



Safe Routes to School Meets Safe Routes to Parks



Children and adults in the United States are not getting enough physical activity, and our health is suffering as a result. But communities are working on many strategies to help – making it easier and safer to walk and bicycle, expanding access to parks, and more. One important place for collaboration and advocacy is around making sure that people can safely walk and bicycle to parks – an approach known as safe routes to parks.

Why focus on safe routes to parks?

Increasing physical activity is essential to improving Americans' health. For a healthy community, everyone needs access to places for physical activity. Parks can be a superior place for physical activity, but a common obstacle to park use involves barriers to getting there, especially when it comes to walking or biking to parks. When parks are difficult to access by foot or bicycle, it can harm health and well-being. For example, one effect is that community members who are reliant upon walking, bicycling, and transit may simply not visit or use the park.

In addition, the absence of safe routes to parks may also decrease the overall amount of walking in a community – community members will not include physical activity as a component of their trip to the park, and may walk less generally, because walking is highly dependent on the availability of attractive destinations such as parks. Finally, when there are not safe routes to parks, community members may walk anyways, but be subject to stress, injuries, or fatalities on the trip. These effects often have a disproportionate impact on low income communities, tribal communities, and communities of color.

Three Components of a Safe Routes to Park Plan

Parks play a critical role in increasing opportunities for communities to be physically active. As increasingly recognized by parks organizations, accessibility via walking and biking is a key component of park utilization. The American Planning Association recognizes three components to a Safe Routes to Park plan: the park itself (i.e. amenities, size and location); park access points (whether the entry and exit points to the park align with the natural paths and infrastructure leading to the park); and finally, the street infrastructure (whether the infrastructure within a half-mile or 10 minute walk of a park supports safe, attractive access via walking and/or biking).

How can Safe Routes to School practitioners address safe routes to parks in their work?

Safe Routes to School practitioners are active in influencing programs, infrastructure, policies and investments in their communities, with an eye towards children's health, safety, and activity levels. Incorporating considerations of safe routes to parks into these activities may be an easy way to expand effectiveness and reach. Specific approaches:

- In walkability assessments and walk audits, include parks as well as schools.
- Encourage colocation of parks and schools when school or park siting is underway.
- Where parks and schools are co-located or adjacent, consider infrastructure improvements and encouragement activities that include the parks as well as the schools.
- Include Safe Routes to Parks on the agenda of existing Safe Routes to School coalitions.
- When working to address Safe Routes to School through city or county policies and practices, include safe routes to parks too. Comprehensive planning, bike/ped plans, zoning, city budget and infrastructure prioritization – all need to address both Safe Routes to School and safe routes to parks. Safe Routes to Parks thrives on interagency collaboration.



National Recreation and Parks Association

The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) has worked to introduce and define Safe Routes to Parks. This concept is in alignment with their [Play Deserts](#) work. They are dedicated to addressing health, wellness, and social equity. NRPA provides guidance on building awareness of the barriers of walkability for park accessibility and how to build community support for safe routes to parks. The six E's of the Safe Routes to School movement can assist in creating a Safe Park Zone through engineering improvements around the park, education and encouragement around reduced speed and the availability of walking and bicycling options in a Safe Park Zone, and enforcement when necessary. NRPA also acknowledges the need for coalition building to highlight the problem. Addressing walkability not only addresses the health and well-being of the community, but also assists in ensuring parks are vibrant, well-utilized spaces.

How can parks professionals address safe routes to parks in their work?

Parks are natural places for physical activity and recreation. Parks professionals have traditionally placed considerable emphasis on park development, maintenance, and programming, but are just beginning to address the issue of park access as it relates to community walking and bicycling.

- Park personnel can lead/co-lead a walk audit for community members interested in addressing walkability near parks in their communities.
- Park personnel can lead walking clubs at the park site and encourage community members to walk to the park to get a few extra steps in.
- Park personnel can gather data on how community members are getting to the park, as well as assess reasons why some residents use parks less or not at all.

Personnel can propose and explore supportive infrastructure changes at parks, such as bike parking, bike racks, and pedestrian-friendly entrances.

How can planning professionals address safe routes to parks in their work?

Planners have a unique role in their ability to develop strategies that influence future changes in the community. This role positions the planner to facilitate safe access to parks and green space and support making parks fun and welcoming for everyone, including children, seniors, and individuals with physical disabilities. The American Planning Association encourages planners to consider the following key strategies: conducting an assessment or gap analysis, park siting considerations, and key partnerships can play a critical role in addressing park accessibility. Further collaboration among planning professionals, such as park planners, transportation planners, school planners, and city planners, will assist in making safe routes to parks a reality.

Conclusion

Addressing park accessibility assists in increasing use of parks and plays a critical part in ensuring that communities have access to places to be physically active. The Safe Routes to Parks concept provides advocates with the language to champion safe access during consideration of park siting, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation. Safe Routes to Parks increases opportunities for community members to be safe, be physically active, and experience the joy, social connectivity, and health benefits that parks bring.

Resources

[National Recreation and Parks Association - Safe Routes to Parks: Improving Access to Parks through Walkability](#)

This report by NRPA defines safe routes to parks, addresses issues of walkability to parks, and highlights key initiatives on safe routes to parks. <http://bit.ly/1M5FSki>

[American Planning Association – Safe Routes to Parks](#)

This fact sheet highlights planners' role in increasing access to parks and green spaces. <http://bit.ly/1SQLNzd>

[ChangeLab Solutions – Complete Parks Playbook](#)

This report provides an overview of the seven elements of a complete parks system. Each section focuses on an element, and includes both a successful community example of that element and a list of valuable resources. <http://bit.ly/1OU>

