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Building health, building communities

In the UK an innovative study of parents by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions noted that over half considered their walk to school as an important opportunity to socialize and catch up on news. Four-fifths believed the walk to school was a good

According to research from the UK, twenty-five years ago approximately 80 per cent of children in grades three and up walked or rode to school on their bikes with their siblings and friends unaccompanied by adults.¹ Today, recent research suggest that while 68 per cent of Canadian children live within a 30 minute walk from their school, only 36 per cent walk as a rule.²

For many of us, driving our children to school seems like the safest and most convenient option in our busy lives. In fact, if current trends continue we may soon no longer have a generation that remembers walking to school. Our dependency on motorized transportation can also be correlated to a continuing decline in air quality, and rising cases of asthma in children. Fifty-seven per cent of Canadian young people are so sedentary that it is harmful to their health, and only 38% of Canadian girls and 48% of boys are active enough for it to benefit their health.³ There is much evidence that suggests that the change in this daily trip, from foot or bike to car seat, is having a big impact on our children's health and safety.



Our use of motorized transportation as a preferred mode of shuttling children to and from school has led to unsupervised and empty neighbourhood sidewalks that are considered unsafe places for children. It has also led to extreme traffic congestion around

way to get some daily exercise (Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions survey, May 2002, www.dtlr.gov.uk).

our schools. Stand outside almost any elementary school these days at drop-off and pickup times and you are likely to witness a scene of complete chaos, with parents and caregivers converging in their vehicles – sometimes as many as 100 – around the school. Children and adults who have to walk through this are at incredible risk of injury. These cars also contribute to air pollution around the school – smog is actually often

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worse on side streets where many of our schools are located. In one study, on a normal summer day in a Toronto school yard, ozone levels approached 70 parts per billion in the afternoon, and 14 air toxins of concern were detected in levels exceeding cancer risk levels of more than one in a million.⁴

But the tide is turning. Around the world, concerns for children's health and safety has led to many communities adopting Active and Safe Routes to School programs in an effort to ensure that their children are encouraged to be safe and active at least twice a day when travelling to and from school. Many European programs have been in place since



the 1970s and have led to an 85 per cent reduction in traffic-related injuries in children.⁵

Canada now joins communities across Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, Japan and Australia in promoting safe and

active travel to and from school. In Canada, the Active and Safe Routes to School program was initiated in Ontario by Greenest City in 1996 in the City of Toronto as a pilot project involving three public schools. In 1997 the Way to Go! School Program was launched in British Columbia and in 1998 Greenest City inspired and urged the development of a national ASRTS program, under the stewardship of Go for Green. As of 2003, ASRTS programs have spread to almost 1,000 schools across Ontario and close to 2,000 across Canada.

Cost of convenience

Every year, each of Canada's 16.8 million cars travels an average of 16,000 kilometres and pumps out more than five tones of air pollutants and greenhouse gases (The Smog Primer, Pollution Probe, June 2002).