ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

Child Health and Well-Being

Across Renfrew County, how we interact with our natural and built environment is integral to understanding how an active transportation strategy can positively impact child physical health and well-being.

Active Transportation Means:
• any human-powered, non-motorized mode of transportation for commuter and recreational purposes
• moving from one destination to another for work, childcare, school, shopping and recreation
• walking, hiking, running, cycling, in-line skating, skateboarding, non-motorized wheel-chairing, skating, skiing, canoeing and kayaking

In 2010, Transport Canada released Active Transportation in Canada: A resource and planning guide, which highlighted recent child and youth health and physical activity data relating to Active Transportation (AT):
• 26% of children and youth are considered overweight or obese.
• 1 in 3 obese Canadian children will become diabetic.
• Only 9% of children and youth are getting the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

Both the risk of obesity and low levels of childhood physical activity are closely linked to AT strategies and planning. Effective municipal planning ensures that both built and natural environments promote the use of AT, supporting positive population health outcomes and sustainable communities. Movement is an essential part of healthy development, however sometimes the environment is not built to support this development, and as a result negatively impacts child health and well-being.

AT Benefits the Natural Environment
Natural environment includes all living things occurring naturally on Earth:
• green space and open fields
• wetlands and waterways
Communities that promote AT can positively impact air quality, reduce environmental pollution and decrease the impact of climate change.

AT Enhances the Built Environment
Built environment includes the physical features of a community:
• land-use patterns
• large and small features including architecture, landscaping and parks
• transportation systems including sidewalks, trails and roadways
Investment in the built environment and expansion of AT networks can provide increased opportunities for physical activity and ensure that active transportation is a safe option for all residents and visitors.
Understanding Barriers to AT

Barriers that may prevent children from engaging in active play and active transportation include:

- limited access to safe routes and outdoor spaces
- distance
- perceptions of safety and real risk
- parental beliefs about existing or perceived social conditions

Children are less likely to be physically active if:

- they live in neighbourhoods that are perceived to be or are unsafe
- their community has high traffic movement with poor walkability
- they lack appropriate access to quality play spaces

According to research, the social conditions that affect the distribution of wealth, housing and access to important developmental supports such as healthy food and social safety nets, create additional barriers to AT participation.

In most cases these living conditions are — for better or worse — imposed upon us by the quality of the communities, housing situations, work settings, health and social service agencies, and the educational institutions with which we interact.

Thus, living conditions, particularly those related to income and safety, can have a significant effect on a family’s choice to participate in AT.

Recognizing the Risks of Motorized Transit

Because of the geographic size of our region, families in Renfrew County often have little or no choice but to use motorized transportation to access employment, food and services, sport and recreation. Yet, this increased use of motorized vehicles also indirectly affects the health and safety of our children.

According to Parachute Canada, injuries related to motor vehicle collisions are the leading cause of injury-related death for Canadian children. Motor vehicle collisions can cause serious injuries such as damage to the spine and internal organs. When not properly restrained, children involved in automobile accidents are also at higher risk of head injury.

Studies have also shown that lower income urban neighborhoods have a higher incidence of pedestrian-related injuries involving motor vehicles.

Effective and frequent use of AT by families in Renfrew County would see more children commuting outside of motorized vehicles, and with the proper safety structure in place, reduce the number of automobile-related injuries and deaths.

Research has also shown that motorized transit contributes to higher levels of obesity. Increased body weight is strongly linked to time spent sitting in a vehicle. The risk of obesity goes up 6% for every hour spent in a car each day, while the risk of obesity goes down by almost 5% for every kilometre walked.

AT and the Work Commute

In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that almost 90% of Renfrew County’s residents drove or were driven to work in a car, truck or van. Approximately 57% of these commuters were employed outside of their local municipality.

Considering the predictive nature of this data, it would seem likely that Renfrew County children will enter into adulthood and face similar challenges, resulting in employment situations that may increase the likelihood of obesity and diseases related use of motorized transit.

Investment in local economic development initiatives are sure to contribute to stronger, healthier communities that support diverse employment opportunities close to home.

Designing Healthy AT Communities

Every journey, no matter how long, starts with walking. If we can extend the distance walked by providing convenient and safe AT infrastructure, children and adults alike will be more inclined to integrate active transportation into their daily routines.

The built form of neighbourhoods along with the scale, design and managed use of sidewalks and roadways has a considerable impact on the AT environment. If the experience is positive, residents and visitors alike will be more inclined to walk and cycle in AT-friendly communities.

Enhanced AT infrastructure and increased community-wide awareness will contribute to the development of accessible built and natural environments that are safer and healthier for children and families alike.

References

i. Transport Canada, Active Transportation in Canada: A resource and planning guide, 2010.
iii. http://www.safekidscanada.ca/Parents/Safety-Information/Pedestrian-Safety/FAQ/Pedestrian-FAQs.aspx#hurt