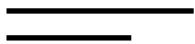




What does kindness  
have to do with  
active school travel?



# What does kindness have to do with active school travel?

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During the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand our national catchphrase has been “be kind.” We’ve had a rollercoaster time of uncertainty, dealing with mis/information overload, working from home, home schooling, and myriad other challenges, and at the time of writing in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, we are back at Level 3. Over this time I’ve been thinking about the fundamental value of kindness and how the “be kind” message has remained an important constant in our lives, for the most part keeping our team of 5 million together and on track. What can we learn from this values-based approach and the power of “being kind”?

Active travel is an essential tool for promoting human and planetary health<sup>1</sup>. Yet to date we haven't been able to generate significant positive shifts in our country<sup>2</sup>. What would happen if we started with “be kind” as a driver for our own behaviours, decision-making and design regarding active travel?

Our research has shown that urban design and how we design streets matters for children’s active travel. Neighbourhoods that have better street connectivity<sup>3</sup> and comprehensive street designs that support and prioritise active travel modes<sup>4</sup> and that promote safety from traffic<sup>5</sup> are all important. Having a school at the heart of a neighbourhood is essential - having a school within 2.3km from home<sup>6</sup> means kids are significantly more likely to get to school actively.



However, the story is more complex than “If you build it, they will come”- school and community relationships, having an active community culture<sup>7</sup>, and a sense of connection with neighbours<sup>8</sup> are all important ingredients for the active travel recipe<sup>9</sup>.

Unsafe traffic environments<sup>5</sup>, particularly lack of safe places to cross and speeding cars are a major deterrent for parents allowing kids to get to school actively. Yet, when given the opportunity to comment on legislation for slower speeds across Tāmaki Makaurau, there was strong resistance<sup>10</sup>. This was despite clear arguments for the value of slowing traffic speeds<sup>11</sup> for reducing the risk and severity of vehicle-related crashes, and for improving public health. Talk of cycle lanes<sup>12</sup> and bike-lash<sup>13</sup> brings out our worst – one study showed over half of drivers perceived cyclists as less than human<sup>14</sup>. We’ve also seen a mixture of systems failures and ableist attitudes<sup>15</sup> restrict participation and mobility in disabled children and young people.



Getting back to our current situation - for many urbanites, air and noise pollution that came with our pre-COVID-19 car-centric lives had been replaced by birdsong<sup>16</sup> during lockdown and the air quality in Tāmaki Makaurau dropped to what it was a century ago<sup>17</sup>.

This is not to suggest that things were peachy – in fact, for many the situation is dire and COVID-19 has only served to highlight and exacerbate existing inequalities<sup>18</sup>. While transport can’t solve all these issues, it does have a role to play in reducing inequality<sup>19</sup> through enabling access to places of importance, and where active travel modes are prioritised, through promoting health from increased physical activity and reduced exposure to air and noise pollution. In the world of transport, COVID-19 has shown us that the transport system and its policy-makers are open to, and capable of, making rapid changes that support active travel - implementing large scale<sup>20</sup>, innovative shifts<sup>21</sup> that might otherwise be constrained and delayed by bureaucratic systems.

Aspirational rhetoric abounded in social media – the world will be forever changed, carless societies will exist, and when we come out of this we will re-prioritise human health and the health of the planet. Perhaps this isn't just aspirational. Significant systems and technical changes to scenarios we never imagined possible were happening, it felt as if almost overnight. Then from July to August we had 102 days with no reported cases of COVID-19. During this time, cars crept back into the fabric of everyday life, and many of us fell back into our old car-centric patterns.



What can we do to support active travel more and reap the human and planetary health benefits of reducing car use? Systems change is an obvious place to start. We've seen the individual passion of decision-makers and practitioners stifled through restrictive systems that prioritise risk adverse, business as usual practice<sup>22</sup>. Accountability to ratepayers, a need to demonstrate delivery, and working within the constraints of prescriptive standards converge to the point that innovation and niche<sup>23</sup> projects can feel too risky to even get started. Temporary, tactical urbanism<sup>24</sup> plays an important role here – revealing alternative realities and inspiring change. The wheels are already turning in this space, with Auckland Transport's Safe School Streets pilot programme<sup>25</sup>, Auckland Council's Tactical Urbanism programme<sup>26</sup> and the New Zealand Transport Agency's Innovating Streets for People fund<sup>21</sup>. The challenge is to harness the new, shared understanding of the value of such initiatives and integrate them into the system in a sustained and meaningful way.



But – and bear with me here - I'd also argue that we need more kindness to make this happen. Kindness to ourselves, to others, and to the planet, within the systems that we exist. To be clear, changes across transport, education, and employment systems are necessary, systems in which we are all actors. If we start with a values-based approach and weave that into our social and environmental norms, where does that take us? First let's ask kids, who generally come up with the best ideas<sup>27</sup>. We asked over 1,000 school children to share their perspectives about their school journey.

Children disliked speeding cars, polluted air, and feeling unsafe crossing roads on their school journey. They appreciated seeing and interacting with nature, spending time and talking with their friends and family, and playing games on their school journey<sup>28</sup>. Simple, right? Remove or reduce motorized traffic, nurture nature, spend time with friends and family, take time to play. This feels eerily similar to the rhetoric reflecting on the positives of the temporarily car-less world we have experienced during our lockdowns.



Kindness first might mean that we stop and think about what is best for others when making policy decisions. It means that employers might support initiatives such as working from home or glide time – in doing so allowing parents to walk their kids to school, community members to volunteer their time on walking school buses, and for people to have the time

to stop and say hi to each other. It might also mean that we consider shifts away from quantitative metrics to evaluate staff performance, and instead value the holistic contributions that people make.

Will the sky fall if such initiatives are put into place? Unlikely. Will people be more happy, productive, and healthy? Probably. Down the line this means better staff retention and improved outcomes for everyone. Kindness means we give ourselves permission to nurture our physical and mental health through role modelling and prioritising

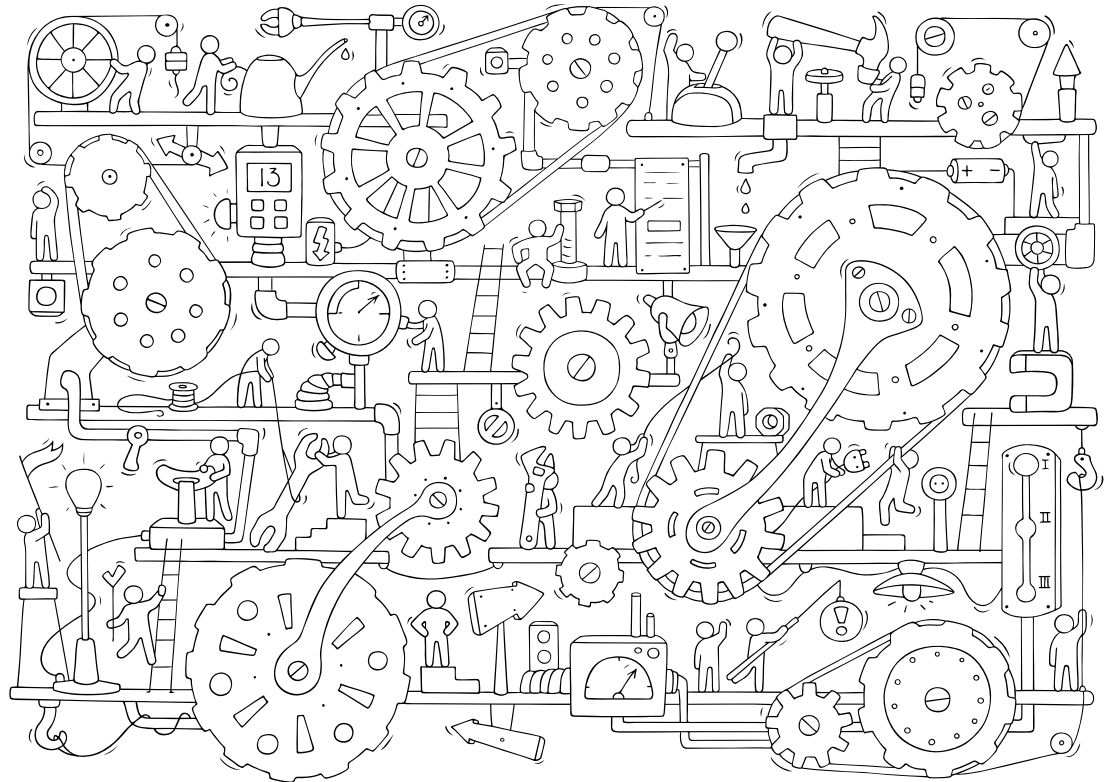
shared active time with family and friends. Kindness also means that you wouldn't dehumanise a person on a bike, you wouldn't drive a car dangerously, and that you would think about the power and impact of your words when you advocate for something, whether it be in a policy-making boardroom or on social media.

# We are all tiny cogs in this very large and complex system

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Some make decisions that impact many, others make important differences through role modelling or being kind to their neighbours.

We can all make a difference in our own ways – as employers who support employee wellbeing; as planners and policymakers designing child-friendly environments; as community members who look out for others; as citizens with a voice to advocate for health-promoting policies and amplifying the voices of others; and if behind the wheel, as considerate and safe drivers.



How we treat each other and ourselves can ultimately filter down to safer and healthier communities for everyone. Ultimately, if we want to live in healthy happy environments that support human and planetary health, we need to take stock and think about how we can nudge ourselves closer towards positive actions as we emerge again from our bubbles.

#### CITATION

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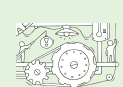
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