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# The **Mommy** Files

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# Walking to school helps kids' hearts



Walking to school protects kids from future heart problems and high blood pressure, according to a new study.



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In 1969, approximately 50 percent of children walked or biked to school, and 87 percent of children living within one mile of school did. Today, fewer than 15 percent of schoolchildren walk or bike to school, according to Safe Routes to School (SRTS), a network of nonprofits, government agencies, and schools supporting a movement to encourage kids to walk to school.

In fact, driving to school has so thoroughly penetrated the K-8 consciousness that school "arrival" and "dismissal" times have been linguistically recast as "drop-off" and "pickup" hours.

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But all of this driving could be depriving children of much-needed exercise.

A new study found that walking to school reduces stress in kids and may curb the risk of heart disease.

Researchers at the University of Buffalo, N.Y., took a group of 40 kids, ages 10 to 14, and had half sit in a comfy chair and watch a 10-minute slide show of images of a suburban neighborhood, ending with an image of a suburban school. The idea was to simulate a typical drive to school.

The other half "walked" one-mile on a treadmill at a self-selected pace, wearing a book bag containing 10 percent of their body weight. As they walked, the images of the suburban neighborhood were projected onto a screen. These kids were walking to school.

After a 20-minute rest period, all kids took a test--aimed at putting them under some stress.

Resarchers found that the heart rates of children who walked to school jumped up by only about three beats per minute when put under stress, compared with 11 beats in children who got a ride. Similarly, the rise in systolic blood pressure was more than three times higher, and the change in perceived stress about twice as high, for the passive commuters.

"The cardiovascular disease process begins in childhood, so if we can find some way of stopping or slowing that process, that would provide an important health benefit," says James Roemmich, UB associate professor of pediatrics and exercise and nutrition science and senior investigator on the study. "We know that physical activity has a protective effect on the development of cardiovascular disease, and one way it may be doing so is by reducing stress reactivity."

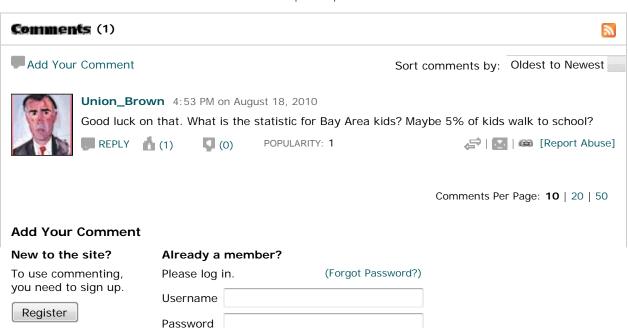
While it seems obvious that walking to school is healthy for kids, this study helps emphasize some of the reasons why it's important for kids to get a little exercise before school starts--and throughout the day.

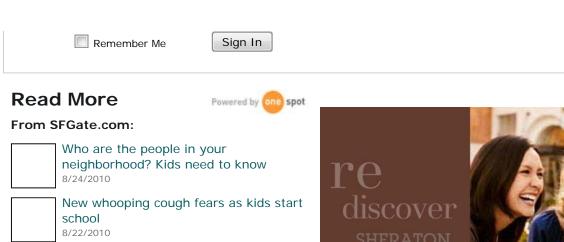
Vote in the SFGate poll: Do your children walk to school? Click here and scroll down the page.

Posted By: Amy Graff (Email, Twitter, Facebook) | August 12 2010 at 11:36 AM Listed Under: Health: kids

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