



# The Research File

Information for professionals from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute

## Active and Safe Travel to School

Getting to school isn't as simple as it used to be. There was a time back when city or town kids would meet their friends, walk to school, and talk along the way. Or they'd ride their bikes—a fast, efficient, and safe mode of travel, not to mention good physical activity! Country kids might walk or cycle moderate distances, or ride the school bus from a corner pick-up spot or the farm gate.

Things are more complicated now. With the concern for bicycle theft, cycling to school is less popular than it once was. And more and more children are driven to school by busy parents, often dropping them off en route to work.

Safety is a big issue, too. One British study showed that the number of 7- and 8-year-olds allowed to travel to school *independently* fell from about 80% in 1971 to 9% in 1990. The concerns *and* the numbers wouldn't be all that different here in Canada.

Adrian Davis, in his article "Walking and Safer Routes to School," says, "The necessary decision-making about school travel modes ... involves a complex web of inter-dependent choices ... Significant determinants are journey length, school location, perceived traffic conditions and 'stranger danger', the age and

sex of pupils, school rules, car ownership and employment patterns within households."

### Reversing the Trend

Efforts are underway to buck the trend to increasing automobile use—particularly as a means of getting children to school. In the United Kingdom, it's done under the Sustrans (sustainable transport) umbrella. In the United States, it's the Partnership for a Walkable America. Here at home, we call it Active & Safe Routes to School.

Active & Safe Routes to School is a national program of Go for Green, the Active Living and Environment Program. The whole idea is to encourage active modes of transportation—walking, biking, in-line skating, and the like—to and from school. The benefits include:

- increased physical activity for children and youth,
- a healthier lifestyle for the whole family,
- less traffic congestion around schools,
- safer, calmer streets and neighbourhoods,
- improved air quality and a cleaner environment,
- opportunities to develop life skills, including the capacity to look after oneself, and
- opportunities to interact and learn about the local environment.



The health and safety benefits of the program are significant. *Active* travel to and from school, by itself, can provide children with a good portion of their recommended daily "dose" of physical activity. As for safety, a study of one school program in Denmark showed an 85% reduction in child pedestrian and cycling accidents.

### Team Effort

Adrian Davis says, "Where schools are involved, feel supported and engaged, attitudes *alone* can help to engender some positive changes, at least in the short term." But he also notes that success over the long term will come through the combined work of schools and various levels of government.

Efforts to reduce and calm traffic, for example, will add to the cause. These obviously require the support and action of jurisdictions beyond the school. Synergies exist if these activities can be tied into broader efforts to reduce automobile use through a variety of fiscal and administrative measures.

Significant policy changes will come through the effective collaboration of public health officials, education administrators, municipal planners and engineers, and others—all working together for a common cause.

### More Info ...

Davis, A. (1998). Walking and safer routes to school. *Traffic Engineering & Control*, 39 (3), 171-173.

Active & Safe Routes to School, c/o Go for Green, 30 Stewart Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5. Call toll-free (888) 822-2848 or check the Web at [www.goforgreen.ca](http://www.goforgreen.ca)

## Fueled by Carbohydrates—Not Hydrocarbons

Walking and Biking School Buses burn no fuel, emit no exhaust, cut down on traffic congestion, and cost nothing to run. They are simple ways to allow more kids to get to school under their own steam. Options of an **Active & Safe Routes to School** program include:

- **Walking School Bus** for young children with adult supervision for safety and traffic awareness;
- **Biking School Bus** for older children with adult supervision and a focus on bicycle safety;
- awareness campaigns and friendly inter- or intra-school competitions;
- no-idling zones for cars around schools;
- group pick-up spots for (motorized!) school buses to increase physical activity for students and improve busing efficiency;
- bus and car drop-off zones some distance from school and safe walking routes in from there.

