

Green Sense 8-25-2013

Walking Back to School

With the passing of a long hot summer, it's now back to school. This may bring a smile to some kids and perhaps many parents. One important back to school activity is practicing the walking route children will take to school.

If you believe in keeping kids healthy, you'll know the value of walking to school. Many health departments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have taken on a mission to get more children walking and biking to school safely.

The CDC recommends children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily. For children and adolescents, this regular physical activity helps build and maintain healthy bones and muscles, reduces the risk of developing obesity and chronic diseases, reduces feelings of depression and anxiety, and promotes psychological well-being.

How does walking to school help our children?

- ✓ It prepares them for a healthy, active lifestyle
- ✓ It gives them an opportunity for social interaction
- ✓ It helps them learn and exercise responsibility

The CDC honored the Safe Routes to School National Partnership with one of their "Pioneering Innovation Awards" for their game- changing approach to encourage healthy walking or bicycling to school. Reading's elementary and middle schools have partnered with the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program along with over 550 schools in 160 Commonwealth communities. This is a very important program in a time when children have become less active and childhood obesity is on the rise.

The Safe Routes to School program is tied in to the MassRides program. According to MassRides, "In 1969, roughly 48% of students bicycled or walked to school. Today only 13% of children do so. And, travel to school can account for up to 25% of all morning traffic." Sitting in traffic is a poor alternative to walking to school for health and well-being.

When SRTS has posed the question to adults, "How did you get to school when you were a kid?" the great majority of adults have said that they walked. The following responses are typical of groups interviewed by SRTS:

"My brothers and sisters and I got together with some neighbor kids and we all walked together. It was really fun."

"Man, we were really awake when we got to school!"

"My mom walked with me when I was little, and then I walked with my big sister. I loved it when we got to go by ourselves – it made me feel really grown up!"

"When I got to be about 12, I didn't walk anymore. I rode my bike and that was a whole new feeling of freedom."

There are many reasons to help your children walk or bike to school, including:

- Children who are active are alert and do well in school.
- Being active improves self-image and independence.
- Physical activity prevents obesity and promotes healthy heart and lungs, lessening the risk of cardio-vascular disease and type two diabetes.
- Children who are out and about in their neighborhoods develop an understanding and comfort with their surroundings, and learn to make their way in the world.
- When parents and children walk even a block or two together on the trip to school, the benefit of "quality time" comes in tandem with improved fitness.

A "walking school bus" is a great starting point, where several kids get together each morning and walk the predetermined route together. If you need to get started, speak with the parents of other school children in your neighborhood. Depending on the age group, parents may take turns walking with the kids each day and meeting them at the end of the day. As the children get a little older, the older kids take on more responsibility.

So, if you haven't considered walking to school, take some time on the holiday weekend to scope it out. Get your children walking to school, for their health and the livability of our community!

A column by Reaiding Climate Committee members Michele Benson and Gina Snyder