Introduction/Background

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health issues worldwide. The prevalence of childhood obesity has increased at an alarming rate. In 2010, the number of overweight children under the age of five is estimated to be over 43 million worldwide. Close to 35 million of these children are living in developing countries, whereas 8 million are in developed countries.

Although Japan is not an exception, it boasts a relatively low level of childhood obesity compared to other countries of similar income. A possible contributing factor could be the walk-to-school practice that has been implemented in Japan for over 50 years.

Global increases in the number of children who are overweight or obese are attributable to a number of factors including increased intake of energy-dense foods that are high in fat and sugars but low in vitamins, minerals and other healthy micronutrients; and decreased physical activity levels due to an increasing sedentary lifestyle, changing modes of transportation, and increasing urbanization. 1, 3-4

Walking to school is one way of increasing physical activity

Active travel to school, such as walking and cycling has been identified as an important source of physical activity in children. Many developed countries are now promoting walking to school as a way to increase physical activity, aiming to tackle the epidemic of childhood obesity. 5-6

The objective of this research study was to describe the “walking to school policy” and to derive lessons that can be useful for cities and countries elsewhere which are promoting similar interventions.

Methodology

Grey literature, online government information, local policy documents and regulations were reviewed, following a cross study methodology to document this policy. The following information was collected:

- Documentation on walk to school experiences from other countries
- Description of the policy
- Maximum walking distance to school, and whether they follow the national standard
- Maximum time limit to walk to school, if applicable
- Other permitted methods of commuting to school (e.g. cycling, school bus etc.)
- Safety measures

What is walking to school practice?

Walking to school every day from their home, instead of parents driving them or using buses or other transport. Children normally attend the school that has been allocated by the municipal authorities in charge of public education. The Board of Education is responsible for the walk-to-school practice, such as walking (through assigning parking spaces in school grounds), and school buses can also be implemented by the Board of Education based on considerations of geography, climate, and transport.

There are many different safety initiatives depending on the characteristics of the district. Parents, school staff, and local volunteers are all involved in supervision.

Examples of safety measures:

- Inspection of school routes
- Guided group walking for children in low grades
- Walking with dogs and local volunteers for protection
- Walk-to-school schemes
- Response to problems specific to each municipality

In most of the urban areas throughout the country, elementary and lower secondary schoolchildren who attend public schools walk to school every day from their home, instead of parents driving them or using buses or other transport. Children normally attend the school that has been allocated by the municipal authorities in charge of public education. The Board of Education is responsible for the walk-to-school practice, such as walking (through assigning parking spaces in school grounds), and school buses can also be implemented by the Board of Education based on considerations of geography, climate, and transport.

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References


Discussion

Although walking to school was not originally intended as an intervention to promote physical activity, walking to school is a practice that has been in place formally for more than 50 years in Japan, and seems to be providing unintended positive outcomes. As Japan has managed to maintain one of the lowest prevalence of childhood obesity in the world, it is likely that the walk-to-school policy benefits schoolchildren in terms of their levels of physical activity. There may be other factors outside the scope of this paper to explain the low prevalence of obesity, such as dietary intake, as the Japanese diet has been shown to be healthier than the American or Western diet.

This investigation of walk-to-school practice revealed several key factors. First of all, there is high availability of schools within walking distance for children, particularly in urban areas. Also, the districts and distances to and from school are decided based on the local characteristics of each municipality. Secondly, there are highly established safety measures in place in Japan. The local Board of Education is responsible for these safety initiatives, so that each one is unique and specific to each municipality or school. The following reasons may be related to the success of the walk-to-school practice. While Japan is considered to be safer than many countries, children are encouraged to take the basic precautions in as part of the world. For example: carrying a personal alarm in easy reach at all times in public, always travelling in a group and from school, walking on well lit and busy routes, knowing how to react if threatened or approached by a stranger, never entering a car or any other private or secluded area with a stranger or suspicious person, and always ensuring parents know where students are and where they are headed. Another factor that may support walk-to-school practice is that there are more children who have at least one parent staying at home, making it possible for younger children to directly walk home after the school day.

Conclusion/recommendation

Recommendations to cities promoting “walk to school” are:
1) Base interventions on the existing network of schools and adapt the provision to other local organizations;
2) Establish a set of safety measures for schoolchildren;
3) Respond specifically to adapt to local characteristics. In addition to the well-established safety interventions, the reasons for the policy’s success may also include Japan’s low crime rate compared to other similar countries. Also, one parent staying at home would support walk-to-school schemes.

The walk-to-school policy can be considered as a valuable opportunity to give an impact on children’s physical activity level, and may possibly have an impact on prevention of childhood obesity.

Disclosure: The views presented herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the decisions, policies or views of the World Health Organization.