Parents

Parents should not assume that because a child participates in SRS safety training that he or she is then capable of walking alone. A responsible adult (or older sibling) should always accompany younger children **until the parents are confident that the children are able to be responsible about safety.**

Bicycle Safety Training

Bicycling is more complicated than walking and requires knowledge of a more sophisticated set of rules and skills. Bicycle safety training should ensure that children have a comprehensive knowledge of traffic safety and laws because, as bicyclists, they have the same responsibilities as drivers. In England, students who have taken comprehensive Safe Routes to Schools bicycle safety training perform better when they later take drivers' education courses.

Beginning bicyclists need to be given exercises that will help them learn to control their bicycles. Also, younger children's perceptions of depth, distance, and speed, as well as their eyesight and hearing, are not fully developed. They need explicit instructions on dealing with traffic that an adult would not require (for example, Don't ride into the path of other vehicles).

Ages for Bike Training

Depending on local conditions students may be ready for bike safety training in grades 3 or 4.



Who Will Teach Bike Safety?

Whereas the average parent can be easily trained to teach walking safety, it requires experienced cyclists to teach bike safety. The League of American Bicyclists certifies cycling instructors. Also some police departments now have some officers on bikes; collaborating with the police is an excellent way to set up bike safety training.

A ratio of 2 trainers to 10 students is recommended.

Method

Demonstrations, drills, and lots of practice in real bicycling situations are key to effective bike safety training. Lessons can begin in empty parking lots and move out onto carefully selected local streets as students gain skill and confidence. Street practice is essential because students are bound to have to ride on streets for some part of their journey to school.

Launch the training sessions with basic handling skills (starting and stopping, straight riding, gear shifting, looking over the shoulder) and then move on to principles of traffic operation (use the right side of the road, yield to cross traffic, yield when moving across the road, signaling, etc.).

BICYCLE SAFETY LESSONS SHOULD INCLUDE:

- Proper bike fit
- Wearing a helmet that fits properly and is correctly positioned
- Using a bicycle mechanical safety checklist
- Riding in a smooth, predictable manner, with no sudden swerves or changes of direction
- How to scan the road, looking ahead, side to side, and over the shoulder to see behind without swerving
- How to recognize and interpret communications from other road users and the importance of making eye contact
- Noticing and understanding traffic signs and signals
- Using hand signals for right and left turns, and for slowing and stopping
- Identifying and avoiding high-risk situations and behaviors
- Riding at a safe speed

- How to keep control of the bicycle when reacting to hazards, and especially how to stop quickly while remaining in control
- Bicycle theft prevention

Students can be awarded a certificate or "license" demonstrating their successful completion of safety training.

Equipment

Children provide their own bicycles, which are subject to a safety check by SRS trainers.

Of course, students must wear helmets while riding; trainers should teach kids how to check for proper fit.

When And for How Long?

It may be impractical to make bike safety training a part of the regular school day. Some families simply won't want their children to participate. And the logistics of having bicycles at school can be cumbersome.

WalkBoston's Safe Routes to Schools program offers bike safety training as either a summer, weekend or after-school activity. Fifteen to twenty-some hours of training make a manageable program, whether it is 6 hours on 3 consecutive Saturdays, or 10 weeks of 2 hours after school, or some other arrangement that totals enough hours.