

## Media Release

14 October 2014

### HALF OF VICTORIAN PARENTS WORRIED ABOUT HARM FROM STRANGERS

Almost half (48%) of Victorian parents of children aged nine to 15 are worried about their child's safety when they are not with an adult because a stranger might approach them.

Victorian parents are more fearful about their child being harmed by a stranger, than they are about their child's general safety when out in their neighbourhood without an adult.

New research released by VicHealth, the first of its kind in Australia, also reveals that around one-third (36%) of parents avoid situations where their child goes without an adult, because they are fearful they would be approached by a stranger.

[\*Beyond the bubble-wrap: Understanding parents' fears in allowing their children to play and travel independently\*](#), contains the preliminary findings of a major VicHealth research study conducted by La Trobe University and the Parenting Research Centre including a survey of more than 2000 parents of children aged nine to 15 across Victoria. It examines the role parental fear plays in shaping children's independence and physical activity.

Parental fear was one of several factors that influenced what children were allowed to do on their own with regard to independent play and travel.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said that children who were able to play and travel without an adult and those who walk or ride to school were more likely to get the recommended one hour of physical exercise every day, which is very important given rising obesity levels.

"Victorian 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. In the 1960s, one in 20 children was overweight or obese. Today, that has risen to one in four, and is expected to increase to one in three by 2025. Only one in five Australian children get the recommended one hour of physical activity every day and only one in four children in Victoria walk or ride to school.

"VicHealth commissioned this research to understand parents' fears as a barrier to physical activity and to find solutions to help parents give their children greater freedom to walk and ride to and from school and within their neighbourhood. Getting kids active puts them on a path to good health for the rest of their lives," Ms Rechter added.

Lead researcher, Professor Jan Nicholson from La Trobe University, said several factors influence parents' decisions to let their children play and travel independently.

"Factors range from 'stranger danger' to traffic and pedestrian hazards. We also learnt that community plays an important role and children were more likely to be independently active when their parents viewed their neighbourhood as a supportive community, where people know and look out for one another. However, disapproval from other parents, family members, and schools also restricts the level of freedom parents give to their children.



**LA TROBE**  
UNIVERSITY



**Parenting Research Centre**  
*raising children well*

## Media Release

“The research also shows that children’s independence is related to their gender and where they live. Parents of girls were more worried about their child’s safety and more fearful of harm to their child from strangers, than parents of boys. On average, boys are allowed more freedom for independent play and travel than girls and the research shows that 39% of boys travel to school independently compared to 33% of girls.

“Children who live in rural and regional Victoria are also more independent than those who live in metropolitan areas, with 40% of children in rural and regional areas travelling to school independently compared to 34% of children who live in cities,” Professor Nicholson said.

Ms Rechter said letting children become independent in their play and travel is a complex process, but that letting go could be managed in stages.

“With obesity on the rise, we’re encouraging as many primary school children to walk or ride to school to help them build the physical activity they need into their daily lives. October is VicHealth’s Walk to School month and is a great way to make physical activity a part of children’s daily lives. We encourage parents to teach their children road safety and navigation skills by riding or walking around their neighbourhood, talk with neighbours about establishing buddy groups of older children who can walk or ride together without adults, or drive part of the way to school and drop your child off 500 metres away so they can walk the remainder – or walk with them at a distance.

“Next year, the findings from this research will provide parents with information to make it easier to weigh up risks and benefits and help their children move towards appropriate independent play and travel for their age,” Ms Rechter added.

**Media Contact: VicHealth Senior Media Advisor Helen Walsh on 0435 761 732 or [hwalsh@vichealth.vic.gov.au](mailto:hwalsh@vichealth.vic.gov.au)**

**Full report: [Beyond the bubble-wrap: Understanding parents’ fears in allowing their children to play and travel independently](#)**

**Summary report: [Beyond the bubble-wrap](#)**