Why aren’t more kids cycling to school?
by Jan Garrard, 17 October 2011

In 1970, nearly all young people in Australia walked, cycled or took public transport to school or university (84%). Few travelled by car (16%). Fast forward to 2011 and most children are now driven to school. So what has changed in the past 40 years? What can we do to get more children cycling to school? And why does this even matter?

National data are no longer available but in Melbourne, nearly four times as many young people are being driven to school than in 1970. Cycling levels are at an all-time low of 2.6%. In fact, Australian children are among the most chauffeured young people in the developed world. Out of the total distance 10-14 year olds travel, walking and cycling is used for 33.5% of the distance in the Netherlands, 14.4% in Switzerland and 13.8% in Germany. In Melbourne (again, there is no national data), it’s 4.6%.

Is this trend a cause for concern? There are many reasons why cycling to school (and other local destinations) is better for children than sitting in a car. Physically active children are healthier, happier and more socially connected than sedentary children. And most Australian children don’t get enough physical activity to reap these benefits. Children who cycle to school are also likely to have improved mental health and social wellbeing; increased IQ and educational attainment; and greater independent mobility. The community benefits from reduced traffic congestion; environmental sustainability; community liveability; and reduced chauffeuring duties for parents.

Primary school students consistently say they’d rather ride or walk to school. They say it’s fun, they like travelling with their friends, and it makes them fit and healthy. Car travel on the other hand – which is their least preferred way of getting to school – is considered “boring”, it means “you have to sit still”, you “don’t get any exercise”, and cars “make bad gas in the air”.

It all sounds positive, so why aren’t children cycling? Many parents would also like their children to be able to walk or cycle to school, but feel they shouldn’t. What stops them? Whether real or imagined, parents worry about: trip distance, which is supposedly greater in Australia; traffic hazards; “stranger danger”; and the inconvenience of cycling compared to being driven. Some of these reasons don’t hold up to close scrutiny. Take trip distance. In Victoria, the median distance from home to school is 2.1 kilometres for primary school students and 5.4 kilometres for secondary school students. Most young people can easily cycle these distances, and in high-cycling countries they do. In Denmark, cycling is the most common way to get to school for distances up to three kilometres. Cycling rates remain substantial for trips up to and beyond eight kilometres.

Australian kids are happy to walk approximately 500 metres or less to school, but distances greater than this have parents reaching for the car keys. The convenience of car travel is a major constraint on riding to school. In Australia, car travel is prioritised over getting around by foot or by bicycle. This is partly because the road environment feels (and to some extent is) unsafe for walking and cycling. Parents respond by driving their children increasingly short distances that are potentially walkable and rideable. In a number of affluent European and Asian countries – such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Japan – cycling is prioritised over car travel in built-up areas. As a result, cycling can be faster and more convenient than driving. Safety also improves: urban areas become places for living, rather than thoroughfares for cars.

Riding to school is dangerous, right? Safety concerns are a key reason many Australian parents don’t let their children walk or cycle to school. Actual injury risk is only part of the picture. Australian parents risk being blamed (and feeling personal guilt) if their child is injured cycling or walking to school. This is because in car-oriented countries, such as Australia, it is considered the responsibility of parents to keep their children safe from cars by keeping them in cars.

In high-cycling countries it is the other way around. The operator of the vehicle that has the potential to cause the most harm has the responsibility for avoiding harm. The onus is on drivers to prove no-fault when in collisions with pedestrians and cyclists. In societies where “everyone does it”, independent travel to school is not deemed to be “risk-taking behaviour”. In the same way, travelling long distances with children in cars (which is as risky as short tips by bicycle) is not seen as “risk-taking behaviour” in Australia where it is common practice. These legal and social factors in high-cycling countries help to protect children from injury, and parents from social blame and personal guilt. “Trust in others” may also be an important factor in whether children get to travel independently. High-cycling countries tend to be among the more equal societies. They have higher levels of trust, social cohesion, and involvement in community life, and lower levels of violence than countries with high levels of income inequality. These factors reduce risk and allay parents’ concerns about their children’s unsupervised use of public spaces. Because of this, children get to cycle more.

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