

Promoting Pedestrian Safety: Walk to School Day

Walking to school is fun and benefits young people in many ways. They revel in the physical exercise, breathe fresh air, get an emotional boost, and socialize with friends. It's also good for the environment to reduce traffic.

International Walk to School Day, which will be held Oct. 2nd, celebrates the joys of walking to school. It also teaches children how to be safe as they walk in their neighborhoods and emphasizes the need for communities to work harder to provide appropriate infrastructure such as sidewalks, traffic devices, and clear pathways for kids and others to use.

The event, which was started in 1997 as a one-day event, has grown to have a global scope. It is now held in 50 states, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia and in 40 countries. Thousands of students and adults will gather on Oct. 2nd to walk in groups to their schools. Some carry banners and signs letting others know about the importance of walking. Local governmental and elected officials are encouraged to put on their walking shoes, too.

“Seeing a large group of children accompanied by adults walking and biking to school is the sort of event that can draw the attention of elected officials and community members who can commit to working together to improve safety,” says Debby Gerhardstein, Executive Director of the ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation.

For children who live too far from school to walk, organizers may designate a gathering spot closer to school where parents can drop off their children so they can also participate.

With many thousands of participants, Walk to School Day also provides an opportunity for adults to reinforce safety tips, such as standing back from the curb at intersections, waiting for a walk signal at traffic lights, looking both ways and behind them before crossing, making eye contact with the driver before crossing in front of a stopped car and sticking to the safe routes their parents have designated for them.

Another movement that supports walking and biking to school is Safe Routes to School (SRTS), which is working to increase the number of children who walk or bike to school safely by funding projects that resolve barriers to walking and biking, such as poor walkways, limited adult supervision or crime.

Over the years, the National Safe Routes to School Center, which is the coordinating organization for Walk to School Day, has evaluated the success of the annual Walk to School event, and has found it is having an impact on the number of students walking. A survey they conducted of 720,000 parents from 6,500 schools showed that walking to and from school increased from less than 14 percent to more than 17 percent between 2007 and 2014.

From providing stickers and other small incentives, to talking about the importance of pedestrian safety, there are many ways health professionals can support students who want to make walking a part of their daily routine. For school presentations on safe use of our walkways and roadways, including bicycle, pedestrian and vehicle safety, contact a [ThinkFirst Chapter](#) in your area.