

Beyond the bubble wrap



Understanding parents' fears in allowing their children to play and travel independently

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS*

Australian children are living a more inactive lifestyle and as a consequence increasing their risk of serious health problems such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Walking, riding a bike, scooting, skating or catching public transport to school and other places is a great way for children to be active in their daily lives, and to help meet the recommended one hour of physical activity every day. However, only around one in four children in Victoria walk or ride to school.¹

Previous VicHealth research shows parents' perceptions of 'stranger danger', traffic concerns and crime are the most common reasons children don't walk or ride to school.

To investigate the role that parental fear plays in shaping children's independence and physical activity, and find solutions to help parents give their children greater freedom,

VicHealth has initiated and funded a three-year study (2012 to 2015) into parental fear, the first of its kind in Australia.

VicHealth has commissioned La Trobe University and the Parenting Research Centre to undertake the study which has included a survey of more than 2000 parents of children aged nine to 15 from across Victoria.

The early findings from this research suggest that children's independence was related to parental concerns about safety in general and harm from strangers in particular.

Letting children become independent in their play and travel is a complex process for parents and parents' awareness of the many benefits of independent travel and play for children, balanced with the relative risk of harm, is important.

The final year of the research will involve working with experts including parents' groups to identify initiatives to help parents overcome barriers to children walking and riding to and from school and within their neighbourhood. Final research findings are planned for release in 2015.

* Preliminary findings refer to early results analysed to date from discussion groups with children and parents, and a telephone survey of parents from across Victoria. Final research findings are planned for release in 2015, following a final research report which will include recommendations developed with experts in the final project stage.



PRELIMINARY PARENTAL FEAR FINDINGS

TWO NEW MEASURES OF PARENTAL FEAR

New measures were developed to assess parental concerns and fear about children's safety when travelling or playing unsupervised by adults in their neighbourhood.

PARENTAL FEAR OF STRANGERS

Assesses fear of harm to children from strangers.

48%

worried about their child's safety when they were not with an adult because a stranger might approach them.

38%

were fearful their child would be approached by a stranger if they went out alone.

37%

were anxious their child would be approached by a stranger if they went out alone.

36%

avoided situations where their child went without an adult because they were fearful they will be approached by a stranger.

28%

were fearful that if their child walked or cycled somewhere in the neighbourhood, he or she might be at risk, or in danger, because of strangers.

GENERAL PARENTAL FEAR

Assesses parental concerns about children's safety when children are without adult supervision.

18%

always worried about their child's safety when they were out without an adult.

13%

were fearful of letting their child go out anywhere without an adult.

13%

were anxious about their child's safety when they were out somewhere familiar without an adult.

10%

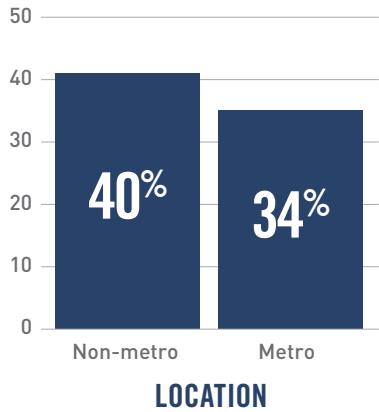
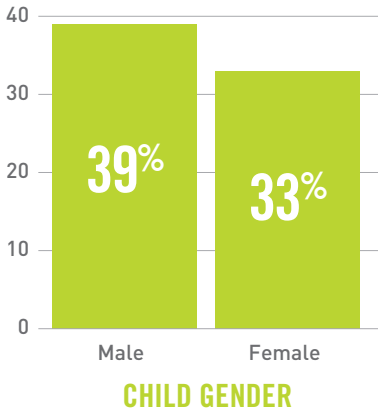
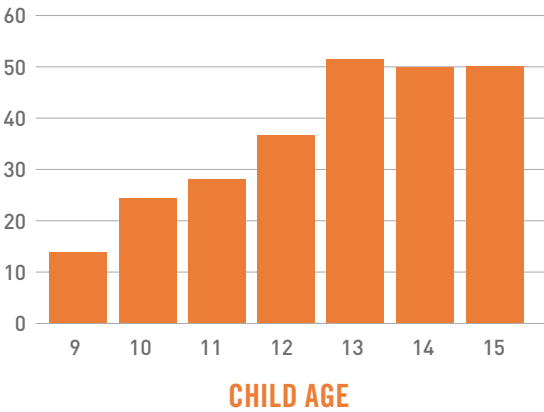
were anxious when letting their child go out anywhere without them.

- Parents who were more concerned about safety in general and harm from strangers in particular reported that their children were less likely to play and travel independently in the community. This applied across all age groups from nine to 15.
- Also, whether children were allowed to travel to school independently was related to how worried parents were about harm from strangers.
- Parents of girls reported more general fear and more fear of harm to their child from strangers, than parents of boys, and girls had less freedom for independent play and travel than boys.
- Parents were more fearful about their child being harmed by a stranger, than they were about their child's general safety when out in the neighbourhood without an adult.

CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENCE WAS RELATED TO THEIR AGE, GENDER AND WHERE THEY LIVE

Average proportion of trips to school that children make unaccompanied by an adult by child age, child gender and geographic location.

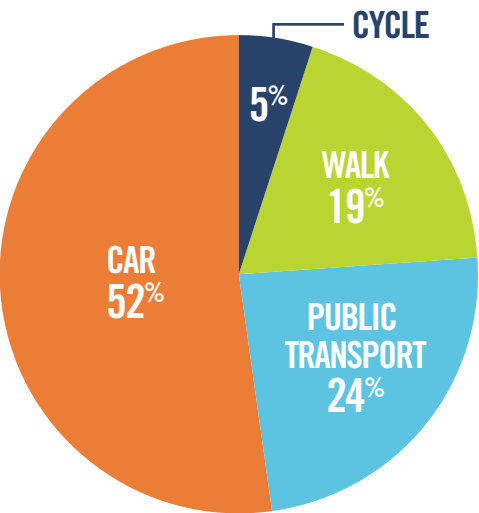
INDEPENDENT TRIPS TO SCHOOL (%)



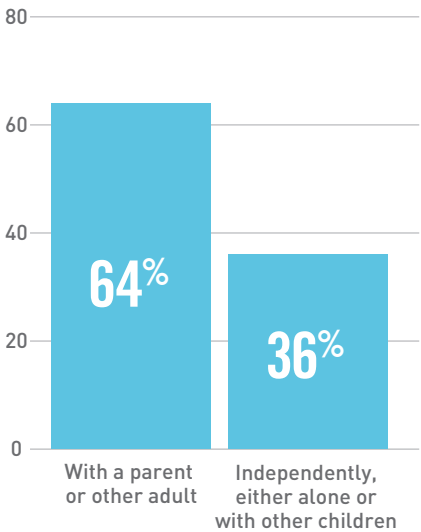
TRAVEL TO SCHOOL

Children travelled to school in a variety of ways.

TRANSPORT



WITH ADULT/INDEPENDENTLY



- On average, boys were allowed more freedom for independent play and travel than girls at all ages.
- Children who lived in rural and regional areas were more independent than those living in metropolitan areas.
- As children get older and more independent, parents tended to be less worried about their safety.
- Children who were able to play and travel without an adult and those who walked or rode to school were more likely to meet Australian physical activity guidelines, of at least one hour of physical activity every day.²

WHAT OTHERS THINK MATTERS

At all ages, parents' perceptions of the views of other family members, schools and other parents influenced their decisions about their children's independence. Children whose parents reported more disapproval from family, schools and other parents were less independent in their play and travel and independent trips to school.

COMMUNITY IS IMPORTANT

Parents were more likely to let their children play and travel independently when:

- they lived in communities where people knew each other
- there were fewer traffic and pedestrian hazards
- there were more adults and children walking.

Parents were less likely to let children aged 11-13 years play and travel independently when:

- children had little practice being independent
- children had low safety skills
- parents were not aware of the benefits of independent play and travel.

The 'Parental Fear as a Barrier to Children's Independent Mobility and Resultant Physical Activity' research was initiated and funded by VicHealth and conducted by Professor Jan Nicholson, Dr Amanda Cooklin, Dr Sharinne Crawford, Ms Shannon Bennetts (Judith Lumley Centre, La Trobe University); Dr Julie Green, Dr Fabrizio D'Esposito, Associate Professor Jan Matthews, Ms Helen Graesser (Parenting Research Centre); Dr Naomi Hackworth (Murdoch Childrens Research Institute); Professor Stephen Zubrick (University of Western Australia); Associate Professor Lyndall Strazdins (Australian National University); and Professor Guy Parcel (University of Texas). At the time of study design and data collection JN, AC, SC, SB and NH were employees of the Parenting Research Centre.

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2. Department of Health 2014, *Australia's physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines*, retrieved October 2014, <www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines>.



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