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KIDS WHO WALK ARE ON TRACK TO BETTER HEALTH

Children who walk to school are more physically active in their day-to-day activities around their neighbourhood than those children who are driven to school, a new study finds.

The study, undertaken for VicHealth by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), also suggests that children who walk to school are significantly more connected with their local community.

ACER Chief Executive Officer, Professor Geoff Masters said: “The research involved analysing surveys and pictures drawn by 659 primary school aged children between the ages of 9 and 12.

“Our study found that only 26 per cent of the years 3 to 6 primary school aged children walked to school in the past five days.”

“Children who walked to school demonstrated a greater awareness of, and familiarity with, their local environment. They drew detailed elements of green space such as parks, trees, grass, flowers, sporting ovals and children playing football, people riding bikes, walking their dog and playgrounds.”

“In contrast, children who travelled to school by car tended to depict abstract, isolated images of their neighbourhood environment with the car and the road as the central theme. They drew images of traffic lights, road signs, school crossings, local schools, office buildings, shopping centres, and fast food outlets. They also drew their own street and a lot of empty blank spaces,” Professor Masters said.

VicHealth CEO Todd Harper said: “This study is a great insight into the hearts and minds of our children. It shows that we need to invest a lot more in their physical and emotional wellbeing.”

“This study is also an innovative look at young children, their physical activity and their connection to their local environment.”

“We know the development of healthy young minds and bodies are essential for reducing the huge burden on our health system when these children reach middle age and beyond.”

“This research has been commissioned to evaluate a VicHealth program called *Streets Ahead*, aimed at increasing physical activity in children aged 4 to 12 years through promoting independent mobility.”

“There is overwhelming evidence that when children walk or cycle to school, they are better off physically and importantly in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing,” Mr Harper says.

The three year evaluation study is analysing results from 1,412 primary school aged children from Prep to year 6 across 19 Primary Schools in Victoria.

The research is being presented by ACER researcher Catherine Underwood at the inaugural *International Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress* in Melbourne next week.

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