

THE BEDFORD CITIZEN

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

AUGUST 18, 2016

August is here, and preparations begin for going back to school.

What is the best way for our children to stay safe traveling to and from school?

The media periodically highlights “stranger danger” by reporting incidents of child abduction, often leaving out how low the risk is compared with other possible hazards. Whenever we parents and adults alike teach kids about safety, we need to be mindful to not inadvertently increase their level of fear. To do that, we have to remember to keep our own fears in perspective. Focus on this teaching as ‘skill building’ or problem solving or even problem *preventing*.

As parents, our primary “job” is to teach our children skills and develop their confidence so they become independent adults. This involves small, measurable steps toward autonomy. For example, how do children go to and from school? You may have heard about Healthy Bedford and the Bedford Safe Routes to School (SRTS) initiative. SRTS seeks to develop a community approach to encourage children to walk or bike to school and to incorporate these activities into their daily lives, the goal being to show that walking and biking are feasible alternatives to driving children to school and that this choice can have lasting health, economic, and environmental benefits.

Walking and Biking Safety

For those in safe walking or biking distance, leave the cars at home and walk or bike to/from school whenever possible. As much as 20 to 30% of morning rush hour traffic can be parents driving children to school (Safe Routes to School National Partnership, www.saferoutespartnership.org). Reducing the number of cars around the schools will improve the safety for children walking and biking as well as improve air quality. If supervision is needed for safe travel, consider establishing a walk/bike pool with neighbors. Similar to a car pool, parents can take turns supervising a group of children either walking or on their bikes. Or consider a safe walk/bike drop off point that still affords your child some physical activity but decreases the time in a vehicle. A few of these safe drop off points have been designated in Bedford with new signs featuring the SRTS logo and made and installed by Bedford Public Works. Check out the Healthy Bedford webpage at www.bedfordma.gov/healthy-bedford under the Safe Routes to School link for descriptions and locations.

Physical activity is good for kids: it not only helps develop muscles and fend off obesity, it also offers opportunities to socialize and learn new skills. Research suggests that physically active kids

are more likely to become healthy, physically active adults, underscoring the importance of developing the habit of regular physical activity early in life. Emerging research also indicates that students who are physically active before starting the school day exhibit greater attention, have faster cognitive processing speed, and perform better on standardized academic tests. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends a minimum of one hour a day of physical activity for school-age children. Most children, even those in organized sports do not meet these minimum requirements. With the new Body Mass Index, or BMI, calculations for children in grades 1, 4, 7, and 10, Bedford Health Department learned that 22% of Bedford's students are either overweight or obese, a figure lower than the state average but still too high for healthy youth. Walking or biking to school could help lower that percentage. Walking or biking with parents or classmates helps reinforce a child's independence and valuable safety lessons. Plus walking or biking to school with a parent fosters communication and connection. You and your kids will love it!

If your child walks to or from school, encourage your child to travel with a friend, otherwise known as "the buddy system." Two heads are often better than one, especially in the event of an emergency. Have them follow the usual rules about walking on the sidewalk, crossing at crosswalks, and paying attention to stop signs and traffic signals. If your child thinks they might be in danger, instruct them to yell, to run to the nearest neighbor who is home or to an open store or business, or to head back to school. To help increase pedestrian skills among children, the Safe Routes to School website has published this guide

<http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/TeachingChildrentoWalkSafely.pdf>

Bicycling is a good way for a child to not only get to school but to get around Bedford. Make sure your child always wears a bike helmet if riding a bike, and teach him or her how to fasten it securely under the chin. It is the law in Massachusetts for children age 12 and under to wear a helmet while bicycling – and a good idea for a bicycle rider of any age. Remind your child that getting off a bike and walking it across a busy street may sometimes be the safest way to cross to the other side. The crossing guard can provide assistance once they are closer to school. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration released a video on basic bicycle safety if you need help getting started <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uADk6-uAUaQ>

Safety and Respectful Behavior on the School Bus

If your child cannot bike or walk safely, then the next best option is to RIDE THE SCHOOL BUS. It can save you time and resources. Fewer cars on the road is better for all of us. School buses are safer than cars, and there is no fee for bus service in Bedford.

Occasionally students can face conflict from a fellow student on the bus to and from school. So when you check the new bus schedules go one step further and talk with your son or daughter about bus etiquette. Bus etiquette involves some simple things as well as some more complex ones. It means standing to one side so those on the bus can get off before your child gets on. It means letting younger children go ahead and maybe helping them out if they need it. It means taking the time to walk and not to run or shove. It means respecting the bus driver and his or her rules as well as the bus itself. And it also means respecting fellow passengers.

Anyone who has ever been the target of a child who teases and bullies knows that waiting for,

riding, and walking home from the school bus can be a scary situation. Often a child feels trapped with no place to go and perceives his or her peers as silent, unsympathetic witnesses and no help at all. He or she might also believe that speaking to an adult could make the situation worse. How can you help?

First of all, teach your child about respectful behavior - how to give it and receive it. Talk about disrespectful behavior, such as teasing, name-calling, physically jabbing or poking, taking or hiding possessions as a 'joke,' to name a few. Your child may have other examples if you ask. Even if they have not been a target, they probably have seen the behavior and wondered what they might do if it happened to them.

Be certain that your child knows that bullying behavior is not acceptable and that he or she should not engage in such behavior nor endure such treatment. Tolerating differences in people does not mean tolerating violence. Bullying is a form of violence that can grow if it is not stopped early.

Try to problem solve with your child about how he or she could handle this successfully. Discuss solutions that might work within his or her personality style, stage of development, and life experience. This could be with humor, with ignoring (depending on the level of bullying), or with a buddy system. Helping your child find words to let the offender know what impact the negative behavior has can be extremely helpful. Simply practicing appropriate responses regarding the teasing or bullying and asking the offender to stop can be a great help to a child. In some cases a child who acts inappropriately may not be aware that he or she is offending in some way. Typically it is easier for a child to taunt another if the child is alone so using the buddy system or a group of friends can also be good protection.

You could also suggest that your child sit close to the front of the bus. The proximity of the bus driver may deter negative behavior. Beginning three years ago, middle and high school students began sharing bus rides, and that may also deter negative behavior among middle school students in particular. Although your child should tell the bus driver if another student is bothering them, he or she may not be comfortable doing that. It is the driver's responsibility to ensure safety on the bus and to report inappropriate behavior to the school principal. If your child does not want to talk to the driver, find out why and see if you can help him or her address those concerns. As a parent it is difficult to know when to let your child handle situations like this and when you need to step in. Safety is the determining factor. If your child continues to feel unsafe, cannot solve this on their own, and you are concerned about their physical or emotional safety, then it is your responsibility as a parent to step in and help. This could mean speaking directly to the bus driver or contacting the school principal.

Driving Your Student to School

If your child cannot walk or bike or ride the bus, DRIVE, BUT ONLY IF YOU MUST. Remember, traffic congestion around our schools is dangerous for students. Competition for parking creates unsafe situations, especially in inclement weather. Emergency vehicles must have prompt access to our schools. Most school related accidents are in parking areas during drop off and pickup time. Besides being against the law, idling cars contribute emissions, reducing air quality around schools.

If you must drive, consider carpooling with other neighborhood kids, and or picking a location a few blocks from school to pick up and drop off. Even a 5-minute walk will be good for your child and your school. Remote drop off and pick up points are used selectively around all the schools, especially for the organized International and Massachusetts SRTS Walk/Ride to School events. Our next event will be **Wednesday, October 5 on International Walk and Bike to School** day. Again, check out the Healthy Bedford website at www.bedfordma.gov/healthy-bedford under the Safe Routes to School link for event details, maps, tools, and ideas about remote drop offs every day as well as additional helpful educational resources to make sure your walk or bike ride is safe.

Keeping the Lines of Communication Open

As your child returns to school, most important is his/her ability to share any negative experiences with you, whether he or she is traveling to or from school or on location, whether they are the actual target of inappropriate behavior, a witness, or even an offender. Listen and try to stay calm. Offer a supportive and safe environment for discussing strategies for coping. Ask a lot of questions, questions that allow your child to openly describe what happened, who said or did what, who else was there. Show that you believe in your child's ability to handle this situation. Step in when your child is unsafe and needs help. Empower your child to be a witness and get help for someone else who may be having difficulty. Use local resources for assistance - another parent, a favorite teacher, school guidance counselor, principal, pediatrician or family doctor, Bedford Police Safety, Juvenile, or School Resource Officers, or Bedford Youth and Family Services staff. Together we can ensure a safe and happy year for all Bedford students.

About the Authors

Keeping the Peace is sponsored by the Violence Prevention Coalition of Bedford (VPC), a representative group of citizens interested in ending violence in families, communities, and beyond. Sue Baldauf is Director of Bedford Youth & Family Services (YFS), a constituent member of VPC, and submitted this article in collaboration with Healthy Communities Coordinator Carla Olson.

The VPC meets the first Tuesday of every other month at 8:00 a.m. at First Church of Christ Congregational, 25 the Great Road, Bedford. For more information call 781-275-7951.