

Here's a healthy thought, make October "Walktober"

"Moving Grays Harbor"
By Maryann Welch

Every day I read a new study on the country's obesity rates and am astounded by how they are continuing to grow. A few studies are so bold as to suggest the grim fact that this generation of children is not expected to outlive their parents. Wow...with all the technological advances we've made in the last century you'd think we'd be able to get a handle on this.

So, how do we solve the problem? It all boils down to one thing - calories in and calories out. If it was just that easy to put into practice! We live in an age of convenience and instant gratification and that isn't likely to change, in fact, with the continued advancement of technology it's likely to get much harder to fit activity into our normal day's routine.

It's obvious that children (and most adults for that matter) need to add more physical activity to their day but the two systems they encounter during a normal day, school and family, have shifting priorities. Some schools are cutting recess time while others are cutting Physical Education classes or making them an elective instead of requiring that all children engage in some form of physical activity every day. So, how do children fit in their recommended hour of physical activity every day?

One solution that I think might be a realistic one for a lot of families is walking or biking to school. A co-worker of mine, Wilma Weber, introduced a "walking school bus" program at Central Park Elementary School last year. In the planning process she discovered that the majority of elementary school children (in Aberdeen and Hoquiam) live within 1 mile of the school that they attend. So why aren't more children walking or biking? Wilma shares that there are many barriers that she encountered from meeting with parents and conducting surveys. These ranged from fear of bullying to traffic safety, unleashed dogs to plain old motivation. Each family had varying comfort levels regarding the prospect of having their children walk to school.

I know a lot of you parents are probably thinking that it's not safe to let your second grader walk to school alone or that it's just easier to drive your sixth grader instead of arguing about the health benefits. I agree with both of those points. However, I do think that we, as parents and adults, need to lead the way. No, I wouldn't send a young child down the street by themselves, but Wilma suggests coordinating with other parents in your neighborhood to see if you could take turns "walk-pooling" the children to school or make sure that they are walking in a group of children that has some older kids who know the rules of the road. As far as the older children...lead by example. Not every trip we take in the car is warranted. If we choose to walk or ride a bike instead of drive to close destinations we are empowering our children to enjoy the same independence.

Not only does walking/biking have health benefits, it is also good for the environment. If we all cut down by even 5% the short trips we drive, we would be making a significant contribution on both accounts.

October is international walk/bike to school (or work) month. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage everyone to make that choice at least once during the coming month. In fact, October 4th is international walk/bike to school day. Perhaps you could make a special effort with parents and children in your neighborhood and school to make this day the start of a health commitment. "Walk to school Wednesdays"... "Two feet Tuesday and Thursdays"... the possibilities are endless and once you get started you'll find that the barriers are not as hard to overcome as you thought they would be.

Along with walking/biking on the roadways comes a need for pedestrian education. Make sure you practice these laws (whether walking or driving) and encourage your children to do the same:

- Pedestrians must obey traffic signals unless otherwise directed by a traffic or police officer.
- Pedestrians have the right of way on sidewalks and in crosswalks. Drivers and bicyclists must yield to them.
- Pedestrians must use sidewalks if they are available. If there are no sidewalks, pedestrians must walk on the left side of the roadway or its shoulder facing traffic.
- Pedestrians and cyclists shall not suddenly leave a curb and move into traffic so that the driver cannot stop.
- Drivers must exercise due care. Give ample room for pedestrians to ensure their safety on roadways.
- Drivers must yield to pedestrians at intersections with no traffic control. Vehicles shall stop at intersections to allow

pedestrians and bicycles to cross within marked or unmarked crosswalks.

- Pedestrians must yield to vehicles outside of intersections. Every pedestrian crossing a roadway at any place other than an intersection shall yield to all vehicles.

If we all do our part to encourage physical activity for all children and make our communities more pedestrian and bicycle friendly we can begin to make progress in the fight against obesity.

This month I challenge you to leave the car at home at least once a week or walk a little further between errand runs. If you have time and are passionate about the benefits of walking to school, see what you can do at your local school to promote a safe a healthy walking environment...this may be the inspiration you've been looking for to start your own walking program. We all need to work together toward building a healthier harbor and no effort is too small.

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.