



Road Danger Reduction Forum

Road Safety Education

Briefing Paper ④

April 1997



**ROAD DANGER
REDUCTION FORUM**

Introduction

*L*ocal authorities have normally carried out some form of road safety education in schools and the wider community since 1974. This is in response to the responsibility given to local authorities following the 1974 Traffic Act to monitor and investigate local road accidents and undertake remedial measures. The education role has normally been the responsibility of Road Safety Officers, although it may often be carried out in conjunction with the police, health promotion agencies and other organisations.

Traditional road safety education

The enormous growth in motor traffic since 1974 has inevitably resulted in an increased level of danger to all road users. The response, until recently, has largely focused on programmes aimed at the most vulnerable road users (child and elderly pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists) to equip them to cope with the increasing levels of road danger they face. The kinds of activities most associated with road safety education, therefore, have historically been the Tufty Club, Green Cross Code and Cycling Proficiency courses.

The messages imparted by these activities have concentrated on raising awareness of danger - for instance the "one false move and you're dead" type of publicity aimed at pedestrians.

Road Safety education programmes aimed at vulnerable road users have promoted defensive strategies such as wearing bright and reflective clothing or safety helmets. Meanwhile, messages to drivers, who are largely responsible for creating road danger, have consisted of exhortations to drive more carefully or take an advanced driving course.

The distinction between "danger to" and "danger from" has been ignored. This has resulted in an increasing road danger which, combined with the traditional road safety messages, has contributed to the fact that travel by non-threatening modes has been discouraged. Despite the relative success of the drink drive campaign, drivers' acceptance of

responsibility for the safety of vulnerable road users has not improved, and speeding is still largely seen as socially acceptable. The "car culture" has not been significantly challenged.

The "hidden curriculum" of road safety education for pedestrians and cyclists has been that-

1. they are the problem, not the ever-increasing level of road danger,
2. the increase in road danger is a "fact of life".

Discouraging walking and cycling may have coincided with overall casualty reductions, but has also contributed to a reduction in the health and fitness of the population and an increase in environmental pollution. Casualty reductions have been accompanied by these negative effects which produce casualties of their own.

Even within its own terms, there is considerable doubt about traditional road safety education methods. The classroom based teaching of pedestrian skills, for instance, has been criticised by a recent DoT report which advocates the use of practical training methods.¹

The need for change

We still need to equip children to cope with the road environment as it is now, but we also need to acknowledge that the continued expansion of car dependency is a dead end. Its negative consequences are becoming increasingly recognised, as well as the need to encourage walking, cycling and the greater use of public transport for reasons of access, equity, health and sustainability.

Achieving these objectives will depend crucially upon our ability to reduce the levels of danger faced by these transport modes. The traditional approaches to road safety education will impede progress towards these aims as they tend only to reinforce the sense of threat.

Practical training

New approaches are being developed to meet the new realities.

Traditional, classroom based methods of road safety education have not proved to be successful in their declared objective of improving children's behaviour as pedestrians.¹

Road crossing requires a range of practical skills and judgements which cannot be acquired in a classroom, or by ritual learning of the Green Cross Code. Practical courses of pedestrian training are increasingly becoming available and, while classroom activities can reinforce such training, they cannot be an adequate substitute.

While practical cycling and pedestrian training can help children to survive the road environment as it is now, it does little to help them to change it.

Education for Change

New strategies of road safety education should encourage children and the wider community to address the problems related to mass car use and consider the consequences of projected levels of traffic growth. Education should concentrate on the options available and the consequences of these options both for the individual and the wider society.

Critical analysis of the "car culture" is crucial for enabling young people to decide which of the alternative futures they would prefer. An understanding of the processes of decision making and change will equip them to have a voice and participate in building the future.

"Education for Change" would therefore involve:

- pedestrian and cycle training programmes designed to encourage

and promote walking and cycling

- programmes aimed at the empowerment of children to show that they have choices and can make a difference
- demonstrating the links between transport and other environmental issues in ways that encourage children to see how they can contribute in a positive way
- methods which involve the whole school, including teachers and parents in the process of change.

There are currently several examples of the sorts of approaches which would meet these criteria, including Walk to School Weeks, Travelwise projects, Safe Routes to School, Green Transport projects, and programmes and materials developed by Leeds, Leicester, Sheffield, Avon and York. Many environmental pressure groups, such as Friends of the Earth and the Environmental Transport Association have developed resources which would be relevant to the new approach.

The role of Road Safety Officers in the future should be to work with teachers to explain the new perspectives, to develop new teaching materials and to demonstrate how the national curriculum offers opportunities to promote greater awareness of the need for change. Beyond schools, education and awareness campaigns must challenge car dependency and act as a stimulus for change.

¹. *Child Development and the Aims of Road Safety Education, DoT, 1996.*