

Law Enforcement Officer Tips: Addressing Personal Security for Students

Law enforcement officers are often asked to support Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs by helping parents and children address personal security issues such as: stranger danger, bullying, drug dealing, and avoiding crime. Resources and entire programs exist dedicated to these issues, and thus will not be addressed in great detail in this SRTS resource. Rather, the topics will be discussed in a general sense as it relates to parental and student concerns when walking or biking to or from school.

Some parents' concerns about crime will be legitimate, while other fears are not based on reality. Regardless, all fears must be addressed, and not discounted. Law enforcement officers can provide an accurate assessment of the potential risks children face when they walk/bike to school. For this reason it is important to have an officer who is familiar with the local community address these issues.

Tips for addressing parents, educators or students on issues of personal security:

- [Tip #1: Outline Strategies to Address Personal Security.](#)
- [Tip #2: Balance the Risks of Walking and Bicycling with Potential Rewards.](#)
- [Tip #3: Separate Fact From Fiction.](#)
- [Tip #4: Speak From Your Own Experience.](#)
- [Tip #5: Address Problems With Bullying.](#)
- [Tip #6: Provide Parents and Educators Strategies for Addressing Personal Security Issues with Children.](#)

TIP 1: Outline Strategies to Address Personal Security.

- Acknowledge child safety is an emotional topic. Share successful strategies with parents and keep group discussions productive and positive. (For more detail, see [Strategies for Addressing Personal Security](#) at the end of this tip sheet.)
- Inform parents up front that most SRTS programs in elementary schools do not advocate children walking to school alone.^[26]
- Reinforce the need for parental oversight with children walking and bicycling to school. No strategy replaces the role of adults in ensuring the safety of their

child. For guidelines for walking and biking to school discussed by age group, see [Traffic Safety Around Schools: An Officer's guide to Parent Education](#).

- Assure your audience that law enforcement officers and the SRTS committee are aware of people's concerns. Cite examples of the school community's concerns if possible. If you are unaware of specific concerns, ask.
- Describe any real security problems that have been identified, and what specifically has been or will be done to mitigate them. For example, if walking school buses will be part of the program, explain how the presence of parents walking with kids will increase "eyes on the street" and help alleviate problems.

TIP 2: Balance the Risks of Walking and Bicycling with Potential Rewards.

- Balance potential risks associated with walking and bicycling to school with its many rewards.
- Discuss that risks are involved in travel regardless of the mode we use. Many parents who fear the safety of their child walking to school drive their child instead. Traveling in a car, children are at risk of being involved in a traffic collision.
- Address the challenges specific to your community, whether it be high gasoline prices, childhood obesity, air quality or traffic congestion.
 - Increasing gasoline prices:
 - Walking and bicycling are free modes of transportation that we can use. By walking or biking with your child, you can reduce your overall fuel costs.
 - Childhood obesity:
 - Regular commuting by car reduces a child's overall level of physical exercise, thus increasing their susceptibility to obesity and its many related health problems.
 - Quality of overall health: muscle and motor skill development, cardio-respiratory health, blood pressure control and weight management
 - Air quality:
 - Walking and bicycling are free of pollutants. By walking or biking with your child, you can reduce pollution around your homes and schools where idling cars produce harmful emissions.
 - Traffic congestion:

- By walking or biking with your child you are one less vehicle that will be present at pick-up and drop-off time periods. The more that people chose to walk or bike, the less congested the school site will be.
- Stress:
 - Kids today are feeling stress just like adults. exercise releases endorphins into the blood stream which make us feel better, enhance self worth, and contributes to enhanced thinking and learning in school
- Regular commuting by car reduces a child's overall level of physical exercise, thus increasing their susceptibility to obesity and its many related health problems. Ensuring that children and adolescents engage in sufficient levels of physical activity is important for a variety of reasons:
 - cognitive and emotional benefits:
 - developmental benefits: enhances spatial awareness, socialization, development of risk assessment skills, and independence.[\[27\]](#)

TIP 3: Separate Fact from Fiction.

- **Use your local crime data to help parents separate fact from fiction.** Parental fears can be based more on the perception of local crime rates and risks rather than actual crime rates and risks.
- **If available, provide helpful information on local crime trends, any special initiatives of your agency and the results you are getting.** A common fear is that a child will be abducted. In 1999 for example, the chance of a child being a victim of a stereotypical kidnapping (defined as an abduction perpetrated by a stranger and involving transportation of 50 plus miles, a ransom, or the intent to keep the child permanently or murder the child) was one in 62,500. In the same year, the chance of being killed in a vehicular crash was one in 8,000.[\[28\]](#) This information is surprising to many parents, who often assume strangers pose the most danger to children.

TIP 4: Speak From Your Own Experience.

- Provide information and anecdotal evidence from your own experiences, if possible.
- Maintain a positive attitude towards walking and biking to school, they are more likely to as well. Parents are aware that law enforcement officials deal with crime and crashes on a regular basis.
- Repeat information about crime and safety statistics to reinforce the message.
- Focus on pro-active and positive measures parents, children, educators, and law enforcement officers can take to increase safety.

TIP 5: Address Problems with Bullying.

- Provide specific ideas for children on how to interact with bullies in an appropriate manner, as they can be encountered in many aspects of life. Bullying has been a recurring concern of students, schools and parents in schools across the country. While parents routinely focus on concerns with neighborhood predators and potential child abductions, bullying is far more common, especially when adults are not present to supervise behavior. Estimates show that 15 to 20 percent of children experience bullying of some nature.
- Advise parents on techniques children can be taught to deal with bullies, including walking or bicycling with a friend, ignoring or refusing to interact with the bully, and telling a trusted adult about the problem. Trusted adults can include: parents/caregivers; extended family members; crossing guards; school counselors; teachers; school resource officers, etc. All disclosures of potential bullying should be taken seriously and brought up with the school administrators for further assessment.
- Support programs developed by many schools on anti-bullying. Utilize many of the [anti-bullying programs](#) and or [useful resources](#) widely available on this issue.

TIP 6: Strategies for Addressing Personal Security.

- Provide parents and educators tools to help ensure child safety in a SRTS program. Give parents suggestions on how to teach their children safe practices, as well as activities that SRTS programs can implement by working together.
- Suggestions for Parents:
 - Establish "**Walking School Buses**" to organize and help young children arrive to school safely. The "driver" walks along a designated route, on which children can wait for and join the group on its way to school. The leader can help with traffic safety, mediate bullying problems, and watch out for suspicious adults.[link]
 - Establish "**Corner Captains**" in neighborhoods and along established routes to school. A corner captain is a parent, teacher, or other volunteer that is stationed outside at designated locations. They can improve personal security by serving as "eyes on the street" and otherwise supervise during the morning and afternoon. Corner captains may decide to wear a piece of clothing that designates their status to both children and other adults. "Safe Houses" can also be identified.
 - Teach "**Street Smart Skills**" to older students able to walk or bike to school on their own (not recommended before age 10, see *Guidelines*[\[29\]](#)).
 - Encourage parents to discuss with their children the following concepts: awareness of their surroundings, trusting their instincts, and avoidance of strangers.
 - Encourage parents to help their children establish an alternate route home. Children should use this route if they sense suspicious activity on their regular route.
 - Encourage parents to establish safe places children may go in case of an emergency or if they feel they are in danger.
 - Establish a "**Check-in Procedure**" with your children. This may include:
 - the child calling their parents at a specific time to let them know they are safely home
 - the child checking in with a trusted neighbor

This will not only give parents peace of mind on a daily basis, but also quickly communicate to parents that there is a problem if the child hasn't checked-in at the designated time, allowing an earlier response by parents and law enforcement officials.