

Focus Group Summary Report

Safe Routes to School Workshop



SafeMobility
Authored by: Shabnam Abdollahi



Overview

A co-design workshop and focus group discussion were conducted with students from a single school as part of a Safe Routes to School initiative to better understand their perceptions of safety during school travel. Children's perceptions of the built environment play an important role in shaping their travel behaviour, willingness to walk or cycle, and overall sense of well-being during school journeys (Abdollahi, Tavakoli, Waygood, Cloutier, & Abi Zeid, 2024; Kunaratnam et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that traffic conditions, driver's behaviour, pedestrian infrastructure, and social factors all influence how safe children feel when travelling independently or with peers (Abdollahi, Waygood, Aliyas, & Cloutier, 2023; Richmond et al., 2022). The discussion explored children's experiences on their routes to school, factors influencing their sense of safety, locations of concern, and potential improvements.

Focus Group Structure

The focus group was conducted in person on May 14, 2026, with Grade 5 students at Akiva School as part of the Safe Routes to School initiative. A total of 26 students participated in the workshop. The session was facilitated by representatives from the City of Westmount, Centre d'écologie urbaine, and SafeMobility. Prior to the workshop, consent forms were distributed to parents through the school.

The workshop began with a brief presentation by representatives from the City of Westmount introducing the project objectives and the importance of understanding students' experiences travelling to and from school. Following the presentation, students were divided into five discussion tables, each supported by one or more facilitators.

A series of structured questions was presented to students. Facilitators read each question aloud and encouraged students to either share their responses verbally or write their ideas on sticky notes. The discussion focused on students' travel experiences, locations where they felt safe or unsafe, factors influencing their sense of safety, and potential improvements to school routes.

In addition to the discussions, students were asked to identify and mark safe and unsafe locations on large-scale maps of the neighbourhood. This mapping exercise helped capture spatial information regarding perceived safety concerns and preferred travel

routes. To support the analysis and ensure that all comments were accurately documented, the discussions were audio-recorded and later reviewed to extract additional insights and details that may not have been captured in the written notes.

Discussion Questions

The discussion was organized around a series of structured questions designed to explore children's experiences travelling to and from school and their perceptions of safety. Facilitators read each question aloud and encouraged students to respond verbally or by writing their answers on sticky notes.

The questions included:

1. **How do you usually travel to and from school?**
2. **What do you like most about your trip to school?**
3. **What makes you feel safe when travelling to school?**
4. **Are there places where you feel unsafe? Why?**
5. **Which streets, intersections, or locations are the most dangerous on your route to school?**
6. **What makes these locations dangerous?**
7. **Are there places that you consider particularly safe? Why?**
8. **What changes could make your route to school safer and more enjoyable?**
9. **If you were the mayor of Westmount, what would you change to improve safety around your school?**

In addition to answering these questions, students were asked to identify and mark safe and unsafe locations on neighbourhood maps. This exercise provided valuable spatial information regarding perceived safety concerns and preferred travel routes.

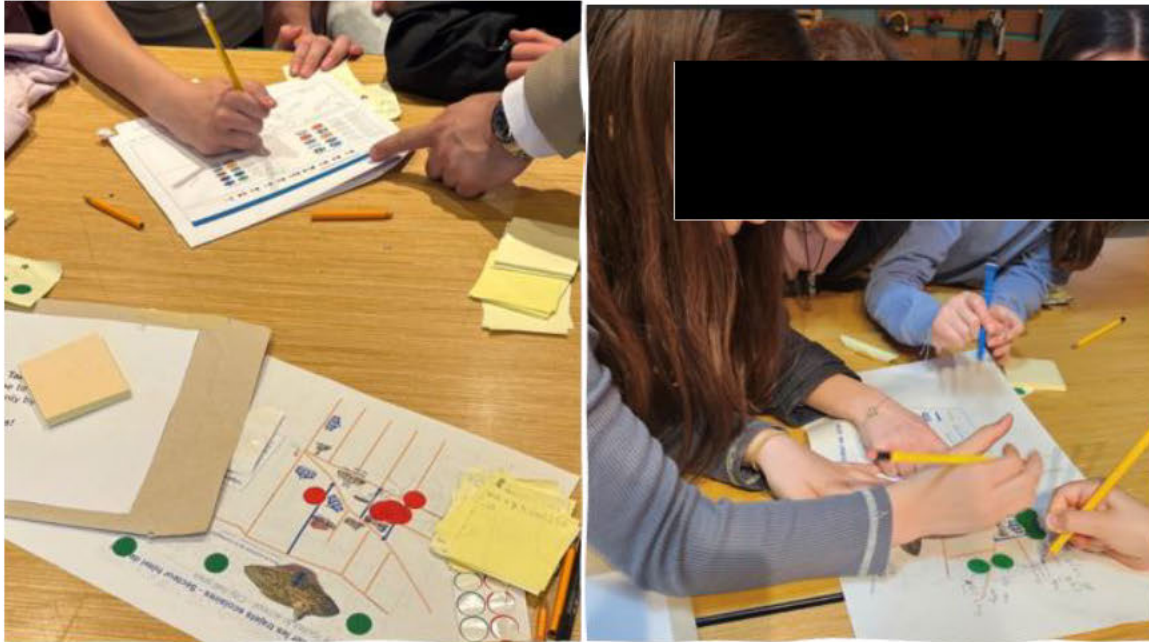


Figure 1,2. Focus group structure

Key Findings

1. Traffic Volume and Congestion Are Major Concerns

Students consistently identified heavy traffic around school arrival and dismissal periods as a major source of discomfort and perceived danger. Streets such as Argyle, Kensington, Sherbrooke, Montrose Avenue, and intersections near school entrances were frequently mentioned as problematic locations. Participants noted that congestion, limited space for vehicles and pedestrians, and crowded intersections contribute to an unsafe walking environment.

2. Driver Behaviour Strongly Influences Perceived Safety

Unsafe driver behaviour emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned concerns. Students reported experiences with speeding vehicles, turning vehicles near crossings, drivers failing to yield, and aggressive driving behaviour. These findings, align with previous research show that driver behaviour is a key determinant of children's perceptions of traffic danger.

3. Crossing Intersections Is a Critical Safety Issue

Many participants identified crossings and intersections as locations where they feel most vulnerable. Unsafe crossings, turning vehicles, and insufficient pedestrian priority

were repeatedly mentioned. Students associated safe travel with the presence of controlled crossings and visible pedestrian infrastructure.

4. Adequate Pedestrian Space Improves Comfort and Safety

Lack of pedestrian space, narrow sidewalks, and limited separation from traffic were identified as factors reducing perceived safety. Wider sidewalks and improved pedestrian facilities were frequently suggested as ways to create a safer school travel environment.

5. Social and Emotional Factors Matter

Beyond physical safety, children emphasized the importance of social experiences during their trips. Walking with friends was consistently described as enjoyable and contributed to feelings of comfort and security. Conversely, heavy traffic and unsafe driving behaviour create stress and anxiety during school travel.

6. Preferred Street Characteristics

Students generally preferred quieter residential streets with lower traffic volumes. Streets perceived as calm and less congested were associated with higher levels of comfort and safety.

7. Recommended Improvements

Participants proposed several measures to improve safety around schools:

- Additional crossing guards;
- Changing street direction from two-way to one-way
- More traffic lights and controlled crossings;
- Installation of speed bumps and traffic-calming measures;
- Wider sidewalks and improved pedestrian space;
- Better organization of school drop-off and pick-up activities;
- Reduction of vehicle traffic around school entrances.

Discussion

The findings from the Akiva School workshop are highly consistent with previous research on children's perceptions of traffic danger. Students primarily identified traffic

volume, driver behaviour, crossing conditions, and street design as the main factors influencing their sense of safety. Heavy traffic during school arrival and dismissal periods emerged as one of the most common concerns. Children frequently associated busy streets and intersections with feelings of discomfort, stress, and increased danger, suggesting that traffic congestion around schools affects both actual and perceived safety.

Driver behaviour was another recurring theme throughout the discussions. Students expressed concerns about speeding vehicles, drivers failing to yield at crossings, and unsafe turning movements near intersections. These findings align with previous studies showing that children often perceive traffic danger through their direct interactions with drivers rather than through technical roadway characteristics. While adults and transportation professionals may focus on engineering measures, children tend to evaluate safety based on whether they feel respected and protected by motorists.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of pedestrian infrastructure. Participants frequently identified crossings, intersections, and sidewalk conditions as factors affecting their willingness to walk. Safe crossings, visible pedestrian facilities, and traffic control measures were generally associated with positive experiences, while wide roadways and complex intersections were perceived as barriers. These observations support previous research indicating that road design and traffic control influence both children's safety and their willingness to travel independently.

An important finding was the role of social and emotional factors. Many students described walking with friends as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their journey to school. This suggests that school travel is not only a transportation activity but also an opportunity for social interaction, independence, and physical activity. Consequently, improvements to school routes should not focus solely on reducing collision risk but should also create environments where children feel comfortable, confident, and encouraged to walk.

The mapping exercise and group discussions also helped identify specific locations that students perceive as the most problematic along their school routes. The intersection of Sherbrooke Street near the school emerged as one of the primary areas of concern due to heavy traffic volumes, complex crossing movements, and the large number of vehicles present during school arrival and dismissal periods. In addition, Argyle Avenue and Kensington Avenue were repeatedly mentioned by students as locations where they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. Concerns at these locations were largely associated with traffic congestion, driver behaviour, crossing difficulties, and conflicts between vehicles

and pedestrians. The repeated identification of these streets by multiple groups of students suggests that they should be prioritized for further field investigation and consideration in future school-route safety interventions.

Overall, the results reinforce the importance of adopting a child-centred approach to school-route planning. The consistency between the workshop findings and previous research suggests that interventions aimed at reducing vehicle speeds, managing traffic volumes, improving crossing conditions, and enhancing pedestrian infrastructure are likely to improve both actual and perceived safety. Furthermore, involving children directly in the identification of issues and potential solutions can help ensure that future interventions respond to the needs and experiences of the users they are intended to protect.

Conclusion

The workshop highlighted that children's perceptions of safety extend beyond collision risk and include comfort, stress, and social experiences. Traffic volume, unsafe driver behaviour, and challenging crossing conditions were identified as the principal concerns. Interventions that reduce traffic speeds, improve crossing safety, increase pedestrian space, and enhance traffic calming near schools are likely to improve both actual and perceived safety for children travelling to school.

Reference

Abdollahi, S., Tavakoli, Z., Waygood, O., Cloutier, M. S., & Abi Zeid, I. (2024). Understanding the Factors Affecting Traffic Danger for Children: Insights from Focus Group Discussions

Abdollahi, S., Waygood, E. O. D., Aliyas, Z., & Cloutier, M.-S. (2023). An Overview of How the Built Environment Relates to Children's Health. *Current Environmental Health Reports*, 10(3), 264-277.

Kunaratnam, V., Schwartz, N., Howard, A., Mitra, R., Saunders, N., Cloutier, M.-S., . . . Environment. (2022). Equity, walkability, and active school transportation in Toronto, Canada: A cross-sectional study. 108, 103336.

Richmond, S. A., Buchan, C., Pitt, T. M., Medeiros, A., Pike, I., Hagel, B. E., . . . Health. (2022). The effectiveness of built environment interventions embedded in road safety policies in urban municipalities in Canada: an environmental scan and scoping review. 27, 101494.