

Within the community



Where a child lives can have a big influence on how active he or she is throughout the day.

A child living in an outer Melbourne suburb with busy roads carrying high-speed traffic, with few public transport options, little open space and poor walking or cycling paths will have limited opportunities to play in the park or ride a bike to school.

A child growing up in a small, close-knit regional town with lots of open space is more likely to ride a bike to places, kick a football around with friends after school or be part of the local netball team.

Having recreational facilities that are close by as well as neighbourhoods that are 'walkable' supports higher levels of activity by children (Ridgers 2013).

On the other hand, poorly designed neighbourhoods can significantly impact on a child's ability to get out and about, particularly if it's hard for them to safely access parks, playgrounds and reserves because of poor pedestrian or cycling paths and crossings – or simply because these facilities are too far away.

Our over-reliance on cars is also putting limits on children's opportunities to be active by walking, riding a bike, scooting, skating or catching public transport to school and other places.

Limiting outside play and independent travel denies children a range of important development opportunities, including exploring, taking risks and making choices, learning through play, problem solving, interacting with peers, building confidence and self-esteem and developing spatial skills (Brown et al 2008, Joshi, MacClean & Carter 1999, Moore & Young 1978, Prezza & Pacilli 2007, Rissotto & Tonucci 2002, Tranter & Whitelegg 1994).

There are a range of complex reasons why children today have fewer opportunities to be independently mobile. There are parental concerns around traffic safety and stranger danger (Thompson 2009).

As our society becomes busier, we are also less likely to take the time to get to know our neighbours or get involved in local activities – this affects the relationship our children have with their neighbours, making them less likely to know other children in the area or feel confident to get out and about independently.

VicHealth supports local councils with a range of evidence-based guides for supporting health and preventing illness in communities.

'Local government action guide number 3' is around increasing participation in physical activity.

'Councils can make an impact on their residents' levels of physical activity by coordinating their work across areas such as:

- infrastructure, street facilities, paths and trails
- open spaces and the natural environment
- active recreation, community programs and participation in community events.

The guide offers a range of actions that councils may consider to increase participation in physical activity when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other strategies.'

(VicHealth 2012a)

Benefits to the community of having active children

Creating more opportunities for children and their families to engage in active travel can reduce vehicle traffic in local streets and neighbourhoods, as well as easing traffic congestion around local destinations such as schools and shops.

Increasing access to and use of local parks and recreation spaces, as well as getting more people 'out and about', can support a better connected community. This may also contribute to a greater sense of safety for community members.

A more active and healthier community can also reduce the reliance on local health and medical services.

'Walking and playing independently helps children learn how to deal with situations, make decisions, explore and have fun. The physical, social and developmental benefits are enormous.'

BEN ROSSITER, EXECUTIVE OFFICER, VICTORIA WALKS



Practical actions for creating more active communities

Shifting the concepts of *design* and *time* within local communities can create more opportunities for children to be active in their neighbourhoods.



ACTION

Consider alternative and innovative options that give children greater access to spaces and places for play.



Consider:

- Providing pop-up playgrounds, temporary play areas and equipment (see Dandenong Pop-Up Park case study p 37).
- Opening residential streets for safe street play and community connection.
- Closing off streets, or sections of streets, to create new spaces for local parks and public use.

Providing good access to parks, open space and sport and recreation facilities increases opportunities for children to be active in these environments (Ridgers 2013). Children are more likely to use these places and spaces if they're in close proximity and are easily and safely reached via connected walking and cycling paths and crossings.



How can existing spaces and places within neighbourhoods be used differently to facilitate active play?



ACTION

Activate local streets and community spaces to get more people 'out and about' within their neighborhood, walking and talking. This contributes to strengthening community connections and safety perceptions, which have positive influences on children's independent mobility (see Rossmoyne Street case study p 38).



Consider:

- Community barbecues, where local residents come together as a community.
- Civic engagement to improve community environments and places.
- Measures to slow traffic speeds to improve safety and encourage more people to be out walking and cycling.
- Providing permanent features that stimulate children's interest and encourage play, for example along access routes to parks.

Parents perceptions of safety, in terms of traffic and pedestrian safety and stranger danger, are strong barriers to children's independence (Ridgers 2013, Thompson 2009) and therefore opportunities to be active through outdoor play and active travel. Walkable neighbourhoods with people 'out and about' encourage perceptions that it's safe for children to be out playing.



In what ways can community members help to minimise safety concerns?



ACTION

Seek children's views and interests in the design and development of playgrounds and play spaces. This helps to meet their needs and engender strong community 'buy-in', so children and families are more likely to use these spaces to be active.



Consider:

- Working with local schools to engage students in the design and development of play space projects.
- Consultation with children through play.

Having access to good parks and play spaces supports children being physically active. As children age, they're less likely to engage in active play (Department of Health and Ageing 2008b), therefore having environments that provide stimulating play options is important for keeping older children active and encouraging creativity and imagination.



How can the design of playgrounds and play spaces reignite children of different ages and abilities to be active through play?



ACTION

Create more ways in which children and families use existing public spaces and places for unstructured outdoor activities, such as kicking the football in the park, climbing trees, building things in nature or exploring local tracks and trails.



Consider:

- Community events or initiatives that encourage parents and their children to explore local places and spaces.
- The role of new and growing activities, such as adventure and lifestyle sports, in engaging more children in outdoor activities.

There are many benefits for children in playing outdoors and among nature (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton 2012). Providing a variety of opportunities for children to spend time being active outdoors can present new experiences for children and their families.



What new opportunities are available to get more children and families active outdoors?



ACTION

Consider ways to shift people's travel choices away from cars, particularly for short trips to schools, local shops, parks or libraries. Create compelling options that encourage children and families to make the choice to get out and about and explore their neighbourhood.



Consider:

- Providing information on walking and cycling routes and travel distances to local destinations.
- Strategies that support walking and cycling over cars such as promoting pedestrian access to community festivals and events and limiting car parking.
- Enhancing streetscapes, improving footpath connection and providing amenities such as seating, to improve walking access to community destinations.
- Working with key local partners, such as council, schools, businesses, to design and deliver solutions to reduce car use.

Reducing the over-reliance on cars within communities is a positive way to get children walking or riding their bike to places. Reducing cars on the street may also help to alleviate concerns around traffic safety.



Within your community, what types of trips can be targeted to encourage walking or cycling over driving, and how?

Further information and resources to support these actions are available on VicHealth's website (www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/activeforlife)

CASE STUDY

Dandenong Pop-Up-Park encouraging being active

A site earmarked for development in a few years' time as part of the Revitalising Central Dandenong project has been transformed into a temporary pop-up park for all Dandenong residents to enjoy.

Previously an unused block of land, the site now features synthetic soccer pitches, a barbecue area, community garden and open spaces.

The park's development is linked into the broader rejuvenation of the surrounding area including a pedestrian precinct connecting the local shopping centre, market and train station.

One of the key objectives in creating the park was to attract and engage hard-to-reach groups within the local community, as well as supporting the health and wellbeing of the broader community through sports programs and activities that encouraged inclusion.

Residents are enjoying the facility in a multitude of ways - for sports games, fitness sessions, outdoor activities, barbecues and picnics with family and friends.

The park has been used for scheduled and unscheduled activities such as soccer, cricket and rugby matches delivered in partnership with professional sporting bodies and community organisations, as well as arts and music events, business team-building activities, charity events and celebrations.

Scheduled sporting activities at the park have been particularly successful in engaging young people, whilst the community garden has appealed to the adult refugee community, and people with disabilities.

Nightly soccer matches have been incredibly important for many of the newly arrived migrant youths in terms of helping them settle into the community and establish social connections.

A number of local unemployed young people were given the chance to work on the park's construction through Mission Australia's Urban Renewal Program, learning new skills and building their self-esteem.

While the park is only intended to be a temporary community facility, the community spirit it's helping to foster will last much longer.

The park is an initiative of Places Victoria and Mission Australia, with funding from the State and Federal Governments, and forms part of the Victorian Government's \$290 million Revitalising Central Dandenong initiative.



CASE STUDY

Rossmoyne Street – building a sense of community

In 2008, a small group of residents in Rossmoyne Street, Thornbury, were concerned their street was in danger of becoming a traffic corridor rather than a living space and wanted to turn that around.

Now known as the Rossmoyne Street Walkability Action Group, the team of committed residents set out to create a street in which local residents felt comfortable walking around and spending time.

They also thought that by joining forces, they'd be better able to advocate for improvements to local infrastructure such as pedestrian/cycling amenities and street furniture.

The group's first initiative was a series of street parties which brought residents together in a fun, inclusive way.

In 2012, their efforts attracted the interest of the local council, the City of Darebin, which selected the street for the pilot Drive With Your Heart program aimed at creating safer streets and stronger neighbourhoods.

The idea at the core of Drive With Your Heart is to get people out and about in their local street so drivers are more aware of their behaviour and slow down. It's a way of letting motorists know that local streets aren't empty corridors to speed along and for residents to reclaim their street as a social space.

The partnership between Rossmoyne Street and Council provided the Walkability Action Group with valuable in-kind support for their efforts to create a safer, more attractive street for residents.

Other initiatives of the group include a car share bay in the street, a trial planter box project and a front yard scarecrow competition. Events to date include pot-luck dinners, a street-long garage sale (Rossmoyne Rummage), an annual Christmas Carol Parade and guided walks along nearby Darebin Creek.

In the space of a few years, the group has well and truly achieved its aim of building a local community around Rossmoyne Street, where social connection and walking are highly valued, for the benefit of all residents.

The group's future plans include lobbying for pedestrian amenities and reduced speed limits intersecting streets, an expansion of the planter box project, and the installation of street furniture.

The Rossmoyne Street Walkability Action Group is supported by Victoria Walks (victoriawalks.org.au). VicHealth funds Victoria Walks because walking is a great way of increasing physical activity and combating obesity, traffic congestion, pollution and a host of preventable diseases. Walking has other benefits too – like helping people make and sustain connections with other people in their own neighbourhoods. Victoria Walks is also supported by the Department of Health in relation to the Victorian Government's Healthy Together Victoria program.

