Family experiences of travelling with children on Cargo and Electric Cargo Bikes

Preliminary findings from a reflexive thematic analysis of parent interviews

CYCLING & SOCIETY

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WHY THIS STUDY

Parenthood tends to push families toward the car

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do parents observe their children's emotions, comfort, enjoyment and motivation when travelling together by cargo bike and how do these shared journeys shape parent-child interaction, family routines, and attitudes to active travel?



Children's experience

emotions, comfort, enjoyment, motivation

Family interaction

Parent-child communication & routines

Attitudes to active travel

autonomy, confidence, future habits

Three ideas this study builds on

Active travel & wellbeing

WHO, 2018 · De Vos et al., 2016 · Kroesen & De Vos, 2020

From “car-parenting” to a technology of care

Oakil et al., 2016 · Egan, 2025

Children as active users, not passengers

UNICEF, 2022 · Kyttä, 2003 · Dowling & Maalsen, 2019



THE STUDY

Semi-structured interviews, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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24

parent/caregiver interviews

30–45

minutes per interview

4

countries (IE, NI, ES, SK)

730

coded excerpts

Four questions about children's experience

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RQ1 - Overall experience

How do parents perceive their children's experience when travelling with them on a cargo bike?

RQ2 - Emotions

Which emotions do parents identify in their children when travelling together on an e-bike/cargo bike?

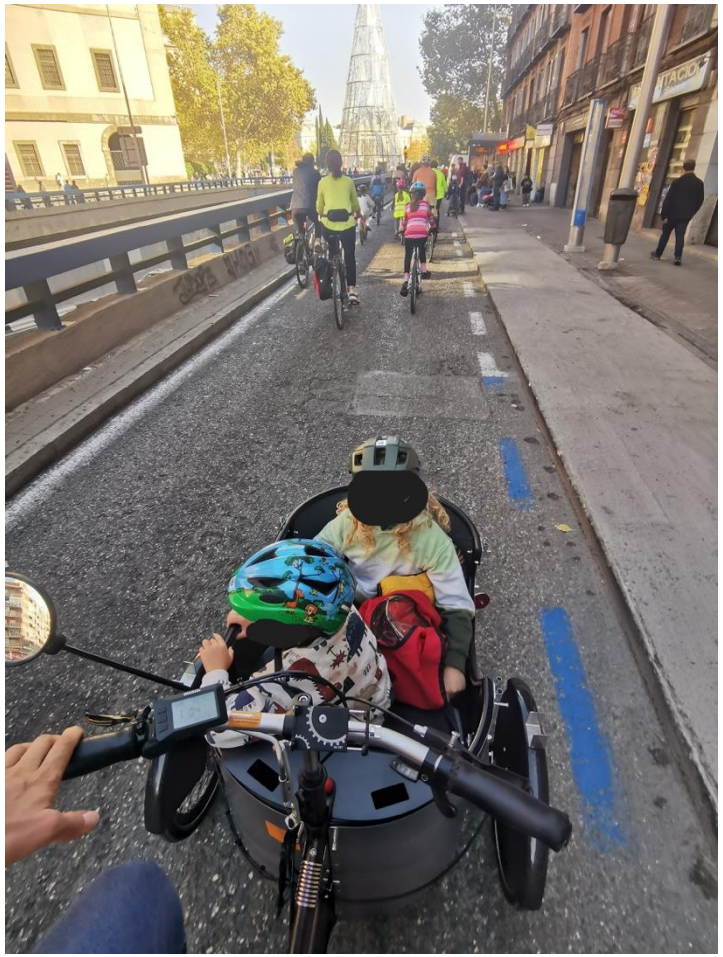
RQ3 - Motivations & attitudes

How do parents interpret their children's motivations and attitudes toward cycling and active travel?

RQ4 - Family interaction

How do parents perceive the influence of cargo/e-bike travel on family interaction and bonding?

How parents perceive the everyday experience



> *"We've actually stopped a few times to pick up horse chestnuts and acorns… you can't do that in a car."*
>
> **P002, Limerick**

> *"They never complained… they just get in with their bags and never complained about the cold."*
>
> **P014, Limerick**

> *"She could point at things… we could converse, that closeness changed the whole experience for her."*
>
> **P016, Belfast**

The emotional range parents observe

> *"The first time I put her on the back of this bike, she was terrified, properly screaming... now she absolutely loves it."*
>
> **P006, Belfast**

> *"She didn't like the wind... broke down crying. Cold, it's not so bad because we do wrap them up."*
>
> **P008, Dublin**

> *"One of my kids used to get really car sick almost every time... this is a complete game changer - he doesn't feel nauseous."*
>
> **P010, Dublin**



How children come to want it themselves



> *"He wanted to start cycling… it did kind of change that in him that he wanted to cycle."*
>
> **P009, Cork**

> *"The car was a bit boring and the cargo bike was the adventure… now they like when we rent a car - that's the novelty."*
>
> **P011, Dublin**

> *"My kids have different values than the majority of society that values big cars. My kids value people and bicycles."*
>
> **P015, Slovakia**

A different kind of shared time

> *"There is nothing more joyous than cycling along with your kids on the back, happily chittering… you don't get that in a car."*
>
> **P006, Belfast**

> *"In the cargo bike, they are facing each other, and they are literally touching… really connected."*
>
> **P013, Limerick**

> *"I find that my children actually talk more to us on the bikes than they do in the car… there's great little chats."*
>
> **P002, Limerick**



What gets families on the bike and what holds them back

Enablers

- Hands-on trial or loan schemes convert scepticism into confidence
- Employer Bike/Cycle-to-Work schemes make the upfront cost tractable
- Word-of-mouth from visible local peers supplies the initial idea

> *"I found an article… making the argument that it is entirely practical to replace a second car."*
>
> **P024, Galway**

Barriers

- Discontinuous cycle lanes and unsafe junctions force risky detours
- Home and public storage rarely fits a cargo bike and theft anxiety persists
- Upfront cost remains prohibitive without a workplace scheme

> *"As long as there's no cycling infrastructure, it's very hard for people to make this jump."*
>
> **P023, Madrid**

Everyday practice: reliable, calmer, increasingly normal



Beats the car on reliability

E-assist reframed

Visibility drives normalisation

cf. "familiar strangers" Milgram, 1972; Liang et al., 2016

"We're almost like the oddballs that have cargo bikes… you're standing out a little less than five years ago."
P001, Limerick



PUTTING IT TOGETHER

The cargo bike is not just a mode of transport

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1

An informal learning space

2

A mediator of family wellbeing

3

A tool of community connection

4

A real alternative to car-parenting

Four limitations worth naming

Sociodemographic bias

Interpretive bias

Geographic heterogeneity



WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

Research and actions

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Research

- Give children direct voice through participatory methods, not just parents' accounts
- Broaden sociodemographic diversity in the sample beyond predisposed early adopters
- Add a gender lens to explore differences in how the environment is experienced.
- Track families over time to see how emotions and autonomy actually develop

Action

- Schools as promoters and collective initiatives like the school bike-bus
- Break the cost barrier with community loan systems (bike libraries)
- Public policy investment in continuous, safe cycling infrastructure
- Sustainable mobility can't rest on individual effort alone


Thank you
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