

Ask the pediatrician: How can children stay safe on the way to school?

September 2 2022, by Phyllis Agran



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Q: How old should kids be before biking or walking to school, and what are some tips to help keep them safe?

A: Walking and bike riding are healthy ways to get to and from school. Skipping the school drop-off [traffic](#) for more active commutes can contribute to the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity kids need each day. Trips powered by feet also can help reduce pollution, which can trigger breathing problems in children. Walking can also help make neighborhoods friendlier places.

Children usually aren't ready to start walking to school without an adult until about fifth grade, or around age 10. Younger children are more impulsive and less cautious around traffic, and they often don't fully understand other potential dangers they could come across.

By walking with your children to and from school, you can help them learn the neighborhood, teach them about [traffic signs](#), street signs and directions, and model correct behaviors when crossing streets. It's also a great opportunity for some chat time with your kids.

Keep these tips in mind when walking with your young child to and from school:

- When crossing streets, hold your child's hand and always observe the traffic safety laws.
- Observe all [traffic signals](#) and let the school crossing guard help you.
- Be sure to look all ways before crossing the street and continue to watch for vehicles. Remind children that drivers may not always

see them.

- Consider starting a walking school bus by inviting families in your neighborhood to walk children to school together as a group. Adults can take turns walking with the group, so make sure each child knows the adults in their walking group.

Each child is different, so consider their individual developmental and maturity level when deciding if it is safe for them to walk to school without an adult. Some children may not have the skills to focus on safe pedestrian behavior until they are 10 or even older.

For students walking to school without an adult, some points to consider:

- Make sure they stick to a safe route to school, one with well-trained adult crossing guards at every intersection.
- If they need to cross any streets on the way to school, practice safe street crossing with them before the start of school.
- Ideally, they should walk with at least one neighbor child or older sibling.
- Make sure they know how to say "no" if someone they don't know offers a ride, and that they yell and run for help if needed.
- Explain to them that it is not safe to use a cellphone or text while walking, which makes them less aware of traffic.
- Choose brightly colored backpacks, jackets and other accessories, ideally with reflective materials for days when it begins to get dark earlier.

Bike riding is also a great way to get to and from [school](#), when children are ready. Kids need to learn to be safe pedestrians before they can be safe bicyclists. All bicycle riders should follow the basic rules of the road, which also apply to skateboards, scooters and other nonmotorized vehicles:

- Ride on the right, in the same direction as traffic using [bike lanes](#) when available.
- Stop and look both ways before entering the street.
- Stop at all intersections, whether marked or unmarked.
- Respect traffic lights and stop signs.
- Before turning, use hand signals and look in every direction.

And remember, [children](#) should always wear a [bicycle helmet](#), no matter how short the ride. The helmet should be approved by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and fit correctly.

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