

Walk and Bike to School-Good for the Environment, Good for Kids

By:

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Recently, the important issues of global warming and carbon emissions have been brought to our attention. Many of us are asking what we can do to combat this problem. One thing we can do to is to get out of our cars and walk and bicycle more. And even more powerful, we can empower our children to walk and bicycle to school- both for the environment and for their health.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 50% of all children walked to school in 1969. Today, less than 15% of America's children walk or bike to school. The lack of physical activity and the excessive use of cars are taking their toll. Childhood obesity levels and asthma rates continue to rise and more cars on the road lead to more child pedestrian injuries and fatalities.

There are many great reasons for kids to ride their bikes and walk to school. As for environmental impact, walking or cycling just a mile to and from school each day can save 600 pounds of polluting carbon emissions per school year. Every child that starts to walk or bike to school is doing the equivalent of planting a tree, which cleanses the air of pollution. A classroom of students could equal a small forest!

With the decline in physical activity in school and overall, walking or cycling to school also gives children the exercise they need. Adults should be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day, and children need 1 hour of physical activity per day plus another 20 minutes of vigorous activity several days per week. A study by the California Department of Education has shown that children who are physically active perform better in school.

Another benefit of getting children on bikes or walking is the reduction of traffic around schools. According to local studies in Marin County, about a quarter of all morning traffic is related to parents driving their kids to school. Reducing the number of kids dropped off in cars makes schools safer and creates a cleaner environment.

Of course, safety is a huge concern. Parents can help their child find a safe route by walking the neighborhood with their child and teaching them the best course. The Safe Routes to School program is dedicated to working with cities to create safe environments to and from school. If there is a safety hazard that prohibits your child from walking or biking to school, contact Safe Kids Sonoma County at 565-6680 to help connect you with a local Safe Routes to School program or resources to create change.

Another concern many parents have is allowing a child to walk alone. Parents can get physically active and model their healthy habit by walking or cycling with their child to school. Neighborhoods or apartment complexes can work together to create a meeting point to walk or bike to school as a group.

On Wednesday, October 3, 2007, we will celebrate International Walk to School Day. Many schools around the county will be organizing special events. Please contact your school to inquire about their event or to help set up an event. Even though we celebrate on October 3rd, walking and cycling to school is a great activity that you can encourage your child do every day!

Children learn from adults. Please be a good role model and show kids how to be a safe bicyclist and pedestrian by you own actions. Some safety tips to keep in mind when your child is walking or cycling to school:

Walkers

- **Always cross at the corner.** Use crossing signals and crosswalks when available.
- **Stop and look left, right, and left again** before crossing an intersection.
- **Walk on the sidewalks or paths.** If there are no sidewalks, walk facing traffic and to the left.
- **Never run into the street for any reason.** Teach children not to chase a ball, a pet, or anything else.
- **Teach kids to cross 10 feet in front of the school bus, never behind.**

Bicyclists

- **Always wear a bike helmet.** It is a law that children must wear a helmet until age 18. However, it is ALWAYS a good idea to wear a helmet regardless of age. Parents can help model good practices by also wearing a helmet.
- **Follow the Rules of the Road.** Bicycles are vehicles on the road just like cars. Bikes also need to obey all stop signs and red lights.
- **Ride right with traffic.** Teach your children to ride with traffic, not against it, as far to the right as possible.
- **Look back and yield to traffic coming from behind before turning left at an intersection.**
- **Don't ride in the dark.** If it is unavoidable, wear reflective clothes or accessories and make sure your bike has lights and reflectors.