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Active Transportation for the School Journey

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Walking, wheeling or cycling to and from school are active, energizing ways for children and youth to achieve health benefits. Using active transportation can serve as an effective way to attain the recommended 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous daily physical activity (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2014).

On average, students attend school nearly 200 days per academic year, allowing ample time for healthy habits such as walking or biking to become a part of a regular routine (Alberta Education, 2007).

This article outlines some benefits and challenges of using active transportation for getting to and from school. It also suggests:

- practical strategies for students, parents, practitioners, and the extended community to become involved in walking, wheeling or cycling; and
- additional ideas for promoting and using active transportation beyond school communities.

Benefits of Active Transportation

There are many benefits that children and youth can gain from walking, wheeling or biking to school. Improved health and wellness outcomes may include healthy weight status and cardiovascular functioning (Hart, 2009), and increased concentration in the classroom (Lee & Hopkins, 2013). More broadly, when kids and teens use active transportation, it can contribute to a strengthened sense of community.

Research has also shown that increased use of active transportation contributes to reduced traffic congestion in school zones and a decrease in collisions (DiMaggio & Li, 2013).



WOW Program

In many Alberta schools, the Walk or Wheel on Wednesday (WOW) program is an inspiring and ongoing mid-week initiative. Families and schools work together and commit to walking, wheeling or biking to and from school one day a week. Schools can celebrate students who regularly participate in the WOW program by noting their accomplishments in newsletters or announcements, or during school assemblies.

Strategies to Remove Barriers to Active Transportation

Although parents and their children may be willing to consider active transportation, there can be different barriers that get in the way. Time, distance and walking alone (as a safety issue) are three common barriers.

Time

Many families find mornings to be a frantic and chaotic time. The thought of using active transportation may seem too overwhelming. At the end of the school and work day, many families schedule sports or music lessons, run errands, or visit friends. In order to do these activities efficiently, many families often require the use of a motor vehicle.

With some planning, using active transportation can be a practical option.

Families and schools can work together to support active transportation for school journeys. Here are some examples:

- Develop classroom goals, family goals, and personal goals to decrease the use of vehicles.
- Establish a simple weekly challenge at school, such as the Walk or Wheel on Wednesday (WOW) program (see sidebar for more information).
- Acknowledge and celebrate students who are active transportation champions in newsletters or announcements, or during school assemblies.
- As a class or school, calculate how many positive environmental acts the students participate in, e.g., reduce air pollution and greenhouse gases by walking instead of driving.

Distance

A kindergarten child is generally able to walk 1 km in approximately 15 to 20 minutes (SHAPE, 2009). While this distance and time may seem reasonable, not every family lives within this radius of their child's school. One way for a family to use active transportation — regardless of how far the family may live from the school — is to participate in a Park and Walk Program.

In a Park and Walk Program, parent volunteers and/or school staff designate a local parking lot (e.g., grocery store, church, or community hall) as a meeting place and parents can park their vehicles at a specific meeting time each morning. Then, parents and children get to walk together in a fun, active and social group.

Park and Walk programs work well in urban or rural settings. School buses and students coming from long distances can gather at the meeting location and enjoy walking the rest of the way to school.

A Park and Walk program has many benefits, such as:

- providing an opportunity for exercise before school, contributing to the child's daily physical activity;

- allowing for interactions and community-building among parents and students;
- reducing time spent sedentary in vehicles; and
- decreasing traffic congestion in the school zone.



Again, celebrating and rewarding students (and parents, where possible) for making the “active choice” is encouraged.

Walking Alone

When is a child ready to walk to school unaccompanied? Safe Kids Canada suggests age nine. This is based on studies which show that, developmentally, the level of thinking and physical coordination displayed by the average nine-year-old prepares him or her to transition to a higher level of independent active transportation.

Generally, nine-year-olds aren’t as impulsive as their younger counterparts. They are more aware of their own vulnerability and able to process multiple pieces of information quickly, resulting in better judgment (Armstrong & Petch, 2013).

However, this suggested age should not discourage parents of younger students from encouraging their children to use active transportation. Young students (under age nine) should be encouraged to walk with an older student until they reach this independent stage.

An example of a program that provides younger students with a companion to walk with is Walking Buddies. Some features of the program include:

- the participating student chooses one other student to walk with;
- Walking Buddies members either participate with their school or sign-up as a team; and
- students track their use of active transportation on provided log forms, and then are rewarded at various increments for their participation.

In addition, Walking Buddies challenges students to:

- be accountable to their buddy (older or younger);
- commit to active transportation;
- practice independence; and
- show responsibility.

Getting Involved

As practitioners and professionals, getting involved in your community and promoting active transportation in school communities is one way to encourage healthy, active lifestyles. Here are some things you can do:

- Find out what your local school is doing. Is there a Walking School Bus or Walking Buddies program? Does the school participate in Winter Walk Day, International Walk to School Week, or Wheel Week?

As suggested by Safe Kids Canada, most children are ready to walk to school unaccompanied at age nine.

- Volunteer to speak to the students, staff and parents about the many health and social benefits of using active transportation.
- Flex your schedule as needed, so you can participate in a walking or biking event at a school; invite colleagues to do the same.
- Offer your expertise in planning walking, wheeling or cycling events and programs.
- Where possible or appropriate, challenge school staff and families to set aside one day a week, or more, to use active transportation for travel to and from school.

Beyond the School Community

Whether or not you have children in the school system, you can be an advocate or champion for active transportation in your community.

- For instance, the Park and Walk model can be used for any workplace location and offers the same benefits previously mentioned. Just park a distance from your work location and walk alone or with others the rest of the way.
- Use active transportation for work. To get in the groove and start walking, wheeling or cycling to work, set an early target of once a week, and then go from there.
- At home and around town, aim to leave your vehicle parked and take a walk or a bike ride when doing errands or short trips, such as going to the library or shopping.

Promoting and using active transportation — whether walking, wheeling or cycling — extends far beyond the context of school. However, schools and school communities are a great place to foster active transportation and healthy, active living.

Beyond schools, we all have the opportunity to consistently incorporate active transportation into our daily routines. Equally, we can all do our part to promote and support walking and biking initiatives in local schools, work locations, and communities.



Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Alberta Centre for Active Living or the WellSpring Advisory Committee.

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