

Personal Security and Safe Routes to School



SafeRoutes

National Center for Safe Routes to School



CSN
Children's Safety Network
National Injury and Violence Prevention Resource Center

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Introduction

Schools, families and communities across the country are committed to creating safe environments for children and youth. Children and youth deserve to feel safe - in their neighborhood, at school, and on their route to school, whether it be on foot, by bicycle or on the bus - and many do. Supervised “walking school buses” that collect neighborhood children to walk in a group to school, middle school students walking or bicycling to school together, and adult “corner captains” who volunteer to provide an extra set of eyes along common school routes are all ways that Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs make the environment around schools safer for students.

As community SRTS programs encourage more students to walk and bicycle to school, the issue of student safety often arises. The range of personal security concerns is broad and often not unique to the trip to school. It is important to understand the personal safety issues faced by students and the valuable role SRTS programs can play in making school environments safer. Children and caregivers may face fears around bullying, personal violent crime, or exposure to gang activities or abduction at school on the playground or during after school programs. In some communities, these concerns pose a real challenge to keeping students safe on their journey to school, whether by bus, by bicycle, or on foot. In other communities, the perception of what could happen is the greatest concern.

Safety and School Attendance

In 2009, 5 percent of high school students reported not going to school at least one day in the previous month because they felt they would be unsafe at or on their way to or from school.¹ Implementing personal security strategies before students reach this age may positively impact school attendance in the present and in the future.

Safe Routes to School programs can be an important component of a broader, community-wide response to the issue of student safety. They can include community-based approaches to help address safety concerns and help improve the climate for students walking and bicycling to school and beyond. While the SRTS program is not the single answer to any safety concern, there are valuable strategies available to improve the personal security of students on their route to school.



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Assessing Local Issues

It is important for SRTS teams to understand the personal security concerns their students face that could impact their journey to school. By assessing the type and degree of local safety concerns, SRTS teams can focus efforts and tailor program strategies as part of a broader community response to student personal safety. There are several ways SRTS programs can assess student personal safety issues:

1. **Talk with families, youth, school officials and community members.**

Conversations with families or caregivers and youth as well as school officials such as principals, school counselors, teachers, crossing guards, and community members, can provide valuable insight into community safety concerns. These people can work together to help protect students. Schedule time to talk with school administrators, ask for time to speak at the PTA/PTO meeting, the neighborhood association or simply hit the pavement to talk with parents or neighbors.



Survey Parents to Uncover Safety Concerns

The National Center for Safe Routes to School's Parent Survey can be used to assess concerns while maintaining the anonymity of school parents. Caregivers can identify issues impacting their decision not to let their child walk or bicycle to school, including the issue of personal security. The community SRTS program can even add supplemental questions related to specific safety concerns, visit: www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/evaluation_parent-survey.cfm.

2. **Gather information on local crime data to separate fact from fiction.**

A local law enforcement officer can provide factual information to help parents understand true risks and assist the SRTS program in focusing efforts. It is important to also seek out anecdotal information from parents, school officials and community members. Some behaviors and issues may not have reached the status of "crime" yet, but are valid and real community concerns.



3. Identify others working on solutions.

If personal security issues have been an ongoing problem, there may already be an existing anti-violence effort in the school or community. If there is another entity working to address these issues, they may have a good sense of the concerns and issues facing a particular school. They may also make a good partner for the SRTS program.

Threats to Personal Security: What Are They?

Bullying: Bullying is any hurtful or aggressive act toward an individual or group that is intentional and repeated. There is typically a real or perceived imbalance of physical power, a social network, or verbal skills that favor the perpetrators.² Bullying is often the most common personal security issue schools face. In the 2007-08 school year, 32 percent of students ages 12-18 surveyed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported having been bullied at school during the school year.³

Gangs: A gang is an ongoing, loosely organized association of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, that has a common name, sign, symbol or color, whose members engage, either individually or collectively, in violent or other forms of illegal behavior.⁴ In some cases, gangs may be affiliated with a larger ring of organized crime. In 2007, according to the NCES, 23 percent of students ages 12-18 reported that there were gangs in their schools.⁵

Personal Violent Crime: Personal violent crimes include rape, sexual battery, physical attack or fight, threat of physical attack, and robbery. According to the NCES in 2007, the rate of violent incidents at school was 26 incidents per 1,000 students.⁶ Over the past 10 years, NCES has tracked significant decrease in violent incidents both at school and away from school (outside of the school setting).

Abductions: Abductions include family abductions, in which a family member tries to deprive a caretaker of custodial rights, as well as non-family abductions which involves forcibly moving or detaining a child, usually in connection to another crime. While child abductions are often a parental concern, the vast majority of missing children are not the result of abductions. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs, in 2002 (the most recent year for which data are available), two percent of reported missing children were the result of non-family abductions. Of the other 98 percent of missing children reported, seven percent were family abductions and the remaining were not related to abduction circumstances, such as a child was lost, injured and unable to make contact with a caregiver or stranded.⁷

SRTS as Part of The Solution

All communities care about student safety and an SRTS program can be a valuable asset to improve the safety of students. According to a 2010 report on preventing violence and promoting healthy eating and active living by the Prevention Institute, SRTS was identified as a strategy that invites participation and promotes a sense of community, factors that are integral to creating safe spaces and walkable neighborhoods.⁸ To address personal safety concerns, local SRTS organizers should:

Bring People Together. Safe Routes to School programs can bring diverse professions and interests together to form a core team or taskforce of people committed to making walking and bicycling to school safe and appealing. It is always important for key stakeholders such as families, youth, law enforcement officers, public health, safety professionals and school administrators to be part of the SRTS team. If the community has an existing anti-violence program, invite a representative to serve on the SRTS team as a way to tap into existing concerns, messages and programs. As the SRTS program is introduced to the community, don't be afraid to raise the issue of personal security, and invite those who voice concerns to join the effort to improve safety. Note that if concerns about personal security are high and crime issues are severe, starting an SRTS program may be challenging, so consider joining an existing anti-violence group and collaborate to get an SRTS program started.

SRTS Can Help Create Safe Spaces

According to a 2010 report by the Prevention Institute, entitled "Addressing the intersection preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living", SRTS was identified as a strategy that invites participation and promotes a sense of community, factors that are integral to creating safe spaces and walkable neighborhoods.⁹

Listen. As discussions on personal security evolve, it is important to acknowledge and respect parent and youth perceptions and listen to their concerns. Child safety is an emotional topic and understanding the specific concerns a community faces will help an SRTS program assess their real and perceived safety issues. As these concerns emerge, the SRTS team can identify appropriate SRTS strategies to help address them, and/or identify additional community partners to play a role.

Share Strategies. Safe Routes to School programs can provide parents and educators with strategies for addressing personal security issues with children on their route to school. While sharing information and ideas, it is important to keep group discussions productive and positive. Emphasize that these strategies can support existing safety and anti-bullying efforts that may already exist within a school or can start a larger discussion within the school and surrounding community.

Is Your School Doing Something?

In 2008, nearly 90 percent of elementary and middle schools surveyed by the NCES reported the use of violence prevention training for students.¹⁰ Highest use was reported in primary schools (a school in which the lowest grade is not higher than grade three and the highest grade is not higher than grade eight). If your school doesn't already use a violence prevention curriculum, consider sharing the Additional Resources section of this resource with school officials.

SRTS Strategies to Improve Student Personal Security

In addition to bringing people together and providing an opportunity for discussion of personal safety concerns, SRTS programs offer strategies that can support the personal security of children on their route to school.

Programming Strategies

Walking Together, Walking School Buses and Bicycle Trains. Walking with others is one of the best ways for children to feel safe and combat bullying. Safe Routes to School programs encourage walking in groups or with adult supervision. For elementary-age students, walking school buses and bicycle trains, in which an adult driver walks or bicycles along a designated route and picks up students along the way, offer a great way for students to travel together. The driver can help with traffic safety, and watch out for anything suspicious. Older children and youth walking and bicycling to school should be encouraged to walk with friends.

Map Safe Routes. Involve children and families to create a map from home to school that indicates crossing guards, safe places, and areas that may have “eyes on the street.” Ask parents or caregivers to use this map to identify acceptable routes to and from school, and encourage children to only use main routes and avoid isolated routes or shortcuts. Parents should discuss and approve possible alternate routes if necessary. Encourage parents to then walk or bicycle the route to school with their child to point out landmarks and safe places to go to in case of an emergency or if they need help.





■ Photo Courtesy of Livable Streets Education

Designate Corner Captains. Corner captains are parents, teachers, neighbors or other volunteers who are stationed at designated outside locations in neighborhoods and along established routes to school. Bullying and other unsafe behavior tends to thrive in areas where adults are not present, and corner captains can improve personal security by serving as an extra set of eyes. They are a creative way to increase adult presence in hot spot locations of additional concern. Though corner captains may wear a piece of clothing that communicates their status to both children and other adults, just a simple willingness to be outside and observant during key student travel times can improve safety. For communities with a bullying or other personal security problem, additional training of corner captains may be appropriate. For specific training on bullying prevention and the role of bystanders, please see the Additional Resources section.

Establish Safe Places. Parents can help their children identify safe places, such as a trusted neighbor’s home to go in case of an emergency or if they feel they are in danger. Some communities choose to establish a formal safe places program, which identifies a marked network of places children can go when they sense danger. A more formal program will require screening and training for volunteers.

Education Strategies

Teach Children and Youth To Be Responsible Reporters and Say Something.

A common approach in safety and bullying prevention programs is to encourage students to report unsafe behavior to a trusted adult and to speak out and say something when they see unsafe behavior happening. The SRTS program can reinforce this by reminding students to be responsible reporters if they see unsafe behavior on their route to school.

Bullying Prevention: Tips for Students and Families

1. Use the buddy system and take a friend: walk or bicycle together.
2. Be a “responsible reporter:” students should tell a trusted adult when bullying happens.
3. Talk about it: talking about bullying can help change a school’s climate and make bullying un-cool.
4. Teach “street smart skills:” identify safe places and alternate routes to school if students feel unsafe.

For more information and free downloadable tip sheets to prevent bullying, visit the Stop Bullying Now! Campaign for adults and kids, a program of the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA):

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/

Teach Street Smart Skills. Teach older students how to walk or bicycle to school. This includes practicing pedestrian safety skills, walking with friends, reporting unsafe behavior and identifying safe places along their route to school. Encourage families to help their children establish an alternate route home to be used if children sense suspicious activity or feel unsafe on their regular route. For children who come home to an empty house, parents can establish a check-in procedure that may include having the children check in with a trusted neighbor or call the parents at a specific time to let them know they are safely home.

Remind Students About Trusted Adults. Safe Routes to School programs can remind students of the trusted adults they can go to about safety concerns experienced on their route to school or throughout their day. Examples may include their own parents or caregivers, a teacher or principal, a school counselor or nurse, the school resource officer, bus drivers, playground aids and/or school crossing guards. Trusted adults should be trained on how to address and respond to safety concerns that may arise.

Educate and Engage Families. Parent or caregiver support and involvement in student personal security is important, and no strategy replaces the role of those persons in promoting the safety of their child. Encourage parents to be involved in the program, discuss the benefits of adult supervision during the walk or bicycle ride to school and provide information on how to discuss personal security with their children. Provide parents with information on how to discuss and teach about personal security issues, such as bullying, with their children.



■ Photo Courtesy of Livable Streets Education



Other Key Strategies

Engage Community Stakeholders. Go beyond the traditional school partners to engage community members in local SRTS efforts. Area businesses, child care facilities, churches, senior or community centers may be near the school and could be valuable partners. Mobilizing communities around personal safety concerns can have a tremendous payoff. If there are serious issues of student safety to be addressed, local residents, neighborhood-based organizations and businesses can play a role in helping to foster a safe environment for children on their route to school. If a community or neighborhood cares about the issue, then SRTS programs are in a much stronger position to implement community-based strategies successfully.



Partner with Law Enforcement. Local law enforcement agencies are important partners in a SRTS program and should be part of a SRTS team or committee. School Resource Officers or Community Police Officers can be part of creating a safe walking and bicycling environment for children and supporting strategies that foster personal security among students. Invite an officer to be present at a PTA or SRTS meeting to respond to concerns about local crime. Local law enforcement may also be available to present safety information to students in the classroom. Help your local law enforcement officer prepare for these sessions by discussing their assessment of local issues ahead of time, and confirming their education approach is in line with recommended approaches and is age and culturally appropriate. Sharing specific information on bullying prevention may be necessary if law enforcement is not already trained in this area.

Law Enforcement Tips to Address Personal Safety

For tips on how law enforcement officer can address students' personal security, visit: www.saferoutesinfo.org/lawenforcement/resources/personal_security.cfm.

Community Snapshot Chicago's Safe Passage Effort

In many Chicago neighborhoods, students face real safety issues on their trip to school. Gang violence has long been a problem in Chicago and after-school gang-related fights are one of the biggest threats to student safety. To improve the safety of elementary, middle and high school students on their route to school, the Chicago Police Department and the Chicago City Schools teamed up to create the Safe Passage effort, which is now over 15 years old. Safe Passage is multi-faceted and includes police patrols, video monitoring of hot spot areas, a Safe Haven (safe place) program, Parent Patrols and a walking school bus program, all with the goal of creating "safe passages" for the city's youth.

In the fall of 2009, a student death as a result of gang violence near a high school led to rising concerns regarding student safety at some city schools. As a result, the Safe Passage program created a school community watch program. By assessing existing gang activity, known gang territories and boundaries, proximity to high traffic public transportation spots where gangs

congregate, and the frequency of neighborhood violence incidents, 214 schools were identified as being at-risk for violence around school neighborhoods. To combat the propensity for crime in these neighborhoods, the Safe Passage effort has engaged non-traditional volunteers (those who don't have children in the school system) to create a safer environment for students. In October 2009, Safe Passage mounted a huge door-to-door canvassing initiative to recruit neighborhood residents to be present on their block before and after school as a means to create and expand a positive adult presence in the neighborhoods. Volunteers are provided full support from the Chicago police, and are asked to call 911 if they see anything suspicious. Response by residents has been overwhelmingly positive. In just eight months, Safe Passage has recruited 3,684 volunteers among 994 city blocks. The door-to-door canvassing effort has also resulted in 224 new businesses signing on to the Safe Haven initiative.

For more information on Chicago's Safe Passage effort, visit: www.chicagopolice.org.

Community Snapshot *Alpine Elementary School, Utah*

Alpine Elementary School, a kindergarten through sixth grade school with 780 students, is part of Utah's Alpine School District, which is the lowest funded school district in the nation. The primary barrier to walking to school had been traffic congestion, but that changed in 2008 when a man attempted to abduct a sixth grade student on her way to school. The student successfully escaped and told an adult crossing guard what happened. The fear that stemmed from that incident created another hurdle to developing a SRTS program.

According to Alpine's principal, David Stephenson, the incident gave new meaning to "safe routes to school." The school was forced to look beyond the physical conditions in which their students walk or bicycle to school and consider how to keep students safe from predators as well as bullying. The attempted abduction, which occurred within blocks of the school, caused the SRTS Committee, PTA Safety Committee, and School Community Council to come together to determine the best strategies to address student safety while walking or bicycling to school. A parent meeting was convened to identify strategies and the committee implemented the following:

Parent Involvement/Presence: The SRTS Committee sought parent representation from the five neighborhood areas that feed their school. The SRTS Committee worked with School Community Council members who represent these areas to engage parents in walking school buses, bicycle trains, and as individual/family walkers.

Parent Patrol: The committee recruited parents who were committed to walking and bicycling with their children to school on a daily basis. They were asked to be alert for any dangerous conditions or situations on their route, reporting concerns to the Safe Routes to School Committee. The school newsletter listed parent volunteers' names.

Walking and Bicycling in Groups: Children were encouraged to walk together in supervised walking school buses and bicycle trains.

Increased Police Presence Before and After School. During high foot traffic periods, the local police department agreed to park a patrol car near the school or have an officer drive around the most common routes to and from school.

Personal Security and Safe Bicycling/Walking Education. Alpine's teachers and parent volunteers taught lessons on personal security to students in addition to bicycle and pedestrian safety, which was taught in a school-wide assemblies and through bicycle rodeo events.

Understandably, after the incident parents were apprehensive of an SRTS program, and initially walking and bicycling numbers and level of parent involvement were low. But the attempted abduction proved to be a catalyst to increase parent involvement and a new level of commitment among the school community to keep their children walking and bicycling to school safely has emerged.

Additional Resources

As schools, communities and SRTS programs seek to improve the personal security of students, the following sampling of resources may provide ideas to aid in the effort:

- The National School Safety Center (NSSC), www.schoolsafety.us, is a non-profit organization established by presidential directive in 1989, that advocates for safe, secure and peaceful schools worldwide and hopes to assist in the prevention of school crime and violence. NSSC provides school communities and their school safety partners with information, resources, consultation and training services. The organization promotes the annual Safe Schools Week campaign and provides resources for all ages for free and for a fee.
- The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, www.olweus.org, is a school-wide program designed to prevent or reduce bullying throughout the school setting. The Olweus approach involves students, classrooms, schools, parents and communities to successfully address bullying in schools. It was identified as an effective program for violence prevention by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Provides a for-fee resource for use in elementary, middle and junior high schools.
- The Stop Bullying Now! Campaign, www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/, is a program of the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) for adults and kids. Downloadable tip sheets for kids, adults and professionals are available on their website. The Campaign provides free resources and tip sheets for professionals, adults and students of all ages.
- Eyes on Bullying, www.eyesonbullying.org, a program of the Education Development Center and a nonprofit organization, provides free downloadable toolkits, activities and resources for parents and caregivers with preschool and school-age children.
- The National Crime Prevention Council's McGruff Neighborhood Initiative, www.ncpc.org/programs/mcgruff-neighborhood, offers a full spectrum of coordinated programs, all focused on educating children and engaging neighbors in keeping children safe. It provides information and free resources for schools and communities with elementary age students.
- A compilation of all federal resources on bullying is available at www.bullyinginfo.org. The site provides tools and resources for youth, parents, teachers and mental health providers to prevent and address bullying and includes a list of evidence-based programs.

America's Safe Schools Week and International Walk to School Month

America's annual Safe Schools Week, www.safeschoolsweek.org, is the third full week in October, and International Walk to School Month, www.iwalktoschool.org, is every October. Combine the two by integrating a discussion of personal security and providing personal security resources to students and parents during walk and bicycle to school events.

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