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## Anxious kids? Let them walk to school

Posted by LAURA BLUE Wednesday, August 11, 2010 at 10:08 am

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A stroll to school in the morning can help kids prep for the stresses that await them in the classroom. They'll have less severe increases in heart rate and blood pressure when they're put on the spot, and will feel less anxious about it to boot -- or at least that's the implication from a new study by researchers at the University of Buffalo medical school. Those researchers randomly assigned a group of kids aged 10 to 14 either to sit in a comfy chair while watching a slide show of a suburban neighborhood (to simulate a car ride) or to walk a mile on a treadmill, wearing a backpack, while the same slide show played (to simulate a walk to school -- a little corny perhaps, but not ineffective). All the kids were then told to relax for 20 minutes with some magazines to read. Then they were asked to take a quick test -- the famous Stroop task, where you have to read the name of color when the word has been printed in a different colored font. (E.g. The word "orange" is printed in blue.) The kids who'd walked a mile showed fewer signs of physical stress in front of the testers -- with statistically significantly smaller increases in heart rate and systolic blood pressure -- and gave lower ratings, too, when asked about how stressed they actually felt. Exercise, it seems, "may dampen children's cardiovascular reactivity when confronted with cognitive stressors during the school day," the researchers write in the journal *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*.

How does exercise help keep stress levels down and keep the heart healthy? According to the Buffalo researchers:

One way that walking exercise may dampen stress-induced cardiovascular reactivity is by altering an individual's evaluation of stressful stimuli such as reducing the perceived threat of the event.

Getting some exercise, in other words, may help kids put minor challenges like the Stroop task in perspective, keeping their nervousness in check. The study authors then go on to cite earlier research that shows physical activity may also help kids to stay happier overall:

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An acute bout of moderate-intensity exercise improves mood and self-esteem and reduces anxiety, which may also play a role in reducing perceived mental stress to a cognitive stress task after exercise.

Of course, walking to school isn't the only way for kids to get moving. But it can be one of the simplest -- and one of the cheapest. The walk to school is also one obvious example of an American pastime that we simply don't engage in as often as we used to. Today just **13% of U.S. kids regularly walk to school**, according to the federal Department of Transportation, down from roughly half of all kids in the 1960s. Even among kids who live within a mile of school, more children today get a ride each morning than walk.

So, parents, if you do live in an area where it's safe for children to walk the streets, don't be afraid to let (or even make) your kids trek to school. And don't forget, either, that there's plenty of evidence to support the **stress-busting benefits of exercise for adults** as well. You wouldn't let a family dog stay indoors all day without getting out for a walk now and then. Allow yourself some time to get out of the house and the office once in a while too.

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 8 9 10 11 12 13 14  
 15 16 17 18 19 20 21  
 22 23 24 25 26 27 28  
 29 30 31

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