

Strategies for Engaging Parents in Active School Travel

Summary of Research - October 2021



Ontario Active
School Travel



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- The Strategic Counsel
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Green Communities Canada acknowledges the many treaty and traditional territories of Indigenous Nations throughout Canada. We are grateful for the continued work of many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples who are the original caretakers of the Land and Waters. In our work as environmental leaders, we have a responsibility to respect Indigenous perspectives and elevate Indigenous voices.

Strategies for Engaging Parents in Active School Travel

Parents and caregivers play a key role in determining if a child will walk or wheel to school. The resistance to change amongst those who choose to drive their children to school remains an ongoing and significant barrier to renormalizing active school travel within communities across Canada.

This report summarises research work completed by the Ontario Active School Travel (OAST) Council between 2018 and 2020. Led by the OAST Council's Parent Engagement Working Group (PEWG), the research sought to investigate strategies to better engage parents in initiatives that aim to get more children using active transportation for school journeys.

The PEWG completed an **Environmental Scan** to summarize existing available research and resources, and commissioned Cullbridge Marketing and Communications to develop a set of **Strategic Recommendations**, which also incorporated the findings of parallel research conducted in 2019 by The Strategic Counsel on behalf of Metrolinx.

Environmental Scan

The PEWG conducted an Environmental Scan to gather information about existing research on barriers and enablers for active school travel identified by parents, as well as best practices, tools, and campaigns that have effectively addressed those barriers.

The PEWG's Environmental Scan identified the following key barriers, contributing factors, and strategies:

Barriers:

- Strangers
- Bullies
- Traffic volumes around schools
- Too far, too much time
- Perceptions that driving is easier and more convenient

Factors:

- Social norms
- Trip-chaining (a succession of trips/combined journeys)

- Fixed school start times and set routines (work, extra-curricular activities, etc.)
- Familiarity with neighbours and surrounding neighbourhoods
- Intention-behaviour gap (intentions overridden by things parents believe they can't change (behavioural controls))

Strategies:

- Keep parents informed
- Demonstrate that active school travel is a safe option
- Show parents the skills their children are acquiring through training programs
- Engage champions/strong supporters across sectors (parents, school administration, municipality, community/neighbourhood, etc.)
- Involve students in promoting active school travel
- Frame messages in a non-judgemental way (avoid parent shaming)
- Engage families that have just had a change or disruption in daily travel routines (relocation, new jobs, etc.)

The full Environmental Scan is available as a [downloadable spreadsheet](#) for further reading. The spreadsheet includes key findings from a literature review, the six stages of change, and the three dimensions of engagement.

Focus Groups

In 2019, Metrolinx commissioned The Strategic Counsel to undertake research to examine parental barriers to active school travel in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA). The research included 13 focus groups amongst parents/guardians of students ranging in age from Kindergarten to Grade 8, with various group specifications around school travel behaviours.

The focus group research identified the following key barriers, contributing factors, and strategies:

Barriers:

- Pressure and stress of before school routines (have to get a lot done before families leave home for the day)
- Belief that it is easier, more time efficient, and more convenient to drive than active alternatives
- Public transit hesitancy due to safety concerns and commuting times
- School bus dissatisfaction due to the experience (extended commuting times, being at a specific spot for pick-up/drop-off, bullying, quality of buses, etc.)
- School pick-up zone constraints

Factors:

- Virtually everyone recognizes the advantages of walking/cycling (disadvantages are seen as more specific, tangible, and compelling, ‘overpowering’ the advantages)
- Drivers recognize the chaotic nature of the school zone (chaos, mayhem, and danger), but do not see themselves as causing the problem
- School programs to manage traffic are ‘enabling’ parents to drive kids to school
- Parents aware of school programs/events, but not converting to sustainable behaviour change

Strategies:

- Incentives/contests to motivate more walking and biking
- Buddy-system
- More before/after school programs
- More crossing guards
- Better urban planning/design
- Increased enforcement
- Walking school bus
- Use strong and emotionally driven messaging, rational messaging will not work

A summary of the focus group results and recommendations, produced by the strategic counsel, is available as a [downloadable pdf](#) for further reading.

Strategic Recommendations

The PEWG commissioned Jay Kassirer of Cullbridge Marketing and Communications in the spring of 2020 to develop a report focused on “Engaging Non-Supportive Parents in Active School Travel”. The purpose of the report was to review and add to the Environmental Scan, make strategic recommendations from a social marketing perspective, and make high level scoping recommendations for the future pilot.

The report identified key strategies and tactics for engagement, including dimensions of engagement, stages of change, and processes of change:

Strategies:

- Strike a balance between both push and pull factors (push approaches push change through training, competitions, programs, and/or events. Pull approaches help to pull people to change by making an activity so enjoyable, rewarding, and convenient that people naturally prefer it)
- Encourage (or require) parents/caregivers to participate in student trainings and assignments that develop safety skills

- Appeal to the emotional brain, utilizing emotion-provoking images and human-interest stories
 - *Refer to the three main dimensions of engagement outlined below
- Consider parents at different stages of change and segment accordingly
 - *Refer to six stages of change and processes of change outlined below
- Use norm appeals, showing that other parents are benefitting from their children walking and cycling to school
- Provide clear guidelines/approval for the desired behaviours
- Make walking and cycling more visible, while making driving less visible
- Provide markers of participation and opportunities for group feedback
- Create opportunities for sharing experiences and other forms of word-of-mouth promotion
- Use competitions and events to provide an engaging context to raise awareness and get parents to consider new actions
- Offer public rewards and recognition (keep rewards small, infrequent, and just one of the many tangible and intangible benefits of active school travel)

Dimensions of Engagement:

- Affiliation (this is who I am) – feeling related to, connection, identification, kinship or relationship, closeness, loyalty, ownership
 - Following social norms/fitting in/doing the right thing
 - Being a loving and responsible parent (by NOT driving children to school regularly), health benefits to children and pets
- Enjoyment (I like this) – feeling good, satisfaction, functional benefits, hedonistic emotions
 - Support with stressful morning routines
 - Finding it easier, more enjoyable, more time-efficient and more convenient for children to walk or cycle to school
 - Avoiding crazy car drop-offs and pick-ups
 - Enjoying walking or cycling to school with children
- Resonance (this is right for me) – feeling attracted to, involvement, relevance, sharing values, wanting to learn about
 - Concerns about/wanting to contribute towards climate change mitigation
 - Concerns about personal health, taking care of oneself through a healthy lifestyle

Stages of Change:

1. Precontemplation – these parents have no intention to change their travel behaviours in the foreseeable future, and think they are doing the best thing for their children by driving them to school

- Emotional messaging
- 2. Contemplation – parents at this stage are aware that driving their children to school may not be the best solution and are starting to look at both the pros and cons of alternative options
 - Fact-based messaging and addressing of barriers/concerns through School Travel Planning and other training programs
- 3. Preparation – parents at this stage are motivated and planning to let their children walk or cycle to school in the immediate future
 - Fact-based messaging and support (programs/events/competitions)
- 4. Action – parents are letting their children walk or cycle to school
 - Reinforce positive behaviour (markers of participation, visibility, encouragement from school)
- 5. Relapse – people may regress to earlier travel habits, due to weather changes, someone getting sick, etc.
 - Mitigate by monitoring for relapses and helping parents in relapse
- 6. Maintenance – the final stage in which people are no longer tempted to relapse

Processes of Change:

- Experiential Processes (cognitive and affective strategies) – more helpful in earlier stages of change
 - Consciousness raising – increasing awareness of the problems with driving children to school and the benefits of the active school travel
 - Dramatic relief – emotional appeals, whether positive or negative
 - Self re-evaluation – self reappraisal regarding family school commute habits
 - Environmental re-evaluation – social reappraisal to realize effects on other persons at home and in one’s network
 - Social liberation – encountering social support for encouraging one’s children to walk or cycle to school
- Behavioural Processes (behaviour management strategies) – more helpful in later stages of change
 - Commitments – parents making a commitment to support their children in walking and cycling to school, based on beliefs that it really can be safe, caring, and convenient
 - Helping relationships – finding supportive relationships that encourage and help in taking the action
 - Counter-conditioning – encouraging parents to notice, remember, and be influenced by positive experiences to counter-condition prevailing norms
 - Reinforcement management – recognizing and otherwise rewarding families whose children walk and cycle to school

- Stimulus control – providing reminders and cues that foster the norm of children walking and cycling to school (e.g. visible bike racks, recognition, incentives, etc.) and on removing those that encourage driving (e.g. have car pick-up/drop-off zones that are farther from main school entrances)

The strategic recommendations are available as a [downloadable pdf](#) for further reading.

Additional Resources

The following resources provide a social marketing planning guide, a stages of change example, and the websites for tools of change and community-based social marketing.

- Changing Transportation Behaviours – A Social Marketing Planning Guide
www.researchgate.net/publication/312188618_Changing_Transportation_Behaviours_A_Social_Marketing_Planning_Guide
- Stages of Change
www.researchgate.net/publication/318421816_Accelerating_Movement_Through_the_Stages_of_Change_for_Forest_Conservation_a_best_practice_literature_review_and_synthesis
- www.toolsofchange.com
- www.cbsm.com