



# Perceived challenges and facilitators of active travel following implementation of the School Travel-Plan programme in New Zealand children and adolescents



Erica Hinckson

Auckland University of Technology, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, Centre for Child Health Research, and Human Potential Centre Auckland, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

Promoting active travel modes has the potential to improve health outcomes, enhance social capital, and reduce traffic related congestion whilst also providing economic benefits. With this focus in mind, Auckland's transport agency developed a series of School Travel Plan (STP) initiatives in Auckland schools as part of the Travel Wise for Schools programme. The initiative incorporated educational and promotional campaigns to promote carpooling and active transport, combined with the Walking School Bus, cycle training for students, parking restrictions, building of traffic calming measures, and improvement of roads and footpaths. The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived challenges and facilitators of active travel to and from school following implementation of the STP Programme through qualitative feedback from children and adolescents. Focus groups consisting of 4–6 children and 6–12 adolescents were conducted in 10 primary schools and three high schools respectively. The challenges and facilitators for children and adolescents focused primarily on intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors. The themes emerged were similar but for different contexts. Under the child factors category five main themes emerged: peers, enjoyment, safety, parent behaviour and health and fitness. The main themes for adolescents were: peers/enjoyment, driving licence, safety and health & engagement. Overall, children and adolescents preferred active modes from passive ones, understood the benefits of active travel and provided valuable suggestions which formed the basis of future plan implementation.

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## 1. Introduction

Promoting a shift from passive to active travel has the potential to improve individual health and environmental outcomes long term. The concept of travel demand management (TDM) has existed since 1970s and measures have been proposed and implemented over the years (Gärling et al., 2002; Gärling and Schuitema, 2007; Ge et al., 2014; Meyer, 1999). TDM involves the implementation of a set of actions with the goal of making people aware of alternative travel options other than car (Meyer, 1999). The aim of TDM is to reduce traffic congestion. Accordingly, since 2005 school-based travel programmes including Safe Routes To School (SRTS) (Boarnet et al., 2005a, 2005b; Cooper and McMillan, 2010), and Travelwise-School Travel Plan (STP) programmes (Hinckson and Badland, 2011; Hinckson et al., 2011; Mammen et al., 2013) have been implemented to achieve these outcomes. These programmes have been successful in reducing pedestrian injury (DiMaggio and Li, 2013), and increasing walking and cycling to school in primary school children after a period of time (Boarnet et al., 2005a; Hinckson et al., 2011; Staunton et al., 2003). Since the implementation of the SRTS programme in New York City there has been a reduction of 33% in pedestrian injury among youth (DiMaggio and Li, 2013), an increase from 40.5% to 42.2% in walking and cycling to school in NZ children after three years of STP implementation, and an increase of 5.5 percentage points in the proportion of children walking and bicycling to school after five years of participating in a SRTS programme in 801 American schools (McDonald et al., 2014). While the results have been encouraging there are no studies examining the perceptions of children and adolescents regarding the challenges and facilitators to active travel during implementations of these programmes. The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges and facilitators of active travel to and from school following implementation of the STP programme. Qualitative feedback was gained from New Zealand children and adolescents to better inform future programme implementation.

## 2. Methods

Focus group participants were recruited from 10 primary schools and three high schools. The schools were located in Auckland, New Zealand. In each focus group there was a mix of active and non-active travellers. The study protocol was approved by the Institution's ethics committee (AUTEK 05/227). Consent from the parents and assent from the children and adolescents were received. The participants were asked specific questions using a semi-structured process. Responses were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Key themes were drawn via thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Pope et al., 2000).

## 3. Results and discussion

There were 4–6 children (years 4–6, ages 8–10) per focus group from 10 primary schools (52 children) and 6–12 (total 26) adolescents from three high schools (years 9–12, ages 13–16). This was a convenience sample however, gender and travel mode were on the whole fairly represented (Table 1).

The participants were asked a variety of questions about the School Travel plan programme. The findings in this article relate to challenges and facilitators of active travel to and from school following programme implementation. The thematic analysis, revealed that challenges and facilitators emerged from the same themes. Challenges and facilitators were categorized into child and adolescent factors (Table 2). The themes emerged for children and adolescents were similar but for different contexts.

Under the Child factors category five main themes emerged: peers, enjoyment, safety, parent behaviour and health and fitness. The main facilitators for active travel to school for children were travelling with friends and having fun. Almost none of the children wanted to be driven to school, most children (96%) preferred active modes of travel.

### 3.1. Peers

The children on the Walking School Bus (WSB) commented that they enjoyed the opportunity to socialise with friends during the journey to school, it was a fun and exciting way to get to school, a means to catch up with friends, and make new friends. Conversely, not having a friend to walk with was identified as a challenge which in some cases prevented children from walking to school.

### 3.2. Enjoyment

The children enjoyed walking to school as part of the WSB because it gave them the opportunity to be with their friends, play games, talk about “things” that mattered to them such as “star wars and lego”, and arranged play dates. Convenience, speed of travel, and generally, being outdoors were also reasons given.

### 3.3. Safety

The children saw the WSB as a facilitator to increasing safety. Children wanted to see more WSB initiated as they perceived that it was safer to walk to school as part of a WSB. Concerns raised by the children included; taunting from teenagers, uncontrolled dogs and cars reversing out of driveways while walking to and from school. Very few children cycled to school. NZ primary schools in general do not encourage cycling to school because of the risk of theft and traffic safety concerns. The danger of road traffic was raised as a challenge by the children. Despite STP targeting road safety issues, the area surrounding some schools experienced heavy traffic flows that probably could not be addressed solely by STP implementation.

### 3.4. Parents

Parents' knowledge and involvement were seen as both facilitators and challenges to active travel. Children asked for more parent availability so more WSB could be organised and with “wider” routes so more children could participate. The children suggested that people could meet at designated places to join onto the WSB and skits could be performed at the parents' assemblies to encourage parents' involvement. The children also raised the issue that parents needed to be educated about crossing the road safely and use the pedestrian crossing accordingly. It was commented that some parents' behaviour had not changed as consistently they seemed to break the rules by

**Table 1**  
Travel mode of focus group participants.

	Children (%)	Adolescents (%)
Sex		
Female	na	58
Male	na	42
Mode		
W/WSB	56	27
Car	33	27
SB	6.0	27
Bike	4.0	4.0
Mix	6.0	19

na, not available; W, walk; WSB, Walking School Bus; SB, School Bus.

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