INTRODUCTION

Physical activity levels are decreasing worldwide among children. The decline in children’s participation in physical activity is exemplified by fewer children walking and cycling to school. Many studies have identified that children’s active travel to school, by walking or cycling can increase levels of physical activity daily.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study was to investigate the promoters of and barriers to active travel to school among primary school children in Galway.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodological approach was taken using a questionnaire survey and a complementary participative approach. The sample of children aged 11-13 years were accessed through 2 mixed gender, 1 all girls and 1 all boys primary school. These were 2 urban and 2 rural schools with 2 of them designated as disadvantaged. The questionnaire was carried out in the children’s classroom and the participative research followed. Written consent was obtained from the childrens’ parents and the children were informed that they did not have to take part and that they could withdraw from the research at any time.

RESULTS

Quantitative research results:

The sample contained 73 children, 40% boys and 60% girls. Non-active travel to school were the primary modes reported (70%). The most frequently reported travel time of the children was between 5 and 15 minutes. Of the children who travelled actively to school 55% of them did so 4-5 days a week.

Children from DEIS (disadvantaged) and urban schools were more likely than children from rural and non-DEIS schools, to actively travel to school. Living near the school was the most significant promoter of active travel. Of the children who actively travel, 100% of them reported they did not travel to school with their parents. They were most likely to travel with their friends. Children from DEIS schools and rural children reported that their parents make the decision about how they travel to school, however the majority of children who actively travel reported that they decide to do so themselves. Fewer non-active travellers reported liking walking compared to active travellers.
Participative research results:

The key promoters identified were: living near the school, getting to school quicker, enjoyment of fresh air, enjoyment of cycling and walking and doing so with friends, good level of physical health and having company. The primary promoters identified by rural schools are continuous pavements, having storage at school, having a bicycle rack, less traffic, living near the school, better visibility and safer roads. For urban schools a ‘lollipop lady’ (an adult to help the children cross the road) was most prominent and for disadvantaged schools owning a bicycle was identified as important.

The key barriers identified included: living too far away, the roads are too busy, bad weather, fast cars, strangers and kidnappers and being lazy, sick or disabled. Children from DEIS schools identified not having adequate footwear as a barrier.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a definite need for adequate road infrastructure to enable the children from both urban and rural communities to actively travel to school. There must be collaborative action from all sectors, children, their parents, the community, the school, and also local and national Government to increase active travel to school and in doing so increase physical activity levels and so promote childrens’ health.

REFERENCES

Available on request.

PRESENTED

As a Poster Presentation at the 20th International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUPHE) World Conference on Health Promotion in Geneva from July 11th to 15th, 2010.