

# Stepping Out

- Children negotiating independent travel -

## Statement of Key Findings from Study

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The Stepping Out study aimed to increase our understanding of how children negotiate active and independent travel, and to find ways to support children's mobility as an important contributor to health and wellbeing. The study explored children's perspectives by walking and talking with them as they negotiated daily travel journeys, in addition to speaking with class groups, parents and teachers. The study worked with 48 children across three schools in the local government area of Moreland in Victoria, Australia during 2011 and 2012. The children in the study were aged 10-12 – a transitional age in social and educational terms, representing the shift from primary to secondary school.

There is a growing literature on children's physical mobility, particularly addressing factors that limit or reduce children's movement. Much less is known about the ways children contribute to negotiating their active and independent travel, especially in the Australian context. Further the discourse around child mobility tends to be approached through dichotomies of dependence-independence or active-passive. The findings of our research show that children's mobility is defined by inter-dependencies.

The study confirmed that the late stages of primary school are a critical period for developing children's confidence and independence to travel without their parents. This period helps prepare children for the transition to secondary school, and the common need to travel further from home using varied modes of transport. The research literature shows that a range of traffic safety measures, as well as school education and active travel programs are already in place, but our findings suggest there remain a number of further ways families, schools and communities are able to support children's development of mobile independence.

A range of shared characteristics were identified in child participants that were confident and able to travel in their neighbourhood without adult supervision. The research suggests these inter-dependent factors help to facilitate child travel, and they include:

- journeys made in groups with friends or relatives to provide companionship,
- travelling along busier routes and at popular times to provide visibility in public spaces,
- carrying a mobile phone to remain contactable and provide reciprocal sense of security,
- having progressed through a number of stages towards independent travel

The findings suggest that parents are able to help support children's development of independent travel through strategies that foster incremental progression over time, such as walking with children early on, then slowly releasing the tether to allow them to walk ahead, to walk with friends or siblings, practicing new routes together, setting rules about routes, having children carry a mobile phone, and finally allowing children to travel without adults present.

In addition, the findings suggest that schools and local governments may be able to assist in children's mobile development, not only by addressing the built environment, safety measures, or formal active travel programs, but also by helping to develop programs or services that support families, children and communities to organise more informal and local travelling collaborations or arrangements.