

Cycling to School

While nearly all children have bikes, less than one per cent cycle to school. It's not because they don't want to. According to a survey by the National Children's Bureau, 31% of pupils want to ride to school.

So what's stopping them? The main barriers are concerns about cycling in traffic, primarily from parents but also from children, and about the security of the bike at school. Some children also worry about the amount they have to carry to school each day.

Where these issues are addressed the results can be dramatic. At Kesgrave High School in Suffolk, 61% of pupils cycle to school – as many as in Holland or Denmark. With cycle training, better facilities, and a pro-active attitude from the school, other schools could emulate that success.

Getting there

Cycle training is vital in producing competent, confident cyclists. It enables pupils to cycle in from all across the local area, not just along traffic-free corridors such as off-road tracks. There's always a road between two points, whereas access to cycle routes depends on where you live. Bikeability (<http://www.bikeability.org.uk/>) is the National Standard Cycle Training programme, with courses available in most areas of England.

That's not to say traffic-free cycle routes aren't popular with parents and pupils, or that they can't have a big impact on numbers cycling to school. They do. Cycle-path charity Sustrans is doing excellent work in providing such routes (see <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/what-we-do/links-to-schools> and <http://www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk>), as well helping foster a pro-cycling culture at schools, particularly through the Bike It programme (<http://www.sustrans.org.uk/what-we-do/bike-it>).

If cycle routes are not available or not convenient, don't judge the journey to school by the route you might take in the car. There's quite likely a better one for cycling, using back streets or traffic-calmed roads.

Luggage for school journeys can be heavy. A school bag has to be portable on the bike and on foot around school. For light loads, a small backpack or shoulder bag can be okay. Heavier loads need to go on a rear carrier rack. Spring-loaded clips or single luggage elastics aren't really secure enough to hold a heavy school bag or briefcase safely on top of a rack. Alternatively, a single pannier with a shoulder strap would work. That could be a dedicated office pannier or simply a universal pannier. A second universal pannier could be used for sports gear/packed lunch/rain gear, assuming there's a locker available for your child to store it in at school.

At school

A few schools actively discourage cycling. Legally, schools cannot stop children arriving by bike. The choice of how to get to school and the liability for the journey (for anything other than transport organised by the school itself) falls to you, as parent. However, schools can ban bikes on the premises, which makes cycle parking a problem.

Cycle parking has to be convenient, secure and in view from the main building(s) to prevent vandalism and theft. Rickety bikesheds won't do. The bikes need to be protected from the weather and supported securely by a proper stand, not a wheel-bending concrete or wire slot. For more ideas on cycle parking that works, download the Cycle Parking for Schools information sheet from Sustrans

Links to School webpage (<http://www.sustrans.org.uk/what-we-do/links-to-schools>). For assistance on how to fund it see <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/what-we-do/links-to-schools/l2s-cycle-parking-grants>.

Your child will need a lock, of course. There will be a trade off between portability, price and weight. A U-lock that's at least Sold Secure Bronze is recommended. Remind your child to remove anything that isn't fixed to the bike when it's parked.

Schools vary widely in their support for cycling. Those that are making the biggest strides in raising the numbers of children arriving by bike have one thing in common: there's always someone pushing for improvements. That someone could be you. Maybe you could press for lockers or cycle parking to be installed at school, if they're not available? Maybe you could become an accredited cycle instructor? It's a four-day course, with two assessed sessions afterwards. Funding may be available to pay for some or all of it (see <http://www.bikeability.org.uk/>). Also worth a look is CTC's 'Right to ride to school' campaign (<http://www.ctc.org.uk/desktopdefault.aspx?tabid=5301>).