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ABSTRACT FORM

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Abstract Remit

Walking to school: Are parents aware of the benefits?

This paper draws on an exploration of parental perceptions of walking and driving to and from school conducted using questionnaires and focus groups at a North Shore City primary school in 2006. We focus on the perceived benefits of walking, the degree to which these benefits are understood, and the way these perceptions influence modal choice for school travel.

We found that the benefits of walking identified within 'walkers' focus groups were: improved parent-child communication; preparing children for the school day; increased community awareness; enhanced social interactions; and the development of independence. The most compelling finding was that the foregoing positive impacts of walking on their children's lives were largely unanticipated before their children started walking. Given this situation, they were not the main motivating factor behind their initial decision to let their children walk to school. While parents had expected that walking would be good for their children's fitness, they had not only been unaware of other benefits but also in hindsight these benefits had become more important than the initial 'trigger' reasons. Parents with currently walking children suggested that had they been driving, they would be unaware of what their children were missing out on. They felt that those parents who always drive their children to school are not in a position to comprehend the diverse range of benefits conferred by walking. Study participants who had always driven their children to school confirmed this observation. They were asked if they thought their children were missing out on anything by not walking. The consensus was that it might be 'nice' for them to walk, and that they were possibly missing out on exercise.

The paper concludes by situating the foregoing observations within the complexities underlying journey-to-school modal choice. We then speculate on how the benefits experienced by parents whose children walk to school can be most effectively communicated to 'driver-parents' in order to encourage a behavioural change.

Author Profile

Debbie Lang, MSc is a School Travel Coordinator at the Auckland Regional Transport Authority and has worked with schools across Auckland to develop School Travel Plans. She completed her masters thesis entitled "To Drive or to Walk? An examination of school travel behaviour at a North Shore City primary school" in 2007.

Robin Kearns is Professor of Geography at the University of Auckland and has researched a range of aspects of school travel behaviour and children's perspectives of neighbourhoods. He has been involved in assessing the benefits and sustainability of walking school buses since their development in Auckland.