

Do it all by walking the kids to school

By Janet Barlow



Led by parents and Acadia University students, Wolfville Elementary launched its Walking School Bus during Walk to School Week, 2003. Photo credit: Ecology Action Centre

In our multi-tasking society, we all welcome the chance to get everything done with time to spare. With only a few weeks of school under their belts, parents are wondering how they managed it last year. If you're a parent, fret not. Have I got a deal for you.

Want to save money, get some exercise, spend quality time with the kids and help the environment? You can do it all simply by walking.

Here's the deal. Instead of driving the kids to school, let them walk. While you're at it, walk with them.

I can sense the eyebrows rising already. No, this is not for the kids who are bussed to school – walking 20 km to class is not reasonable. This is for the kids who live about three km or less from school. There are lots of them in our province.

The current trend of high gas prices is enough for any parent to at least consider the thought. You could save money by letting little Johnny and Jane hoof it instead of driving them.

The average Canadian makes over 2,000 car trips per year of less than three km. Many of them are school-related. It's your hard-earned dollars spewing from the tailpipe every time you chauffeur the kids.

Many of us find it difficult to fit regular exercise into our lives. If you're one of those people, the walk to school with your child could be the answer.

First of all, you don't waste gas money driving to the gym. Second, you don't waste the time getting there and back. Third, walking is free – no gym fees. The trip to school has to happen anyway. Lace up the sneakers and you've got your exercise plan in place.

Little Johnny and Jane could use the exercise too. Two-thirds of Nova Scotian children and youth are not active enough and 32 percent are overweight or obese – higher than the national average.

A recent UK study showed the number of calories burned by walking to school in a week equals two hours of physical education. With fewer of these classes than ever before, the walk to school could provide what's missing from students' timetables.

As we try to squeeze more and more into the run of a day, quality time with the kids falls to the wayside. The walk to school is an excellent time for parent-child bonding.

Then there's the warm, fuzzy feeling you get from saving the environment. About 49 percent of the average Canadian's greenhouse gas emissions come from transportation. Driving less would put a considerable dent in those emissions.

Leaving the car at home also reduces local air pollution. Between the car and the school's front door, kids must walk through clouds of exhaust from idling cars during drop-off and pick-up times.

It's a pretty convincing argument. You're sold, right?

Here's where all the "Yeah, but" people chime in. "Yeah, but there are no sidewalks in my neighbourhood. Yeah, but it's not safe for kids to walk to school. Yeah, but I don't have time."

While they're valid concerns, they can be overcome with something called the *Walking School Bus*.

Organize with other parents in your neighbourhood to take turns supervising a group of kids on the walk to school. You meet by a certain time at a known meeting spot just like a regular school bus stop. The *Walking School Bus* leaves and everyone walks to school together.

This is especially useful in areas with no sidewalks. The adults make sure the kids stay on the side of the road and out of street.

There's safety in numbers. Cars will automatically slow down and take care around a group of people, more so than if it were just one person.

In terms of time, the argument for combining your exercise time and walk-to-school time is pretty strong.

Savings, exercise, quality time and a cleaner environment – it's hard to argue with an activity that does all this. Besides, your kids are worth it.

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