The school run: can it be active and safe?
by Jenny Pogson

*With many kids not getting enough physical activity, is it time to rethink the morning drop-off?*

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Did you ride your bike to school when you were a kid? A generation ago most kids rode, walked or caught the bus to school; very few of us were dropped off by our parents at the school gate.

These days most of us have experienced the daily traffic jams around schools at drop-off and pick-up times, as parents drive their children to the school gate.

While there is no national data on the number of children who walk or ride to school, a recent Victorian survey found nearly half of all children are driven to school every day.

Parents choose to drop their kids at school for a number of reasons – mostly to do with safety and convenience. But experts say chauffeuring your kids to school every day could mean they're missing out on much-needed exercise and other life skills.

**Health benefits of 'active commuting'**
Research suggests at least a third of Australian children aged 9-16 years aren’t getting the amount of daily physical activity recommended in national guidelines. But this isn’t because children’s participation in leisure or sporting activities has dropped off, says Dr Jan Garrard, senior lecturer at Deakin University's school of health and social development.

Participation in these activities hasn’t altered much over the years, Garrard says but what has changed is the level of incidental activity children do. "When you look at countries where children are just active as part of everyday life, they don’t have to be sporty, all they have do is get around the way the community gets around by walking and cycling, and they get enough physical activity," she says.

UK studies have found young adolescent girls are around seven times more likely to meet physical activity guidelines if they travel actively to school.

"Whereas in countries like Australia they are population groups that tend to miss out because they don’t deliberately take up physical activity."

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The school run: can it be active and safe? (cont’d)

Learning life skills
But physical activity isn't the only benefit of walking or riding to school. Adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg says allowing children to get to school by themselves also helps them learn to be independent and responsible.

"Our job as a parent isn't to protect our child from every potential threat in the world, no matter how remote, it's to teach our children how to live in the world by themselves. By being a snow plough parent – removing all obstacles – all you're doing is giving themselves a false sense of the illusion of control, which teaches our children nothing but to live in fear of everything," he says.

Also encouraging an active commute gets kids to spend time outside on a regular basis. Carr-Gregg says research suggests people who spend time outside in parks, gardens and green spaces tend to be healthier, better adjusted and better at coping with stress.

Perceptions of risk
Despite the benefits, many parents still struggle with the decision to let their children walk or ride to school and safety is one of the major concerns.

There is no specific data on the risk of injury for children who walk or cycle to school, however, Garrard says most parents make their decisions based on the perceived risk of letting their child ride and cycle alone.

Evidence does show injury rates are lower for children walking and cycling when compared with those who are car passengers. But this is because exposure is lower, that is more children spend more time travelling in cars.

However, the relative risk of injury is higher for pedestrians and cyclists compared with car passengers per kilometre travelled.

"This is where risk perceptions come in. We tend to base our risk perceptions on relative risk rather than absolute risk. We don't let kids walk or cycle to school because it is 'risky'," she says.

"But driving them long distances is not perceived as risky even though the absolute risk of walking or cycling short distances and driving longer distances might be the same, or greater for driving depending on distance," Garrard says.

It's also worth noting our perception of risk is also influenced by what people around us are doing. If most people allow their children to travel to school independently, then it isn't perceived as risky behaviour. Conversely, when only a few children walk or cycle to school, parents view it as more risky and feel they are being irresponsible by allowing it.

"You tend to take your risk perceptions from what other people are doing," says Garrard.

Another factor that contributes to parents' decision-making is how our society is geared towards convenient motor vehicle travel.

"We've become increasingly car-oriented in our transport. So many of our [government] policies cater for motor vehicle transport and as a result motor vehicle travel has become comfortable, convenient and reasonably fast. Only recently we've discovered those benefits also come with some [disadvantages]," she says.
The school run: can it be active and safe? (cont’d)

Is 10 the magic age?
There's no hard and fast rule about when your child will be ready to walk or cycle to school by themselves, says psychologist Warren Cann, CEO of the Parenting Research Centre and member of the Raising Children Network.

VicRoads recommends children be at least 10 years old before they independently walk to school. This is because experts say children younger than this aren't cognitively ready.

"Younger kids are impulsive, so if the conditions are right they may be able to handle something but if anything changes, like they drop something and it rolls onto the road, they are not always good at controlling impulses," Cann says.

Cann says parents also need to be aware of their child's own developmental status because kids develop very differently.

"There may be some 10 year olds that are ready, and there may be some 10 year olds that are not. There may in fact be some 12 year olds that are not ready," Cann says.

You should also take into account how far your child has to travel to school, the nature of traffic conditions and whether there is strong community support, such as crossing guards at pedestrian crossings and traffic lights.

"It's hard to be very prescriptive. The 10 year old age range is a good guide, but parents need to think of the child's maturity and also the traffic conditions," Cann says.

Teaching kids how to commute safely
But there are some things parents can do in order to help their children to be safe and active commuters:
- Talk with other parents about letting their children walk to school if you aren't comfortable with your child walking alone.

- Organise a walking school bus with other parents who live in your area.

- Slowly build up to independent travel by walking or cycling with your children all the way to school, then halfway, then staying home when you feel they are able to handle themselves.

- Cycle or walk the route to school together so you can coach them in road safety.

- Set a good example to your children by obeying road rules, such as always crossing the road at pedestrian crossings.

- Start teaching road safety early by verbalising everything you do when walking around the streets and crossing roads with your children.

- Watch how your children negotiate walking around the streets and crossing roads.

- Ask your child to verbalise what road safety actions they are taking when you walk around the streets.

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