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Mediaportal Report



Walking the line between safety and good health

[Herald Sun, Melbourne](#), General News, [Jerril Rechter](#)

14 Oct 2014

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Walking the line between safety and good health



LIKE most people, I look back on my childhood with fond memories of summer evenings and being out playing with my friends.

When I was eight years old I began walking to school, first with my mother who walked part of the way, and later on my own. On the 20-minute journey, I'd cross what was to become the Monash Freeway and Blackburn Rd, both busy thoroughfares, even then.

While my parents warned me never to speak to strangers or approach an unfamiliar car, it was never something I truly worried about. I rode my bike through the neighbourhood until the sun began to set. I used to love going to the milk bar on my own to buy a treat.

It can sometimes feel like the world was a safer place when I was a child. But in reality, parents today share many of the same concerns my parents had — they worry their child will be harmed by a stranger, that they will be hit by a car or get lost.

Today, VicHealth is releasing the preliminary findings of a major

research study, the first of its kind in Australia, examining the role that parental fear plays in shaping children's independence and physical activity.

The research was conducted by La Trobe University and the Parenting Research Centre, and involved surveying more than 2000 parents of children aged nine to 15 across Victoria.

Beyond the Bubble-Wrap found 48 per cent of Victorian parents worry about their child being approached by a stranger and 36 per cent avoid situations where their child goes without an adult because of fears about strangers.

We know there are numerous factors that influence parents' decisions to let their child play and travel independently — from traffic concerns to parents' work demands, childcare arrangements and external perceptions.

But we also know children who are able to play and travel without an adult and those who walk or ride to school are more likely to meet Australian physical activity guidelines.

In the 1960s, one in 20 children



was overweight or obese. Today, that has risen to one in four, and is expected to become one in three by 2025. With Australian children living a more inactive lifestyle, there is an increased risk of serious health problems, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Only one in five Australian children gets the recommended one hour of physical activity every day, and only one in four walks or rides to school. Letting children become independent is a complex process for parents and every child and family situation is different. From a health perspective, it's clear that physical activity should be an important feature in children's lives.

The freedom my parents gave me as a child is one of the greatest things they ever did for me. I learned to navigate my neighbourhood, developed confidence and learned to interact better with peers. All parents want the best for their children and the

final year of this project will involve working with experts, including parents groups, to find solutions to help parents give their children greater freedom to walk and ride to and from school and within their neighbourhood.

In the meantime, we all have a role to play in helping create safe and secure neighbourhoods for children. I now live in the western suburbs and love seeing kids out playing and riding their bikes in my local area. I want them to feel safe so I give them a wave; after all, lots of children out walking and playing is a sign of a healthy neighbourhood. And who wouldn't want that?

JERRIL RECHTER IS VICHEALTH CEO



Herald Sun

Let kids live life

PARENTING is by no means an easy job but it is one of, if not the most, important and rewarding roles in the community. As parents we must find a balance between protecting our children from harm and providing them with enough freedom to grow into capable and resilient adults.

A major study by VicHealth reveals that some parents are struggling to get the balance right, with a sizeable proportion of mums and dads “bubble-wrapping” their youngsters.

The research showed that more than a third of Victorian parents of children aged nine to 15 avoid situations where their kids are without an adult in case they are approached by a stranger.

The fear of stranger danger threatens to intensify Australia’s child obesity crisis as parents drive children to school instead of allowing them to walk or ride their bikes or scooters. There are predictions that in the next decade one in three children will be overweight.

VicHealth chief executive officer Jerril Rechter believes parental fears around stranger danger may be exaggerated:

“There is no evidence

to show that it’s any more dangerous now than we were 20 years ago,” she said.

“If kids can walk to school, then we know they are going to be getting a good chunk of their physical activity every day.

“We’ve just got to reclaim the neighbourhoods and the streets for our children so that they can have and live a really fulfilling, happy, healthy life.”

Walking with your children to

school and allowing them greater freedom to exercise in the outdoors are lifestyle changes that can make a meaningful difference in tackling the childhood obesity problem.

There can be as much danger in overprotecting children as there is in not appropriately supervising them. We all want our children to be safe but wrapping them in cotton wool can be counterproductive.

Children are naturally resilient, but we risk making them weak by shielding them from life, with our efforts to protect sometimes causing more harm than good. The phrase “killing with kindness” comes to mind.

Health concerns associated with excessive weight must be taken into account when parents make decisions about their children’s activity levels.





It's time to take the bubble wrap off our children

Let kids walk to school

WES HOSKING
EDUCATION REPORTER

STRANGER danger is threatening to exacerbate Australia's child obesity crisis amid concerns too many children aren't allowed to walk to school.

Victoria's peak health promotion agency is pushing for ways to counter parent's fears and the "bubble-wrapping" of children. It predicts one in three children will be overweight or obese in a decade unless lifestyles improve.

A major VicHealth study reveals more than a third of Victorian parents with children aged 9-15 avoid situations where they are without an adult in case they are approached by a stranger.

The danger was perceived as greater than for more general safety risks like traffic.

VicHealth chief executive officer Jerril Rechter said the research — the first of its kind

in Australia — showed most parents were confident letting their kids walk or cycle in the neighbourhood but things changed once they ventured further afield.

"This barrier just pops up," she said. "There is that parental fear when you do let your child go. There is no evidence to show it's any more dangerous now than it was 20 years ago. If kids can walk to school,

we know they are going to be getting a good chunk of their physical activity every day.

We've just got to reclaim the neighbourhoods and streets for our children so they can have and live a really fulfilling, happy, healthy life."

There was no set age a child should start walking to school

without an adult.

Letting them walk with other children was one way to ease the transition, she said.

More than 2000 parents with children aged 9-15 were surveyed in the three-year *Beyond the Bubble Wrap* study, due for completion next year.

Parental concern began to dissipate once children reached their pre-teens.

Parents acknowledged the chances of a stranger harming their children were probably low, but were aware of high-profile abduction cases and would never forgive themselves if something happened.

"I'd much prefer to err on the side of caution and know that they are safe," one said.

La Trobe University's Prof Jan Nicholson, the report's author, said the demands of work or childcare meant parents

often drove children to school.

wes.hosking@news.com.au
JERRIL RECHTER, OPINION P20



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KIDS GO IT ALONE

Percentage of independent trips to school

9yo	13.9%
10yo	24.5%
11yo	28.2%
12yo	36.6%
13yo	51.5%
14yo	49.9%
15yo	50.2%
Female	33.3%
Male	38.9%
Metro	34%
Non-metro	40%

Source: Beyond the Bubble-Wrap report.
Average proportion of trips to school made by children unaccompanied by an adult.

Primary school friends Ava and Ava, both 11, walk to school together.
Picture: DAVID CAIRD