

TIPS FOR Engaging Middle School Students in Safe Routes to School Programs

SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School



TIP SHEET

Middle school students are very energetic and curious and yet engaging them can be a challenge. They have a new level of independence when it comes to walking and bicycling to school compared to when they were younger, but may be reluctant to take advantage of it because they think it “uncool.” They may also resist walking and bicycling safety advice from adults. How can Safe Routes to School (SRTS) practitioners get these students excited about Safe Routes to School? The secret lies in recognizing and building off of the typical attributes of middle school students:

- A desire for self-expression and self-determination
- A preference for hands-on learning that is personally relevant
- An expanding awareness of social, cultural, and environmental issues
- A growing concern for peer approval
- A sense of awkwardness and self-consciousness associated with the onset of puberty



Students at Hall Middle School in Marin County, California prepare to take the stage for a school assembly on the benefits of green transportation that they helped plan.

The following tips offer ways to use these attributes to engage students in a Safe Routes program. In most cases, these ideas require coordination with the school, so it is a good idea to discuss options with administrators and teachers before getting started.

Tip 1—Provide opportunities for self-expression and self-determination.

- Ask students to design logos, posters, computer animations, and web sites with SRTS messages.
- Put students in charge of planning SRTS-related activities, such as assemblies, fundraisers and publicity campaigns.

Tip 2—Create hands-on learning experiences that are personally relevant.

- Ask students to identify locations where changes like sidewalks or crossing guards would improve walking conditions using GPS devices, digital cameras or checklists for assessing walkability and bikeability.
- Establish a build-a-bike program, where students can learn about bicycle repair, maintenance, and safety by fixing up used or donated bikes, which they then get to keep.
- Encourage students to voice their need for improved walking and biking conditions. Suggest a presentation at a public meeting or a letter writing campaign to local decision-makers.



Middle school students use portable computers, digital cameras, and GPS devices to identify blighted properties and other safety concerns around their schools as part of the Mapping Out a Safer Community Program in Detroit, Michigan.

Tips For Engaging Middle School Students in Safe Routes to School Programs (continued)

Tip 3—Highlight the connection between SRTS and social, cultural, or environmental issues that may be important to students.

- Organize lessons, activities, and events about climate change and the benefits of walking or bicycling for transportation.
- Invite local sports personalities to talk about how walking and biking to school promotes physical fitness and health.

Tip 4—Foster positive interactions between middle school students and their peers and provide opportunities for peer identification and acceptance.

- Start a club with a mission that ties into SRTS, such as an after-school bicycling or environmental club.
- Plan events that emphasize fun but also deliver relevant SRTS messages, such as a “Walk to School Day” or “Walk and Roll Day” celebrating walking and biking to school.
- Develop a cross-age teaching program, where older students teach bicycle and pedestrian safety skills to younger students. High-school students can be recruited to teach middle school students and middle school students might decide to teach elementary school kids.



Alexandria, Virginia's Junior Bicycle Ambassadors demonstrate a turn signal during a Bicycle Rodeo at Hammond Middle School.

Tip 5—Be sensitive to the vulnerability, awkwardness, and self-consciousness that often accompany the middle school years.

- Avoid putting middle school students in situations where they may be exposed to ridicule or embarrassment, such as contests that identify losers on an individual basis or where students are allowed to choose teams.
- Be extremely sensitive when addressing the issue of obesity.