

Parental fear: a barrier to the independent mobility of children

Research highlights





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Introduction

About this research

Parental fear has been identified as a potentially critical barrier to children’s ability to travel and play independently and may act to restrict children’s physical activity (Zubrick et al. 2010; Thomson 2009).

There is a gap in evidence about whether parental fear makes a contribution to children’s independent mobility after taking into account the impact of associated parent, child, family, socioeconomic, neighbourhood, and broader political and economic factors. There is also a need to identify key factors associated with parental fear to inform evidence-based recommendations for promoting the independent mobility of Victorian school-aged children.

To investigate the role that parental fear plays in shaping children’s independence and physical activity, and provide recommendations to promote the independent mobility of Victorian school-aged children, VicHealth initiated and funded a three-year study (2012 to 2015) into parental fear, the first of its kind in Australia.

VicHealth commissioned La Trobe University and the Parenting Research Centre to undertake the study which included:

1. Focus groups with 132 children aged eight to 15 years and 12 parents, to explore their perceptions of independent mobility and the process of becoming independently mobile.
2. A survey of more than 2000 parents of children aged nine to 15 from across Victoria, to determine the factors associated with children’s independent mobility and parental fear.
3. Expert workshops with 47 professionals from a broad range of sectors, to inform the development of evidence-based recommendations for promoting the independent mobility of Victorian primary and secondary school-aged children.

The findings from this research demonstrate that parental concerns about safety in general and harm from strangers are related to lower levels of children’s independent mobility.

Letting children become independent in their play and travel is a complex process for parents and parents’ awareness of the many benefits of independent travel and play for children, balanced with the relative risk of harm, is important.

Overall, the research identified that a multi-pronged, tailored approach addressing barriers at the individual, social and community, built environment and legislative levels is essential for effective and sustainable change in children’s independent mobility.

KEY TERMS

Active travel

Non-motorised travel between destinations, such as walking, cycling, scooting and skateboarding (VicHealth 2014).

Children’s independent mobility

Children’s freedom to move around in public spaces without adult accompaniment (Hillman et al. 1990), such as playing outside, walking or riding to school.

Physical activity

Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure (Caspersen et al. 1985, p. 129).

1 in 4
children in
Victoria walks
or rides to
school



Background

Walking, riding a bike, scooting, skating or catching public transport to school and other places is a great way for children to be active in their daily lives.

However, today, Australian children are living a more inactive lifestyle and as a consequence increasing their risk of serious health problems such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Only around one in five Australian children meets the recommended one hour of physical activity every day (ABS 2013a).

Patterns of children’s mobility have changed in recent decades, including a decrease in children walking and cycling to school and an increase in children being driven to school (Salmon et al. 2005). Only around one in four children in Victoria walks or rides to school (ABS 2013b).

This change in patterns coupled with a restriction on the distance that children are allowed to ‘roam’, is constraining their independent travel and overall physical activity (Carver et al. 2014).

Importance of children’s independence

Being independently mobile helps children in their development of spatial awareness, decision-making, self-confidence and knowledge about their local neighbourhood (Zubrick et al. 2010).

Children’s independent mobility can also contribute to children’s physical activity (Garrard et al. 2009a). It is particularly important when children move towards adolescence, as their overall levels of physical activity decrease (VicHealth 2015). Therefore greater independence at this time can provide greater opportunities for physical activity through independent travel and outdoor play.

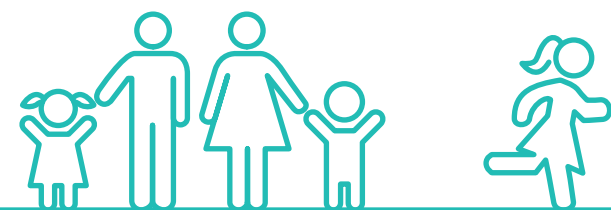
Why study parental fear?

Parents are the gatekeepers to children’s independence and autonomy across all stages of childhood (Davison and Lawson 2006).

Evidence suggests the most common barriers reported by parents relating to children’s participation in active travel to school is their fear for their child’s personal safety on the journey, namely, fear of strangers, abduction or assault (Brunton et al. 2006; DiGuseppi et al. 1998; Krizek et al. 2009; Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Veitch et al. 2006; Garrard et al. 2009b) and traffic risks (Veitch et al. 2006). Previous VicHealth research shows parents’ perceptions of ‘stranger danger’, traffic concerns and crime are the most common reasons children don’t walk or ride to school.

Parental fear includes parents’ worry, anxiety, fear and concern about potential risks and dangers to children when they are independently travelling or playing unaccompanied or unsupervised by a trusted adult (Malone 2007).

Influences on children's independent mobility



What did parents and children say?

Four major themes, including parental fear, emerged from the research regarding the influences on children's independent mobility.

1 Fitting in with family life

- Daily routines and managing the demands of family life were major influences on children's travel and play. For example:
 - working parents reported that time restrictions meant that they had to drive children to school
 - children who attended before-school or after-school care lacked opportunities to practice travelling to school by walking, cycling or public transport.
- Fostering children's independent mobility and physical activity was not always a priority for parents when they had to negotiate busy daily schedules, for example getting children to school, then parents getting to work in the morning.

3 Worries about strangers and other safety concerns

- Parents and children raised a number of safety concerns about children's independent mobility. For example:
 - parents were worried about strangers approaching and/or abducting their child, and they were also concerned about their child being injured in traffic
 - while a small number of children mentioned being scared or wary of strangers, more often, they discussed being worried about getting lost, being bullied by older children, and about being frightened or attacked by animals (e.g. dogs, snakes) during their independent travel and play.
- Children described strategies they had used, or would use, to deal with problems encountered in the neighbourhood, such as 'I'll yell at the top of my lungs' if approached by a stranger, or use a mobile phone to call for help if they were lost or in danger. These strategies had been discussed with their parents and siblings, and sometimes at school, particularly after an incident near the school or in the local area (e.g. an attempted abduction).

2 Neighbourhoods and knowing people

- Children who had some independent mobility described how much they enjoyed the social and emotional aspects of it, as well as the physical benefits. Children acknowledged they had a lot of 'fun', would 'muck around', 'tell secrets' and have a bit of time out.
- Parents and children felt more comfortable about independent mobility when they knew people in the local neighbourhood, and were familiar with their surroundings.
- Children's independence was determined by networks of family and friends in the local community. For example:
 - in regional areas, where parents and children knew and trusted their neighbours, and were familiar with many people in town, parents saw fewer risks to their child's safety in independent mobility
 - for families in metropolitan areas that had recently migrated to Australia, where the parents were not familiar with their neighbourhood, the language or the people, there were greater safety concerns about independent travel and play, and therefore children's independent mobility was restricted.
- Community 'norms' shaped children's activities, travel and recreation. For example, school policies and messaging influenced parents' perceptions about what was appropriate in terms of children's travel.
- Parents had varying views on the merits of children's independent mobility. While some parents acknowledged the benefits of independent mobility, other parents labelled independently mobile children as a 'type' who were 'wandering aimlessly' and lacked boundaries from their parents. The more negative views about children's independent mobility were heard from parents in metropolitan areas whose children were less independently mobile.
- Children aged eight to 15 years old had a broad range of independence, ranging from walking to school with older siblings to travelling from Melbourne's outer suburbs to the city by train with friends.

4 Finding a reference point for decision-making and boundaries

- Parents used a range of points of reference when making decisions about independent mobility for their child. Some parents referred to other families to gauge what was 'normal' in terms of independent mobility for a child's age.
- Some parents recognised that they were very protective of their child, and some did not like being so worried about their child's safety. However, often it was the concept of 'better safe than sorry' that governed decisions about children's independence.
- Parents would weigh up the social, emotional and physical health benefits against children's skills and maturity, potential risks and demands on parents' time before making decisions about the appropriateness of independent mobility for their child.
- Some parents described agonising over decisions about their children's independent mobility, with their perceptions of the benefits of independence conflicting with their concerns about the risks.
- Parents described feeling anxious about their child being independently mobile but recognised that children must be afforded independence at some stage. Even when children were well prepared for independent mobility and were 'ready', parents were still concerned.
- When the time came for children to move from dependent to independent mobility, it was a staged process, and parents and children would negotiate the details. For example:
 - setting rules and boundaries about where the child can go, who with, and when they needed to be home. These rules and boundaries were under constant discussion and negotiation between parents and children as their levels of independence increased
 - often, children would take a mobile phone with them and let their parents know when they had arrived safely at the destination. It was important that children were contactable when they didn't have adult accompaniment, and both parents and children viewed mobile phones as a safety measure.

Children's independent mobility in general

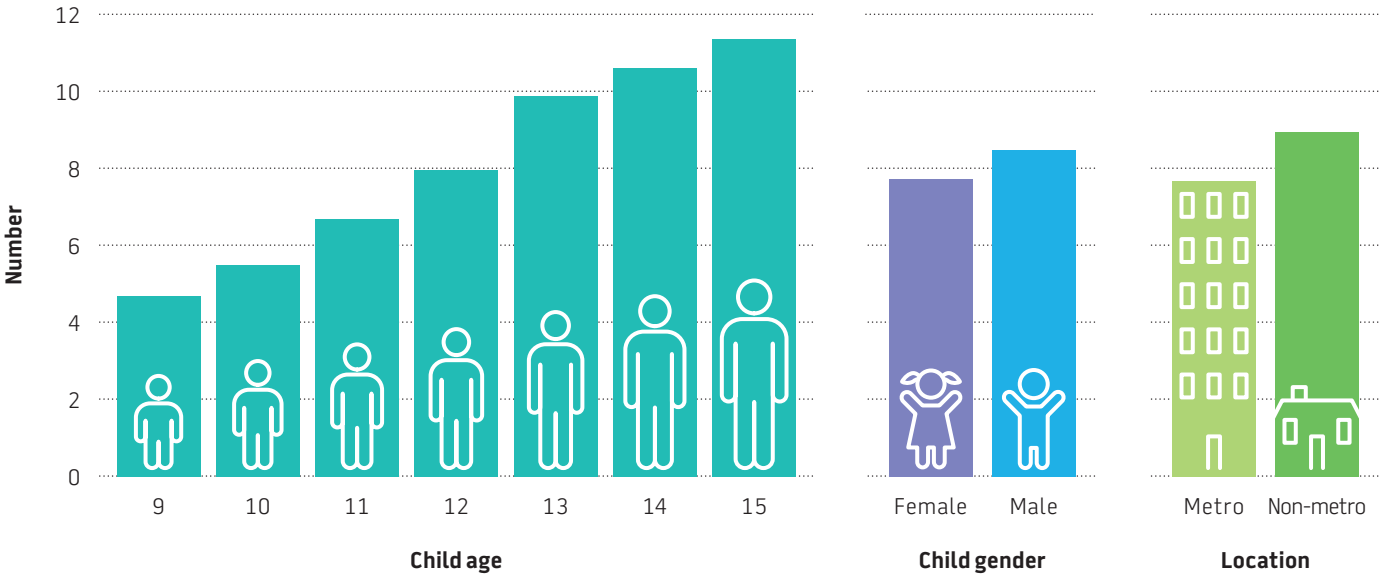
The parent survey identified that:

- On average, children participated in eight activities without an adult, from a list of 15 activities (e.g. play in the street, go to the local shops, go out after dark).
- The number of independent activities children were allowed to do increased with age.
 - Children aged nine years were allowed to do an average of four to five activities independently, compared with an average of 11 independent activities for children aged 15 years.
 - During the pre-teen years (ages 11 to 13) children moved from quite limited independence to much more independence.
- Most parents started allowing children to play and travel in their community without adult supervision in primary school.



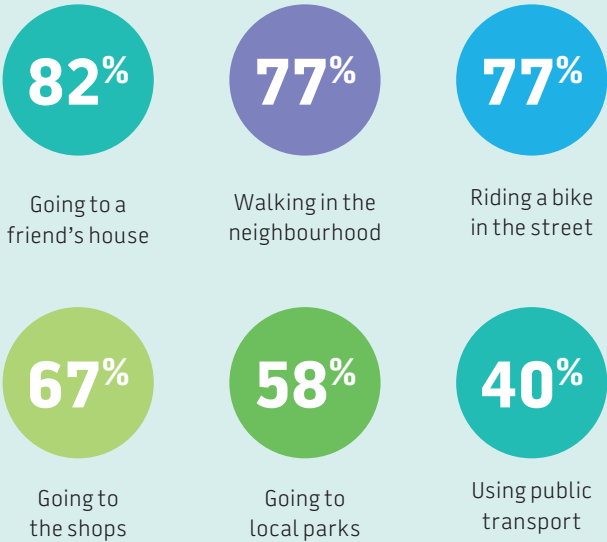
Average number of independent activities per week

Number of independent activities (range 0-15) children are allowed to do by child age, child gender and geographic location



96%

For children of all ages, other common independent activities included:



Almost all nine to 10 year-old children were allowed to play in their own yard without adult supervision.

Children's independent mobility and physical activity

Children who were able to play and travel without an adult and those who walked or rode to school were more likely to meet Australian physical activity guidelines, of at least one hour of physical activity every day (Department of Health 2014).

Children aged 11 to 13 years who:

- had more independence were more likely than their less independent peers to meet the physical activity guidelines on weekend days
- walked or cycled to school were more likely than children who were driven or took public transport to meet the physical activity guidelines on week days.



Children's independent travel to school

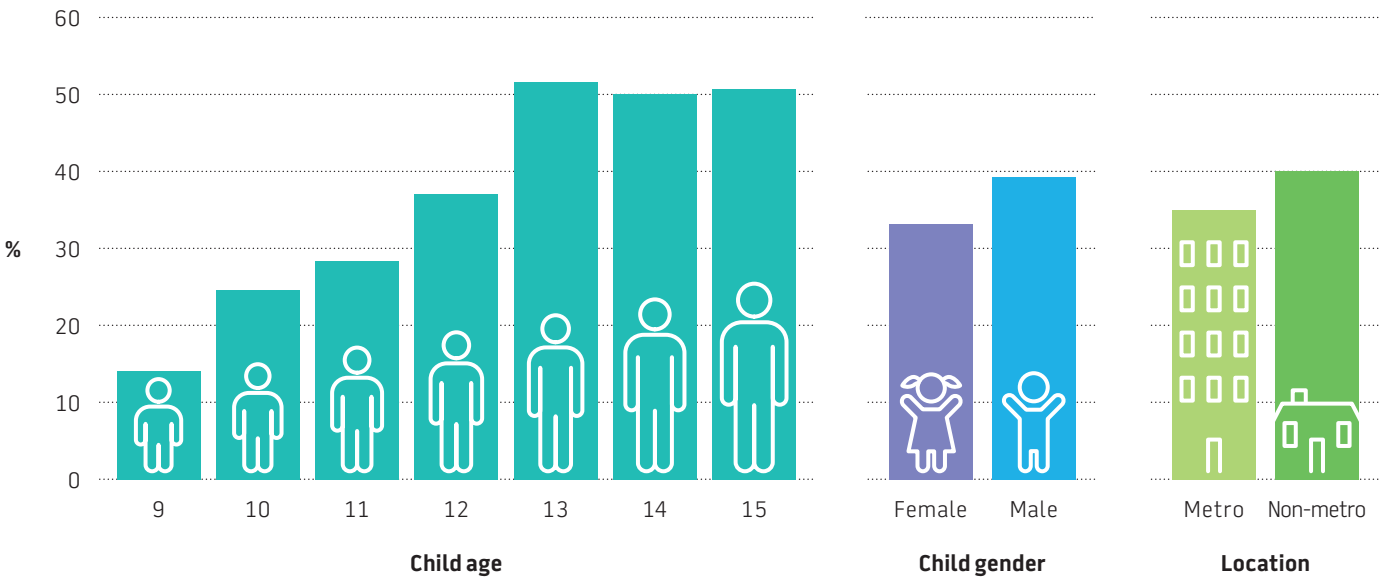
The proportion of children's independent trips to school (by walking, cycling or public transport without an adult) increased as children progressed through primary school, and remained steady at around half of children from 13 years of age.

However, even for children aged 14–15 years around one third (35%) were never travelling independently to school.

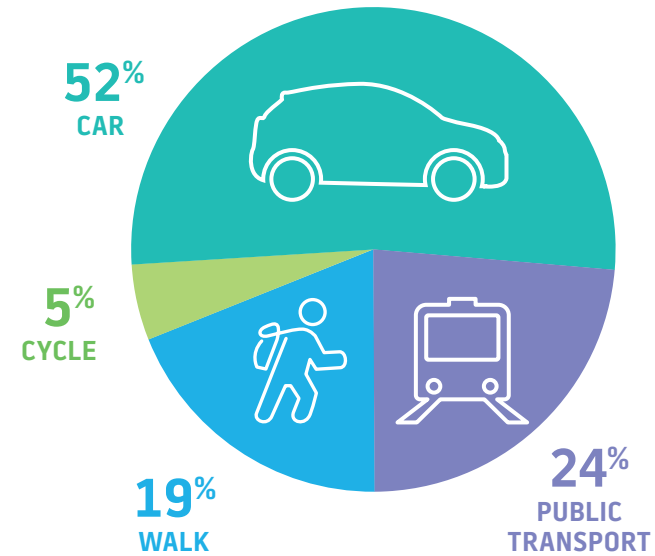


Independent trips to school per week (%)

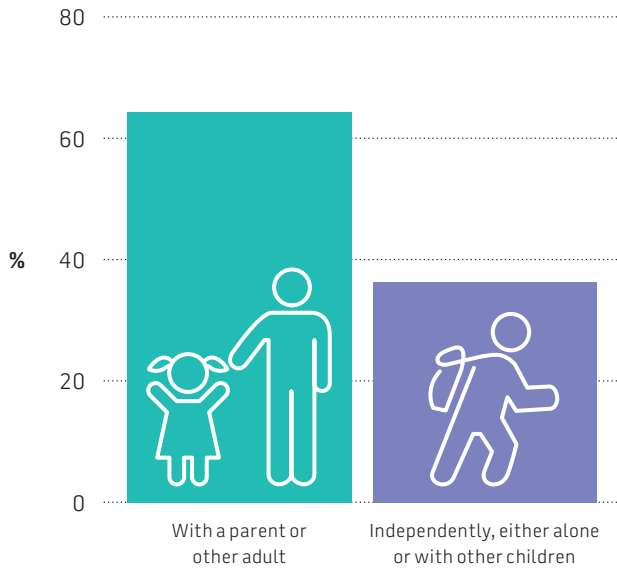
Average proportion of trips to school that children make unaccompanied by an adult by child age, child gender and geographic location



Travel to school



Travel to school with adult/independently



Parental fear

Findings from the survey demonstrated that parental fear was found to be related to lower levels of independent mobility for children. This survey included two new measures of parental fear – general fear and stranger-specific fear.

Parents were more fearful about their child being harmed by a stranger, than they were about their child's general safety when out in the neighbourhood without an adult. Parents who were more concerned about safety in general and harm from strangers in particular reported that their children were less likely to play and travel independently in the community, including to school. This applied across all age groups from nine to 15 years.

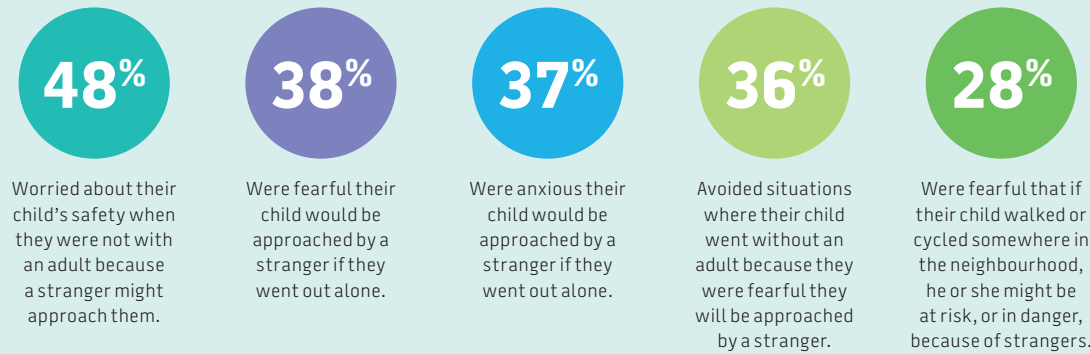
General parental fear

Assesses parental concerns about children's safety when children are without adult supervision



Parental fear of strangers

Assesses fear of harm to children from strangers



Modifiable and non-modifiable factors

A number of non-modifiable demographic factors were associated with children’s independent mobility and parental fear. However, several modifiable factors could potentially be changed through targeted intervention.

Factors affecting children’s independent mobility

Non-modifiable factors	Modifiable factors
Children were <i>less likely</i> to be independently mobile if they: <ul style="list-style-type: none">were younger (9–10 years old)were femalelived in a metropolitan area (compared to a rural or regional area)were living with a disabilitywere living with a younger parentspoke a language other than English at homehad a parent with lower educational attainment (i.e. not a tertiary qualification)lived in a more disadvantaged neighbourhood (i.e. a lower SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage score) (ABS 2011).	Parents were <i>more likely</i> to allow their child to be independently mobile if they: <ul style="list-style-type: none">reported less fear (general fear and fear of strangers) about their children’s safety when independently mobilehad confidence in their child’s ability to travel safely in the neighbourhood (e.g. child is responsible, careful in traffic, has road safety skills, knows what to do if a stranger approaches them)perceived independent mobility as having multiple benefits (e.g. make friends, learn responsibility and independence, get exercise, get to know the neighbourhood)did not believe that other parents, family or the school would disapprove of their child making independent trips to schoolprovided their child with access to a mobile phone.

Factors associated with parental fear

Non-modifiable factors	Modifiable factors
Parents had <i>greater</i> fear if they: <ul style="list-style-type: none">had a younger childhad a female childlived in a metropolitan area (compared to a rural or regional area)spoke a language other than English at homehad lower parental educational attainmentwere a single parent familyhad past experience with strangershad fewer children under 18 years at home.	Parents had <i>greater</i> fear if they: <ul style="list-style-type: none">had greater symptoms of psychological distresshad a more protective parenting styleperceived the neighbourhood as less safe (e.g. child likely to get injured, bullied, lost)had doubt in the child’s abilities to travel competently (e.g. responsible, careful in traffic)perceived disapproval from others (e.g. parents, school or family members) about their child travelling to school independentlyplaced less value on the benefits of the child’s independent mobility (e.g. making friends, learning independence, getting exercise).

Relationship between children’s independent mobility and parental fear



Recommendations

The research aimed to develop in partnership with community, government and non-government stakeholders, recommendations and strategies to promote the independent mobility of Victorian children aged nine to 15 years.

Workshop group discussions with professionals from a broad range of sectors, including local government, sport and recreation, health, research, urban planning and parent advocacy, informed the following recommendations.

Policy-makers, state government, local government and urban planners

- Encourage urban planning that facilitates walking and cycling to local destinations.
- Coordinate state and local planning to develop and maintain high walkability as a shared goal.
- Conduct cost-benefit analyses to compare the cost of upgrading or maintaining safe and accessible walking and cycling spaces, with the alternative cost of an inactive population.
- Increase access to quality green spaces for children to gather and play, and enable unstructured contact with nature through parks, playgrounds, paths and green corridors.
- Use wayfinding and footpath decals to highlight safe routes to local places and spaces.
- Promote and encourage both children and adults to walk to places within neighbourhoods, to have more people being out and about on the streets, and support an improved perception of safety.
- Encourage the safe use of streets for play (e.g. pop up street closures, street parties and meet your neighbour days).
- Engage parents and children in the planning and design of places and spaces, so that perceptions of safety and preferred safe routes to key local destinations such as local schools, parks and libraries are incorporated.
- Map and evaluate current community-wide and school-based programs promoting children's active travel, physical activity and mobility, to support coordination of these initiatives implemented within local councils.
- Consider how existing policies and legislation influence children's independent mobility, active travel behaviour and physical activity levels. In particular, consider those having a risk aversion approach, such as legal implications for parents who allow their children to be independently mobile, compared to an enabling approach.
- Develop and provide evidence-based tools to support parents to make judgements about when their child is ready for staged transition from dependent to independent mobility.



Community groups, schools and teachers, sporting clubs, local government, health and health promotion professionals

- Provide opportunities for community members to meet, interact and get to know each other, to build a sense of community and social capital (e.g. meet your neighbour, street parties, free group activities in established meeting places such as parks and Neighbourhood Houses).
- Encourage peer support and peer leaders for parents to promote independent mobility amongst children and shift perceptions and social norms (e.g. through social media, school community, parent networks or parent bloggers).
- Implement community-wide messaging (e.g. social media, local media) providing information on the multiple benefits of children's independent mobility (e.g. getting exercise, making friends, fostering independence and responsibility).
- Consider how technology can support children's independent mobility, such as applications that promote safe routes to schools and local parks.
- Provide sufficient support and resources for programs implemented in schools to optimise implementation and outcomes, including links to curriculum and active homework (e.g. orienteering, map your neighbourhood).
- Support parents to consider the benefits of their child attending a local school (primary and/or secondary school), rather than a school further away, to enable opportunities for independent active travel to and from school.
- Promote opportunities for children's independent mobility, other than their travel to school (e.g. outdoor play, walking or cycling to other destinations), such as through sporting clubs, maternal and child health centres, playgroups, community groups and parents' workplaces.



Individual families, parents and their child

- Support children to learn the necessary skills for safe travel and play (e.g. cycling skills, road rules, negotiating traffic). Where skills might be taught in a program, families can reinforce these with further practice, to increase children's competence for safe travel and play.
- Encourage parents and their child to walk and cycle together in their neighbourhood to support increased independent mobility for children by:
 - enabling parents to model safe travel and physically active behaviours to their child
 - practicing and reinforcing of safe travel skills with children (e.g. skills for cycling in traffic, awareness of road rules)
 - discussing safety issues and strategies in a supportive way
 - observing and recognising improvements in their child's skills and behaviour in and around traffic over time
 - observing the local environment (e.g. access to walking paths and familiarity with the neighbourhood)
 - adequately assessing the safety of the neighbourhood environment, including potential risks (e.g. traffic hazards, lack of safe crossing points, footpaths) and perceived barriers (e.g. distance, time)
 - enabling parents to make a judgement about when their child is ready for staged transition from dependent to independent mobility.
- Encourage the use of mobile phones as a strategy for parents to support children's independence.
- Encourage parents to make a plan with their child about possible strategies when things go wrong (e.g. getting lost, stranger approaches, they or their friends get injured).
- See [How to help your kids get around safely on their own](#) for more information.



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