Get off to healthy start, walk to school

With high gas prices pushing adults to ride the bus to work or walk to the corner market, there is no better time than the present to teach kids the benefits of using the oldest and healthiest mode of transportation.

International Walk to School Day is Oct. 8, and although some Southeast Valley schools are not in session that week, it's a reminder for parents and teachers to encourage children to be active every day of the year. It is part of the National Center for Safe Routes to School program, which assists states in getting proper infrastructure in place to help students at that end.

The program also includes lessons that incorporate fun activities that illustrate the long-term benefits. The idea is to encourage kids to adopt practices that could turn into habits that'll benefit them, their community and their world.

Students

Kids get exercise to help fight childhood obesity and improve overall health. This helps counter the hours they spend on computers, watching TV or playing video games, particularly as schools trim physical education programs.

Community

Fewer parents driving their kids to school eases traffic congestion and reduces pollution.

The more that people walk, the greater the demand for pedestrian-oriented communities that connect schools, parks, businesses, libraries and neighborhoods, which falls in line with Safe Routes to School's aim.

World

Students would see their world on a larger scale and they'd be more likely to adopt sustainable practices that go beyond walking or biking to school.

Activities

Here's how schools can make International Walk to School Day fun for students:

- Create theme days like Marching Monday, Walking/Wheeling Wednesday and Footloose Friday.
- Add the distances students at your school walk and compare them to distances between major cities, such as Phoenix and Tucson.
- Draw a tree without branches and have students add cut-out leaves each time they walk to or from school to illustrate a greener world.
- Hold a promotional assembly to boost school spirit; decorate your school fence with posters to promote the event to the community.
- Post maps of safe transit, cycling and walking routes in the cafeteria.
- Walk with other families to create a walking school bus for safety and to encourage participation.
- Challenge another school in your community or in another part of the world.

Source: www.walktoschool-usa.org.