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Help your child take their first steps to an active school year

Parents are being encouraged to give their kids an active start to the school year by helping them walk or cycle to and from school.

South Western Sydney Local Health District Acting Health Promotion Director, Liz Millen said setting healthy examples and encouraging children to be active when they were young promoted healthy life-long habits.

“Regular physical activity bring children so many health benefits, like building strong bones and muscles, maintaining a healthy weight, improving balance and posture, maintaining and developing flexibility and boosting confidence and self-esteem,” Ms Millen said.

“The biggest hurdle is often finding time, but with a little bit of planning parents can help turn new activities into regular, beneficial habits.

“Children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

“This doesn’t need to occur all at once, it can be accumulated throughout the day with a combination of moderate to vigorous activities,” she said.

The 2014 Active Healthy Kids report shows only 19 per cent of Australians aged five to 17 meet the recommended Australian physical activity guidelines.

While 64 to 85 per cent of children participate in some form of organised sport, only 35 per cent of six to seven year olds and 39 per cent of eleven to twelve year olds travel to school using active transport at least once a week.

Evidence suggests active commuting provides children with a number of health benefits including increased physical activity, six to eight times higher energy expenditure and three to nine times higher levels of cardiovascular fitness.

“Many adults remember walking or cycling to school, but today, most primary school children travel to and from school by car, even if they live within walking distance of their school.

“For families who live some distance from school, try parking the car a good distance away from the school and walk the rest of the way, or walk to the bus stop instead of driving,” she said.

Ms Millen encouraged parents to consider whether walking or cycling to school was possible and safe.

“Children should always wear a helmet when riding their bike, and if walking, children under 10 should hold an adult’s hand when around traffic and when crossing the road.

“If it’s not possible for your child to walk or ride a bike to school, consider some after-school activities like team sports or even encourage them to kick a ball around with other local kids,” she said.