

Planting the Seeds of Safety: Traffic Gardens & Foundational Transportation Literacy

August 2025

Imagine a large playground transformed into a miniature city—striped with crosswalks, lined with roundabouts, and equipped with traffic lights and stop signs. Children walk, roll, and ride through this scaled-down streetscape, building essential safety and life skills—and having a blast along the way. For nearly a century, traffic gardens have provided a unique opportunity for kids to learn about the world of mobility in a safe environment tailored to their needs. By learning through fun, hands-on experiences, kids gain life skills that help them keep them safe while sparking curiosity about transportation careers—laying the foundation for a future where they can thrive and lead.



Child wearing a yellow helmet rides a tricycle at a traffic garden. Source: Adobe Stock.

Only a few years after the Ford Model T was introduced, automobiles became commonplace on American roads, and by the early 1910s, the number of cars began to exceed the number of horse-drawn vehicles. To help children learn the rules of the road and how to navigate streets safely, Patrol Officer Frennd Boals introduced the concept of a “[safety town](#)” in 1937, adapted from a book of children’s stories and a similar UK concept. The miniature streetscape created by Boals in Mansfield, Ohio—complete with child-sized stop signs, working traffic signals, and buildings—gained national attention and recognition by the AAA. This was the first traffic garden in the United States. Their popularity faded and then peaked again in the 1950s when the American highway systems boomed. Most recently, traffic gardens reemerged in the 2010s after a Federal Highway Administration report

highlighted a Swiss example. Traffic gardens became popular around the country and notable gardens like the [Seattle White Center Traffic Garden](#) serve as examples of these innovative learning environments.

Traffic gardens, also known as “traffic playgrounds” and “bike gardens,” provide unique experiences for children to learn how to safely navigate their world and engage with the joy of walking and rolling. They also help children gain valuable skills like problem-solving, motor skills, communication, and a big picture view of their community, their world, and the role transportation plays in it. For more than thirty years, the Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) has been developing and delivering education and workforce development programs and materials to empower people of all ages to learn about the movement of people and goods. Our most recent endeavors include exciting curriculum for preschoolers and elementary students, all of which were developed and piloted with experienced educators and are available online for free [here](#). Read about the collaboration that led to the preschool materials [here](#). Our lesson plans cover topics such as high-speed [rail](#), [climate change](#), and the history of the movement of [people](#) and [goods](#).



An aerial view of the Bike Playground at Dick Thurnau Memorial Park in Seattle, WA. Source: [King County Parks](#).

The [Seattle Department of Transportation Safe Routes to School Program](#) supported [Discover Traffic Gardens](#), [Cascade Bicycle Club](#), and [Outdoors for All](#) to develop the [Seattle Traffic Garden Handbook](#), a guide for creating traffic gardens in the city, but which offers a wealth of inspiration and useful information for anyone wanting to learn more about traffic gardens, their importance, and how to build one. The website [Discover Traffic Gardens](#) developed by engineer and co-founder of the [Early Childhood Mobility Coalition](#) Fionnuala Quinn and team also offers extensive resources.



Most traffic gardens have 1) paved, painted streets, 2) intersections, and 3) traffic signs. Other common features include art and murals, miniature buildings, and information signs. Source: [Discover Traffic Gardens](#).

Traffic gardens introduce core transportation concepts to children in a safe, engaging way. These spaces build both bike/pedestrian skills and social-emotional learning—helping kiddos gain independence, resilience, and awareness of their built environment. Traffic gardens and other child-focused lessons and activities cultivate space for little ones to grow into safety-conscious professionals, informed citizens, and compassionate community members. In shaping how children explore their surroundings, traffic gardens help shape the future of mobility itself.

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