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Personal Health

Turning the Ride to School Into a Walk

By [JANE E. BRODY](#)

The signs say “School Is Open, Drive Safely.” Of course, one should always drive safely, school or no school, and not only “when children are present,” as speed limit signs near schools often state. If only these signs reflected what health and safety experts hope will become a major change in how children get to and from school and after-school activities.

Forty years ago, half of all students walked or bicycled to school. Today, fewer than 15 percent travel on their own steam. One-quarter take buses, and about 60 percent are transported in private automobiles, usually driven by a parent or, sometimes, a teenager.

The change was primarily motivated by parents’ safety concerns—a desire to protect their children from traffic hazards and predators. But it has had several unfortunate consequences. Children’s lives have become far more sedentary. They are fatter than ever and at greater risk of developing hypertension, [diabetes](#) and heart disease at young ages.

The sedentary life also affects their behavior and the ability to learn. Studies have shown that children who engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity show improvement in concentration, memory, learning, creativity and problem solving, as well as mood, for up to two hours after exercise.

With more children being driven to school, traffic congestion has mushroomed. That has increased stress to drivers and risks to pedestrians and cyclists, as well as air pollution, especially in and around schools. Parents who drive their children to school make up about a quarter of morning commuters. More traffic also means more vehicular accidents, endangering the lives of children and the adults who drive them. It has become a vicious cycle that must be broken, and soon.

Safely moving children to and from school and after-school activities is a matter of great concern, not only to parents, but also to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), which in July issued a policy statement on school transportation safety.

School Buses Versus Cars

The academy’s statistics on injuries and fatalities suggest that being driven to school in a passenger vehicle is by far the most dangerous way to get there, and riding in a school bus is the safest. Seventy-five percent of the fatalities and 84 percent of the injuries occur in passenger vehicles, but just 2 percent of student deaths and 4 percent of injuries result from travel by school bus.

The numbers might not tell a complete story. The academy’s Committee on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention and the Council on School Health pointed out that “school bus crash data are incomplete, and that injuries cannot be reliably estimated.

“The first emergency-department-based study of nonfatal school-bus-related injuries found that the number of injuries, 17,000 annually to children 0 to 19 years of age, greatly exceeded previously published estimates.”

When the Minneapolis highway bridge collapsed this summer and a school bus filled with children plunged toward the Mississippi River, witnesses described children “flying” around in the bus. There are just two ways that could have occurred. Either the bus was not equipped with safety restraints or the children, all of whom escaped safely, were not buckled in.

Before child-restraint systems and safety belts came along, large school buses relied on “compartmentalization” to protect their occupants. This meant closely spaced seats with high energy-absorbing backs, which we now know to be inadequate, especially in rollovers and side impacts with other large vehicles. As of this summer, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York, as well as many local school districts, had passed laws requiring seat belts in school buses. California requires them in newly made buses.

Children should be secured in age-appropriate restraints in all motor vehicles. On a school bus, someone other than the driver should be responsible for assuring this.

There are potential side benefits, too: better student behavior, a more consistent seat belt habit among children and fewer distractions for the driver.

The academy urged that all school buses built before 1977 be retired from use “because they are deficient in several significant safety standards.” Old buses also spew undue emissions of pollution that children inhale, increasing respiratory symptoms and hospitalization for [asthma](#).

Safer Routes

Cities and communities throughout the country are trying to encourage more children to walk or bike to school. The only way this can occur is if children can travel there safely. That means more sidewalks and clearly marked bike lanes or paths separated from roadways, lower traffic speed on school routes, safer crosswalks, well-trained crossing guards at all corners near schools and adult supervision.

Also helpful are traffic-calming measures — changes in the design of streets and intersections to slow traffic automatically to acceptable speeds. In 2005, Congress allocated \$612 million over five years to help communities create such safer routes to school.

Seattle has reported a 77 percent to 91 percent reduction in traffic accidents after installing a citywide traffic-calming program that included 700 new residential traffic circles. Just last week, Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) announced that New York would spend \$32 million in federal money on a Safe Routes to School initiative that includes transportation and public education projects across the state. More information on traffic calming is available from the Local Government Commission at www.lgc.org or by calling (800) 290-8202.

Oct. 3 is the date of national Walk to School Day this year, promoted by the Partnership for a Walkable America (www.walktoschool-usa.org). Children who fail to learn how to walk safely face greater risks whenever they are pedestrians. They have to learn when it is safe to cross and how to judge the speed of oncoming traffic. They must be taught to look both ways for traffic, even on one-way streets. Vehicles do sometimes make mistakes, and bikes can come from any direction.

Parents, who are notoriously pressed for time to exercise, can benefit, too, if they walk or bike with their children to school. Just as parents have managed to organize car pools and play groups, they can organize groups of children who walk or cycle to school accompanied by a different adult each day or week. A walking version of the car pool, the Walking School Bus, has been successful in Canada and England. Parents share the responsibility of escorting children to and from school on foot or bike.

For guidance on setting up a Walking School Bus, a guidebook is available from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Check the Web site, www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/, or call toll-free, (888) 232-4674.

No need to wait for Walk to School Day. Start today to promote better health and safety for all schoolchildren.

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- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
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- [Back to Top](#)

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