

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Title	Perceptions of London's streets among children and their parents		
Objective	To explore the perceptions of children aged 5-11 & their parents of the streets where they currently walk and play. To explore this audience's barriers to children wanting to walk, or play on street and help inform TfL's new strategy to walking		
Date	25/04/2016	Agency	2CV
Methodology	Desk Research 2 x Expert interviews 14 x in-home family sessions with parents and children that included accompanied walking trips. These sessions were preceded by a brief pre-task designed to encourage participants to think about their environment and how walking fits into it		

Abstract

The majority of walks families make are local, utility walks. Compared to other activities walking is quite a low conscious behaviour and perceived to lack excitement. However, when they do go out and walk, they enjoy the experience.

A range of factors can influence attitudes and behaviours to walking and outdoor play. But crucially when parents don't feel safe in their local environment, walking and outside play can be discounted. Walking can also be easily substituted for an alternative mode when time is tight or there is a more appealing and easier option. Parents can be encouraged to walk more if there are more visual cues that communicate to them that the environment they live in is safe. Raising parents' awareness of existing walking/play initiatives (Play St) and supporting Local Authorities / schools to encourage walking to school and after school outside play can also drive engagement.

Key findings

A range of social, economic and environmental factors have contributed to a decline in children being outdoors. These factors are underpinned by a perception that environments are less safe. There has been, however, an increase in influences that can have a positive impact on perceptions of walking and the behaviour families. There is clearly an appetite from parents for a return to their childhood experiences and the autonomy it delivered but this exists alongside a paradoxical fear of the risks associated with it.

Parents are the decision makers and promoting the benefits of walking and outside play to them is key, as this will filter down to the children. It is apparent that children in the 5-1yr age range are at different stages of development. As such a targeted approach will be needed for children with varying priorities and needs.

Unsurprisingly, families across London have very different living environments and experiences which inform their attitudes and behaviours. Families adapt their lifestyles and behaviours accordingly, and can have different propensities to walk/be outside based on this. Most of the walking journeys made by families are local. Focussing infrastructural improvements or initiatives around the local, residential environment will be key to encouraging families to walk more. The main utility walking journey for families is the school commute. Walking for leisure, while enjoyable, is a less common behaviour and can be seen to lack purpose. School policies can be quite influential on walking behaviours, and can have a positive or negative impact.

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Families who recognise the health and wellbeing benefits of walking and live in a more pleasant area tend to walk more whereas those who live in more disadvantaged areas and don't see the benefits of walking tend to walk less.

There are many barriers to address that get in the way of consideration. How safe people feel in their local area is fundamental to their decision to walk. Both utility and leisure walks can easily be substituted with alternative options. Walking needs to be repositioned to make it appealing to families and encourage them to choose it over other options'

There are opportunities that can encourage family walking including:

- Making families feel safe in their environments via visual cues that they are cared for
- Communicate health and wellbeing benefits of walking to create a 'pull'
- Raise awareness of existing walking/play initiatives
- Work with Local Authorities / schools to encourage walking to school and after school outside play
- Reframe walking – for children - so they link it to fun, freedom and play; for parents – so giving leisure walks a 'purpose'
- Consider a targeted strategy and approach – different areas of London require different levels of support. And summer months are more appealing than winter months.