



**LA TROBE**  
UNIVERSITY

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# Beyond the bubble-wrap

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

Preliminary research findings

In partnership with



\*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.

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.

# Introduction

As children grow and develop, they need to learn independence and autonomy. Their parents have a critical – and sometimes difficult – role in supporting them to do this.

Many people think that today's parents are too worried about their children's safety and aren't giving their children opportunities for healthy growth and development. Commentators use terms such as 'helicopter parenting', 'cotton-wool kids' and 'bubble-wrapping children' to describe this situation<sup>(1-5)</sup>. Overly fearful parenting has been suggested as contributing, among other things, to declining levels of independent physical activity in children and high rates of childhood obesity.

Despite considerable media attention, to date there is surprisingly little evidence linking parental fear to children's 'independent mobility' – children's freedom to move around in public spaces without adult supervision<sup>(6)</sup>.

When asked why they don't allow their children to walk or ride to school, parents often say they're worried about safety, especially traffic risks and the risk of harm from strangers<sup>(7-9)</sup>. But we don't know much about how parents judge these risks and how they decide the level of independence granted to their children.

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.

The research team has designed this project to increase understanding of the:

- role that parental fear plays in shaping their children's independent activity
- factors that help parents give their children greater freedom.

As part of the project, the team developed two new reliable measures of parental concerns for their child's safety when playing and travelling independently in the neighbourhood and parental concerns about threats from strangers.

## Method

Between October and December 2013, researchers conducted a large-scale community telephone survey in Victoria. The content of the survey was informed by school-based discussion groups with 132 children and 12 parents, to build a richer understanding of children's views about how they gain independence and how parents make decisions about children's independence.

The survey was the first of its kind in Australia to collect detailed information about the factors that influence parental fears for children's safety and the amount of freedom parents give their children to play and travel without adult supervision. Altogether, 2002 parents of children aged nine to 15-years-old from rural and metropolitan Victoria completed the survey.

The research focused on understanding the role of parental fear in three key areas:

- independent play and travel – the range of activities children could do in their neighbourhoods without adult supervision
- independent trips to school – the number of trips to and from school per week that children made without adult supervision, by walking, riding or using public transport
- active transport to school – the number of trips to and from school per week where children walked or rode to school (with or without adult supervision).

# Results

## 1. Children learn how to be safe in their neighbourhood through practice

As shown in Figure 1.1, most parents start allowing children to play and travel in their community without adult supervision in primary school. During the pre-teen years – 11 to 13 years – children move from quite limited independence to much more independence. For example, 9-year-old children were allowed to do an average of four to five activities independently, whereas children aged 15 years were allowed to do an average of 11 activities.

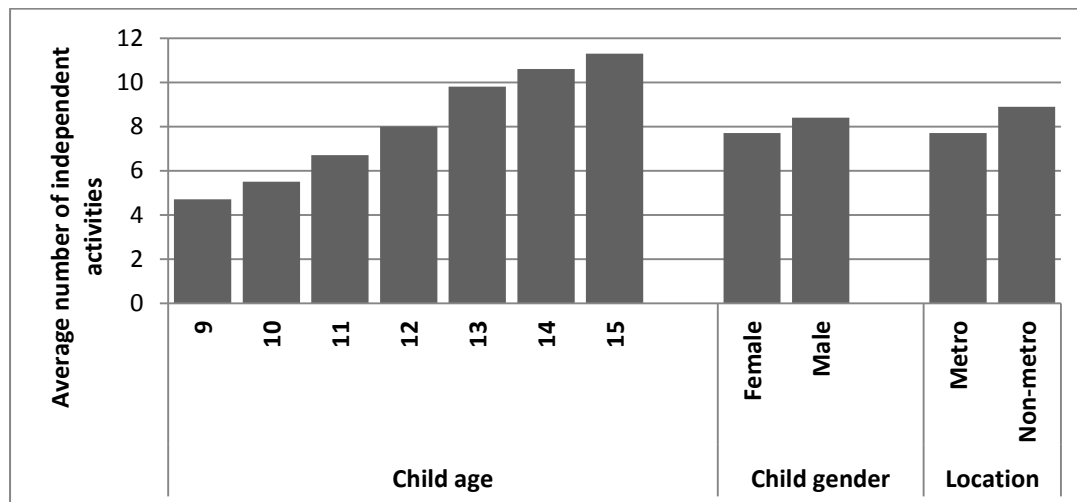


Figure 1.1: Number of independent activities children are allowed to do by child age, child gender and geographic location

By 9 years, almost all children (97%) were allowed to play in their own yard without adult supervision. Other common independent activities included going to a friend's house (80%), walking in the neighbourhood (77%) or riding a bike in the street (75%). Going to shops (65%) or local parks (56%) or using public transport (37%) was less common, and only 13% of children were allowed out after dark without an adult.

**Children's independence was related to their gender and where they live.** 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. Fathers did not differ from mothers in how much independence they reported giving their children.

In the families surveyed, half of the children travelled to school by car (52%), while 19% walked, 5% cycled and 24% travelled by public transport. Most children travelled to school with a parent or other adult (64%), although 36% travelled to school independently, either alone or with other children.

As shown in Figure 1.2, the proportion of children's independent trips to school (by walking, riding or public transport without an adult) increased as the child progresses through primary school. From the time children are 13 years, the proportion remained steady at around 50%. Boys had slightly more independent trips to school compared to girls (39% compared to 33%), and children in rural and regional areas had more independent trips to school than children in metropolitan areas (40% versus 34%).

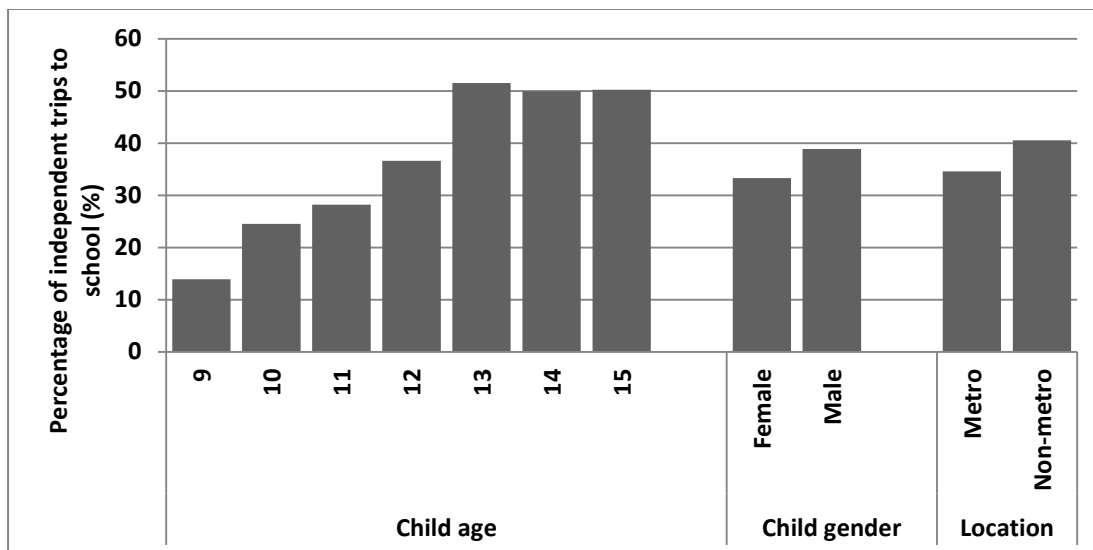


Figure 1.2: Average proportion of trips to school that children make unaccompanied by an adult by child age, child gender and geographic location

Increases in children’s independent play and travel correspond with the ages when they move from primary to secondary school. Both children and parents said this is when children get better at managing risks, so it’s a good time for them to start having more freedom and independence. The comments below illustrate this.

‘Yeah, [my parents] gave me more freedom because they thought, “You’ve grown up now. You know the boundaries. You know what you can do and what you can’t do.”’  
 – Girl aged 13 years

‘[Children] tend to be a little bit more independent once they get into high school. They tend to do a few more things that you probably wouldn’t necessarily have thought they would have done. But no way when they’re in primary school, I don’t think they’re mature enough.’  
 – Parent of children aged 10, 11 and 14 years

## 2. Two new measures of parental fear

The research team developed two brief and reliable measures to assess parental concerns and fear about children’s safety when travelling or playing unsupervised by adults in their neighbourhood:

- **General Parental Fear** assesses parental concerns about children’s safety when children are without adult supervision.
- **Parental Fear of Strangers** assesses fear of harm to children from strangers.

### How the data was gathered

The questions for the survey were developed following a series of parent and child discussion groups and consultations with an expert review panel, then tested on 118 parents for refinement and statistical validation. In the telephone survey these measures were completed by 2002 parents.

High levels of concern (‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’) about the following were expressed by parents as follows:

#### General parental fear

- 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

#### Parental fear of 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% of parents 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

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 (Figure 2.1).

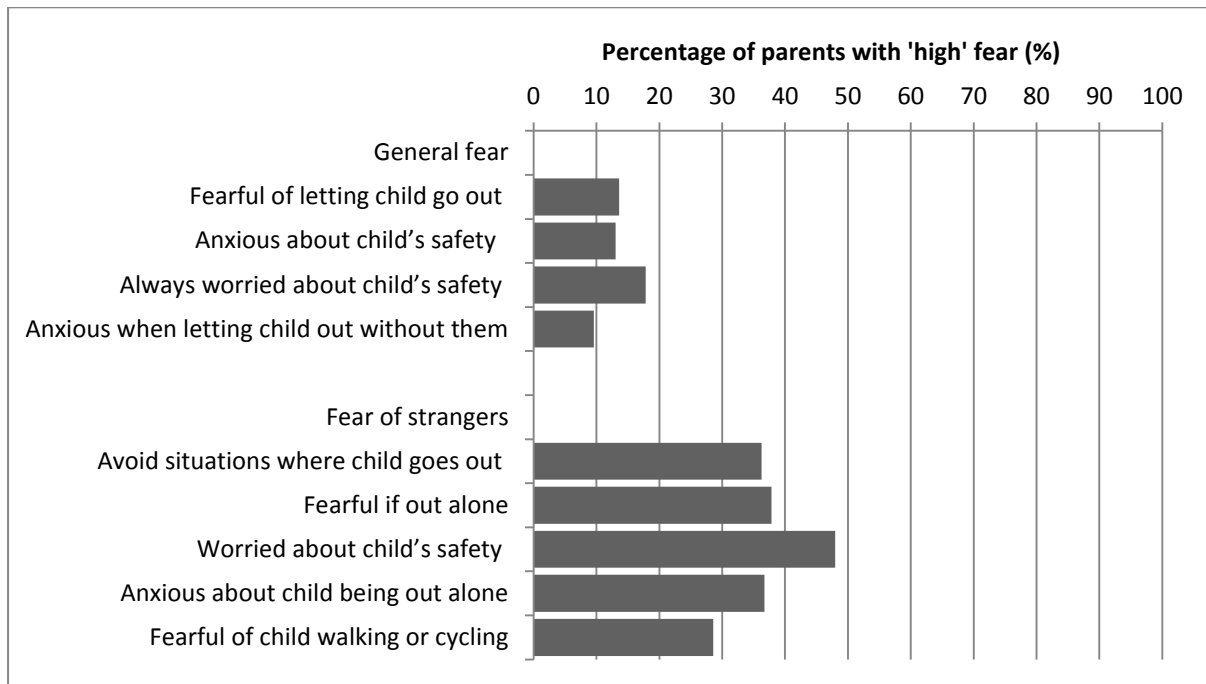


Figure 2.1: Percentage of parents reporting 'high' levels of general fear and fear of harm from strangers, for their child's safety when out in the neighbourhood without an adult

### 3. Parents' have fewer concerns as children get older

As children get older and more independent, parents tend to be less worried about their safety.

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show the average level of parental concern about children's safety in the neighbourhood in general and in relation to harm from strangers.

Three groups of parents had lower concerns:

- Parents of older children (compared to younger children)
- Parents of boys (compared with girls)
- Parents who lived in rural and regional locations (compared to metropolitan areas).

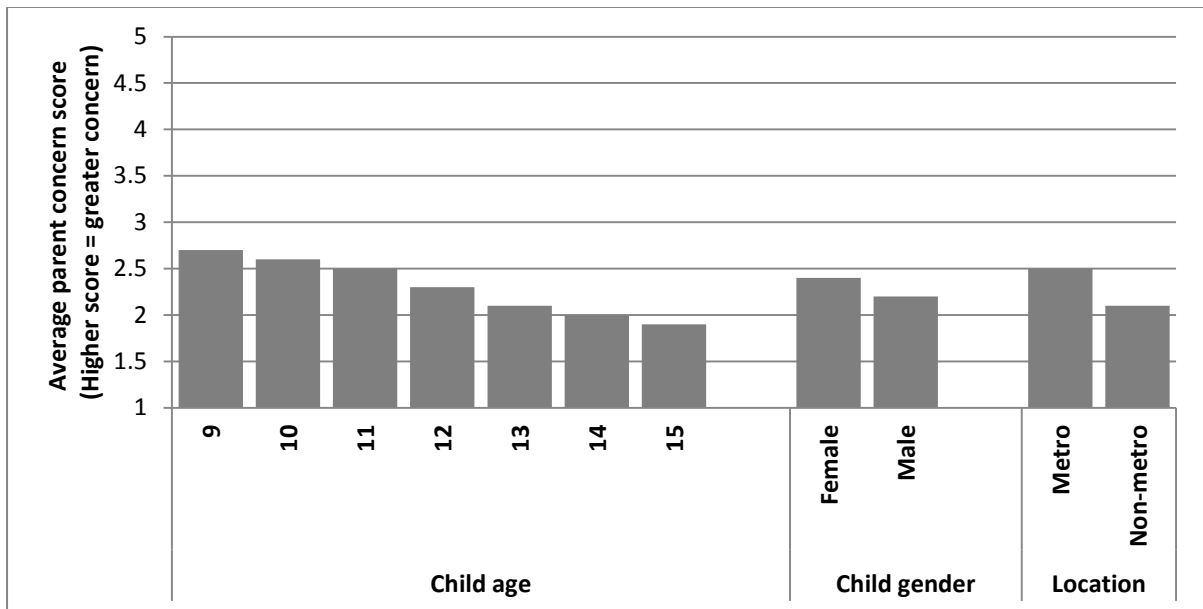


Figure 3.1: Parental concern about children's general safety according to child age, child gender and location

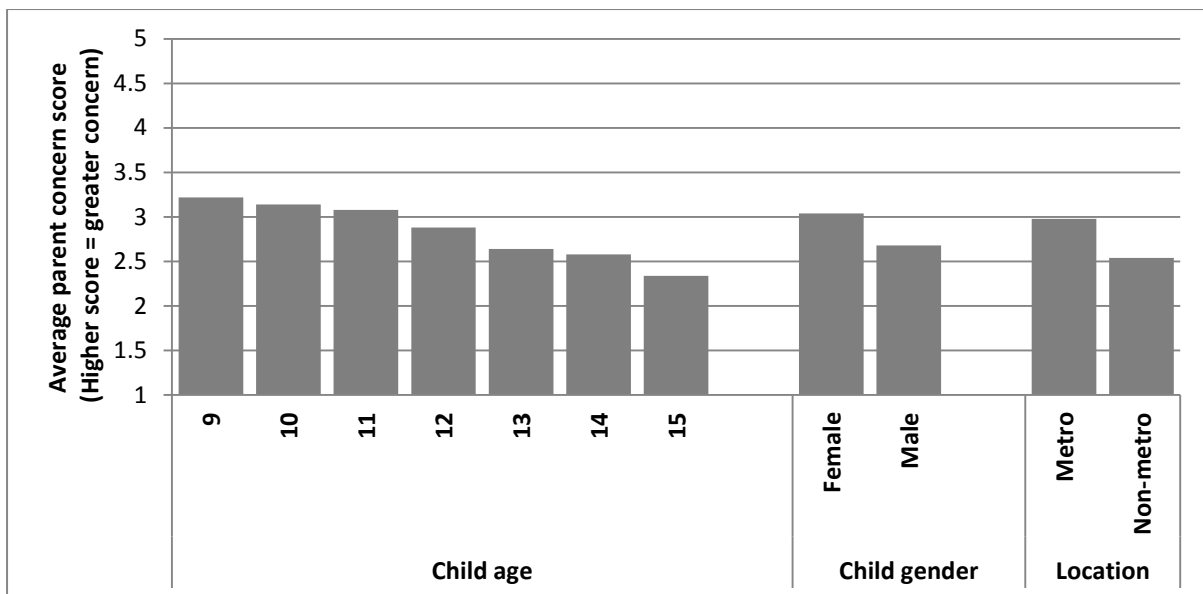


Figure 3.2: Parental concern about harm from strangers according to child age, child gender and location

Children's independence was related to parental concerns. 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 9 to 15 years.

Also, whether children were allowed to travel to school independently was related to how worried parents were about harm from strangers.

Parents in metropolitan areas tended to be more worried about children's safety in general and harm from strangers in particular, and their children had less independence, compared with children in rural and regional areas.

In the discussion groups, parents recognised that the chances of their children being harmed by a stranger were probably low. But they were very aware of high-profile cases of child abduction and felt that they would never forgive themselves if something did happen to their children. For example:

'You think about these things that have happened [to other children] and that you hear about .... I'd much prefer to err on the side of caution and know that they are safe than if something horrendous happens and regret it for the rest of your lives.'

– Parent of children aged 8 and 10 years

'There are these bad people out there... it's made us be more aware that you can't trust anyone and you've got to be so careful.'

– Parent of children aged 8 and 12 years

#### **4. Supporting children's independence is a complex process**

Letting children become independent in their play and travel is a complex process for parents.

In the discussion groups, parents acknowledged the health benefits, social benefits and enjoyment that children get from independent travel and play. When they were making decisions about what they let their children do, parents weighed these benefits against children's skills and maturity, potential risks and demands on parents' time.

The telephone survey identified several factors that influenced parents' decisions. 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.

## **Independent play and active travel is good for children's health**

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.

Australian physical activity guidelines recommend that children aged 5-17 years should do at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day<sup>(10)</sup>.

Children aged 11-15 years who had more independence were more likely than their less independent peers to meet the physical activity guidelines on weekend days.

Children aged 11-13 years who walked or rode to school were more likely than children who were driven or took public transport to meet the physical activity guidelines on week days.

#### **5. Busy family lives make it challenging for children to gain independent safety skills**

Walking or riding to school with children is one way that parents can ensure that their children are developing important safety skills and awareness. For many parents, other demands made this difficult.

Working parents reported that time restrictions meant that they had to drive children to school. Children who went to before-school or after-school care also lacked opportunities to practise travelling to school by walking, cycling or public transport. For example:



'I'd like to not work every day pretty much so I could walk the kids to school easily but I have to work, so a lot of our travel decisions are made because of our circumstances.'

– Parent of a child aged 8 years

## 6. What others think matters

At all ages, parents' perceptions of the views of other family members, schools and other parents influenced their decisions about 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.

Parents looked to other parents when making decisions about their own children's independence. For example:

'I probably wouldn't have let them do it but then I think well obviously that parent is confident with their child doing it ... so then I think well maybe I can instil a little bit more independence in them as well ... so it takes sometimes another parent.'

– Parent of children aged 10, 11 and 14 years

## 7. Community is important

Of the survey respondents:

- 76% of parents had a strong sense of belonging
- 81% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they felt a strong sense of identity with their neighbourhood
- 94% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their neighbourhood was a good place to bring up children
- 91% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they often saw adults walking in their neighbourhood
- 81% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they often saw children walking in their neighbourhood.

In the group discussions, both children and parents identified 'feeling safe and knowing people' as an important factor in decisions about letting children play and travel independently.

For children, being familiar with their surroundings also made them feel safe. In metropolitan areas, children who knew people in their street or at the local shops believed that someone would support them if they needed help. For example:

'... people that own the milk bar, and they know my mum and dad, and whenever [my sister and I] walk in there they just check on us ...'

– Child in Year 5, metropolitan area

Parents who didn't know their neighbours reported feeling concerned about their children's safety. For example:

'... these days you don't have a real community feel out on the streets.'

– Parent of a child aged 8 years, metropolitan area

In rural towns, parents and children felt safe because 'everybody knows each other'. But one of the towns where a discussion group was conducted had a lot of tourists at certain times of the year, and children reported they were less likely to go out during peak tourist times.

# Implications from preliminary findings

These preliminary study findings indicate that while parental fear was reported by some parents, other factors were also important in parents' decision-making about children's independent travel and play. While levels of general parental fear were low, parental fear of harm from strangers was reported by one third to one half of parents in the survey. Both types of parental fear were related to lower levels of independent activities in

children aged 9-15 years, and fewer independent trips to school. Parents of girls reported more general fear and more fear of harm to their child from strangers than parents of boys.

However, several other factors also influenced what children were allowed to do on their own. Children's ability to safely play and travel without adult supervision was found to be closely associated with age. As children get older and more mature, they can become more aware of potential dangers and how to respond to them. At the same time, children's independent activity levels increased and parental safety concerns decreased. Children aged 9-10 years were found to be less likely to walk or ride to school because their parents reported being more concerned about harm from strangers. Developing their safety skills can be reinforced through practice in primary school, so that as they reach secondary school, they can transition to becoming more independent mobility.

The demands of daily family life can shape children's opportunities to be independently active. Parents' work and child care arrangements can limit the opportunities that children have to play and travel on their own. Parents reported that busy family lives and jobs make it hard to practice travelling to school with their children.

Our early findings suggest that once children reach the pre-teen years (11 to 13 years), parental fear doesn't have as much influence on how children travel to school. Characteristics of the neighbourhood, social norms and competing demands on parents' time influenced children's levels of independent activity and how they travel to school. The findings also showed that when parents were more aware of the health and social benefits of independent activity, they tended to give their children more freedom.

Parents also look to others – in their family and community – when making decisions about what they should and shouldn't allow their children to do in relation to their independent play and travel. Parents who expected disapproval from other parents, from schools, or from other family members reported lower independent travel and play in their child. On the other hand, children were more likely to be independently active when their parents viewed their neighbourhood as a supportive community, where people know each other and look out for each other. These characteristics are likely to explain why children in rural and regional areas were reported to have more freedom than their city-based peers, relative to how worried parents are about safety.

Findings showed that children aged 11-13 years go from limited to greater independence in travel and play. This transition to greater independence is likely to be related to the transition from primary to secondary school. This period provides an important window for research to investigate how best to engage, inform and support parents to confidently foster children's independence.

It is likely that multiple strategies are required to increase the levels of independent physical activity among Victorian children. Building on the preliminary findings described here, the next phase of this research project will involve working with experts with the aim to develop evidence-based recommendations for promoting independent play and travel for Victorian primary and secondary school children. Through a series of workshops, the research team will consult with peak body industry experts from a broad range of child, family and community fields to inform the development of recommendations for policy and practice.

The early findings from this research suggest that parents' awareness of the many benefits of independent travel and play for children, balanced with the relative risk of harm is important. Building community cohesion and child-friendly environments is necessary to give parents and children opportunities to practise the skills that allow children to navigate their environments safely.

Ultimately, findings from this research will provide information to make it easier for parents to weigh up risks and benefits and help their children move towards age-appropriate independent play and travel. This research is to be completed in mid-2015. Final research findings are planned for release in 2015.

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