

These feet are made for walking

Ben Rossiter *February 3, 2011*



Walking to and from school - and further afield - allows children to develop many skills, as well as keep fit. *Photo: Peter Stoop*

MY OLDEST child starts school on Monday. He will walk or ride the 1-kilometre distance every day of the year – rain, hail or shine.

Initially, he will travel with a parent or other local children and their families. When he is older and more confident, he will travel by himself and with friends.

He will learn to negotiate the neighbourhood, traffic and strangers. Importantly, he will get to play, find interesting things, kick a stone along a street, learn tricks on his bike, socialise and much more.

People walking for leisure, pleasure or purpose are a marker of a healthy community. Neighbourhoods where people walk to local destinations, shops, work or school with a dog, by themselves or with others indicate a healthier, happier, more socially connected community.

As a community, we should encourage children (where age appropriate) to walk without an adult as part of their development. If children are able to walk without adults we are building their capacity for resilience and independence. If our streets are not child, or senior, friendly, our community is failing miserably.

We need to encourage children's footsteps and laughter on our streets, whether this be through walking to school, around their neighbourhood or playing. Given the climate of fear around abduction and child molestation, this is no small task.

Promoting independent mobility for children should be a priority for all levels of government and the wider community. Walking and playing independently helps children learn how to deal with situations, make decisions, explore and have fun. The physical, social and developmental benefits are enormous.

Since the 1970s there has been a massive decline in children walking to school, people walking to work and walking generally. This decline is extremely significant as physical inactivity and

obesity are rising at an alarming rate. Only 37 per cent of Australian adults do enough exercise for it to benefit their health. **Research** indicates that 61 per cent of adults are overweight or obese, as are 25 per cent of children aged 5–17. The **total cost** of obesity to the Australian economy is estimated to be \$37.7 billion.

Walking can be an effective way to combat obesity. It is the most popular and readily attainable form of exercise. In safe, attractive and vibrant communities, people are more likely to walk and be physically active and experience a better quality of life. Building walking into everyday life offers one of the greatest opportunities to increasing physical activity.

We need to increase the number of children walking to school. But, focusing on the school journey alone is not enough. We also need to get children walking to friends, shops and parks and socialising on their streets whenever and wherever they can.

As a child I lived next door to my school. While this might sound like a parent's dream of safe travel, for me it was a social disaster. I remember being jealous of other kids who always seemed to have adventures on the way home. Their walk could lead to anything from catching taddies down the creek, playing footy, building tree houses in a park, to playing in someone's backyard. Walking enabled the type of imaginative, creative and spontaneous play that is essential for children's healthy development.

A range of cognitive, social and intellectual skills can be developed from creative play and independent travel. The trip to and from school can be as important to the long-term health and wellbeing of children as is what occurs inside a classroom.

But we should be careful not blame the decline in children's walking solely on parents. The obstacles are complex and many. Poor urban form, few local destinations relevant to everyday life, lack of crossings, good footpaths, shade and the like, all play a part. Traffic volume and speed is a major barrier.

Recent VicHealth research found that 62 per cent of **parents** felt there was too much traffic on the roads for children to move safely around their neighbourhoods without adult supervision. We need to put our streets on a car diet. We need to slow traffic speed, not simply by lowering speed limits, but by "design speed". Designing our streets for slower speed and less traffic depends upon visionary leadership and commitment. It can be expensive, but these costs are outweighed by the enormous benefits to children and the community. The burgeoning costs of physical inactivity, congestion, road trauma, climate change and the looming impact of peak oil makes action an economic and social imperative.

If we want to get children walking, we also all have to walk more. Children learn by imitating parents and others, if others aren't walking, who can they imitate? Populated streets are safer streets.

Ben Rossiter is the executive officer of Victoria Walks, which is funded by VicHealth.