

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### How to support children to become independent as they grow

VicHealth is today publishing a practical guide to help parents to support children to safely travel and play outside independently as they grow.

The *How to help your kids get around safely on their own* guide - developed as part of VicHealth's commitment to encourage more Victorians to be physical active – follows a major three-year study which found children who were able to play and travel without an adult and those who walked or cycled to school were more likely to meet Australian physical activity guidelines. Just one in five Australian children is physically active for the recommended one hour each day.

“Children who are independent are more physically active,” says VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter. “Being active in childhood helps reduce the risk of serious health problems later in life including obesity, Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Independence also helps children to develop confidence and decision-making and coping skills which are important for dealing with life's ups and downs later in life.

“Every parent tries to do the best by their child – this guide is aimed at those parents who would like some tips for supporting their child's independence as they grow. It offers practical suggestions such as practicing the skills children need to travel and play safely.”

VicHealth commissioned researchers at La Trobe University and the Parenting Research Centre to examine if parental fear is a barrier to children's independence and physical activity to address a significant gap in the available evidence.

“Over the past three years, we held focus groups with 132 children and 12 parents across Victoria, surveyed 2,002 Victorian parents and hosted workshops for 47 professionals with interests in child health, parenting, physical activity, health promotion and planning,” says researcher Dr Sharinne Crawford from La Trobe University.

“We found parental fears about child safety influence parents' decisions to allow their child to travel or play outside independently as they grow. Factors influencing parents' decision-making around their child's independence included having confidence in their child's skills to travel safely in the neighbourhood, fears about strangers and other safety concerns and perceived attitudes and actions of other parents.”

In 2014, VicHealth released [preliminary findings](#) of the survey of 2,002 Victorian parents with children aged nine to 15. It found 36 per cent avoided situations where their child went out without an adult because they were fearful they will be approached by a stranger while 13 per cent were anxious about their child's safety when they were out somewhere familiar without an adult.”

#### Media Contact

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Ray Dunne, Acting Media Advisor T 03 9667 1319 E [rdunne@vichealth.vic.gov.au](mailto:rdunne@vichealth.vic.gov.au)

The survey also revealed:

- Parents living in metropolitan areas and parents of girls were more likely to have child safety fears – including general fear and fear relating to strangers.
- Boys were more likely to be allowed more freedom to travel or play outside without adult supervision – 39% of boys had trips to school unaccompanied by an adult compared with 33% of girls.
- Children living in rural and regional areas were more likely to be allowed to travel or play outside without adult supervision than those living in metropolitan areas - 40% had trips to school unaccompanied by an adult compared with 34% of those living in metropolitan areas.
- Children aged 11 to 13 who had more independence and those who walked or cycled to school were more likely to meet the recommended levels of physical activity.

The guide is published during VicHealth's Walk to School month which encourages kids to walk, ride or scoot to school. "Our research shows half of children in Victoria travel to school by car," says Ms Rechter. "Walking, cycling, scooting or taking public transport to school is a great way for kids to get their recommended one hour of physical activity each day. It's not too late to register – visit [www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au](http://www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au).

View the guide and research report at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/parental-fears](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/parental-fears).

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### **Why allowing children to get places on their own is so important**

Increased 'independent mobility' gives children the opportunity to:

- Develop self-confidence
- Play with friends, including making new friends
- Learn responsibility and independence
- Get to know the neighbourhood
- Learn coping skills, which is very important to build resilience, a key factor in children's mental wellbeing
- Get some exercise, including playing outdoors, which makes it easier for them to get the recommended one hour of physical activity a day.

### **What can parents do to support their child to become independent?**

Letting go is challenging but can be managed in stages:

- Try setting aside regular time to walk or ride with your child around the neighbourhood, to the shops or the park as a great, inexpensive family activity.
- Teach and reinforce road safety and navigation skills with your child by riding or walking around your neighbourhood
- Talk with neighbours about establishing buddy groups of older children who can walk or ride together without adults
- Drive just part of the way to school and drop your children 500m away so they can walk the remainder – or walk with them at a distance.
- Participate in VicHealth's Walk to School month which runs throughout October – schools can still register at [www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au](http://www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au).

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