

How to help kids walk, bike or roll to school safely

By Tony Chase

As physical activity rates among children in Yellowstone County continue to decline, now is the time to rethink how we can create safe, active environments for our kids.

The 2023 Yellowstone County Community Health Needs Assessment revealed that fewer Yellowstone County children are physically active for more than an hour per day – 58.7% compared to 70.8% in 2017. The assessment also showed that 65.5% of children had more than two hours of screen time for entertainment on an average school day.

Luckily, October is full of fun ways for kids and adults alike to be more active.

Walktober is a month-long celebration of walking, biking and rolling to school activities. This Walktober, the Yellowstone County Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Committee is working with schools to find simple ways to make walking, biking or rolling to school safer, easier and more exciting.

Walking, biking or rolling to school has many benefits. Students arrive ready to learn and perform better, families practice traffic safety together and fewer cars near schools make the air cleaner and roads safer for everyone.

With fewer children getting the recommended amount of physical activity, we can also use events like Halloween and the winter season to encourage safe, fun ways to walk and bike.

Stay safe and seen this Halloween

- Wear reflective clothing or lights to be seen in the dark.
- Look left, right, then left again before crossing the street and make eye contact with drivers. Whenever possible, cross the street at intersections or crosswalks that are controlled (stop lights, stop signs, flashing beacons, etc.).
- If kids are trick-or-treating independently, encourage traveling with a group of friends, set neighborhood boundaries and a location and time to re-group.

Staying active during colder weather, lower light seasons

- Dress in layers that wick moisture and allow you to move easily.
- Wear shoes that have good grip for snowy or icy conditions.
- Get creative - decorate backpacks and bikes with reflective tape and lights.
- Leave earlier if it's snowy or icy and choose routes with clear sidewalks.

The SRTS Committee is a collaboration between RiverStone Health, Billings Public Schools, the City of Billings Planning Division, Billings Metropolitan Transit (MET), United Way of Yellowstone County, Parent Teacher Organizations, and community advocates. School-specific efforts are made possible through collaboration between schools, parent networks, and community partners.

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