Everyone’s Doing It: The Use of Positive Peer Pressure  
By Kelechi Uzochukwu  
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Peer pressure doesn’t all have to be bad. Studies show that it can be good, too! Kids can encourage each other into activities that will improve their health and social life and make them feel good about themselves.

One study by Salvy et al. (2007) examined the relationship between social context (the presence of peers, friends, and family members) and physical activity intensity for overweight and lean girls and boys. The study, which comprised only preteens (ages 12-14), found that children were more likely to engage in intense physical activity when in the company of their peers or close friends. Furthermore, overweight children engaged in greater physical activity when in the presence of peers than did their healthy-weight counterparts. In fact, the presence of peers turned out to be the only significant predictor of the children’s activity intensity in this study. In a more recent study, Zhu and Lee (2009) corroborate these earlier findings, showing that positive peer influences (other children’s and parents’ regular walking behaviors) promote walking to and from school.

But sadly, overweight children spend more time alone than healthy-weight children because negative peer pressure deters them from socializing and exercising. They are more likely to avoid physical activity in order to avoid peer victimization (Faith et al., 2002) and peer rejection (Storch et al., 2007), and are thus less likely to walk and bicycle to school. These kids are then more likely to fill their time with unhealthy activities, such as, junk food snacking and excessive TV watching (Salvy et al., 2007).

Fortunately, there are ways to combat these negative behaviors with positive peer pressure. For example, parents can encourage peer involvement by increasing their children’s interaction time with the peers they are already comfortable with. They can also create opportunities for their children to interact with unfamiliar peers that their children do not feel threatened by (Salvy et al., 2009).

All in all, these studies find that friendships among children are rather powerful. They highlight the importance of peer relationships in physical activity and childhood obesity. Thus, when attempting to increase the activity level of school-age children, do not overlook this key component of friendship.

Can you recall a time when a friend pushed you to do something good for yourself or to avoid doing something that would have been bad for you? In the same way, allow your children to be the positive peer pressure that encourages other children (and adults) to be more physically active.

More research blogs available at the Safe Routes to School National Partnership website: http://saferoutespartnership.org/blog/kelechi-uzochukwu
We’ve Got You Covered: Geographic-Specific Research

By Kelechi Uzochukwu

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Since Safe Routes to School became a federally funded program, it has experienced tremendous support nationwide. Parents are encouraging more physically active lifestyles. Students are engaged in more walking and bicycling to school. Schools and local governments are establishing policies and infrastructure that enable safe walking and bicycling.

Scholars are also contributing to the success of this movement. As researchers examine Safe Routes to School programs in different geographic areas, scholars have contributed to the diffusion of Safe Routes to School knowledge and innovations across the country. As a result, no matter where you live, there is likely a study that has examined some area-specific concern that you currently may be grappling with.

For example, because of the higher prevalence of obesity in America’s rural areas, Rodriguez and colleagues (2011) sought to understand the impact of physical activity levels on obesity prevalence in these areas. They were able to conclude that reduced physical activity appears to drive the disparity in obesity in the rural population, and thus recommended that physical activity in and outside of school should be initiated in these communities to help abate the prevalence of obesity in adolescents. A study specific to walking to school conducted by Dalton and colleagues (2011) examined the impact of the built environment on rates of active travel to school in two primarily rural states.

In another study, Falb and colleagues (2007) studied Georgia, a southern state that has seen relatively rapid growth. They set out to estimate the percentage of children in Georgia who live within a safe and reasonable walking distance from school and to identify demographic, school, and neighborhood connectivity characteristics associated with the potential to walk to school. In so doing, they were able to make generalizations not only about Georgia, but also about states that had similar growth patterns as that of Georgia. Scholars concluded that high population density, small school enrollment size, and high street connectivity were associated with higher percentages of potential walkers. Furthermore, while few children lived within a safe and reasonable walking distance, this did not reduce how much students valued walking to school. To increase this low percentage of students who walk, the authors recommended educational efforts and changes to the built environment.

Just a few years ago, there was little guidance on how to run a successful Safe Routes to School program. Today, a variety of studies conducted in local and regional settings across the country provide Safe Routes to School advocates with proven strategies for success. More information on this topic can be found on the Practitioner Information page of our website.
Leveling the *Playing Field* for Underserved Communities

By Kelechi Uzochukwu

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Some neighborhoods are more equipped to support active lifestyles than others. Yet, in many of these less equipped neighborhoods, we find higher instances of students who walk or bike to school (Giles-Corti et al., 2011; McDonald, 2008). While neighborhoods with sidewalks, crosswalks, and the like make it easier and more appealing for their residents to be physically active, pedestrians in these less equipped neighborhoods tend to do so out of necessity than leisure. Consequently, they are at greater risk of traffic injuries, a leading cause of childhood mortality globally (Pollack et al., 2012).

Safety and security concerns have become so apparent that Safe Routes to School scholars and advocates have turned their attention to the income disparities in built environments. For example, a 2012 research brief by Bridging the Gap informs us that people living in low-income communities are less likely to have such pedestrian-friendly features as sidewalks, street and sidewalk lighting, marked crosswalks, and traffic calming measures. In a 2011 publication by Active Living Research, the authors synthesized a number of studies that found that racial and ethnic minorities and lower-income people live in communities that do not provide as many built and social environmental supports for physical activity. Rather, they experience more crime and traffic dangers than their more affluent counterparts. Furthermore, in another 2012 research brief by Bridging the Gap, findings indicate that land use laws requiring pedestrian-friendly improvements, active recreation areas, open space, trails and bike lanes are less common in lower- and middle-income communities than those in higher-income communities.

State and local governments can try to address this glaring reality in a number of ways. For instance, Safe Routes to School programs should track the income level of schools and communities that apply for and receive Safe Routes to School funding to assess whether low income schools are being adequately served (Pedroso, 2010). In so doing, they could also determine which approaches produce the best impact in these underserved communities. As another example, cities should prioritize lower-income communities and largely minority communities when creating new neighborhood parks, open spaces and other such destinations for recreational physical activity. Cities and states could also adopt best practices for street designs, zoning, and community plans that create safer pedestrian environments in these low income communities.

More information on this topic can be found on the following webpages:

1. Research Publications and Reports
2. The Influence of the Built Environment on Travel Behaviors
3. Lower-Income Communities
4. Personal Safety

More research blogs available at the Safe Routes to School National Partnership website: http://saferoutespartnership.org/blog/kelechi-uzochukwu
Going Green… Staying Green

By Kelechi Uzochukwu
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Terms like *eco-friendly* and *going green* have become popular buzzwords in today’s environmentally-conscious society. In practically all aspects of our lives, the idea of *living green* has gained traction… and for good reasons. Eco-friendly practices allow us to take better care of our planet as well as our own health.

For example, in a study by Wilson et al. (2007), neighborhood schools had 4.5 times less emissions (of air pollutants and greenhouse gases) than citywide, more auto-dependent schools. In this same study, neighborhood schools (vs. citywide schools) had six times more children walking to school. In another study, Higgins et al. (2005) found that bicycling in lieu of driving for short trips had the potential to reduce gasoline demand up to nearly 35%.

In a recent study, Maizlish et al. (2012) estimate that high levels of active transportation could reduce greenhouse gas emissions up to 14.5% and could lead to up to 13% fewer premature deaths per year and 15% fewer years of life lost from cardiovascular disease and diabetes. A separate study, Pope et al. (2009), found that reductions in air pollution in the 1980s and 1990s (not specific to active transportation) accounted for as much as 15% of the overall increase in life expectancy.

It is well established now that the built environment affects people’s choice to walk, bicycle, or drive (Frank et al. 2006). Therefore, investments in infrastructure that makes non-motorized, active transportation easier and safer should be encouraged. When in place, these policies and practices provide a mechanism by which eco-friendly *trends* can become *standard practices* in our everyday lives.

Two ways you can capitalize on *green* practices are through Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets. Whether your interest in Safe Routes to School is about health or safety, it can reduce fuel consumption and air pollution in the vicinity of schools by increasing students’ access to safe routes and their willingness to walk and bike to school. We are also seeing the passage of Complete Streets policies in numerous states and localities across the nation, which encourage street connectivity and aim to create a comprehensive network for all transportation modes.

Buzzwords come and go, but with movements such as Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets, *green* buzzwords are here to stay.

To access more research studies on this topic, click here.

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