

## Linking Health to Learning

### Walk or Bike to School: Healthier, Less Expensive, and Less Traffic!

By Gabrielle Ratte Smith, CCSU Prevention and Wellness Coordinator

I've started biking to school some days with my two children. I've been meaning to do this, but I've always found a reason not to: It is a two mile ride with small children across busy streets; I've got too much to bring with me to work that day; Is it safe enough?; or I'm just not organized enough that morning to get us out the door in time. Then, I drove to school the first few days this year, and the traffic and frustration I experienced made that bike ride look pretty appealing! Now, add in that I could save money on gas and wear and tear on my car, and we've practiced biking and bike safety over the summer. Soon enough, I was ready to commit to biking as much as our schedule would allow. The kids were so excited! They said, "Mom, we're first graders now, and we can do it!"

I'm sharing my story with you to illustrate the reasons I had for driving my car to school. Some, or all, of them may be ones you share if you drive, too. At this time there is no annual survey, so we do not know how many families drive to school in our community each year. What we do know is many students do walk or bike to school, especially if they live within several blocks of their school. Lots of us do need to drive for a variety of reasons. However, if you, like me, can bike or walk to school (even a few days a week), but are still driving, there are lots of good reasons to consider:

1. Biking and walking are healthy choices. Not only are you and your children getting the immediate health benefit of exercise, but you are giving your kids the gift of developing a healthy habit (that biking and walking is a great way to get places nearby, rather than taking the car). Whether or not weight is an issue for you or your children now, physical activity is key in getting to and keeping a healthy weight. Obesity is a growing concern among Americans, most alarmingly our youth. Establishing a regular exercise habit as a child is important to lifelong health and avoiding obesity.
2. Biking improves motor skills, coordination, and balance.
3. Pedestrian and bicycle travel produces no exhaust and air pollution, helps to decrease traffic congestion and reduces our collective carbon footprint.
4. When traffic is really bad, biking is just as fast – or faster – than the car (some days, I think that is true of pedestrians, too!)

Safety is a huge concern for all of us. Our communities are safe places for pedestrians and bicyclists. There are very few injuries, and even fewer fatalities, involving people walking or biking in Vermont, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In Essex Junction, CCSU employs crossing guards to ensure safe crossings at all busy intersections and most crossings that students take to school. Thank you to Margie, crossing guard at Route 2A and Central Ave, for reminding my kids and me of two important rules when crossing with a guard present: always wait for the guard to tell you it's safe to cross and walk your bike across the street. Other important safety rules:

When biking: Always, always wear a helmet. Be sure it fits correctly (for information on proper fit, go to

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/outreach/safesobr/18qp2/bikehelmet/>). Check clothing – be sure there are no dangling shoe laces (tuck them in the shoes) or pant legs that could get caught in the chain. Do not wear headphones or use an iPod, as this will distract from hearing. Remember to ride on the right hand side of the road, with traffic, using the sidewalks only when necessary. Principal Dan Ryan also reminds Fleming students to ride only one person at a time on a bike – no passengers! At Summit Elementary, Principal Mary Hughes asks that people walk, not ride, their bikes on school grounds. For all students, be sure to lock your bikes! All of our schools have bike racks.

When walking: Supervise children under the age of 9. Children typically develop the cognitive ability to cross streets on their own between ages 9 and 10. Stop at the edge - a safe place to view traffic (curb, parked car, or any other visual barrier that block the view of oncoming traffic). Look left, then right, then left again before crossing. Walk, don't run when crossing. Walk on the left side of the street, facing traffic, when there are no sidewalks.

For more information on pedestrian and bike safety, check out these websites: [www.saferoutesinfo.org](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org), <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org>, and <http://www.walktoschool.org/>, which is the site for the International Walk to School Day on October 8, 2008.

If the cost of a bike is an issue for your family, we are lucky to have a terrific resource in Chittenden County. Recycle Bikes refurbishes donated bikes and resells them to people who are income-eligible for \$15, including a helmet and a lock! Go to <http://www.localmotion.org/bikerecycle/> or call 264-9887 for more information.