

Fresh air a must for kids

By Dyani Baggenstos

Children's health is at risk if parents turn a blind eye to traffic congestion around their schools.

Auckland Asthma Association nurse Debora Leutenger says parents need to get more actively involved in educating their children on health issues, especially with asthma on the rise.

"One in three New Zealanders have asthma and you can contract it at any age," Leutenger says.

She says a lot of congestion happens around schools with buses and cars just sitting in traffic.

"Often enough parents can't be bothered waiting for buses. People are continuing to run their cars and air pollution is worsening."

Walking School Bus co-ordinator Sue Kendall, who works for the Auckland Regional Transport Authority (ARTA), says parents need to get motivated and take note of alternative transport options.

Organising school children walking in groups to bus stops and schools was introduced to Auckland in 1999. It aims to encourage kids (and parents) to get motivated and fit, rather than drive by car to school.

"Schools approach us about establishing walking routes to get to the school. We have a local traffic engineer to make sure the footpaths are in good condition," she says.

"And parents and students are given timetables and maps for routes in their district."

Walking School Buses is now in more than 90 primary schools throughout the Auckland region, with 197 routes to different schools mapped out.



PHOTO: MERLE FOSTER

HEALTHY HABIT: More children need to walk to school, says the Auckland Asthma Association.

The group aims to create 60 new routes a year, believing that by encouraging kids to get walking to school, reductions in traffic flow and air pollution are achievable.

"Our biggest challenge yet is getting parents involved," Kendall says.

"Air pollution and quality is a concern of ARTA but it's not always a concern for others."

She believes parents often do not take all areas of their child's health into consideration.

"In 2002 there was a lot of media hype around child obesity and the Walking School Bus programme really took off because

parents began seeing the major health and exercise benefits of walking to school.

"But I don't think that air quality is top on a parent's mind when encouraging their child to get moving."

Another school transport programme, Auckland School Travel Plans, is also dedicated to improving children's health.

The organisation's co-ordinator, Steve Lynnfield, says the main mission of the newly launched programme is to focus on traffic around schools, reducing speed and minimising traffic flows.

"Our focus is on getting

Auckland moving," says Lynnfield.

"Initially there wasn't a strong focus on asthma and air pollution but it was definitely highlighted," he says.

The programme is designed to fit individual primary schools and aims to encourage more walking, cycling and car pooling.

It is funded by the Ministry of Environment and ARTA and has been running for two years.

"Some schools are worse than others," he says.

"For example, Three Kings has a lot of traffic congestion around the school grounds because it is situated on the corner of two

main roads, and it's not good for children's health."

More than 110 primary schools now have a travel plan and since the program started two years ago, one million cars have been taken off the road, with a reduction in over one million kilometres travelled throughout the Auckland region.

Lynnfield says the success of the programme demonstrates there is the right focus on children's health and safety.

"We want to have 555 primary schools in the Auckland region set with a travel plan by 2014.

"The main thing is just trying to get local involvement."

Nurses bite back at TV 'bimbo' image

By Rob Bridgman

Nurses around the country are speaking out against the negative portrayal of their on-screen counterparts in popular TV dramas.

International Nursing Advocacy is a non-profit organisation that monitors the depiction of nurses in the news and media.

The group is calling on producers of popular TV shows to change the image of the "sexy but stupid" nurse to that of a respected medical professional.

INA member and senior health lecturer at AUT University Anita Bamford says the bimbo image of nurses in shows like *Grey's Anatomy* must be changed.

"Nurses are knowledgeable workers and it is a combination of their skills that has a direct impact on the quality of patient outcome," Bamford says.

"In a lot of these programmes they are portrayed in a sexy type role, where you don't really need a brain to do what they have nurses doing," she says.

"In *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, you see physicians undertaking work that is normally the domain of nurses and nurses doing things really a robot could do."

Bamford says the simplified role of nurses seen in the media has an extremely damaging effect on the medical profession.

"There is an international shortage of nurses and we really need good, intelligent students applying to come into our nursing programme," she says.

"There is research to show that by repeatedly portraying nurses in this light the public's perception becomes exactly what they see on TV."

New Zealand College of Nurses member Annette Dickinson says her organisation is constantly addressing this problem and says it is deterring people from entering the nursing profession.

"It doesn't make nursing look like an attractive career. All the polls will tell you nursing is the most trusted profession, but we are struggling to get people to see nursing as an attractive career option."

Dickinson says it all depends on how well programme producers research the roles of its characters.

"Many of them aren't doing that research very well at all. The College of Nurses is one group constantly challenging the image of nursing in the media," she says.

Wendy Horne, dean of health and environmental sciences at AUT University, is responsible for ensuring

the university has enough high quality students enrolled in its programmes.

"It's often a challenge getting students into AUT who have a realistic idea of what nursing is really about," she says.

"I know one of the biggest influences in whether people come into nursing with a realistic expectation of what that profession is about, is how nurses are portrayed in the media," she says.

"If we get a poor portrayal of nurses in programmes such as *Grey's Anatomy*, then people come into our programmes with totally unrealistic expectations of the role of a nurse," she says.

However, Horne says local shows like *Shortland St* have a far better grasp on what it means to be a nurse.

"The NZ programmes are a lot more realistic about how they present nurses. American TV for some reason does seem to have a lot more poetic licence and sensationalises issues."

Bamford agrees that local programmes are more realistic in their portrayal of healthcare workers.

"*Shortland St*, for example, does get clinical advice around the programme

and clinical input," she says.

Yet Trish Watt, a registered nurse, says she is unsure whether or not medical dramas are affecting the up-and-coming nursing students. But she says the representations are far from accurate.

"I don't tend to watch those programmes because they are so heavily over-dramatised. In *Shortland St* the nurses are definitely represented as being simple and bimbo-ish," she says.

"As for *ER*, I just don't believe those situations would ever happen in reality," she says.

Watt says she entered the nursing profession because she was interested in caring and looking after people from an early age.

"However, the problem today is that the profession is much harder. Nurses have to continually keep themselves qualified and this is forcing nurses in my age group out of the profession."

She says nursing has changed dramatically from when she first started her career and nursing is taking a more prominent role in the medical world.

"We are seeing nurses doing tasks that doctors would normally have done a few years back," she says.

"This isn't being represented in TV programmes and it is important for people to recognise this change."

"Nurses are definitely represented as being simple and bimbo-ish."