



Safe Routes
to School
National
Partnership

Effective Messaging for Promoting Biking and Walking Best Practices and Media Inventory



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 this vision matter to the person who is listening to your message? What will convince them that they should care about creating walkable and bikeable communities? 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. Your message should make connections between active transportation and broader outcomes that improve quality of life in the community.

Messages about walking, biking, and healthy communities should be framed in positive terms rather than with fearmongering 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) and tailor your message to address those issues in a positive way.

Choose a trusted messenger to deliver your message. This person will vary from one community to another. For example, in some

communities, a physician may be the most trusted spokesperson, while in other communities a nurse would have more credibility.

Use visuals to deliver the message that biking and walking is something fun, healthy, and manageable that normal people can do:

- Show an array of people that make up your community, including a variety of ages, abilities, races, ethnicities, sexes, body types, and family structures.
- People should be dressed in normal clothes. Think about a person biking to work in the same outfit they wear at the office or to go grocery shopping.
- Avoid specialized gear and accessories that aren't necessary, like high visibility vests, reflective anklets, etc.
- Show people walking and biking to a variety of everyday destinations, such as school, work, shopping, the park, and places of worship.
- Children on bikes should always be wearing helmets.

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.

Three Key Language Principles to Follow

- **Normalcy:** Show that walking and biking are normal activities that normal people do
- **Simple and Vivid Language:** Create clear pictures in people's heads
- **Equity:** Communicate in ways that show respect for differences among people in our communities and support for fairness

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.

Instead of saying 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.”

Say 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.”

Say This...	Not That...	Context
People walking and biking	Bicyclists and pedestrians	These are common examples of how you can replace jargon with everyday language that people will relate to. You may want to substitute or add “rolling” for “biking” to include wheelchair users, skateboarders, and others.
Sidewalks, bike lanes, safe crossings	Infrastructure, bike facilities	
How kids get to and from school	Mode share	
Biking and walking (or rolling)	Active transportation (OK to use internally but may be confusing to the wider community)	
Encouragement and education programs	Non-infrastructure programs	
Regional transportation planning agencies	MPOs (metropolitan planning organizations)	
Our communities aren't supporting healthy kids	There's an obesity epidemic	Frame the problem as a community, not individual, responsibility, using language that has been shown to encourage people to move towards action.
Crash	Accident	Almost all crashes stem from bad driver behavior or poor street design and are not accidents.
Communities/people of color	Minorities	Identify specific demographic groups if possible. Use inclusive, humanizing language that puts people first. A good rule of thumb: follow the lead of the groups you are talking about. (However, be aware that groups may use language internally that they don't want outsiders using.)
People with disabilities	Handicapped people, disabled people	
People who are low-income	Poor people/communities	
Older adults	The elderly/seniors	
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer community (LGBTQ)	Gays or homosexuals—don't use as a noun	
People	Individuals/populations	

Delivering the Message: Paid, Earned, and Social Media

There are all kinds of media channels available, but the most effective campaigns may use a combination of paid, earned, and social media to disseminate the message to a wide audience, bolster its credibility, and reinforce positive behaviors via peer networks. There are advantages and disadvantages to each channel.

Paid media

Examples: Print, television, web, and radio ads, PSAs, billboards, bus wraps

Pros: Paid media can reach a wide audience and can be targeted to achieve the highest impact. For example, you might identify transit riders as a group of people who would be more receptive to messages about walking or biking compared to people who drive, and reach them with ads on buses, trains, and transit stops.

Cons: Can be cost-prohibitive.

Earned media

Examples: News stories or op-eds

Pros: A news story about the benefits of walking or an op-ed written by a credible person in favor of walkable communities lends legitimacy to the message.

Cons: The news cycle moves quickly and messages can be overshadowed by other pressing stories.

Social media

Examples: Videos, infographics, memes, or messages designed to be shared via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks

Pros: Cost-effective way to share messages, resources, and information.

Cons: Studies show that peer networks are more likely to reinforce someone's existing values and norms than to expose them to new viewpoints or ideas. A message about the benefits of biking to work might go viral among people who already bike to work, and may be successful at convincing people who have considered it to give it a try. However, it is unlikely to gain traction among people who are ambivalent or opposed to the idea.



Common Campaign Themes

In general, many media campaigns for walking, biking, and active communities fall into one of three categories. The same messaging guidelines outlined above apply to each category, but the message is refined based on the goal of the campaign. In this section, we highlight successful examples of campaigns in each category.

Rally Support

Build community support for an initiative, a new policy, or a general concept, such as Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, or walkable communities.

Change Behavior

Convince people to walk, bike, or take transit instead of drive. The campaign might aim to increase participation in a specific event, like Bike to Work Day or Walk to School Day, or to change behavior on a larger scale, such as encouraging more short trips in the community to be taken by foot or bike.

Safety Campaign

Explain the risks of unsafe behaviors like distracted driving or ignoring traffic signs, and encourage everyone to be attentive and respectful on the road.

Safety campaigns should be careful to avoid placing blame or casting the brunt of responsibility on people walking and biking. It's easy for drivers to want to blame people walking or bicycling – since these ways of getting around are less common, drivers are less sympathetic to the conditions in which people walk and bicycle, while they are more likely to overlook dangerous driving behaviors that they see frequently or engage in themselves. Though unsafe walking or bicycling behavior can certainly cause a crash or injury, it is vastly less likely to cause serious harm than unsafe operation of a motor vehicle that weighs thousands of pounds and may go 40 miles an hour on local streets. Examples of scenes from some safety campaigns that stigmatize people walking and biking and can encourage drivers to provide less respect and safety for walking and bicycling:

- A person who is walking while texting causing a crash
- People on bikes running red lights
- An argument between a person driving and a person biking

These messages can cause drivers to see people walking and biking as the problem; that is likely to make drivers less cautious of people biking and walking, which is counterproductive. Instead, safety messages should focus on encouraging people driving to pay attention and respect people walking, biking, and taking transit.

MEDIA INVENTORY

We've collected a variety of examples of campaigns of different types with positive and constructive messages. These may inspire you or give you a starting place as you create your own messages.

Theme: Rally Support

GoBoston 2030

Who: City of Boston
When: 2015-present
Media: [Website](#), [videos](#)

Imagine Boston 2030 is the city's campaign promoting the 2030 master plan, and GoBoston 2030 focuses on transportation planning.

American Planning Association PSAs

When: 2015
Media: [Radio](#), [video](#)

The American Planning Association offers a suite of radio and television PSAs for communities promoting active living, planning for health, safe streets, and the benefits of healthy communities.

Complete Streets PSA

Who: Central Florida SRTS
When: 2012
Media: [Video](#)

PSA identifying the need for Complete Streets to make it safe to walk to school.

Safe Routes to School/Walk to School Day

Who: Oregon Metro
When: 2015
Media: [Video](#)

This video shows kids explaining why they love walking and biking to school, with a companion [infographic](#).

Safe Routes to School Marin County

When: 2015
Media: [Video](#)

This student-made video showcases clips of kids walking and bicycling to school to promote the Safe Routes to School message.

Eat Smart Move More NC

When: 2015
Media: [Web](#), [print](#), [video](#), [billboards](#)

This campaign has a variety of examples of ads and videos promoting walking that were informed by the Every Body Walk message testing and support the Surgeon General's 2015 call to action on walking.

Theme: Change Behavior

Alameda County I Bike! Campaign

Who: Alameda County
When: 2016
Media: [Print ads and graphics](#)

This campaign does a good job of making biking and walking seem fun, worthwhile, and normal.

GoByBikeSD

Who: San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)
When: 2015-present
Media: [Website](#), printed ads, billboards, bus wraps

With a goal of encouraging short trips around San Diego, this campaign offered tips and resources to new riders, including a bike mapping tool, a [Riding Tips fact sheet](#), and information about classes and workshops. The website also featured links to resources about the Regional Bike Plan and other bike projects and programs.

Bike to Work PSA

Who: OC PICH
When: 2016
Media: [Video](#)

This 30-second PSA frames biking to work as a healthy, enjoyable alternative to driving. It casts the car commute in an unfavorable light, showing clogged freeways and polluted skylines.

SF Bay Area Bike to Work Day PSA

When: 2014
Media: [Video](#)

Shots of SF Bay Area residents riding bikes in scenic areas in the Bay Area, set to upbeat music. There is no voiceover narration or on-screen messaging.

Biking to Work PSA

Who: Denver Region Council of Governments (DRCOG)
When: 2014
Media: [Video](#)

Main message: Biking to work saves you money, makes you healthy, makes you happy, and it's good for the environment. PSA starts off by framing driving as a tedious, negative task, followed by the contrasting picture of biking to work. Promotes regional route planner "Way to Go" and has tips for new bike commuters.

Why You Should Bike to Work

Who: British Columbia Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure

When: 2015

Media: [Video](#)

Message: Encouraging new bike commuters to try biking to work.

Narrator is bike coordinator/BC resident. Shares tips and resources for new commuters.

Theme: Safety Campaigns

Visuals play an important role in de-emphasizing the perceived risks of walking or biking. An image showing a person walking on the sidewalk on a tree-lined street filled with other people, or biking in a separated bike path, conveys a safer and more positive message about active transportation than an image of someone walking in a deserted area or biking in a narrow bike lane next to high-speed traffic.

We're All Drivers

Who: Bike Cleveland

When: 2015

Media: [Videos](#), [website](#)

The goal of this campaign was to spread the message that “people on bikes come from all walks of life and they deserve the same courtesy and respect on the road as they do anywhere else.” The campaign features several people from the community of various ages, occupations, and races. One video features an older adult woman who is a leader at a local place of worship bicycling in a skirt. The voiceover message communicates that she deserves to be able to get to work and home safely on her bike, and encourages drivers to be attentive and leave adequate room while passing people on bikes.

Drive With Care

Who: Bike Pittsburgh

When: 2014-2015

Media: [Website](#), 36 transit shelters and billboards, 100 additional ads on sides of Port Authority buses, social media, web app

Similar to the We're All Drivers, the goal of this campaign showcased a variety of community members who ride bikes and encouraged drivers to pay attention. By portraying bicycling as a normal activity done by familiar people, the campaign urges people to respect people on bikes and drive with care.

