

Active Facts:

Kids CAN Walk To School

Six Things You Can Do To Make Your Child's Walk To School Safer

The walk to school is becoming an endangered activity; fewer and fewer children walk, even if the school is within a half mile or a mile of their homes. At the same time, streets around many schools are becoming clogged in the mornings by parent/motorists who are dropping their children at school, when they could easily have walked. The US Department of Transportation estimates that up to 20 percent of the morning rush-hour traffic in any given community is caused by children being driven to school.

This is all leading to what's been called an "obesity epidemic." It's a recognized fact that children aren't getting enough physical activity these days. Too many hours in front of televisions or computer screens, increased homework loads, and decreased emphasis on physical education and recess in the schools all contribute to this growing obesity epidemic.

Your child can get part of the physical activity he or she needs by walking to school. But you should make sure he or she is taking a safe route, and knows how to safely cross streets.

#1 CHECK OUT YOUR CHILD'S ROUTE TO SCHOOL

Pick a Saturday or Sunday and walk with your child along the route he or she takes to school. Are there any dangerous crossings, missing sidewalks, or blind spots? Make notes and take photos and bring the problems up at your next PTA meeting. Discuss with your child how he or she should approach an intersection, how the pedestrian-activated signals work, and how he or she might be blocked from a motorist's view by parked cars or vegetation. If a route has a particularly hazardous crossing or other barrier, explore alternative routes with your child.

#2 WORK WITH (OR FORM) A PTA SAFETY COMMITTEE

Work with your PTA's safety committee to identify walking hazards near the school. Don't have a safety committee? Start one! Have safety committee members (which can and should include children from your school) canvas the school zone area for things that could act as barriers to children walking or biking to school, and take plenty of pictures of any hazardous conditions you find. Then lobby the city council to fix the problems.



Kids need more physical activity than they're getting today, with reduced PE courses and more "screen time." Walking to school is a great way to get some of that needed exercise. As a parent, you need to be sure they've chosen a safe route. (Photo by Sharon Roerty)



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#3 GET THE KIDS INVOLVED

Kids can help you find those traffic problems as they learn how to make a difference in the community. Think of it as a “real world” civics class that can lead to gratifying results! Ask kids what makes them uncomfortable along their routes to school, or in the school zone. To get kids involved, check out this resource: http://www.activelivingresources.org/assets/kids_in_community_planning.pdf.

#4 START A WALKING SCHOOL BUS

Start a “walking school bus” program in your neighborhood. Get together with other parents and kids and create a “bus route” that goes by each child’s house, or to an agreed-upon meeting place (a nearby corner, for example). Just like a real bus, you gather kids (and parents) along the way to school at a pre-arranged time. See the sidebar to the right for more on how to start a walking school bus in your neighborhood.

#5 CREATE A WALKING EVENT

Create a “Walking Wednesday” event (any day will work)! Once a week or once a month on the selected day, encourage everyone to walk to school. Include parents or guardians who might typically drive children to school.

#6 TAKE PART IN THE INTERNATIONAL WALK TO SCHOOL DAY

Get your school to take part in International Walk To School Day. Each year, parents all over the world walk to school with their kids. This year, Walk to School Day is Wednesday, October 3, 2007; you can find out more by visiting this link: <http://www.walktoschool.org/faq/index.cfm>

When should you get started? There’s no time like the present! Talk with your child right now about his or her route to school.

The Walking School Bus

Many parents are afraid to let their children walk or bicycle to and from school. They fear too much traffic, dangerous crossings, or potential antisocial activities (for example street gangs, bullies, or transients).

The walking school bus is a simple idea that has caught on in many communities and can help to alleviate those fears. Here’s how it works: a parent, caregiver, or even an older student volunteers to walk a pre-determined route in the morning, collecting children at “stops” along the way for the walk to school. In the afternoon, the process is repeated in reverse, dropping children off on their streets.

The “Walking School Bus” was first suggested by David Engwicht of Brisbane, Australia, in the early ‘90s. The Canadian Go For Green program picked up the idea and has promoted it widely. More recently, communities across the United States have started putting walking school buses “on the road.”

For more resources about starting your own walking school bus, see: www.activelivingresources.org/saferoutestoschool5.php



A little rain doesn't slow a walking school bus in Eugene, Oregon. The bus is led by parent Marc Schlossberg (left), a professor at the University of Oregon. (Photo by Gary MacFadden)



www.activelivingresources.org
National Center for Bicycling & Walking
8120 Woodmont Ave., Suite 520
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: 301.656.4220