

Parents: Get kids walking to school

Millions of schoolchildren from around the globe walked to school in October in recognition of International Walk to School Month. Schools across the Valley joined in the month-long event, including Mariposa Elementary where participants included more than 200 students, teachers and parents.

Walk to School Month promotes safety, health, concern for the environment, a sense of community and physical activity among children.

Communities are encouraged to pick a day, a week, once a week or the entire month to celebrate the event and draw attention to these issues. International Walk to School Day began in 2000, following several successful walk to school campaigns in the U.S. and Canada.



NICHOLE MOSQUEDA

Unfortunately, walking to school has become a thing of the past. A generation ago, it was customary for children to walk, even bike, to and from school. In 1989, nearly half of all children ages 5-18 walked or rode their bicycles to school. By the year 2001, this number dropped to less than 15%, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

More parents are transporting their children to school by vehicles than ever before. Even among those kids living within a mile of their school, only 25% are regular walkers. As a result, there is greater traffic congestion en route to schools, which in turn heighten fears about public safety.

Parents have a right to be concerned. Safe Kids USA, a nonprofit organization to promote child safety nationwide, states

that pedestrian injuries in the U.S. are the second leading cause of accidental death among children ages 5 to 14. Across the country each year, approximately 626 children ages 0 to 14 are killed and 38,500 suffer nonfatal pedestrian injuries.

These statistics may give parents pause, however; there are things they can do in the community to make walking to school a safe experience for their children. Parents can start by educating children about bicycle and pedestrian safety, such as how to cross streets at marked crossings, obey all traffic signals and walk on sidewalks.

Parents can model safe behavior for children by walking or riding bikes to school with their children. By accompanying their children to school, parents can supervise their children, monitor potential hazards and reinforce safety.

Parents can also work with local law enforcement to aggressively enforce posted speeds and traffic laws to create safer driving habits in neighborhoods, near parks and schools.

All residents, including parents, should work with local city government in the design and building of facilities — roadways, sidewalks, lighting, signs — to enhance the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. Communities can also encourage safe, healthy, regular walking through special events, public relations, and incentive programs.

Walking to school presents a great opportunity for children to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. For some families who do not live within walking distance, transporting children by vehicle to school may be the only option. But for other children whose homes are within walking distance, they are missing a prime opportunity for physical activity.

Now more than ever children need more

opportunities for physical activity. The reality is that children in the United States are less fit today than they were a generation ago. According to the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, obesity rates among children have more than doubled in the past 20 years. In addition to excess weight, many children are now exhibiting higher blood cholesterol levels, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

Studies have shown that physical activity lowers the risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease stroke and certain types of cancer. Physical activity also helps build and keep healthy bones, muscles and joints. Another benefit of exercise is that it helps improve concentration, enabling children to better focus while at school.

The American Heart Association advises that healthy behaviors be promoted in childhood by introducing regular physical activity, in addition to a low-saturated-fat, low cholesterol diet after age 2 and observing regular medical checkups.

The Network for a Healthy California recommends that children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day to maintain their health. Exercise can include simple forms of physical activity such as brisk walking, biking, taking the stairs and dancing.

For more safety information on what parents can do to establish safer routes to school, parents can visit Web sites for the Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Highway Administration, National Center for Safe Routes to School and WalktoSchool.org.

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