

# Benefits of active travel for young people

## Key facts

- Active travel to school can increase concentration by up to four hours
- The health benefits of cycling far outweigh the risks
- 15 minutes of exercise can improve a child's mood
- The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that 5- to 18-year-olds do 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous exercise every day
- Almost 20% of children aged 10-11 are obese

## Introduction

Research shows that **active travel to school makes children more alert** and ready to face the school day than if they had arrived in a car: walking, cycling or scooting to school wakes up the mind and body.

Active travel doesn't have to end at the school gates. As well as keeping young people fit and healthy, being fun and promoting independence, **school travel can be used as a topic to deliver the curriculum**. It can be incorporated into classroom activities and help in the delivery of a variety of subjects from Geography and English to PE and PSHE.

Encouraging children to think about and **explore their school journey can feed into lively classroom sessions incorporating debates, artistic and written work**. This infosheet provides the facts and figures you need to encourage your school or college to invest time, effort and – if appropriate – budget into promoting or increasing active travel to your site.



## Health and fitness benefits

It's easy to imagine that exercise is simply 'good for us' and for children especially. The following research supports this assumption and can be used in pitches, proposals and bids to help gain support for active travel initiatives in your school or college.

Active journeys can help reverse the sharp drop-off in physical activity in the early teens as it addresses key barriers to participation, such as perceived lack of time, effort required and body image/appearance – unlike many sports, active travel can be fitted into daily routines, is relatively gentle and requires no special clothing or competitive element.

- **Physical activity can encourage healthy growth** and development, maintain a healthy weight and reduce anxiety and stress. **It can improve muscular strength, endurance and flexibility** in children and adolescents<sup>1</sup>

- Recent figures from the National Child Measurement Programme show that **20.7% of Year 6 boys and 17.7% of Year 6 girls (age 10-11) in England are obese** – with a significant increase in obesity between 2007 and 2012<sup>2</sup>. In Scotland, recent figures from the Scottish Health Survey show that 16.8% of children are at risk of obesity

- **The health benefits of cycling greatly outweigh any risks involved**; on average cyclists live two years longer than non-cyclists<sup>3</sup>

- Research shows that **15-minute bouts of aerobic exercise can lead to significant increases in positive mood** and decreases in negative mood amongst younger children<sup>4</sup>

- **The Chief Medical Officers of all four home countries recommend that all 15- to 18-year-olds participate in physical activity of moderate-to-vigorous intensity for one hour per day** (and up to several hours). This can include a variety of activities across the day including organised sport, play, walking or cycling to school, physical education or planned exercise<sup>5</sup>

- **The Chief Medical Officers' recommendations include vigorous intensity exercise to strengthen muscle and bone at least three days per week.** Cycling at a low speed constitutes moderate activity, while cycling at higher speeds constitutes vigorous activity<sup>5</sup>



## Mental alertness and motivation

The benefits of active travel are not just physical. Measurable increases in concentration, positivity and academic performance are further advantages arising from active journeys.

- A 2012 study of 20,000 children in Denmark found that those who cycle or walk to school demonstrate a **measurable increase in concentration** that lasts for up to four hours

- Adolescents who regularly take part in physical activity are more resistant to drug and alcohol addiction and **display less social behavioural inhibition** than their less active counterparts<sup>6</sup>

- The reduction in levels of physical activity due to **increased car use affects children's stamina, alertness at school and academic performance**<sup>7</sup>

- Physical activity is associated with psychological benefits in young people by **improving their control over symptoms of anxiety and depression**<sup>8</sup>

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- Research indicates that children who travel actively to school have **wide social networks** and are more actively engaged with their community than those who travel by car<sup>9</sup>

- Independently negotiating the school journey is thought to **develop children's responsibility, decision making, and time and risk management skills**<sup>10</sup>

- The range of skills children can develop through interacting with their local community and environment could **enhance their job prospects** – a study by the Higher Education Authority revealed that 54% of employers will be looking to employ people who are socially and environmentally responsible in the future<sup>11</sup>

## Encouraging independence

In addition to the physical, emotional and academic benefits, making an active journey to school has been shown to increase the independence of participants, teaching them valuable life skills.



**“Having a bike and having more independence makes you more inclined to do things. It's important to me that I have my independence.”**

Comment from school pupil in York



- Children who walk to primary school **develop road safety awareness and are less vulnerable** when they walk independently to secondary school<sup>9</sup>

- Studies have found that children who travel actively to school have **better spatial awareness and more road sense** than children who are driven to school<sup>12</sup>

- There is consistent evidence to show that **motorists are less likely to collide with pedestrians and cyclists if more people walk or cycle**<sup>13</sup>

## Road safety

Children who walk, scoot and cycle to school from an early age develop a greater awareness of traffic and the ability to travel independently and safely.

## References

- 1 British Heart Foundation (2007) Healthy Schools: Physical Activity Booklet A
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- 4 World Health Organisation (2002) *The World Health Report 2002 – Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life*
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- 6 Kircaldy, B., Shephard, R. Siefen, R. (2002) 'The relationship between physical activity and self-image and problem behaviour among adolescents', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 37:544-550
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- 9 Living Streets (2008) *Backseat Children: how our car dependent culture compromises safety on our streets*
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- 11 HEA (2008) *Employable Graduates for Responsible Employers* (online) accessed 11.05.11 <<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/sustainability/EmployableGraduates2008.pdf>>
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- 13 Jacobson, P. L. (2003) 'Safety in numbers: more walkers and bicyclists, safer walking and bicycling', *Injury Prevention* 9:205-209

## Further information

Visit the Sustrans website [www.sustrans.org.uk/youngpeople](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/youngpeople) for:

- free resources and guidance, such as our guides to increasing active travel to school and working with older students, as well as further information sheets
- curriculum materials, including our Big Street Survey and Suss It Out activity sheets
- access to our free Big Shift online challenge to increase active travel
- national events, such as our annual Big Pedal competition
- details of our active travel award scheme, the School Mark
- our Superheroes skills and incentive scheme for pupils
- news and events for each of the UK regions, including sign up to our free e-bulletins

## About Sustrans

Sustrans is the charity that's enabling people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day.

It's time we all began making smarter travel choices. Make your move and support Sustrans today. [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

**If you are interested in working with a Sustrans officer, or for enquiries about our work in educational settings and with young people, please call 0117 915 0100 or email [youngpeople@sustrans.org.uk](mailto:youngpeople@sustrans.org.uk)**

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