



3. MAKING THE CASE

WHY DO WE NEED ACTIVE AND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL?

Walking and cycling as a means of transportation are on the decline in Canada, as part of a decades-long international trend toward more sedentary lifestyles and increased dependence on automobiles. This directly affects children attending elementary schools, as they have little choice about how they get around. If the parents drive to work, the children are likely driven to school. Over the past 30 years, the habit of walking to school has seen a steep decline. In fact, studies have shown that almost 80% of children used to walk to school, compared to 35% today.

At the same time, dramatic increases in childhood obesity rates combined with low physical activity levels are resulting in dire health consequences and an urgent need to reverse these trends. Increasing the number of children who walk and bike to school can play a significant role in achieving this. Walking or biking between home and school builds physical activity into the day, helping children meet the recommended amount of daily physical activity. It also sets up an active lifestyle that can carry on into adulthood.

The increasing number of children being driven to school has negative environmental consequences as well. Greenhouse gas emissions from cars contribute to climate change. Idling (running your car for 10 seconds or longer) in school zones increases air pollution in an area where children spend a lot of time.

This trend has also led to extreme traffic congestion around schools. Stand outside most elementary schools at drop-off and pick-up times and you are likely to witness complete chaos, with parents and caregivers converging in their vehicles around the school. Children and adults who have to walk through this area are at significant risk of injury.

The 2009 Physical Activity Report Card produced by Active Healthy Kids Canada states: "Although nearly two-thirds of Canadian families indicate that they live within a reasonable distance to walk or cycle to school, just over one-third of children report having walked to school, and 80% report never having cycled to school, according to parent reports."

If current trends continue, we may no longer have a generation that will remember walking to school.

Traffic congestion contributes to air pollution around schools. Air quality has been shown to be worse on streets where schools are located.

“Fifty percent of kids hit by cars near schools are hit by cars driven by other parents dropping **their** kids off because they’re afraid of **them** getting hit by cars.” —Lenore Skenazy, Free Range Kids.

Less freedom for our children

Parents’ fear can be a powerful barrier, with many of today’s children not allowed to move about their neighbourhoods on their own. But are we doing our kids any favours by keeping them under close watch at home? For many children, unstructured play outdoors has been replaced with watching TV or playing video games. Current national data indicates that only 10% of Canadian youth are meeting the recommended guideline for screen time of less than 2 hours per day, and many spend closer to 6 hours per day.

“The world is no less safe than it was 20-30 years ago. What has changed is our perception.” —Lenore Skenazy, Free Range Kids

WHY ARE PARENTS DRIVING THEIR KIDS TO SCHOOL?

Many parents cite traffic safety as the number one reason they drive their children to school. “There’s too much traffic” is a familiar phrase, yet they do not make the connection that they are adding one more car to the chaos around the school. Some cite a fear of “stranger danger” or “white van syndrome,” while others feel the distance is too far for their children to walk.

Some of these barriers are due in part to challenges resulting from the design of modern neighbourhoods, which are not conducive to walking and biking. Cul-de-sacs create much longer walking and biking distances than the traditional grid-style of streets in older neighbourhoods. In addition, many newer neighbourhoods do not have sidewalks. The consolidation of smaller schools into larger, central schools has increased the distance between home and school. For some students, these factors have made it difficult to walk or bike.

Regardless of the parents’ reasons for driving, their children’s travel habits are shaped in great part by their choices. If the parents typically drive everywhere, they will also drive their child to and from school.

THE CAR DILEMMA

While cars have become our main mode of transportation due to their perceived convenience and safety, they are actually proving to be a threat to children’s overall well-being. Every parent who drives their child to school adds one more vehicle to already congested roads, while removing their eyes from the street. This creates a downward spiral – the emptier the sidewalks become, the more parents may view them as unsafe.

And with fewer parents monitoring their neighbourhood sidewalks, there's a concern that children who walk to school alone can become more vulnerable to the dangers of traffic, bullying, harassment or abduction. Most parents say they would let their children walk to school if there were ways to ensure they were safe. Many of them don't realize that the solution is in their hands.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WALKING AND BIKING TO SCHOOL?

Meaningful, active family time

Walking or biking with your children provides time to simply chat about the day or have a meaningful conversation while being active together. According to the *Healthy Kids Healthy Futures* Task Force Report produced by the Province of Manitoba in 2004, "Only 43% of parents are, on average, regularly active with their children. The number of parents who are active with their children drops by 25% once children reach the age of five and drops a further 30% once children reach 13."

Learning "road sense"

Younger children who walk to school with a parent or caregiver have the chance to build up their road sense over time, making them better prepared for independent journeys as they age.

Taking action on climate change

Reducing car use has positive environmental impacts. In Manitoba, transportation accounts for over 30% of greenhouse gas emissions overall and almost 50% of individual household emissions. Walking or biking instead of driving for one or two short trips per week can make a difference.

"A British study found that children are as dependent on cars as their parents, with 90% of girls and 75% of boys saying they would find it difficult to adjust their lifestyles without a car." —Sina Arnold and Domenica Settle, "Hooked on Cars: Driving as Addiction," *Car Busters Magazine*, no. 7, Winter 1999-2000.

The best protection from obesity comes from unorganized play. This includes going for a walk, running, riding bikes, playing on the playgrounds and playing ball hockey on the street. Children who do this are about 50% less likely to be fat compared to those who don't.

Chassity McIntyre, a parent at École Riverbend School in Winnipeg, says that walking her son home from school is like the "carrot at the end of the stick" that gets her through each day. "I find out what the teacher was wearing, what the other kids had for lunch, and what is going on at the school every day, and it's great. I feel more connected to my son and what's going on in his life."

Polar Bears Do Not Like Cars

Walking to school can help save polar bears! How? Walking instead of driving helps reduce climate change, so that the Arctic ice floes from which the bears hunt and feed do not melt and disappear.

Physical Activity and Health Facts

Over the past 25 years, the overweight/obesity rate of youth aged 12-17 has more than doubled from 14% to 29% (and the obesity rate has tripled from 3%-9%).

Manitoba children (ages 2-17 years old) are more overweight and obese than Canadian children in general. 31% of Manitoban children are overweight/obese compared to 26% of Canadian children.

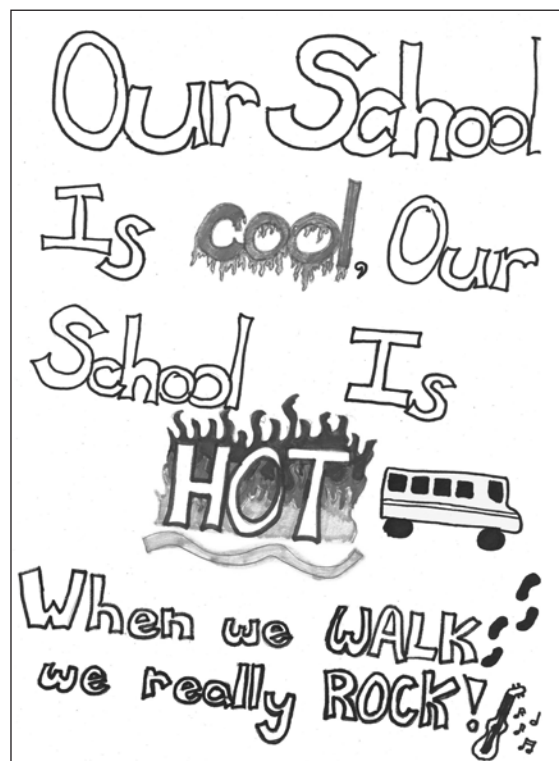
In Manitoba, 59% of youth aged 12-19 years old are not active enough for optimal growth and development. (www.gov.mb.ca/healthyschools/issues/physical.html)

Staying healthy by being active

Daily physical activity can help to build and maintain healthy bones and muscles, boost cardiovascular fitness, maintain a healthy weight and lead to more energy. Walking or biking to school is a great way to increase children's physical activity level.

Better performance in school

High grades and performance on cognitive measures are consistently associated with children who are more active. Most parents would strongly agree that physical activity helps their children's growth and development, builds self-esteem, helps with concentration and improves learning. The 2009 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card states that academic performance is improved by engagement in regular physical activity. There are also direct links made to a reduction in depression and anxiety and fatigue, and improved interpersonal relationships.



Poster from North Memorial School Clean Air Day Celebration, Portage la Prairie