

David Engwicht

Eight reasons kids reckon they should walk to school

Believe it or not, kids *love* walking to school. In 2001, kids from four schools in Brisbane, Australia, participated in the inaugural *Red Sneaker Week*. In one school, 25% of students experienced walking to school for the very first time in their entire life. As part of this week, students made pages for a class book called *Our Adventures While Walking*. The drawings and quotes speak eloquently of why we are robbing our children blind every time we drive them rather than letting them walk. Here are eight reasons kids loved walking — much of it in their own words.

1. Walking is an Adventure

Walking is not just a means of transport. It is an opportunity for an adventure! The adventure books are rich with stories — like seeing a snake sunning itself on a traffic island; pretending to be a gymnast balancing on a gutter edge; watching baby spiders hatch on a leaf; seeing three baby frogs fighting over food; and finding money. These adventures are the backbone of many of the benefits that follow — from enriching the child's imagination to developing a sense of place; from new social relationships to a greater sense of independence.

I love walking. It is amazing because you find so much stuff.

Cameron 4GC Payne Road State School



On Friday when I was walking with Rory and Max, we found a plank in the middle of the road. It had termites in it so we put it in the gutter and we tried to break it by jumping on it and I broke it. Then we started walking again.

Nick 4R Bardon State School

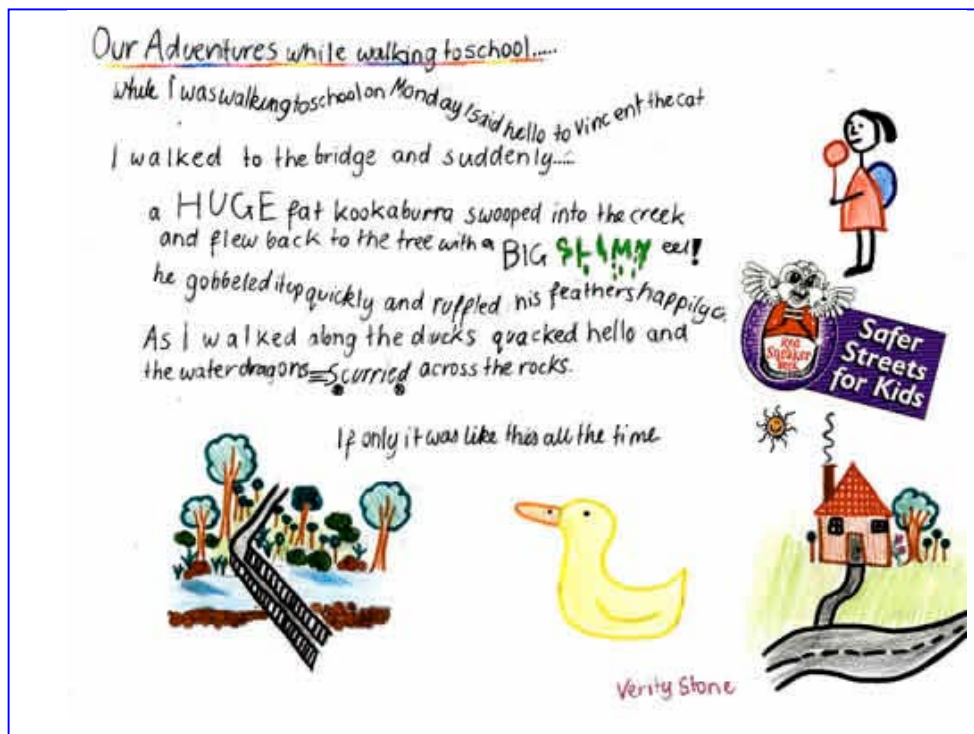
I walked a different way back home so I could have a different adventure...

Rahul Snelling 3/4D Ithaca Creek State School

2. Sense of Place

One thing that adds to the psychological wellbeing of children is a 'sense of place'. *Sense of place* means feeling connected to your physical environment and community. The elements that make up our physical environment become the repository of our memories and affections and therefore cease to be merely physical elements. A tree ceases to be just a tree if we played in it as a child or stopped off on our way home from school to eat its fruit. Even if the tree ceases to exist in the physical realm, it lives on in a special place in our memories. Every time we conjure it up in our imagination we 'come home'. It becomes a safe haven where our identity is reconfirmed.

'Walking adventures' are one way children build a sense of place. Their experiences as they walk and explore builds a mental and emotional map of their 'home territory' which becomes integrated into their sense of self. This is demonstrated over and over again in the Adventure Books. Many of the drawings show remarkable details about the physical environment. Many take the form of a map with landmarks. They talk about 'passing the house where my grandparents lived'; apple trees; the names of shops; and walking along the creek. Walking not only gives the child an experience of their environment. It builds a sense of place.



When I went walking
I saw a butterfly and
a bee, a ant, a
beautiful river, a
baby, a bird, a cat, a
beautiful sky, a
flower a park and a
world.

Pippa 1B The Gap State
School

3. Sensitivity to the Environment

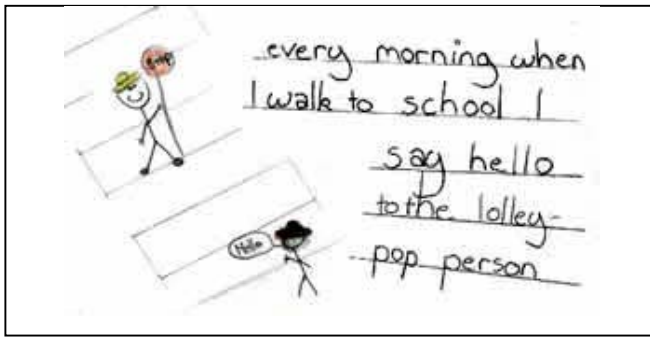
The overwhelming majority of drawings and stories in the Adventure Books relates to interactions with the natural environment. Much of it displays a deep sensitivity to nature and a sense of attachment. The stories are often full of wonder, excitement, and curiosity — key ingredients for learning.

When I was walking I
found a birds nest. I
put it in a tree so it
would not get hurt.
When I came back to
school next day there
was a bird living there.

Cheyene 4GC Payne Road
State School

4. Enriched Social Relationships

One of the reasons walking was such an adventure for the kids was the chance to have social interactions; with friends, parents, adults who walked with the kids, and people they passed while walking. Children saw a wider range of people in the community (like the child who reported seeing a man with just one arm) which is important in building a diverse and inclusive society.



Last Monday I walked back from school and I think it is lovely because you can see stuff without just zooming past... I also like how you can talk to your friends for 10 to 20 mins after school.

Chris 5H, Payne Road State School

5. Learning Better and Creative Stimuli

It has been known for sometime that students who get exercise before their morning classes are more relaxed and mentally alert. They therefore learn better. It is evident from the Adventure Books that kids discovered this benefit for themselves and couched this in their own language. The most striking is a grade one/two student who says, “every time I walk to school I get everything right”. His picture shows how pleased the teacher is with him (see picture below).

The other surprising thing from the books was the number of times children said, “walking gives me lots of energy”. You would think that they would say “walking made me tired”. What did they mean by ‘energy’? From the context it is clear that walking, and their engagement with a

world full of stimuli, made them feel more energised and alive. They had more vim and zest to face their day's activities.

It is also interesting that what they observed on their walk became the stimuli for creative drawings and stories. At times in the adventure book it is hard to know where reality ends and their fantasy takes over. In many cases the story is clearly total fantasy. The books are littered with poems, humor, and creative stories. Walking provides unlimited possibilities for building a reservoir of memories and stimuli from which kids can fashion their creative products.



I like walking because I get lots of energy

3/4L Payne Road State School

At What Cost?

John Adams from Britain has suggested that very soon, we will no longer have a generation that remembers walking to school.

What is the significance of this?

How important are those lingering, sensory experiences that many of us can remember from our childhood -- playing with mud puddles, kicking through piles of autumn leaves, and chatting with buddies along the way to school?

One retired British teacher has written about the loss of lived experiences of his students:

I found it increasingly difficult to stimulate children's writing and artwork because there was so little in the way of stored experience for them to use... If I wanted children to write about walking in the rain I had to suggest just about everything because so few of them had walked in the rain... Not one, not one of them had the chance to feel raindrops running down their backs. Had any of them walked in the morning fog? Not one. Had they had the chance to walk into the teeth of a howling wind? Had they felt the full force of a hail-storm? Of course not.

6. Safety & Independent Mobility

We did not anticipate one of the great benefits of Red Sneaker Week: street safety training. It is clear from many of the stories that before allowing their children to walk, many parents gave their children detailed instructions. Others walked with the child and then gradually gave the child more freedom each day. Some even followed from a distance. If Red Sneaker Week had been a single day event, this gradual training and increasing of freedom to walk would not have taken place.

Over the past few decades there has been a marked decline in children's independent mobility. For example, in 1971, 88% of 9-year-old English children were allowed to go to school unaccompanied. By 1990 this had declined to just 27%*. The trends are the same for Australian children.

The implications of this for a child's personal development are immense. Independent mobility is part of developing a sense of control, independence and confidence. Freedom to explore the neighborhood is also probably the key ingredient in children developing a feeling that they belong to a neighborhood, a place. It is also an important way of maintaining physical fitness.

Red Sneaker Week therefore provided an opportunity for parents to experiment with giving their children increased independent mobility.

*Cited Paul Tranter, *Children's Mobility in Canberra* 1993 Monograph Series No 7, Australian Defense Force Academy, Canberra.

7. Taking Risks & Growing Up

Adventures entail risk. The greater the risk, the greater the adventure.

Risk-taking is an essential part of a child's developmental processes. Children need to test limits and learn the extent of their capabilities. Some developmental psychologists suggest that the modern phenomenon of attempting to protect our children from all risk has delayed this essential risk-taking experimentation until adolescence where it is potentially much more destructive. However, while giving children space to take risks, it is the responsibility of the wider community to remove the risks *imposed* on children from the outside world. In other words, it is a community responsibility to *create a safe environment in which kids can take risks*. This means we need to reduce traffic volumes and speed so that children can have a safer street environment in which they can gain increasing independent mobility and where they can create their own adventures (which will include risk taking).

When I was walking I learnt a new rule. It was that you don't run across the road... You can only walk fast.

Ines 1B The Gap State School



Waving good-bye to mum.

One day I had to walk to school at 7.00. I set off with my four best friends, but before I could set off my mum said, go only when the lollipop lady says so. When I got there I went when she said not to. I got into lots of trouble at school. On the way back I did the same thing. The next day I went when she said so and I hardly ever got into trouble.

3/4D student, Ithaca Creek State School

8. Healthy Body, Mind and Air

One quarter of Australian children are obese or overweight. The figure is even higher in the USA. Many children are not even getting enough exercise to maintain minimum health levels. Kids noted in the Adventure book that walking made their bodies fit, gave them 'energy' and made the air cleaner.

Bonus... an extra 4 reasons

Besides the eight reasons given by the kids as to why they should walk, here are four of our own.

Safer Streets for Everyone

Enabling kids to walk to school helps reduce the volume and speed of traffic city-wide. It also helps reduce the risks of 'stranger danger'. This makes streets safer for everyone – not just kids. This is of particular benefit to other vulnerable groups in the community such as the elderly.

Friendlier Neighbourhoods

Community life is constructed out of the informal and accidental interactions people have while walking the dog, shopping, or walking to school. The more people there are in public space, the more interesting the space becomes and the greater the opportunities for a rich community life.

Less Crime

The greater a person's sense of connection to their environment, the less chance they will vandalise that environment. Walking builds that sense of connection in children. In addition, the more eyes there are on the street, the less chance there is for crime. Lots of people walking is the best form of 'neighbourhood watch'.

Savings for taxpayers

There are a range of hidden costs everytime we drive our kids, cost that must eventually come out of our pocket. Generating more traffic means that road and car-parking infrastructure must be eventually increased. Pollution from cars causes environmental damage and is a health risk. Lack of exercise is contributing greatly to our national health costs.



Walking to school is lots of fun,
feel the air on your face as you run.
Talking and laughing with our friends,
the fun really never ends.
Its nice walking along the creek,
aware of the flowers that smell so sweet.
Keeping fit and healthy on the way,
have a refreshed mind for the day.
I love walking to and from school,
I think its fun and really cool.
If I could walk to school everyday,
my answer would be definitely yay!

Sophie 5S Bardon State School