



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

# Effective Messaging for Promoting Biking and Walking

## Best Practices and Equity Framing

What is the vision of the world we'd like to communicate when we talk about walking and biking? Generally, we are trying to paint a picture of communities that are designed to make walking and biking safe and convenient; a world that is equitable where everyone has access to healthy transportation options; and a world where people are healthy and thriving, and everyone is respected. A big part of the message we want to convey is that when we work together, we have more power to create change.

Why does how we represent walking and biking matter to the person who is listening to or reading your message? What will convince them that they should care about creating walkable and bikeable communities or that they should walk and bike to their next destination? It's important to understand your audience and understand what motivates them to care or change their behavior. For some people, that might be improving their own health and the health of their community. For others, it might be saving money by walking or biking. Whatever benefit you are boasting to support using human powered transportation, your message should make connections between walking and biking and the outcomes that improve quality of life in a community. Representation matters too. Creating messages and materials that represent your audience and their loved ones helps them make a connection that you are speaking to them directly and that benefits will impact them personally.

Messages about walking, biking, and healthy communities should be framed in positive terms rather than with impending danger or scare tactics. Consider conducting polls or focus groups to understand what issues are important to different types of people in your community (parents, teachers, older adults, young people, low-income people, various races and cultures, and people with disabilities) and tailor your message to address those issues in a positive way. When you ask people about things for which they care and leverage that information with your messages, you improve the chance that what you are conveying connects in a deep and meaningful way.

Another important aspect of messaging is choose the right form of communication and a trusted messenger to deliver your message. The form of communication and the messenger will vary from one community to another. For example, when promoting walking and biking in some communities, newsletters sent home by school staff might be the most trusted form of communication, while in other communities social media messages sent from peer to peer might be more credible.



### Three Key Language Principles to Follow

- **Equity:** Communicate in ways that support respect, fairness, and inclusion for all types of people in communities
- **Normalcy:** Show that walking and biking are used by people to get to where they need to go
- **Simple and Vivid Language:** Create clear pictures that people can imagine easily

In general, polls show that people respond more positively to messages about how walking is safe and healthy and good for vibrant communities, as opposed to environmental benefits.

Using visuals to reinforce that biking and walking is something fun, healthy, and manageable that everybody can do is an effective way for messaging to be inclusive and representative of your audience:

- Show an array of people that make up your community, including a variety of ages, abilities, races, ethnicities, sexes, body types, and family structures.
- Show people walking and biking to a variety of everyday destinations, such as school, work, shopping, the park, and places of worship.
- People should be dressed in various clothing because people walk and bike to a variety of everyday destinations. Think about a person biking to work in the same outfit they wear at the office, children that wear uniforms or casualwear to school, people walking to places of worship, or families walking to go grocery shopping.
- Avoid specialized gear and accessories that aren't necessary for biking to everyday destinations like high-visibility vests, reflective anklets, cycling shorts, etc.
- Consider whether your images challenge stereotypes rather than reinforce them. Show people within different groups as individuals with diverse interests, abilities, and relationships.
- Children on bikes should always be wearing helmets.



## Addressing Real and Perceived Risks

As we think about the messages that encourage people to walk, we also need to consider the different reasons why people don't walk, and how to best overcome those challenges.

In some cases, people are reluctant to walk because there aren't any sidewalks, crosswalks, or street lights in their neighborhood. For others, crime and violence may present real threats to people on the street. In the case of real safety risks, frame the message around the benefits of walking and the solutions that can address the problem. And, if you have already demonstrated why people should care about living in a safe and active community, you can better make the case for adding sidewalks and street lights, or for partnering with community organizations to address crime and violence.

In other cases, it is the perception of risk that causes people to fear walking and biking. It's important to address perceived risks because one way to encourage active transportation is by explaining why people don't need to avoid or fear it. However, sometimes addressing fears head-on is not the most successful approach.

For example, while the data shows that stranger kidnappings are extremely rare, facts and data are unlikely to convince a concerned parent that their child is safe on the walk to school. Instead, focus on messages that show that walking and biking are normal and socially acceptable ways to get around. It's ok to use some numbers and facts, but don't overwhelm your audience – just choose one or two strong facts to back up your message of reassurance and normalcy.

### Framing for Success

*Take this...* “Less than a fraction of 1 percent of kids are abducted by strangers in the US. There's a greater than 99 percent chance your child will be safe walking to school.”

***Reframe like this!*** “Lots of kids walk to school every day in our community. In a neighborhood like ours with sidewalks, traffic signals, and crossing guards, walking is a safe and fun way to get to school.”

*Take this...* “For those that are concerned about crime in our community, children walking and biking to school can be safer if their friends walk and bike too.”

***Reframe like this!*** “We can make our community safer from crime and violence. Our programs support children's safe and active trips to and from school. There are many strategies that can be integrated into efforts to keep children that walk and bike in their communities safe.”



## Including Equity Language and Framing

Many of us want to do better at making our messages and materials about walking and biking more inclusive. We want to message our efforts in a way that lets other people know that walking and biking is for everyone and making it safer to do so for everyone increases equity, especially for those communities that might need safer walking and biking conditions the most. Don't let the fear of saying something wrong stop you from spreading support for walking and biking far and wide. The important thing is trying, speaking up, and correcting our course in real time once we know better.

Some equity frames work better than others depending on the audience's personal views and political stances. The words "equity," "fair," "justice," or "injustice," and others like them, may not be the frames or words that resonate for those who are more conservative, but may be words that are accepted by more progressive individuals. Overall, most people will accept values-based language, which focuses on overarching values we as Americans hold true. When initially introducing equity into communication about walking and biking, focusing on the values of community, personal choices, the benefits extending to everyone as opposed to just specific groups, and opportunities (a more progressive ideal) will generally make your message well-received.

### Examples

- "Health starts where we live, learn, work, and play. Everyone should have the opportunity to choose how they get to everyday important destinations in our community. It's important that everyone has safe places to walk and bike."
- "Walking school buses make it possible for all children to choose active, fun, and safe ways to get to school."
- "Safe Routes to School enables you to have a choice in how your children get to school. Whether your child rides in a car, on the bus, on a bike, or gets to school by foot, sidewalks and bike lanes make it safer for all road users."

Once you have introduced your message within the framework of commonly held values, you may use messages more expressly centered around the concepts of justice and equity. This language can point out how specific groups of people, such as people who have historically been marginalized, people of color, and low-income people, would benefit from safe places to walk and bike. You can also frame access to sidewalks and bike lanes as a human right, because everyone has the right to get around their communities safely.

### Examples

- "Everyone deserves to be safe as they walk and bike to their destinations. Low-income communities and communities of color are especially at risk of injury and death because of historical disinvestment. We can make this right. We can prioritize creating safer places to walk and bike in these communities."
- "Safe Routes to School initiatives benefit all children, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others."
- "Safe Routes to School projects/biking and walking projects are essential to addressing the needs of communities and populations which have historically been marginalized."
- "People in low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to walk and bike to everyday destinations and are often using walking and biking out of need, rather than for recreation. People in low-income communities and communities of color also have considerably higher injury and fatality rates from traffic crashes, many times due to years of disinvestment in safe places to walk and bike."

## Another Way to Say It

Here are some suggestions for commonly used phrases and their alternatives. Also note that as our society changes and evolves, our language does too. So be prepared for groups to periodically introduce new language to describe themselves that better fits their identity, and adjust your language accordingly.

Instead of saying	Better alternative	Context
Bicyclists and pedestrians	People walking and biking	These are common examples of how you can replace jargon used by planners, engineers, and advocates with everyday language that people will relate to. You may want to substitute or add “rolling” instead of “biking” to include all things that roll like bikes, wheelchairs, scooters, skateboarders, etc.
Infrastructure, bike facilities	Sidewalks, bike lanes, safe crossings	
Mode/mode share	The ways kids get to school	
Active transportation	Biking and walking (or rolling)	
Non-infrastructure programs	Encouragement and education programs	
MPOs (metropolitan planning organizations)	Regional transportation planning agencies	
There’s an obesity epidemic	Our communities aren’t supporting healthy kids	Frame the problem as a community, not individual, responsibility, using language that has been shown to encourage people to move towards action.
Accident	Crash	Almost all crashes stem from bad driver behavior or poor street design and are not accidents.
Minorities	Communities/people of color	Identify specific demographic groups if possible.
Handicapped people, disabled people	People with disabilities	Use inclusive, humanizing language that puts people first. Asking is a great thing to do in this instance. How does the community/individual prefer to be described? However, be aware that groups may use language internally that they don’t want outsiders using. Also be aware that people within a given group may have different preferences.
Vulnerable or impoverished or poor or high-need communities	Low-income communities Communities of color Communities that have been made vulnerable by disinvestment	
The elderly/seniors	Older adults	
Gays or homosexuals—don’t use as a noun	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer community (LGBTQ)	
Men and women	People of all genders	
Individuals/populations	People/residents	

