

Streets Ahead

Supporting children to get active in their neighbourhoods

In the space of one generation, the ability of children to explore and move through their own neighbourhoods has been whittled away. Children are more likely to be hemmed into their homes and ever-shrinking backyards.

For children's health and wellbeing, this is a negative trend.

Streets Ahead: Supporting children to get active in their neighbourhoods involves our local communities **reclaiming neighbourhood streets** – making them safer for children and more welcoming for us all.

Streets Ahead builds on the learnings from VicHealth's Walking School Bus program, which encouraged children to walk to and from school under adult supervision.

Streets Ahead goes further. The idea is that for short local trips we can help children to use their own legs and wheels more – and travel by car less – by encouraging them to **walk, cycle, skate or run** to school and other local destinations. It's about using active transport instead of being a passenger and, where age appropriate, without adult supervision.

Getting this new program to work will take energy, imagination and support from **councils, schools, community groups** and, most importantly, **parents**. It will mean seeing the 'big picture' of our neighbourhoods through the eyes of children.



What *Streets Ahead* needs most are **great ideas** for

projects that suit local conditions, which is why the program aims to channel a wide variety of views into action committees run by local councils. The **action committees** will include parents and representatives of schools and community groups. They will help identify the 'road blocks' to children using active transport and come up with strategies for overcoming these barriers.

VicHealth has committed \$1.7 million over three years to support *Streets Ahead*. Six local councils will lead the way with demonstration projects focused on particular neighbourhoods within their municipalities:

- City of Greater Bendigo
- Brimbank City Council
- Cardinia Shire Council
- Darebin City Council
- City of Greater Geelong
- City of Wodonga

More information about *Streets Ahead* and other active transport programs is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

We can use these demonstration projects to start restoring our neighbourhoods by encouraging children back onto the streets.



Why we need *Streets Ahead*

Streets Ahead aims to increase physical activity in children aged 4 to 12 years through active transport, such as walking or cycling – pursuits that were seen as ‘normal’ until relatively recently.

A great deal of research has been done about how and why parents now drive children for trips that, a few years ago, children would have taken using active transport. Among other reasons, we know that parents believe they are saving time and protecting their children from harm by driving them, instead of allowing them to travel locally ‘under their own steam’ and, for older children, without adult supervision.

However, we know there are lots of health and developmental benefits for children who use active transport. It reduces their risk of childhood obesity and increases their chances to learn to exercise judgement (including traffic sense), become independent and socialise.

Using active transport more often for local trips instead of cars could also reduce traffic congestion, alleviating the environmental and safety issues that come with busier roads.

Liam leads the way

Liam’s mum has just walked him to school. Her walk home gives her time to reflect on the positive differences that walking instead of driving the short daily trip has made. Liam is happier – it was his idea – and ‘pester power’ persuaded his parents to give it a go. Most mornings he gets to spend a few more minutes chatting with his mum or dad, who often use the opportunity to reinforce practical road safety advice. Liam’s parents were initially reluctant to start walking to school when most other parents drove their children. But it wasn’t that hard to make the change – they identified a safe walking route and had a trial run to estimate how long it took. They now enjoy the exercise and time out from traffic.

What *Streets Ahead* communities can do

Streets Ahead is about how small steps can make big differences to individual families and whole communities. Parents can start with changes that encourage others to follow, building up a momentum of support until it’s ‘normal’ again to see young pedestrians and cyclists in local streets.

These changes are about more than just infrastructure (e.g. crossings and footpaths) – they involve habits and behaviours. But what if whole communities backed these moves and brought governments and other authorities on board? What if we all shared the responsibilities and benefits of having children walk, run, ride and skate in our streets?

We know that the more children walk and cycle, the safer our local streets become. Together, we could use these demonstration projects to start restoring our neighbourhoods by encouraging children back onto our streets.

It could also become a catalyst for getting to know our neighbours. Children tend to break down social barriers between adults, and help make streets more ‘human’ and interesting places.

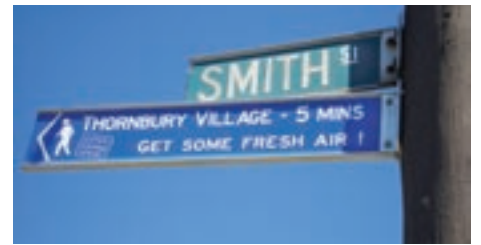
These are just some of the many reasons for supporting *Streets Ahead*.

What the evidence tells us

Over the past three decades, there has been a major shift in how parents transport children to school. The proportion of students walking to school in Melbourne, for example, between 1974 and 2003 fell from 45% to 15%, while car travel to school increased from 23% to 70%. This is despite most children living close enough to walk or ride a bicycle to their school.

Research involving parents and children, both overseas and in Australia, highlights the many reasons for these changes, which have had big impacts on lifestyles. The influence of cars in decentralising our suburbs and towns, for example, means many of us spend more time driving than did previous generations.

This, in turn, contributes to much greater volumes of traffic, making our streets less safe. Importantly, these changes reduce the ability of older children to move around their neighbourhood or town without adult supervision.



Independent mobility enables children to be more active, have better social connections and to learn about their local neighbourhood. Some key findings from a broad range of research are explained below.

The world seems more risky

Media stories highlighting crime and other bad news tend to heighten parents' anxiety, making them want to supervise their children at all times. This leads parents to overestimate likely risks and to believe that driving their children protects them from hazards like 'stranger danger' and traffic accidents. Paradoxically, when more parents opt for the car they may actually expose those children who are pedestrians to much greater risk overall than is likely to come from 'stranger danger'.

Parents under pressure

Parents are under increasing economic stress and many are working longer hours, leaving them 'time poor'. At the same time, they feel under peer pressure to be seen as 'good parents' by supervising their children and giving them access to lots of scheduled activities.

This sees many parents 'chauffeuring' their children on frequent short trips – making parents even more 'time poor' than if their children walked or cycled themselves.

Do cars slow us down?

Parents generally see driving their children as the quickest and easiest option, but this perception may undermine the reality when everyone is following the same route.

In Victoria 17% of early morning traffic on the roads is made up of cars doing the school run. This significantly adds to road congestion, slowing down journeys and boosting car emissions.

It may also be forming life habits for children who never experience any alternative to cars as the preferred form of transport.



Cars burn petrol, not calories

The community is looking for ways to reduce greenhouse gases and childhood obesity – active transport tackles both. Fewer short car trips would reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help reverse rising childhood obesity. In 1960, 5% of children were overweight; in 2004 this had increased to 25%.

Research suggests that up to one-quarter of Australian children do not do enough exercise. Active transport builds regular exercise into children's daily lives and is good for their emotional health. Even short walks to and from school have been found to reduce feelings of anger and anxiety.

It is believed that children may be adopting some of their parents' concerns about the world being a risky place, making them more vulnerable to depression. When children find out what's 'out there' and overcome their fears – they develop greater resilience and coping abilities.

What's it all about?

Streets Ahead is a program to increase physical activity in children aged 4 to 12 years by supporting them to walk and cycle around their neighbourhoods.

We want to:

- Establish community action groups that help identify barriers to children's active transport and independent mobility, and develop strategies to overcome them.
- Increase the rate of children walking and cycling to school, and for older children to do so independently.
- Increase the rate of children using active transport to get around their local neighbourhoods; to be out in the parks and other public places; and for older children to do so independently.

Children learn by doing – and by example

We know that family behaviours influence whether children adopt active transport. If parents walk and cycle with their young children, these children are more likely to walk and cycle, gaining independent mobility, as they mature.

Teaching children traffic sense also requires a supervised, incremental approach. With the right support, children can be taught road safety so that, at a suitable age, they can travel independently to school and around their neighbourhood.

Children want more freedom

Interviews with children found that most would prefer to walk or cycle to school and to other local destinations, and they want the independence to travel without adult supervision (where appropriate).

These opportunities allow them to become resilient and to develop autonomy, a sense of responsibility, time and risk management skills, and independent decision making.

It also frees them to explore their neighbourhoods, and become confident within their communities.

Taking the first steps

Streets Ahead wants communities to develop initiatives that suit their own neighbourhoods – this is not a 'one size fits all' program. Following are some good ideas for encouraging active transport. Some of these measures could be adapted to your local neighbourhood or they may spark community conversations that lead to other innovative solutions.

What do children want?

We need to talk to children about what would make them feel more confident about moving around their own neighbourhood. Maybe children can help advise local councils how to design or modify public spaces to make them more 'child friendly', giving children places to play actively or just hang out and feel safe.

Making it easy

We need to develop ways of making it easier for children to walk and cycle safely. In addition to behavioural changes we need infrastructure measures, such as:

- traffic-calming measures that reduce car volume and speed
- street closures to through-traffic
- better walking and cycling infrastructure
- home zones where streets are shared by cars and pedestrians.

Teaching children about drivers

Road education for children is not very effective unless we allow children to put theory into practice – in age-appropriate ways and under adult supervision.

Just as young adults learn to drive by practising, so too do children learn traffic sense – by doing and by following others.

Teaching drivers about children

We can make streets safer for children through public awareness campaigns that make drivers understand how child pedestrians and cyclists behave.



If you live in a *Streets Ahead* community

Talk to your family, your friends, your neighbours and your children about what changes could encourage children to walk, run, cycle, skate or scoot on short trips around the neighbourhood, instead of being driven by car.

The councils pioneering *Streets Ahead* need volunteers to join their action committees to get this new program under way. Your support by way of ideas and suggestions or participation in local demonstration projects is welcome.

For more information contact VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/streetsahead

'Love Living Local' is a partnership between the City of Darebin and the Victorian Government.