



# VicHealth

LETTER

Issue No. 24 Summer 2005



## A Growing Concern

Children and Physical Activity  
The 'Bubble Wrap' Generation  
Families and Activity



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**O**ur sporting nation is rapidly turning into a nation of watchers. What we're seeing is an alarming trend developing. Our children have stopped being active. They are not running around our feet anymore. They are sitting by our side, taking up more space on the couch and spending more time doing it.

More than half of all Australian children aged five to 14 years are spending more time watching television and videos than in the school classroom.<sup>1</sup> This doesn't leave much time for homework, let alone physical activity. Even more worrying is evidence showing nearly one third of boys would prefer to watch TV than be physically active.<sup>2</sup> A sporting nation for how much longer?

According to a recent study, the average time per day spent in moderate to vigorous activity among children aged five to six years was 4.5 hours for boys and 4.1 hours for girls. Among children aged 10 to 12 years, the average time spent in moderate to vigorous activity was 2.4 hours for boys and two hours for girls.<sup>3</sup> And we suspect, particularly when we consider the evidence above, that it is a downward sloping trend that is gathering pace.

What is pushing kids in this direction? Sedentary entertainment options such as television, computers and electronic games are expanding in variety, popularity and being promoted vigorously. It's been stated that the average house in California has 13 remote controls. In the urban environment we have designed communities that work against, rather than for, physical activity—more cars, a perception of stranger danger, less corner shops to walk to, bigger houses with less space available to play outside, and streets that are deserted rather than vibrant. Parents feel 'socially trapped'<sup>4</sup> into driving children everywhere and economically trapped into working more often or longer hours. These are 'big' realities that public health advocates acknowledge as barriers to physical activity. So VicHealth's efforts are directed to finding innovative ways to reclaim time and make it easier for children to fill it up with physical activity that is either structured or, more importantly in many ways, unstructured. Take off the 'bubble wrap'. It is vital for future population health.

We know parents are concerned about their children's activity and are supportive of innovative responses to increase it. Two of VicHealth's most successful programs are increasing physical activity among children. More than 2000 Victorian primary school children are now walking to and from school as part of VicHealth's Walking School Bus™ Program, which began in 2001 with just 224 students. Buses are now operating in 192 schools and involve 70% of Victorian Local Government areas. It has evolved into a remarkable community program, reaping benefits that nobody anticipated three years ago when 14 schools decided to give the buses a go.

The OSHS (Out-of-School Hours Sports) Program is a phased-in, three-year pilot program, in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission, that began with 15 schools in Term 3 last year. It has grown to involve 71 State and Catholic primary schools and more than 950 children (see page 16).

These are good results from good programs. However, the evidence about physical activity and children is in the early development stage. We know, for instance, that boys are more active than girls, but we are not confident we know the reasons why. This is why we have devoted this VicHealth Letter edition to an issue that many people are concerned about. To provide a state of play.

In this VicHealth Letter we raise a number of questions. What do the leading researchers in the area think are the major issues? What does the latest research tell us about children and physical activity? What input can children have to influence their own environment and therefore their inclination to play and be active? What role can parents and families play? Can parents do anything positive on an individual level? How is VicHealth making a contribution?

It's a critical time. We must ensure this generation has every chance to be active.

**Dr Rob Moodie**  
Chief Executive Officer

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# Don't stop now

## *Finding ways for children to be active again*

**O**ne of VicHealth's major objectives is to increase participation in physical activity. Physical inactivity is ranked second only to smoking as the most important issue affecting our health.<sup>1</sup>

In Victoria, only 60% of men and 53% of women are sufficiently active to enjoy the health benefits of physical activity.<sup>2</sup> It's a pattern that starts with young people which is why the apparent decline in levels of physical activity among children remains so concerning.

Being overweight as a child can also increase the risk of high blood pressure, asthma, type 2 diabetes and musculoskeletal discomfort, as well as threatening potential social and psychological wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> An important way to reverse increasing levels of obesity<sup>4</sup> among young children is to increase their activity. Activity also has a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

However, despite a growing recognition in the community that a shift has taken place in relation to physical activity, most of the big questions remain unanswered. What is stopping some children from being physically active? What is compelling others to be highly active? What has driven the general decline? When is the decline occurring, for whom and at what age?

This means that much of the current investment is focused toward gathering evidence on children and their physical activity patterns. VicHealth is monitoring this activity, funding researchers who work in this area, working on ways to address barriers to physical activity, and exploring effective interventions.

Researchers and program developers are focusing on understanding areas where differences can be made. Schools, the family environment and the home, the urban landscape, sporting clubs and associations, and community activity are considered areas where potential changes that support physical activity among children can occur. Many of the settings are interconnected but the intent remains the same—to increase levels of physical activity among children.

### At School

Children starting school experience a significant dip in their activity levels. Deakin University's Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition (C-PAN) has found that within a few short years, between the ages of six and 10, children's activity levels dropped by half. A recent University of South Australia report, *Children and Sport*, advocated five ways schools might support higher levels of physical activity among children. It suggested remodelling

### Physical Activity Guidelines

**O**n 29 July 2004 Health Ministers endorsed and announced the new Australian Physical Activity Recommendations for Children and Youth.

1. Children and youth should participate in at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day.
2. Children and youth should not spend more than two hours per day using electronic media for entertainment (eg. computer games, internet, TV), particularly during daylight hours.<sup>5</sup>

### Are we meeting them?

Results from the CLASS study showed that 5-6 year olds and 10-12 year olds are meeting the minimum guidelines. However in the 10-12 age bracket the number of people achieving activity levels beyond the minimum drops off dramatically, particularly among girls.

A national monitoring system would assess whether these standards are being met.



the school environment, for example: staggering break times; increasing the amount of play equipment and adult supervision; up-skilling teachers and providing specialist PE teachers; integrating physical education into homework policy (for example calendars with daily 'fun' activities); maximising physical activity opportunities in out-of-school hours centres; and giving students and parents a voice to make schools active for children.

VicHealth Senior Research Fellow Dr Colin Bell is studying children's activity levels in the Western Victorian town of Colac. After baseline data showed that 28% of local children were not involved in any activity after school, a local after-school activity program conducted in 2003 added 2500 active hours to children's activity levels. The Colac After-School Hours Sports Program is one idea reaching many more people as it receives government support. The combined VicHealth/Australian Sports Commission Out-of-School Hours Sports Program, a Victorian pilot, became the catalyst for the federally-funded, national Active After School Communities initiative that is to be rolled out in 2005.

## In the Family Environment

The family environment is another critical variable determining levels of activity. Deakin University's Children's Leisure Activities Study (CLASS) examined the relationship between children's physical activity levels, sedentary behaviour and the family environment. It found that the family environment can either be highly supportive of physical activity or discourage activity by promoting sedentary behaviour. It showed that self-efficacy, enjoyment of physical activity, time spent outdoors, seasonal variation, parental support and positive expectations and beliefs about the outcomes of physical activity were important predictors of children's physical activity.<sup>6</sup>

Other studies reinforce the CLASS findings that lack of time, changing work patterns and the local environment affect parents' ability to

promote physical activity. Paul Tranter discusses the concept of 'social traps' (see page 21) inhibiting parent's willingness to break out of the mould and encourage their child to walk or cycle to school, or engage in free play around the home or on the streets. Social changes leading to, for example, the increased prevalence and use of the car have been perpetuated by individual perceptions. Parents not only consider it too dangerous to let their children roam, but increasingly believe it is socially unacceptable and 'bad' parenting to expose their children to road traffic risks or perceptions about stranger danger.<sup>7</sup>

## Doing Without Thinking

The Walking School Bus™ program, which has expanded rapidly, aims to tackle this social trend. As more children become involved, traffic danger around schools decreases and an upward spiralling effect on levels of activity can occur. Deakin University's Dr Anna Timperio says that a parent's perceptions generally painted a worse picture than their children about the dangers of being active in their local neighbourhood. However, she admits that in order to increase the number of children walking or cycling to local destinations there is a need to increase lights and crossings, as well as to address perceptions of road safety. VicHealth certainly acknowledges the issue as real and that concerns need to be addressed in a realistic and practical manner. VicHealth recently funded the Port Phillip City Council's Greenlight project to examine the safety of road crossings to ensure the local Walking School Bus™ could operate safely (see page 21).

The urban environment is also a critical factor in how kids play. The European Commission recognised this recently with their *Kids on the Move* report which showed that the type, quality and diversity of children's play is directly related to the type, quality and diversity of the neighbourhood environment.<sup>9</sup> UNESCO's *Growing Up in Cities* project has emphasised that urban

### Did you know?

**T**here is a massive drop in activity levels recorded for 5-6 year olds compared to 10-12 year olds. The older age group engage in moderate or vigorous physical activity for nearly half as much time as younger children. It doesn't get any better either. The decline continues as people get older.<sup>8</sup>

Although experts don't really know why this happens they suggest intervention very early on may be necessary—not just in schools but to support families to be more active.

planners need to take into account a child's view of the world and set up participatory processes to ensure developments are in accord with a child's wishes—from the ground up, rather than top down.<sup>10</sup> The issues are plentiful: making parks accessible, safe and useful; creating play areas that aren't prescribed; making it safe for children to be in the open or on the streets; and building houses that leave room for children to play outside. (see page 14).

## Screen Time

Of course, one of the biggest factors affecting the modern habits and play of children is the revolution in and availability of sedentary entertainment options—televisions, computers, video games. The causal relationship between high levels of screen time and low levels of physical activity is blurred. Some children can in fact combine high levels of screen time with high levels of physical activity.<sup>11</sup> Researchers are divided as to the importance of screen time as a determinant in predicting levels of activity (see pages 8-13). However there is no doubt all consider less screen time would have a positive effect on a child's health.

It's a fine balance we're walking—keeping the freedom of childhood alive, while ensuring that lifestyles are conducive to good health both now and in the future. It's a dilemma many parents would be familiar with anyway. We can't wait for all the stars to align. Research activity is critical, but so is putting forward the right interventions and ideas to create change now so that we don't lose a generation. ■

## It's an emerging area of research – what might help...

- National Monitoring Guidelines that determine what is influencing physical activity and what are the patterns of physical activity.
- Systematic and broad ranging policy analysis. How do policies over a range of areas - transportation, housing, workforce, health - affect physical activity?
- Policy makers should project forwards rather than wanting to talk about how it was in the past. The challenge is to understand where we are heading in terms of demands on people's time, work patterns, family environments, forms of entertainment available, urban design and develop coherent policies to make physical activity part of modern living rather than trying to turn the clock back.

## It's Not Just About Obesity

**T**here are a range of health reasons why it is important for children to be physically active. Physically active children have better cardiovascular health, increased bone density, and are leaner. Physical activity can also reduce stress and anxiety.<sup>12</sup>



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# One Town makes a Change



*A Research project is collaborating with health, community and sporting agencies, and local government in Colac, on community-based interventions to help prevent childhood obesity. By VicHealth Senior Research Fellow Dr Colin Bell.*

**T**he average day for children living in Colac, a Western Victorian town not far from Geelong, is increasingly being filled with physical activity options.

For the past two years the *Be Active Eat Well* Project has been helping children, parents and teachers find ways to build more activity into children's days. Ask a child in Colac what play is all about and he or she will be likely to answer: "Moving around and having fun". Play, in their eyes, is skipping, jumping, walking, painting, acting and fishing. It is marbles, chase, hopscotch and swings. Fun, active, varied.

He or she will also tell you what is not play: watching television. Our intervention has shown that children quickly lose interest in television and other sedentary behaviour when there are other, more exciting, things to do. The *Be Active Eat Well* team has recognised that change doesn't automatically happen. Children need options, and parents and teachers need support in providing these alternatives. We've marketed physical activity to the children (and parents) through the media, festivals and school newsletters; reorientated existing services in the town; and provided new resources to make it easier for Colac children to get on the move.

Local baseline evaluation data showed that almost 60% of children living within 1.5 km of school travelled to school by car. Starting a Walking School Bus™ was an obvious way to make it easier for children to walk to school. The local shire received funding from VicHealth to do this and one Walking School Bus™ is now operating. More are planned.

Baseline data also showed 28% of children were not involved in organised games, sports or dance outside school hours. Parents expressed a need for activities for their children immediately after school. To fill this gap, schools allowed local sports clubs to use their grounds,

with the sports clubs providing an after-school activity program where children could be active and try a new sport at a very low cost. Occurring at 4pm, a time-slot that fitted well with parents, more than 2500 hours of total physical activity time was spent in this program in 2003. This represents 2500 hours that Colac children did not spend watching television.

To market these activities and sell the "Be Active" message to the whole Colac community, the *Be Active Eat Well* project was the major sponsor of the annual street parade and festival, the 2004 Kana Festival. Each float in the parade had a 'Be Active, Eat Well' theme and local children spent weeks painting fruit and designing 'healthy costumes'. *Be Active Eat Well* colouring competition entries were also on display. Bikes, dance, walking and gymnastics were key features of the parade and those watching the parade were treated to free fruit.



Other initiatives being developed in Colac include times of supervised play for children at local playgrounds and an active arts program where children paint pictures for display on a walkway around a portion of Lake Colac.

It can be said that such changes are relatively easy in a small country town compared to other places like Geelong or metropolitan Melbourne. To some extent this is true. Colac does have plenty of parks and open spaces. Only 17% of children did not have at least one park or open space to play in within 10 minutes walk of their home. It is also a very safe community, with parents reporting low risks from strangers, bullying and environmental hazards. Also, as people increasingly take to walking, traffic hazards will diminish. However, the point is not that Colac had a head start, but rather that they are turning the resources they have into opportunities for children to be physically active. That is possible anywhere. ■

# The 'Bubble Wrap' Generation

*Many forces are working against children being physically active. However five leading researchers are working hard to find ways to reverse the trend.*

**By Rosie Hoban**

Let's assume children are less physically active now than they were 20 years ago. We can only make an informed guess because there is insufficient data series on changes in physical activity, and no agreement on appropriate levels of physical activity, though a great body of work is currently underway in Australia and internationally.

The study of inactivity and obesity in children is in its embryonic stages, but associated anecdotal and empirical evidence exists to support the assumption that physical activity among Australian children is declining. We know that:

- 25% of children are overweight or obese, and between 1985 and 1995 children's body mass index increased by 0.8% per year. At this rate by 2020, 50% of children will be overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>
- 70% of children aged seven to eight-years-old are driven to school. In the 1970s, 80% of children walked to school.<sup>2</sup>
- Urban development and technological innovations are reducing a child's opportunity to be active.
- Participation in organised sport has dropped since 1985 from an average of two sports to none for girls, and from three sports to one for boys.<sup>3</sup>

Physical inactivity is not just a childhood malaise. It is a social malaise that has impacted on adults as well as children, with 60% of Australian adults now overweight or obese. Most researchers agree on at least four socio-cultural changes that have influenced a child's level of physical activity—the increasing number of families with both parents working; increased density in our urban areas; the rapid uptake of screen-based technology; and fear of the streets and local neighbourhood. They also warn that no one factor can be looked at in isolation.

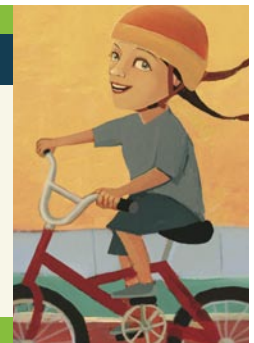
## The Critical Window

Undoubtedly the critical time for children is the two-hour window after school between 4pm and 6pm. This is when many children of working parents come home to an empty house and are told to stay inside and lock the doors. They have unfettered access to food and no access to the streets or their neighbourhood for free and spontaneous play. They are left with their backyard and even that is under threat. According to Dr Tim Olds, Director of

### Winds of Change

#### The important issues changing childhood activity levels

- The increasing number of families with both parents working.
- Increased urban density and suburbanisation.
- The rapid uptake of screen-based technology.
- Fear of the streets and local neighbourhood.



the Centre for Applied Anthropometry at the University of South Australia, the average Australian house block has shrunk by 15% in the past decade, but the average house size has increased by 15%. The backyard, where balls have been kicked and thrown for decades, is being squeezed out of existence.

But the clock can't be turned back to when mum was always at home to meet the children after school. Dr Michael Booth, an NHMRC Senior Research Fellow at the University of Sydney's Centre for Research into Adolescents' Health, believes solutions and successful interventions require a turning forward of the clock. "We need to look for more flexible workplaces where parents stagger their knock off times and someone is home at 3.30pm after school," he says. "The benefits to kids of having a parent home are enormous. They walk in and can dump their emotional stuff on you. Lots of interesting and





**CONSISTENT:** Girls are less active than boys at all ages.

challenging things go on at school and they can come home and talk about it.”

### ‘Stranger Danger’ and Cars

Dr Booth says children are prevented from walking to school and are kept off the streets after school because of ‘stranger danger’ and cars. But he has seen no evidence that shows our streets are any less safe, in terms of ‘stranger danger’, than they were 40 years ago.

“We have a very high rate of car ownership and very few children walk or cycle to school. They are driven. It is a catch-22 because parents are afraid of letting their children walk anywhere because of the fear of traffic and other safety issues, so they drive them, which causes an increase of cars on the road, which makes it less safe to walk or ride,” Dr Booth says. “When we were kids you came home from school, raced outside and came home when the street lights were turned on. Now, some people see free play as a waste of time. But apart from the physical benefits of play, it is very important for a child’s social development and communication. It is a place to learn about sharing through team sports and games that go on in a street. It also helps children develop creative and lateral thinking and they learn to manipulate the environment they live in. It is also important for the development of fine and gross motor skills and gives children a sense of how their body works.”

Jeff Walkley, Associate

Professor and Leader of RMIT University’s Division of Exercise Sciences, says this fear has developed over the past 40 years and that parent-school communities need to think of creative ways to allay fears. One example of this exists in some American schools where parents are phoned by an automated computer system and alerted of their child’s absence within minutes of the morning roll call being completed.

The Walking School Bus™ currently involves 70% of Victorian councils, but still only captures a relatively small number of children. Prof. Walkley applauds its development to date, but questions its long-term viability because of its reliance on volunteers and funding from VicHealth. VicHealth sees the Walking School Bus™ as a critical bridging the gap between no walking and walking unaided (see page 20).

### Screening Calls

There is little argument about the importance of physical activity, but the influence of factors such as television and other screen-based activities is unknown, or at least there is little agreement.

#### Turn off that Telly. Why?

- Critical window between 4pm and 6pm when children could be outside playing.
- Children miss out on development if they have reduced free play.
- Children can miss out on sleep crucial for performance at school.



Dr Booth says there is no evidence to suggest children are watching more television now than they did 40 years ago. He believes it is one issue in the debate where many assumptions are made and that public health agencies run the risk of developing inappropriate interventions. The average boy currently watches three hours television a day and girls about 2.5 hours a day, and there is no evidence to suggest that if they stopped watching, that they would replace the screen-based activity with a physical activity. After dinner television viewing is unlikely to compete with the critical after school time where physical activity is most likely to occur.

“But as a health professional I think that watching this much television means that children are still missing out on so many things that enhance the quality of their lives,” Dr Booth says.

Dr Olds says that while evidence about increased television viewing may not exist, there is now additional media available such as computer games, and also more homes have television than in the 1960s, so the total

*“The problem with television is that it has pulled our children in from outside and away from free play.”*

amount of television watched has almost certainly increased. He agrees that watching television is not necessarily the flipside of physical activity, though this view has taken hold. In his recently published Children and Sport study, Dr Olds identified a group of children he called ‘techno-actives’ who combine high screen time and high sports participation. But like Dr Booth, he would like to see screen time reduced because it is an isolating activity and takes children away from necessary sleep time at night, which can lead to poor performance in school.

The ‘turn off the telly’ camp is strong and gaining momentum. Dr Colin Bell, a Senior Research Fellow at Deakin University in Geelong, believes television watching has played a big part in the decline of physical activity.

“We have to encourage less television watching and create an environment where that is possible,” Dr Bell says.

“The problem with television is that it has pulled our children in from outside and away from free play. Television has become very difficult to avoid, because they are bigger and louder and in more rooms and wherever there is a television, the chairs are pointed in that direction.



LINK: Building a healthy active Australia – <http://www.healthyactive.gov.au>

Everything in the environment encourages watching of television and discourages physically active alternatives.”

The latest figures from the Barwon South Western region of Victoria reveals that 16% of Australian children have a television in their bedroom. The figures reveal that almost 40% of parents in households with a television had no rules governing what the children watched or for how long they watched it. Also, 46% of families eat their evening meal in front of the television, meaning a child can be sedentary from 4pm right through until near bedtime. Interestingly, a research study of physical activity and children conducted for the South Australian Department of Human Services did not consider television watching and computer games as barriers to physical activity.

Dr Bell, a VicHealth Research Fellow, says physically inactive children are not just at risk of becoming overweight. Once overweight they are at risk of a range of health issues including diabetes, early onset of puberty, asthma, non-alcoholic steato-hepatosis (NASH) and flat footedness. If a child is obese he/she is likely to be obese as an adult. They will almost certainly develop health problems in adulthood and cut an average of seven years off their life compared to adults in a healthy weight range.



**DROP OFF:** Children's activity levels fall by half between the ages of five to 10.

Television mealtimes was a trend noted by Professor David Crawford in Deakin University's Children's Leisure Activities Study (CLASS), which also found that 15% of families do not like this time because it is when there are the most fights. He says the use of television as respite for parents and babysitting of children illustrates the complexities of peoples' lives and more research is needed to understand this area fully.

## Health Issues

Dr Bell says the physical problems associated with overweight, obesity and physical inactivity are known, though the causal pathways of all the illnesses are not fully understood. However, the psychological impact of obesity is one of the issues we know the least about. Research done in the United States on the affects of stigmatisation of 'fat kids' paints a worsening picture. This stigmatisation may lead to social isolation, self-esteem problems and body image issues. "I would be surprised if these problems did not continue into adulthood. There is already some evidence that obese adults are discriminated against by employers and health professionals, creating a vicious cycle," Dr Bell says.

### What can parents do to help?

- Model being physically active.
- Create opportunities to walk as a family.
- Have rules about TV, computer use.
- Don't have TVs in children's bedrooms.
- Encourage children to spend time outside.
- Support their sporting interests.
- Advocate for change at school and elsewhere for policies around food and activity.

List courtesy: Professor David Crawford.

## Turning the Tide

While research into physical inactivity in children is going on worldwide, several Australian academics are critical of the approach, which they say is piecemeal and unlikely to turn the tide. Prof. Crawford believes many research projects and interventions rely on three-year funding cycles and are often

only resourced to run a pilot project or demonstration.

"The challenge for us in public health is to get the population swimming against the tide. We need to arrest the decline in physical activity before we can think of turning it around," Prof. Crawford says.

"Doing interventions and developing programs in this area is very challenging. But as well as research to help us better understand the causes and influences, we need a policy analysis of influencing factors. For example we need to find out if our urban designs are working against physical activity, where services are located and how will people get to them. We have to better understand people and the places they live in. Are we developing neighbourhoods where people are out and about? At the same time systems must be set up which will allow for national uniform monitoring systems."

There is a sense of pessimism about the declining levels of activity and increasing levels of obesity among children. Dr Olds sees no signs for optimism and believes the trends

in society and technological developments will lead to further declines in physical activity.

He is convinced things will deteriorate further for the following reasons:

- Society produces information and not things. A child doesn't need to walk to the library because they access information on the internet. Children do not even get up to change the channel on the TV because they have a remote. The average Californian home has 13 remotes. On-line shopping is replacing walking to the shops.
- Women are now having fewer children (3.1 in the 1960s and 1.7 now) and so family needs, particularly those of children, will have less influence on planning issues such as the provision of parks. We will have an environment less adapted to children.
- Suburbanisation has created the worst possible environment for children to move around in because there are long distances to shops and other services. The corner shop is disappearing from the streetscape and is being replaced by shopping centres.
- All technology is now geared towards labour saving devices and decreased energy use. They are tiny

reductions in energy use, but they add up. This is a giant social trend and to try and reverse this is to reverse economic growth and it will not happen.

Prof. Walkley isn't as pessimistic, but thinks it will take at least 50 years to turn the problem around. He likens the physical activity battle to that faced by anti-tobacco lobbyists in the 1950s. Cigarette smoking, once promoted as safe and socially desirable, is now banned in most public places in Australia. Recently there were suggestions that cigarette companies should contribute to health care costs of tobacco-related illnesses.

Prof. Walkley, who teaches two undergraduate courses to primary and secondary physical education teachers and those wanting to teach human movement in a non-school setting, agrees that most interventions are piecemeal and will not have the sort of momentum that drove the tobacco changes. That, he says, can only come from a top-down, bi-partisan political push that influences many sectors.

"There was a massive amount of money made from cigarettes and the same is true of food, goods and services that currently reduce our levels of activity. So the push will have to come from the very top," he says.

## Research

Prof. Crawford and his colleagues are involved in one of the largest studies in the world involving 1200 families who participated in the CLASS project. Children from these families will be tracked three years after the initial survey and then every two years after that, up to the age of 17 years. The study launched in December, examines changes in physical activity and obesity and will provide a detailed picture of how factors in the family have influenced change, as well as considering the role of the local neighbourhood as a source of influence.



## A selection of key findings from the CLASS study

- A higher proportion of children living in the western suburbs of Melbourne were overweight or obese.
- Regardless of their age boys were consistently more active than girls.
- Boys spent significantly more time outside than girls.
- The older children were only half as active as the younger children.
- Three of the most prevalent physical activities, sports class, physical education and playground activities were performed at school.

- Walking or cycling to school, particularly on a regular basis, was uncommon among the children.
- The key barriers that influenced children's walking or cycling in their local neighbourhood were concerns about traffic and safety issues related to crossing roads.
- Children living in houses or flats on small blocks of land were less active than other children.
- Stranger danger and road safety were the most significant barriers for parents of children in both age categories.

- On average children were spending a lot of time being sedentary, with most of this time being spent on screen based activities.
- Children living in houses with more sedentary options spent more time being sedentary and had higher average body mass index.
- Greater than one-third of households had more than three TVs and more than one-third of older children had a TV in their bedroom.

**All findings taken from:** Salmon J, Telford A, Crawford D. CLASS Study (Summary Report) Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research, Deakin University, July 2004.

Prof. Walkley wants to see environmental and structural changes made that will force behavioural change. One example would be the mandatory inclusion of bike parking space and change rooms in all new office building plans.

Dr Olds agrees that change needs to come from the top and that it will require a radical solution. Forty years ago a suggestion that smoking would be banned in many social settings would have been considered extreme.

That same radical approach is needed to halt the decline of physical activity.

Dr Bell believes the changed attitude to smoking was fostered because environmental changes supported behavioural change. "It became easier to quit

smoking when there was nowhere you could go to smoke and when the prices went up."

Systemic change needs to include schools, which most academics believe are vital areas for change. Dr Olds says better resourced schools could introduce some creative practices to increase physical activity, such as staggering timetables so that physical education teachers began at 10am and stayed at school running sports programs until 5pm. In Norway children do 3.5 hours physical activity each day. Several studies have found even very high levels of physical activity to enhance, not hinder, their academic performance. It's difficult to believe that the current climate is open to such change, particularly in Victoria where many public health practitioners fear physical education is being squeezed out of the curriculum.

We can get a good idea of the future impact of decline in physical activity by looking at the past, according to Dr Olds. "Imagine yourself as a 12-year-old standing beside your 12-year-old son or daughter as they are now," he says. "They would weigh about seven kilograms more than you did at their age, have a waist girth 10 centimetres greater, and have 25% more subcutaneous fat. If you were to race them four times around a 400 metre oval, you would probably finish almost one lap ahead of them."

"But I just don't think there is the political will at the moment to bring about the necessary change," he says. ■

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## Public Liability

Extensive work has been done in all jurisdictions to address the issue of public liability insurance. Reform of liability insurance law in Australia released by the Commonwealth in February 2004 acknowledged that a response was needed. High premiums were effecting sporting and recreational events and the capacity to involve volunteers in local activity was justifiably creating serious community concern.

### So what's the situation now?

It is still possible for many of the activities essential to community life, such as sport and walking school buses to continue, albeit with a greater focus on preparation and risk assessment.

Significant reforms are taking place to deal with the issue. For instance in Victoria Part 9 of the *Wrongs and Other Acts (Public Liability Insurance Reform) Act 2002* confers protection on volunteers doing work for community organisations from civil liability for acts or omissions done in good faith.<sup>1</sup>

VicHealth recently prepared a background paper (available at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)) summarising work that had been undertaken in the area. VicHealth is interested in keeping abreast of issues relating to public liability insurance and playing an advocacy role in partnership with the many key players already involved in public liability reform or monitoring.

In the Club Support and Risk Management sections of its website, VicSport has prepared information, fact sheets and people to contact in order for organisations to receive advice and assistance.

<http://www.vicsport.asn.au/>

The Municipal Association of Victoria and Our Community provide a range of general information on insurance products and risk management [http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/insurance/insurance\\_main.jsp](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/insurance/insurance_main.jsp)

[www.communityinsurance.com.au](http://www.communityinsurance.com.au)

VicHealth has trademarked the Walking School Bus™ to ensure that minimum safety standards and care are in place. One of the minimum requirements is that all volunteers are covered by appropriate insurance.

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**LISTEN:** Children can point adults in the right direction if we're prepared to listen.

# Play up now

*Asking the children what they want may be the way to find answers.*

*By Karen Coghlan.*

**A**s more and more children live in cities where the opportunities for unregulated spontaneous play are being eroded, researchers, planners and governments are examining how to create modern environments in which children can live and play. The leaders in this field are taking an innovative approach to find the right answers. They're consulting with children.

The UNESCO *Growing Up in Cities* project is a world-wide project taking a child's eye view of the world in order to evaluate urban environments and improve living conditions. Through its work with children and youth, the project has identified a list of child-generated indicators of quality of life—provision for basic needs, social integration, safety and free movement, peer gathering places and safe green spaces—which have been used as a foundation for policies and initiatives aimed at building child-friendly cities.

According to Associate Professor Karen Malone, from the School of Education at RMIT and a recognised local expert in this area, the acknowledgement and application of children's views is one significant outcome of the *Growing Up in Cities* project, as children's views on community problems and resources are often quite different from those of adults.

Assoc. Prof. Malone says recent research shows that children and youth around the world are able to articulate their needs clearly, saying they want:

- Clean water and enough food to eat.
- Friends and family who love and care for them.
- To be healthy and have the space to learn, develop and play.
- To participate in community life and be valued.
- They want to collaborate with adults to make the world a better place for all.
- Peace and safety from threats of violence.
- Access to clean environment where they can connect with nature.
- To be listened to and their views taken seriously.

It is a strategic approach that might challenge preconceived ideas but one that has a better chance of creating sustainable change. Implementing the knowledge gained from these exchanges however takes a significant political and social commitment.

Examples are starting to emerge however. UNICEF has developed a Child Friendly City initiative in an attempt to enact and institutionalise child-friendly policies in a top down approach. A child-friendly city is one that acknowledges and implements the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensuring that priority is given to children and that they are involved in decision-making.

Assoc. Prof. Malone says the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Secretariat has developed a toolkit to support

LINK: UNICEF Child Friendly Cities project – <http://www.childfriendlycities.org/>

cities to work toward achieving child-friendly status. Building blocks include:

- Children's participation
- A child-friendly legal framework
- A city-wide children's rights strategy
- A children's rights unit or coordinating mechanism
- Child impact assessment and evaluation

In Italy, the government has gone even further, creating La Citta Dei Bambini (Children's City)—a countrywide initiative through which the government is able to prioritise the needs of children. Funding for the program is enshrined in law and there are now 57 cities in Italy that constitute La Citta Dei Bambini. In essence, both the government and

the local community take responsibility for the wellbeing of children in finite ways, where everything from outdoor spaces to signage is designed with children in mind.

A recent Australian report found that the notion of play had a diverse range of meanings for children but the common elements were friends, fun and fairness.<sup>1</sup> ■

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## Connect the spots

**N**ew research mapping children's movements through their neighbourhoods, including their sites of play, has found that 10% of children don't go anywhere without an adult while 14% of children go to five or more places on their own.

Dr Jo Salmon and her colleagues, from the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition (C-PAN) Research at Deakin University, are conducting a study on children's free play and independent mobility, and relationships with the built and open environment. They interviewed 212 grade 3-6 children attending Melbourne primary schools from high, mid and low socio-economic status areas and 80 of their parents to find out where children go to play, who they go with and how they get there.

"We found that children didn't usually roam more than one kilometre from home," Dr Salmon says. "Parks and recreational areas were frequent destinations; however, proximity wasn't the deciding factor. Children would travel further to a playground they perceived to be better."

Further, the existence of recreational spaces close to home did not ensure accessibility. Both parents and children in low socio-economic status (SES) areas reported that many nearby parks and outdoor spaces were unsafe. Often the other users of these spaces—groups of adolescents, people under the influence of drugs or alcohol—were perceived as a threat.

Their own backyards, friends' homes and parks were the main sites of independent play for children, with boys playing at 2.3 different places and girls 2.8 different places per week. However, children who lived in cul-de-sacs were more likely to play in the street.

In other research—the Children Living in Active



Neighbourhoods (CLAN) Study—lecturer Dr Anna Timperio used sophisticated mapping software (geo-spatial technology, known as GIS) to track children's journeys from home to school. This work is part of a larger study examining longitudinal changes in children's physical activity.

#### Key findings among 10-12 year-old children included:

- Children were 70% less likely to walk or cycle to school if they needed to cross a major intersection—highway, freeway or arterial road.
- Children were 90% less likely to walk or cycle to school if they lived more than 800 metres from school.
- If their parents perceived that there were no lights or crossings for their child to use, children were 50% less likely to walk or cycle to school.
- If their parents perceived that there were few other children in their neighbourhood, children were 40% less likely to walk or cycle to school.
- 42% of children had to cross a major intersection in order to get to school.

The objective data obtained from the mapping exercise generally supported what parents and children were reporting regarding their concerns about traffic and the perceived barriers to travelling to school on foot or by bike.

"This research shows that urban designers should consider the needs of children when designing or redesigning urban areas," Dr Timperio says. "And if we can't eradicate barriers to their movement through planning, we need to skill up children to negotiate the obstacles, such as major intersections, that are part of their environment."

# Bye the book

*The Out-of-School Hours Sports Program has expanded as children remain active between 4-6pm. By Rosie Hoban.*

**O**ut-of-School Hours Care (OSHC) coordinator Scott Walker has convinced hundreds of primary school children to be physically active without them realising it. He takes a traditional sport, plays around with the rules, adds some fun moves, and creates a game for children who have never previously been interested or confident in being active. Suddenly, 30 children from Carlton Gardens Primary School are on the field, chasing each other with scrunched up paper balls. They run, jump, and leap into the air in a game called Asteroids. Based on this experience, some of those same children may go on to join their local football, soccer or gymnastics club.

Fun is the hallmark of the games that Walker runs during his out of school hours and holiday programs. The introduction of the Out-of-School Hours Sports (OSHS) Program last year

Victoria work with the OSHC Program staff to deliver the program and provide the necessary equipment during a 10-week session.

Megan Kerr, OSHC Program coordinator at VicHealth, says research shows the best predictor of fitness and obesity is the use of after school time. Providing children with a positive, safe, nurturing and healthy sporting experience is one of the key outcomes of the program, as is increased junior membership in local clubs. However, participation in physical activity, whether that be in a club or at the OSHC program, is the ideal result.

“We know that lifelong involvement in a club is beneficial for physical and emotional wellbeing because it not only helps to maintain a level of physical activity, but it also connects people to others in their community,” Kerr says.

*“In some cases we had to start by acquainting the children with the school's monkey bars that they had never felt confident enough to play on.”*



has also given him the chance to introduce children to a range of sports such as gymnastics and baseball. The OSHS Program, a joint initiative of VicHealth and the Australian Sports Commission, provides children attending OSHC in Victoria with the opportunity to participate in structured sporting experiences.

The OSHS Program is a phased-in, three-year pilot program that began with 15 schools in term 3 in 2003. It has grown to involve 71 State and Catholic primary schools and more than 950 children. Eighteen Victorian sporting associations including Badminton Victoria, Victorian Baseball Association, Gymnastics Victoria and Tennis

“For some children, this program provides the only exposure to organised sport out of school hours.”

Christine Davidson, development manager with Gymnastics Victoria, is already seeing the spin-off of the OSHS Program for Victorian clubs. Anecdotal evidence indicates children are taking up membership with local gymnastic clubs, and two OSHC programs have already retained gymnastics coaches to run programs beyond the pilot.

Gymnastics Victoria trainers, including Davidson, have worked with OSHC Program coordinators and more than 150 children from seven schools within Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and metropolitan Melbourne. Participation in the program has



also encouraged Gymnastics Victoria, which represents 109 clubs, to review and design a more creative and flexible junior development program.

"We went into the program with a set plan, but we soon realised that after school care groups vary enormously," Davidson says. "Some have a strong sport focus and some are scared at the mention of a forward roll. In some cases we had to start by acquainting the children with the school's monkey bars that they had never felt confident enough to play on.

"The image of Olympic-standard gymnasts is a barrier for many children and OSHC coordinators. Through OSHS we have opened up gymnastics to a lot of children and helped them see the relevance of balance and coordination in other sports. One of the first things we teach them is how to fall. Suddenly the young boys playing football become interested in gymnastics. The children develop increased spatial awareness, mobility and self-confidence whilst participating in gymnastics."

Walker and Davidson hope the skills learned by OSHC coordinators through the pilot can be sustained long-term



**CRITICAL TIME:** On the bell, start to play.

and they are looking forward to the Commonwealth's \$90 million, four-year Active After School Communities Program, which has grown out of the OSHS Program. Schools participating in this program, starting mid 2005, will nominate their sport and work with a local club or association to deliver it to any interested children after school, including those children attending the school's OSHC program. ■

## More fun, no finals for growing sports

**S**port is facing up to many of the barriers that stop people from being physically active: transport, cost, time, lack of skills and club environments are just a few.

However those addressing the issue of participation by children are being creative to keep people in the sport. Once you've got a participant at the club the emphasis must turn to keeping them involved: from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. It's too hard to gain a member to then lose them. One of the more interesting recent developments designed to keep young people involved is a 'play for the moment' philosophy. Junior competitions in sports such as netball, lacrosse, softball and football are run without ladders, finals, reported scores, personal bests or best players. It creates an environment conducive to focusing only on the now. It's a mindset weekend golfers can only dream about.

It might seem strange to those reared on the notion of the ladder and finals but interestingly enough the children are able to accept it quickly—often the parents provide the greater resistance to the idea.

Those involved in sports administration say this change has practical and psychological effects. Spectator behaviour changes as parents put less pressure on their offspring to perform and gain some imagined prestige for themselves or their club.

Clubs no longer leave children disillusioned at finals time by

abandoning the principle of equal time for each player when premierships are at stake.

Involvement in the activity, not the result becomes the focus.

Andrew Bailey, Sport Development Officer from the Victoria Softball Association, says it's important that sports are prepared to acknowledge the evidence rather than doing things just because that's the way they have always happened. "Kids involved in junior sport need to learn to enjoy sport before they get older and get involved in competitions. Not having finals and not keeping score allows them to treat their sport as fun not as win at all costs," he says.

Observers say it doesn't mean children don't learn to win or lose well through sport. Scores are kept on the day but not recorded or used to create ladders. "Kids learn to say that the other side was better on the day, but you don't have to have all the other measures in place to reinforce that," says Shelley Maher, senior project officer in VicHealth's Physical Activity Unit.

Other more subtle shifts are taking place to maintain participation. The number of games children play in a day is limited. Sports are focusing on making sure age ranges at which teams are created is small so that skills, sizes and attitudes are similar and games remain competitive.

It is early days but those who treat young people well and look after their future will be the growing sports of tomorrow.

Time to



Move

*Families and Physical Activity*

**P**arents, friends—even the family dog—are all factors that may influence a child’s participation in physical activity, according to research from the C-PAN at Deakin University.

Identifying positive influences is crucial, as within a few short years between the ages of six and 10, children’s levels of activity drop by half, findings from C-PAN’s Children’s Leisure Activities Study (CLASS) have shown.

About 1200 Melbourne children aged five to six and 10 to 12 and their families were involved in the study that examined the influence of the family and social environment on children’s levels of physical activity.

Melbourne children from areas of both high and low socio-economic status were recruited for the study, which used a combination of objective measures, including ‘activity monitors’, to assess children’s levels of physical activity, as well as reports from parents and children.

“In general, we found that children who enjoyed being active were more likely to be active,” Dr Jo Salmon, a VicHealth Research Fellow working at Deakin University says. “Parents and friends, particularly friends who lived in the same neighbourhood, also emerged as strong influences.”

If parents encouraged their children to participate in sport or drove them to activities, they were more likely to be active, the study found. At a more subtle level, parental attitudes about their neighbourhood and their perceptions about road safety, in particular, also influenced whether or not their children were active. And the more active the parent, the more active the child, at least in the early years.

“Mothers who were more active tended to have children who were more active, although the same relationship was not observed for fathers,” says Dr Salmon.

Dr Anna Timperio, also from C-PAN, who examined parents’ and children’s perceptions of the neighbourhood—traffic density, road safety, strangers, sporting facilities and public transport—says that parents generally perceived their neighbourhoods to be more dangerous than their 10 to 12 year-old children perceived them to be.

“Children were not as concerned as their parents about these issues and they tended to underestimate their parents’ level of concern,” she says. “However, when we look at children’s movements within their neighbourhood, parental attitudes were more influential.”

Dr Timperio says that in order to increase children’s walking or cycling to local destinations there is a need to increase lights and crossings, as well as to address perceptions of road safety.

Despite safety concerns, children who had friends in the

### The Nepean Study

**T**he Nepean Study, a collaborative study between C-PAN and the Westmead Hospital in Sydney, which is following a cohort of children born in 1989/90, showed that a combination of individual, family, social and environmental factors influenced young people’s levels of physical activity.

Friends who lived locally emerged as a key indicator of activity. The influence of peers manifested in a number of ways. If their friends were active, and if they were body conscious, boys were more likely to be active. The presence of local sites, parks and recreation grounds where young people could go with friends was also important.

“Some evidence suggests that the parents of younger children are not happy with adolescents using the same spaces,” Dr Salmon says. “It may be that adolescents need spaces of their own.”

neighbourhood got out and about in the local area and were among the most active.

“With friends living nearby, children have more opportunities to get out of the house and play,” Dr Salmon says. “Walking to school is also more likely as the children can walk together and parents feel more reassured about their safety.”

Dr Salmon says that incidental exercise is just as important as formal physical activity and walking to school every day is a great form of incidental activity that may lay the foundations for an active lifestyle.

“We found that children who walk or cycle to school tend to be more active in general,” she says.

By encouraging their children’s friendships and active play in the neighbourhood, parents can greatly increase their child’s level of activity, she says. This is especially important as sedentary pursuits begin to take up more of children’s time as they reach the 10-12 age group. Boys aged 10-12 spent time playing electronic games and playing computers while girls spent more time sitting around talking to friends and talking on the phone.

However, the data showed that girls in the 10-12 age group were more likely to be active if the family owned a dog. The same correlation didn’t occur for boys.

“We might attribute this to concerns about safety, where girls are more likely to feel confident about walking around the neighbourhood with a dog,” Dr Salmon says. ■

# Let me **BE** now

*Stress for teenagers can be managed with regular physical activity.*

*By Karen Coghlan.*

**R**evealing interviews with young people, undertaken through the VicHealth-funded qualitative study *Rural and Regional Youth: the meanings and experience of participation in physical culture*, show that participation in physical activity leads to a range of positive experiences.

Researchers from the University of Melbourne’s Australian Youth Research Centre interviewed young people in years six, seven, eight and 10 from rural, regional and metropolitan schools. They found physical activity was an important outlet for providing enjoyment and release from life stresses.



**TEEN SPIRIT:** Young adults can lose themselves in activity.

“For young people in the latter part of adolescence, most of the focus is on the future, which creates a great deal of pressure,” says lead researcher Professor Johanna Wyn. “However they reported that physical activity, whether it was riding a trail bike or playing organised sport, created a space for them ‘just to be’.”

Often participation—the act of playing a sport or taking part in an activity—was seen as secondary to surrounding activities such as chatting to a parent on the way to a venue, or the camaraderie shared with teammates.

However, as they moved through adolescence, young people began to associate physical activity with socially held values and ideals about fitness and health.

“In the early years, sport is about activity for activity’s sake,” Prof. Wyn explains. “But as they get older, their ideas about physical activity become more tied up with health and body image.”

Prof. Wyn says that as a society we need to be careful about the messages we send to young people about physical activity and health, understanding and emphasising the global benefits rather than focusing on narrow messages which can be misinterpreted.

Overall, the young people’s experiences were positive, with physical activity becoming a way to create an identity, learn to set and achieve goals which bolstered confidence, and earn the respect and recognition of parents and peers.

Prof. Wyn says that if parents understand the many benefits participation brings to their children they will be more likely to support them. And, in turn, she suggests that governments and funding bodies need to acknowledge the role families play in supporting young people’s participation. “It’s a team effort,” she says. ■

**Author Tim Winton speaking to Andrew Denton**

**ENOUGH ROPE ABC TV**

**“W**hen you’re a teenager you feel overcome by all these problems. Everything seems enormous. Everything seems big. You seem tiny and bewildered. So, in a way, jumping into the ocean and diving deep was a way of getting over myself, you know, a way of leaving myself, not worrying that I wasn’t tall enough, that I wasn’t skinny enough, that I wasn’t smart enough, that, you know, you didn’t get the girl.” *Tim Winton.*

# Where's This Bus Going?



*The Walking School Bus™ has been a major success, however as it continues to evolve new issues are arising.*

**M**ore than 2000 Victorian primary school children now walk to and from school as part of VicHealth's Walking School Bus™ Program, which began in 2001 with just 224 students. Buses now operate in 192 schools and involve 70% of Victorian Local Government areas. It has evolved into a remarkable community program, reaping benefits that nobody anticipated when 14 schools decided to give the buses a go.

Rita Butera, a Senior Project Officer at VicHealth, says the physical benefits of the Walking School Bus™, were well understood as the program had already been operating in England, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland and many other countries.

## Getting Closer

"What we didn't really envisage was the community impact," Butera says. "Children participating in the Walking School Bus™ feel connected to the community they move through and they inspire others to walk." Some Walking School Buses pick up 'taggers', who are often other children walking to school independently. Grandparents, dogs, locals and parents also join in along the way. People talk to each other and friendships are developed along routes that have been audited by local government traffic engineers or safety officers.

## Attending More Often

As well as improving social interaction, some schools have discovered that the Walking School Bus™, funded by VicHealth through local government, has led to a reduction in lateness and absenteeism. Elizabeth Tomlins, Latrobe City Council's Walking School Bus™ project officer, said Churchill Primary School (10km from Morwell) has seen a reduction in absenteeism and late arrivals at school since the introduction of the program. The school, the first to hit the footpath with a walking bus in Latrobe City, involves many families living in a local housing estate and is near problematic major roads and intersections.

Latrobe City has six schools with Walking School Buses and is expecting two more to start early next year. Churchill Primary is keen to add a bicycle bus to its Walking School Bus™ program. Morwell Park Primary School, where the bus already operates, has also introduced a lunchtime walk around the large school block twice weekly. It is, according to Tomlins, a great sight to see more than 300 students and staff walking.

"Participating in the Walking School Bus™ is also about educating the parents that there are other ways of getting to school and it means leaving a car at home. That is a cultural shift and it is beginning to happen in these schools," Tomlins says.

"Most schools are looking to increase the number of routes



LINK: Department of Infrastructure Travel Smart Program – <http://www.travelsmart.vic.gov.au/>

and thereby increase the number of their students walking. The Walking School Bus™ has become a very positive part of our school and wider community in Latrobe City.”

## Feeling Safer

Perhaps one of the most unexpected developments has come from the City of Port Phillip, where the Walking School Bus™ has spawned a critical pedestrian safety research project called the Greenlight Project. The recommendations from the project may well lead to policy changes that will affect all Victorian pedestrians.

Meg Selman, the sustainable transport officer with Melbourne's Port Phillip Council, says the Greenlight Project arose after several of the council's six Walking School Buses expressed concern that the bus—with a ‘volunteer’ driver (front) and ‘conductor’ (rear) and sometimes more than a dozen children and parents in-between—did not have enough time to cross main roads, including Pickles Street in Port Melbourne and St Kilda Road.

The study looked at six sites in three municipalities, including the City of Port Phillip, Greater Geelong and Bayside, measuring the time given to cross main roads on a green pedestrian signal, and the time a Walking School Bus™ in the area actually needed to cross safely.

“Our study has shown that at every one of the six sites there is not enough time to get across the road,” Selman says. “Walking School Buses are still crossing when the pedestrian signal changes from green to flashing red, and are still completing the crossing while the signal is on solid red.”

According to VicRoads, which is responsible for the signal phasings at pedestrian crossings in Victoria, the standard green pedestrian signal is one second per 1.2m. However, the *Greenlight Project* is recommending VicRoads change the green signalling to 0.7m per second.

“Our focus groups and surveys found that the most overwhelming feeling was a fear that they would be mowed down one day because they did not have enough time to cross on green,” Selman says.

“People feel anxious and vulnerable and it is acting as a disincentive to parents who would like their children to walk to school. We would like to eliminate that sense of fear.”

Butera says VicHealth, which helped fund the Greenlight Project, has also found that fear of crossing major roads is a barrier to walking to school. She says VicHealth has trademarked the Walking School Bus™, in order to maintain a high and safe standard. Its sustainability and value depends on such standards. ■

## A Bus with Direction

**T**he Walking School Bus™ is necessary because it breaks a gridlock. As a community we had come to an important impasse. Children were no longer walking to or from school. Parents no longer felt it was safe to encourage their children to do so. Dr Paul Tranter, Senior Lecturer in Geography at the University of New South Wales' School of Physical, Environmental and Mathematical Sciences, calls the bind the community found itself in the ‘Social Trap’. His basic thesis is this: How can a parent decide whether to let their own child walk or cycle to certain places (especially to school) if there is uncertainty about what other parents are deciding to let their children do?

Intervention is therefore required to make a parent's decision to allow their child to walk or cycle to school, logical, possible and in many ways, socially acceptable. Tranter says there are two steps to effecting the change and various Travel Smart Programs become critical for facilitating those steps. “The first step is to have adults understand the collective impacts of their individual decisions. An education program may be necessary for parents to recognise the benefits of active transport and the potential long term negative impact of constant driving to school. The second step is to bring parents together to agree to change their behaviour in ways that will benefit all of their children,” says Dr Tranter.

Citing the one-off effect of the walk or cycle to school days as an example of what can be achieved, Dr Tranter says

the bigger challenge is to convert that sense of collective action into ongoing travel behaviour change. “What needs to happen is a change in the expectation of what a good parent does,” Dr Tranter says. “Can we change the culture so that a good parent is not one that drives a kid to school but one that allows their child to experience the joy and wonder children can get by walking or cycling to school. Because we can't make that direct change from driving to walking independently, the Walking School Bus™ Program has become really important.”

The Walking School Bus™ concept becomes an intermediate program to model social change and open up further possibilities. It acknowledges what society is prepared to accept at this stage. However it is not the endgame. Programs such as the Department of Infrastructure's School Travel Planning Programs are vital to embed and sustain real cultural change that once again makes it easy and common for children to walk independently to school.

In a wider sense the benefits to community health can spiral upwards, if more children are out on the streets, volunteers are being active and people who live along the routes are enlivened by the presence of people out and about. Social capital can flow from the school's Walking School Bus™ Program. “It might just create a sense of community at the neighbourhood level. That's the theory anyway,” says Dr Tranter.

## GO FOR YOUR LIFE Campaign Launched

On 10 November 2004, the Victorian Government launched a statewide integrated communications campaign, 'Go for your life'. Aimed at raising awareness and motivating Victorians to get the most out of life, it highlights the simple things each person can do to stay healthy, happy and active.

The campaign will feature public activities such as events, media relations, TV, print and outdoor advertising, and information kits.

These activities will encourage individuals to visit the [goforyourlife.vic.gov.au](http://goforyourlife.vic.gov.au) website or call 1300 73 98 99 to obtain tips and other information on ideas for physical activity, active living, nutrition and community involvement.

The campaign will be supported by a range of community-based programs and policies, which will be initiated across several Victorian Government departments. Under The Healthy and Active Victoria strategy, this campaign represents an investment of more than \$21 million towards new initiatives designed to further encourage Victorians to participate in their community and adopt healthier lifestyles.

The government is committed to working with all members of the community (including local government, business, health, sport, recreation and volunteer sectors) in building a healthier and more active Victoria.

For more information about The Healthy and Active Victoria strategy, contact:

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 Dept. for Victorian Communities  
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**CAMPAIGN:** An advertisement from the 'Go for your life' campaign.

## 2004 Malaysia Herald Sun Tour of Provincial Victoria

VicHealth's Active for Life team once again tackled the 2004 Malaysia Herald Sun Tour of Provincial Victoria. This year's Active for Life team included Canadians Eric Wohlberg and Dominique Perras, Uruguayan Jorge Libonatti, New Zealand's Glen Mitchell and Melbourne's Matthew Gould.

The tour pedalled off in Carlton's Lygon Street on October 14, winding its way through regional Victoria promoting participation in physical activity.

It is an exhausting event with 85 riders covering 1100 kms. The course is broken up into 13 stages including 37 hill climbs and 119 sprints. More than 2000 school children

entered four banner competitions with the winners designing the best Active for Life message. The tour culminated with a participation highlight—a free family bike ride that saw 400 people participate, and a festival involving the local Traralgon community which drew a crowd of thousands.



Family fun day at Traralgon.

## Funding Opportunities

### Audience Access Scheme

The Audience Access Scheme supports arts organisations. The aim is to make it viable for people who otherwise would not attend arts events to attend. Being

involved in activities and events that form part of community life is important for a person's mental health and wellbeing.

This scheme offers the opportunity for medium-sized arts organisations to work on strategies to make their organisation more inclusive of people who are socially and economically disadvantaged, and therefore the least likely to attend arts events. Applications should be forwarded by 5pm on Friday 18 March 2005.

Funding Guidelines are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or the VicHealth website [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)

### Food for all: Improving access to food for healthy eating — A food security program

The Food For All Program is designed to increase regular access to, and consumption of, a variety of foods, in particular fruit and vegetables, by people living in disadvantaged communities. The program is designed to receive applications from local government authorities. Applications close 5pm, Friday 28 January 2005. Projects must commence by 1 June 2005.

Funding Guidelines are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or the VicHealth website [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/foodforall](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/foodforall)

### Conference Support Scheme

Through the Conference Support Scheme (CSS) VicHealth will provide limited support to conferences conducted by other providers.

The objectives of the Conference Support Scheme are to:

- facilitate the transfer of new and existing health promotion knowledge through the support of health promotion conferences, and;
- ensure supported conferences are accessible to a range of delegates.

VicHealth also ensures supported conferences take place in healthy environments.

The next closing date for applications is 30 March 2005.

Funding Guidelines are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or the VicHealth website [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)

## Research Grants

VicHealth will be offering up to two Senior and three Public Health Research Fellowships in 2006. The call for applications will commence 4 December 2004 and will be advertised in *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers, with applications due 11 March 2005. Application forms will be available from the VicHealth website from 4 December. Please direct enquiries to Dr Michelle Callander at [mcallander@vichealth.vic.gov.au](mailto:mcallander@vichealth.vic.gov.au).

## Publications

### Annual Report

The VicHealth Annual Report was tabled in the Victorian Parliament in November and is available from VicHealth.

For a copy of the report, contact VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)



### Food for All

Case studies of two of the VicHealth Food Community Demonstration Projects—The Braystone Project and the Café Meals Project. This and further information about the Food for All program is available on the VicHealth website [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)



### Health in Public Spaces

This publication evaluates VicHealth's Art and Environment Scheme that is part of VicHealth's Mental Health Promotion Plan.

Copies are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or on the VicHealth website [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)



The Health in Public Spaces report is part of the organisation's series of evaluation reports that are based on

evaluations of projects funded as part of VicHealth's mental health promotion plan. An order form is available from the Mental Health and Wellbeing Unit at VicHealth on (03) 9667 1332.

## Awards

### Award in Planning for Health and Wellbeing to Heart Foundation

VicHealth congratulates the Heart Foundation for winning the 2004 Planning Institute of Australia's award in Planning for Health and Wellbeing with its innovative *Healthy by Design: a planners' guide to environments for active living resource*. *Healthy by Design* is an innovative tool which helps planners incorporate design considerations that positively impact on our health and wellbeing. VicHealth contributed to training of planners on how to use the tool.

### Victorian Public Health Award winners for excellence and innovation

VicHealth congratulates all winners of the Public Health Awards announced on 8 November 2004. Two community demonstration projects funded by VicHealth were joint winners of the innovation award in the programs category—the collaboration between Maribyrnong City Council, WestNet and Western Region Health Centre for the Braystone fruit and vegetable shop front and mobile van project, and the collaboration between North Yarra Community Health and City of Yarra for The Café Meals Program.

### Seminars

The Planning Institute of Australia 2005 National Congress Creative and Sustainable Communities is to be held 17-20 April 2005 in Bendigo and Melbourne. For further information, [www.piacongress2005.com.au](http://www.piacongress2005.com.au) or email: The Meeting Planners [piacongress2005@meetingplanners.com.au](mailto:piacongress2005@meetingplanners.com.au)

### Website

To register and receive fortnightly updates of additions to the VicHealth website go to [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/register](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/register)

Disclaimer: Views and opinions expressed in the VicHealth Letter do not necessarily reflect those of VicHealth.

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