

STEP BY STEP:

How to Organize a KidsWalk-to-School Program in Your Neighborhood

Use this step-by-step list to organize your walk-to-school program; be creative and design the program to fit the particular needs of your neighborhood. Each step should take about a week to complete but will vary from neighborhood to neighborhood; therefore, community organizers should allow about 7 to 9 weeks to plan their KidsWalk-to-School program. For additional ideas about making the KidsWalk-to-School program fit your community, see Program Variations on pp. 21–23 and Having Fun on pp. 25–27.

Step One: Identify Interest

1. Informally talk with neighbors to identify who wants to participate in the program.

Talk with neighbors about the program, share the KidsWalk-to-School Introduction (pp. 1, 2) with them, and see if they are interested in getting a KidsWalk-to-School program started in your neighborhood. Explain the general concept of a walk-to-school program and what is needed to get one started. Discuss the benefits of a walk-to-school program.

- Increased levels of physical activity
- Increased safety in the neighborhood
- Decreased traffic speed
- Fewer cars
- Community cohesiveness

It may also be useful to mention similar programs that have been successful. (Examples of successes are highlighted in boxes throughout the guide.)



*Palm Bay
Elementary
School, Palm Bay,
Florida.*

2. Talk with school officials about the KidsWalk-to-School program.

If there is neighborhood interest in the program, contact the school principal to let him or her know about the program and the interest in your neighborhood. Ask who you can speak to at the school for answers to some of your questions and for help planning your program.

- a. Find out if the school has similar programs. If so, contact people in the other programs and find out what they are doing and how they implemented the program in their neighborhoods.
- b. Ask what rules the school has for transporting children to and from school.
 - Some schools may require informed consent forms from parents or guardians stating that the school is not responsible for the children until they are on school grounds.
 - Some schools may require children to have signed permission slips before they leave the school with anyone other than their parent or legal guardian.

Some schools receive funding based on the number of children who ride the bus and therefore may be concerned about supporting a program that may reduce this funding. Take this into consideration and be sure to remind them how children benefit from the program.

3. Contact other potential partnering organizations.

Developing and implementing the KidsWalk-to-School program can be done with a few interested and dedicated individuals, but a complete neighborhood effort will include established community organizations. Examples of partnering organizations are the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), local health departments, safe-kids coalitions, community traffic safety programs, churches, civic clubs, and local businesses.

Walk-to-school organizer Bev Benda-Moe in Grand Forks, North Dakota, says that efforts made for the walk-to-school program at Ben Franklin Elementary School are seen as small steps toward large change. The partnerships alone that they have formed have set the stage for larger change at the community level. These partnerships will be instrumental when the community is ready to take on the larger task of making the entire community more walkable.

Gaining support from community organizations will establish credibility for your walk-to-school program and can be essential for overcoming the barriers that may develop during this process.

- Schedule a meeting with or write a letter to potential partnering organizations that may have a particular interest in the program and may want to become involved in assessing, planning, implementing, evaluating, or expanding the program. (See Table 1, p. 9.)
- Explain the problems you want to address and the program itself.
- Ask for support as you assess your neighborhood for safety and walkability and plan to implement the KidsWalk-to-School program.

Step Two: Organize

1. Notify neighborhood residents about the informal neighborhood meeting.

At this point, you have already talked to the school and to neighbors who would like to see something done. Now it is time to prepare for a meeting to provide information to interested persons and to organize the program planning.

- Send a letter to everyone in your neighborhood explaining KidsWalk-to-School and announcing the informational meeting; a sample letter is provided in Tool A on p. 53. Include people who do not have children because the program will affect the entire neighborhood.
- Post fliers throughout the neighborhood announcing the meeting. Get children involved by allowing them to design and distribute the fliers. Make sure you consult neighborhood rules on posting fliers within the community.
- Ask people in person or by telephone to attend the meeting.

Table 1. Potential Partnering Organizations

Partnering organizations	Ways they can help
School, PTA, teachers, administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a meeting place (classroom) • Provide resources (copy machine and fax machine) • May assist with school publicity • May provide motivation
Local health departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be a good source of information and support • May adopt the project or help you develop your program
Police department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas of loitering, high crime, trouble traffic spots, etc. • Present a seminar on traffic and pedestrian safety • Provide traffic and pedestrian booklets for parents and children • Help develop a crime watch program in your area • Help control traffic • Set up crossing guards during the commute to and from school • Enforce traffic laws in your community
Local transportation department, traffic engineering division, department of public works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource for transportation statistics • Responsible for improving the safety features and walking/ bicycling routes (such as sidewalks) to and from schools • Provide funding
Local & state politicians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support • Develop supportive policies or legislation



Atlanta, Georgia
Police officer's on bicycles volunteered to ride beside children from Mary Lin Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia.

- Put a notice in your neighborhood newsletter or local paper.
- If your neighborhood already has a formal neighborhood organization that meets regularly, this is a great way to introduce the program, announce a meeting of the community, and ask for program volunteers.

2. Hold an informal neighborhood meeting.

Present the KidsWalk-to-School program to your neighbors.

Be prepared to discuss concerns that members of your community may have about the program. Be positive and look for solutions to concerns together as a community.

At the informal meeting

- Assign tasks that need to be completed during Step Three: Assess (pp. 11–13). Write down the names of people who are willing to volunteer for each task and agree on a reasonable target date for completing the task.

	<u>Volunteer(s)</u>	<u>Date to be completed</u>
1. Distribute the walk-to-school survey:		
• make copies of survey	_____	_____
• give the survey to neighborhood parents	_____	_____
2. Obtain a map of your community	_____	_____
3. Carry out a Walkable Routes to School Survey:		
• organize neighborhood walkability assessment	_____	_____
• participate in the neighborhood walkability assessment	_____	_____
• work with an official at your local public works department to discuss how to fix problems identified on the walkability survey.	_____	_____
4. Examine the results of the surveys:		
• key the map using results of the walk-to-school survey and the walkability survey	_____	_____
• develop a participant roster	_____	_____
• contact volunteers	_____	_____
5. Prepare results to present at the planning meeting	_____	_____

Not everyone will volunteer to help, but assume that everyone would like to help—ask for a skill they have or offer to teach them how to do a certain task.

- b. List the resources needed for these and future tasks related to the program and plan ways to get them. Some people may not be able to volunteer their time, but they may be interested in providing computers, fax machines, copy machines, or names of other people who may help.
- c. Pick a time, date, and place for the planning meeting.

Step Three: Assess

Gathering information about your community will help you develop a walk-to-school program that fits your neighborhood's needs. The following tasks will help you gather this information.

1. Provide a walk-to-school survey to parents.

Distribute the walk-to-school survey (Tool B, p. 54) to everyone in your neighborhood; mail it, go door-to-door and meet with neighbors to ask them the questions on the survey in person (this is particularly useful if you are working with limited resources and it is difficult to make copies of the survey for everyone in the neighborhood), or hand it out at the informal meeting (Step Two). To ensure that you get a sufficient response, it is a good idea to specify a deadline for returning the surveys.

Results of the walk-to-school survey can be used to

- demonstrate a need for a walk-to-school program;
- gain information about how to structure your program to meet the needs of each child and family;
- provide information about barriers to program participation, safety concerns, and the location of families; and
- compare with future survey results (ideally, the survey can be conducted again at the end of the school year to see how many people have changed the way they travel to school since the KidsWalk-to-School program began).

2. Obtain a map of the neighborhood and school area.

It is best to work with your county or city planning, public works, or transportation office to obtain a good community map. In addition to this map, look at maps from parks and recreation offices, local bicycle shops, and auto clubs—each one may tell you something different about your community. When contacting your local planning, public works, or transportation offices let them know your neighborhood is conducting a survey. Find out if they have staff, such as a pedestrian coordinator, who can help look at the walkability of your neighborhood.



Sidewalks with cracked, uneven pavement and no ramp make it difficult for strollers and wheelchairs to cross.

3. Take a walk around the neighborhood and the school to assess safety and walkability.

- a. When you assess the walkability
 - Get together with other parents, neighbors, and children and use the Walkable Routes to School Survey (see Tool C, p. 57) to evaluate the walking and bicycling routes from your community to the school.

- Walk with a stroller, wheelchair, or wagon to help determine whether the path is accessible for parents with young children and persons who may use wheelchairs or walkers.
 - Get young people and older adults to help with the walkability survey. They may see problems that others may miss.
 - Invite the media along for your walk. Point out issues that concern the safety of your neighborhood.
- b. Once the Walkable Routes to School Survey has been completed, meet with the appropriate person at the local public works department.
- Discuss the problems identified and any others the public works official noticed.
 - Talk about how these problems can be fixed.
 - Secure a commitment of appropriate timelines for fixing problems.
 - It is best to follow-up this meeting with a letter identifying the problems discussed and any corrective actions that were agreed upon.
- c. Meet the public works official in your neighborhood to walk along the route to school and point out concerns you identified while completing the Walkable Routes to School Survey.

For information and advice on how to make your route to school more walkable and how to deal effectively with elected officials and engineering and design professionals, refer to Working with Elected Officials on p. 31, Promoting the KidsWalk-to-School Program Through Policies on p. 33, Funding for KidsWalk-to-School Programs on p. 35, and Traffic Calming on p. 39.

4. Use the results of the Walkable Routes to School Survey and the Walk-to-School Survey to plan your walk-to-school program.

- a. Use color-coded markings on the map to indicate
- homes of children who will be participating in the program or go to the school;
 - safe street crossings, bus stops, bicycle paths, walkways; and
 - dangerous areas (unsafe crossings, gang hang-outs, drug dealing corridors, etc.).
- b. Identify potential routes to and from school on the map that are safe and convenient.
- c. Add the number of children who walk or ride a bicycle, school bus, public bus, or train, automobile, or other vehicle to and from school.
- d. Develop a participant roster that contains names, telephone numbers, addresses, ages, and grade levels of children in the neighborhood. *The ages of the children will help you determine an appropriate adult-to-child ratio.*
- e. Contact volunteers who responded that they would like to help with the walk-to-school program and ask them how they would like to contribute. Ask them to attend the program planning meeting to learn more about what needs to be done and how they can help.

Got survey results?
You're ready to
make some plans!



A partnership between the Department of Public Works and the Department of Education in Howard County, Maryland, has resulted in the installation of miles of new sidewalks that enable students to walk to and from school safely instead of riding a school bus. Before these sidewalks were installed, students who lived within walking distance of school rode a bus for safety reasons. The lack of sidewalks also prevented parents from walking their children to school on evenings and weekends to use playgrounds, basketball courts, and fields located on or near school grounds. In addition to improving child safety, the sidewalks allow other members of the community to walk, jog, or bicycle through their neighborhood and to walk to nearby recreational areas and shopping centers.

Step Four: Plan

1. Hold a KidsWalk-to-School program planning meeting.

At the program planning meeting

- a. Present results of the neighborhood walkability survey and the walk-to-school survey.
- b. Define objectives or goals for your walking program.

Examples of some objectives you may want to adopt are to increase the number of children in the neighborhood who walk to and from school from 3 to 10 children, to plant trees along the route to school, and to contact the Department of Public Works about putting in more street lights.

- c. Set priorities and deadlines for your action plan. Use the results of the neighborhood walkability survey and discussions with the public works department to develop an action plan for correcting walkability concerns.
 - Do not plan to tackle every problem at once.
 - Identify the issues that need immediate action, and then prioritize the others.
 - Make sure deadlines are reasonable.

You may want to consider making small changes immediately, such as adding traffic signs, crossing guards, and pavement markings, and removing graffiti. Long-term changes, such as getting sidewalks, may require more effort and time and should be prioritized as long-term goals.

- d. Assign tasks to volunteers. Write down the names of people willing to volunteer for each task and agree on a reasonable target date for completing the task.

	<u>Volunteer(s)</u>	<u>Date to be completed</u>
• Set up a committee to stay on top of the action plan for correcting walkability concerns identified in the walkability survey	_____	_____
• Set up a committee to discuss safety measures	_____	_____
• Organize an adult leaders' schedule	_____	_____
• Organize a practice walk	_____	_____
• Plan a kickoff (Step Five: 1)	_____	_____
• Evaluate the program (Step Six)	_____	_____

Older people in the community are ideal volunteers for the KidsWalk-to-School program. They are usually enthusiastic about participating in something that benefits the community and children and are more likely to be home during the times that children would be walking to and from school.

- e. Plan your time.
- f. Send all participants an organizational chart that includes the tasks, who will complete them, and when they will be completed. Contact information for all participants should be included with the chart.

2. Decide what safety precautions must be taken.

Use information from the Safety Tips (see p. 37), your local police department, and your local SAFE KIDS coalition to consider safety precautions for your walk-to-school program. The following are a few to consider:

- a. Decide how many adults are needed to supervise the children walking to and from school. A good ratio is one adult per six children, but with younger children (ages 4–6) you may want to keep a ratio of one adult per three children, and with older children (10 and older) you may be able to have a larger ratio. Each situation is different and depends on the children who participate. A very large group may be divided into sections.
- b. You can ask parents to wear a specific badge or tag identifying them as an adult leader of that day's walk to school.
- c. Plan what to do if a child must stay after school or misses the group to walk home. Adult leaders should be advised to never let a child leave school with anyone else unless the parent has provided the leader with instructions to do so.
- d. Adult leaders should learn pedestrian safety rules so that they can demonstrate appropriate behavior to the group of children and be aware of possible dangers when walking. Organizations that may be able to provide pedestrian safety training are your local department of transportation, police department, health department, or SAFE KIDS Coalition.



Seattle, Washington
Children of Bryn Mawr Elementary School walked to school on National Walk Our Children to School Day while waving yellow flags so they would be more visible to motorists.

- e. Adult leaders must remember that they are setting an example for the children and should model appropriate safety habits. For example, adult leaders should actually turn their heads from left to right to left instead of just moving their eyes back and forth as experienced walkers often do before crossing.
- f. Before you start you may want to remind neighborhood residents that the KidsWalk-to-School program will begin soon.
 - Send them the mapped route the children will be walking to and from school.
 - Ask them to take particular caution as they drive during the morning and afternoon hours when children will be walking to and from school.
- g. It may alleviate some concerns if adult leaders agree to undergo a voluntary background check. Contact your local law enforcement agency on background check rules and procedures.



Susan Beeching of Atlanta, Georgia, and her two children meet 3 other children at the corner of their street and walk to school as a group daily.

3. Organize adult leaders' schedules.

Use the information from the parent survey to find out which parents want to lead a walk to school. You may suggest that these volunteers meet separately to work out schedules and develop a calendar. The following several issues should be considered:

- a. Where should the children wait for the pickup? At the end of their driveway, in the lobby of their apartment building, at a specific bus stop, or another location?
- b. Where will the children meet at the end of the school day for the walk home?
- c. Who will serve as a backup when an adult leader is unable to walk at the last minute, and how will these changes be communicated?
- d. What will you do in case of severe weather? Similar programs have continued to operate even if it is raining or snowing, but on days when the weather becomes potentially hazardous, you should reconsider walking.
- e. How long will the group wait for a participant before continuing the walk?
- f. What is inappropriate behavior and what are the consequences?

4. Send out parental consent forms.

Check with the school to find out specific rules on its parental consent policies.

Your neighborhood may also want parents to sign a parental consent form (see Tool D, p. 59), which informs parents about the program and any potential risks. By signing the form, parents are simply giving permission for their child to participate in the walk-to-school program.

5. Conduct a practice walk to and from school.

Children, parents, and adult leaders should do a practice walk to and from school. You may decide to schedule the practice walk on a weekend or evening so all parents and children can

To help make walks safe and comfortable—

- Encourage children to wear bright or fluorescent colors during the day and reflector tape on their backpacks or jackets during darker hours of the day.
- Bring along a wagon to carry the children's belongings.
- Encourage children to wear comfortable shoes and clothing appropriate for the temperature and weather conditions (see Program Variations, p. 21).
- In warmer climates it may be advisable for children to carry a water bottle.
- Remind children to eat a balanced breakfast to help provide the energy they need for optimum physical performance.
- Adult leaders may want to carry a cellular telephone to use in emergencies.

participate. This practice will

- determine how long it takes to get to school;
- identify any problems that might occur;
- allow you to correct problems before the kickoff day;
- enable parents to show their children what behavior they expect each day during the walk; and
- provide an opportunity for participants to meet each other.

Step Five: Implement

1. Sponsor a KidsWalk-to-School kickoff event.

A kickoff event is a great way to get people excited about and to celebrate a new program. Some suggestions for a KidsWalk-to-School kickoff event include:

- Inviting members of the community, such as local law enforcement officers or local celebrities, to participate in the event and walk to school with your group.
- Providing muffins and juice at the meeting spot for the walk to school as well as handouts, such as reflector badges, for the children.
- Sending out a press release (see Tool E, p. 60), invite members of the media to be present at the kickoff, and prepare a story on your KidsWalk-to-School program—this coverage may encourage others to begin programs in their neighborhoods.



*Alexandria
Avenue Elementary
School National Walk Our
Children to School Day,
October 1999*

On National Walk Our Children to School Day, the children in Oakland, California, walked to school with Mayor Elihu Harris. The children in Las Vegas, Nevada, shared refreshments with then-Governor Bob Miller. In Silver Spring, Maryland, McGruff the Crime Dog[®] walked to school with the children of East Silver Spring Elementary School.



National Walk Our Children to School Day is a great time to kick off your program! For more information on the National and International Walk Our Children to School Days see the Resources section under Partnership for a Walkable America on p. 47 or The University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center on p. 44.

Step Six: Evaluate

1. At the end of each term, evaluate your program.

- a. Ask students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and other groups involved with KidsWalk-to-School what they think of the program. What do they like and what do they think can be done better? Collect the success stories and use them in a newsletter or an update letter to send to your partnering organizations (e.g., school and public works departments).
- b. Fill out the KidsWalk-to-School evaluation form (see Tool F, p. 61). Use this evaluation to see how your program is working and how to improve it.

2. Keep an eye on the progress of your program.

- a. Monitor and address participants' concerns and revise routes, objectives, and strategies as necessary. Why is this important?
 - To confirm that the program is meeting its goals and objectives.
 - To identify successes and problems.
 - To generate additional support for the program.
 - To help others who are planning a KidsWalk-to-School program.
- b. Keep the school and other partnering organizations informed about participation, problems, and improvements to the KidsWalk-to-School program.

Step Seven: Look to the Future

1. Keep your program going.

- a. Plan for the next school term's program, as children will be graduating elementary or middle school. New parent organizers and leaders will be needed.

- b. When new school terms begin, create a feeling of excitement among the walkers by planning a special outing or doing something special on the first day back.

After the KidsWalk-to-School program is under way, it is important to keep morale high and motivate participants, especially as the weather becomes less pleasant. To keep the neighborhood excited about the program, it might help to include daily activities or weekly and monthly contests (see *Having Fun: Ideas to Generate Children's Enthusiasm* on p. 25). You can also distribute informational letters about the program at parent-teacher conferences or ask the editor of your child's school newsletter to include a section about the program.



Drawing hung outside the office at East Silver Spring Elementary School, Silver Spring, Maryland, to promote walking to school.

Some local organizations may also want to be a part of your KidsWalk-to-School program. For example, check with your local health department, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, or the American Lung Association.


These organizations may be willing to sponsor, provide helpful information, or acknowledge volunteers for participation. The more support a program has, the greater its chance of lasting for a long time. See the Resources section on how to contact these organizations on p. 41.

2. Look for ways to expand your KidsWalk-to-School program.

- a. Promote the success of the KidsWalk-to-School program to other neighborhoods, the school, and the community. Here are some ways to do this:

- Promote the program by word of mouth.
- Include articles in your school's newsletter.
- Post your own newsletter at the school.
- Present your program at the next PTA meeting.
- Ask a local news station to do a story.
- Write an editorial for your local paper. (See *Working with the Media* on p. 29.)

- b. Conduct an informal schoolwide travel-to-school survey to find out how children get to and from school. Request that teachers ask their students to raise their hands to indicate how they got to school each morning for a week; have teachers record the responses and take the results to the administrator's office. You may be surprised at how many children are driven to school and how infrequently they walk. This survey may get your school interested in expanding the program to other neighborhoods that feed the school.



Spread the word to other schools and neighborhoods!

- c. Help other neighborhoods start walk-to-school programs. You can help them organize KidsWalk-to-School programs by guiding them through the specific steps that were difficult, by sharing ideas that were useful, and by explaining how you overcame barriers. Remember that every neighborhood is different and will have different barriers and successes.

3. Planning the program on a larger scale.

You may want to plan a KidsWalk-to-School program for an entire subdivision, school, or school system. Many of the steps for organizing a larger scale program are similar to the neighborhood program, but there are several considerations:

- Present the program to your school's PTA.
- Once you have established interest, form a committee that includes representatives from all participating groups, such as teachers, crossing guards, the school principal, and the transportation committee.
- Include all students in the KidsWalk-to-School program and not just the ones who live within walking distance of the school. Everyone can gain from the message of KidsWalk-to-School and participate in different ways. Use some of the other ideas from Program Variations (see p. 21): have schoolwide contests for walking the most in a particular week or month or include pedestrian safety, air pollution reduction, physical activity, and related topics in the school curriculum.
- Have each neighborhood come up with a name for their group that distinguishes them from other walk-to-school groups. Design signs for each group that will help young children identify their group at the end of the school day.

4. Take steps to secure a walkable community far into the future. Establish long-term goals.

Once members of your community experience the neighborhood as pedestrians, they will pull together to change the streets to accommodate children and adults who want to walk and bicycle. Changing the structure and lifestyle of your community can be difficult. It will be necessary to write letters to city council members, county commissioners, and other elected officials. Examples of more extensive changes that can be made include changing the dimensions of an intersection in order to reduce traffic speeds, putting in more sidewalks, altering the structure and flow of traffic, and implementing traffic-calming measures (see Traffic Calming on p. 39). Many organizations offer materials and support to promote the design of healthy, walkable communities (see Resources on p. 41).

The Danish city of Odense launched the Safe Routes to School project in response to the large number of children who were killed in traffic collisions. Community members, teachers, politicians, and civil servants gathered to change dangerous streets into safe streets. Three years later, the number of pedestrians hurt by cars was reduced by 85%.

