Look Both Ways™

Tips for Effective Safe Routes to School Messaging

✓ Emphasize health benefits of walking and biking.

✓ Focus on the fact that Safe Routes to School programs improve safety for kids who are walking and biking.

✓ Background on Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs: Safe Routes to School programs are collaborative efforts by parents; schools; community leaders; and local, state, and federal governments to improve the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to walk and bike to school. Funding for these programs can be used for both infrastructure projects, such as improvements to sidewalks and roads, and non-infrastructure projects, such as education on walking/biking safety and enforcement of traffic laws.

✓ Safe routes to school projects result in real change in the ways students and parents travel to and from school by incorporating principles of the "SRTS Six E's": Evaluation of the current walking/biking routes near the school/district; Engineering improvements to eliminate barriers to walking and biking such as lack of sidewalks/crosswalks/signage or poorly designed intersections; Education on how to safely walk and bike with traffic; Encouragement of walking and biking through special events and promotions; Enforcement to ensure that traffic laws are obeyed around schools; and Equity to ensure support for safe, active, and healthy opportunities for children and adults in low-income neighborhoods, neighborhoods of color, and beyond.

Safe Routes to School Messages (*Use key messages consistently and repeatedly)

Every child deserves to walk or bike to school safely. We should plan our neighborhoods so they can.

• Schools in some rural communities have found creative ways for kids who take the school bus to also walk part of the distance. For example, they are dropped at off at a park and walk the final distance to school.

• Keeping kids active can help prevent heart disease and diabetes– and people who live in neighborhoods with sidewalks and bike lanes are more active, have cleaner air, and experience fewer car crashes.

• We need safe routes to school in every neighborhood.

• Research shows safe routes to school programs are good for health, the economy, and education.

    • These programs keep our kids active and safe— reducing crashes and helping to prevent diseases like diabetes and heart disease. They even teach our kids important traffic rules.

    • Health care costs go down when neighborhoods invest in safe spaces for people to walk and bike.

    • Active kids are better learners. Students who are physically active on a regular basis have better attendance, behave better in class, and have higher test scores.

Language to Emphasize/Language to Avoid

Messages that resonate best are clear and simple. They use everyday language free of jargon and communicate shared values and emotion. Below you'll find a list of words/phrases Voices for Healthy Kids encourages you to use (left-hand column) when talking about safe routes to school. Language in the right-hand column includes terms and phrases not as easily understood or impactful when looking to engage your audience.

Use This Language	Instead of This Language
✓ Physical activity	✗ Exercise
✓ Neighborhood	✗ Community
✓ People who walk and bike; walking and biking	✗ Pedestrians, bicyclists
✓ Crashes, collisions	✗ Accidents
✓ Sidewalks, cross walks, safe intersections	✗ Built environment, infrastructure
✓ Education on walking and bicycling safety, enforcement of traffic laws	✗ Non-infrastructure projects
✓ Helping children grow up at a healthy weight	✗ Preventing childhood obesity

Tips for Effective Messaging to Support Public Policy Change

1 Connect with supporters.

When communicating to gain support for policy, systems, and environmental changes that help kids grow up at a healthy weight, it is important to use language that will move people to take action. By framing your message in a way that paints a picture of how the current environment makes it difficult, if not impossible, to make healthy choices, you can create a sense of urgency and the need to take action. Make sure to clarify that the change and action you're calling for is about transforming environments to make it easy for people to eat healthy and be physically active and less about creating personal behavior change.

2 Use the right words.

While obesity is a chronic disease, most people still think of it as a personal problem with a personal solution. They believe if someone is obese or overweight, that person just needs to eat less and be more physically active. They don't immediately see the need for public policy solutions. However, when talking about people facing obesity-related diseases like diabetes and heart disease, most people agree that we need to work together to find a solution to the problem. Avoid using "obesity" and instead emphasize the health threats posed by heart disease and/or diabetes.

3 Emphasize choice.

People are most supportive of healthy changes if they don't fear their choices will be limited. When talking about adding healthy options, stress the array of overall choices offered to people, especially parents who we are here to support, so the focus is not on the removal of unhealthy options.

4 Use the right messenger.

Messages are only as strong as the person delivering them. Is the person delivering the message credible? Are they representative of the community most affected? Do they have personal experience related to the issue? Are they respected by the audience? The best messenger needs to be determined for each situation and location. For example, when messaging on health issues, the best messenger could be a doctor, a nurse, or a patient. Make informed decisions about the most culturally appropriate messenger on an issue.

5 Stress consumer education as ONE piece of the puzzle.

People believe education is the best way to encourage behavior change. But helping all children grow up at a healthy weight is a complex challenge and education is only one part of the solution. Reinforce consumer education as key to awareness building about the problem and solutions, but emphasize other initiatives that drive system-wide policy change. For example, with tobacco use, warning labels did a great deal to educate consumers but the change in norms and dramatic drops in smoking rates happened when environmental changes happened like prohibiting the sale to minors and making workplaces smoke-free.

6 Alleviate skepticism and build trust.

People are very skeptical of government and framing our solutions only from that lens can prevent us from getting our message through to key audiences. Introduce policy, systems, and environmental change efforts to the public with words like "services," "resources," "partnerships," as people are more inclined to embrace this terminology instead of "regulations," "mandates," "bans," "funding," and "government."