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Children’s Independent Mobility: Fact or fiction: 8 to 12 year olds - worried about strangers

The most important rule is: “not to talk to anyone you don’t know, because you can’t trust anyone you don’t know”.

The rising prevalence in the number of children who are overweight or obese is increasing in importance as a public health issue in Australia (McCallum & Gerner, 2005)¹. Parental fear as a barrier to children’s independent mobility and physical activity has contributed to the decline in children’s physical activity. Timperio et al. (2004)² and Veitch et al. (2006)³ have reported parents commonly identify ‘stranger danger’ as a barrier to children’s independent mobility within their community. In a recent VicHealth survey it was reported that 63 per cent of participants agreed parents should not let primary school age children move to and from places without adult supervision. The same study reported 38 per cent of respondents agreed there was a high risk a child would be abducted by a stranger if they moved around in the community without adult supervision.

Zubrick et al (2010)⁴ reported while the likelihood of a child being harmed by a stranger is extremely low, many parents continued to hold a view that strangers present a constant threat to their children’s safety in public spaces. Vallentine et al. (1997)⁵ also reported that restrictions on children’s independent mobility and physical activity are mostly due to parental fear of strangers and related social dangers.

Data obtained from the Victoria Police Crime Statistics unit for the period 1 July to 30 June 2011, shows there were 27 offences recorded for child stealing. In nine cases the offender was known to the child, in six cases the child was not related or associated to the child. However, in 12 of the 27 offences it was not possible for the relationship to the child to be determined.⁶ Without definitively knowing the relationship of 12 of the child stealing offences, up to 21 children or as few as 6 could have known their offender.

It is important that the benefits of instilling in children good safety practices does not make them fearful unable to trust well meaning people.

¹ McCallum, Z. and Gerner, B (2005). Weighty matters: An approach to childhood overweight in general practice. *Australian Family Physician* 34(9), 745-748.

² Timperio, A, Carwford, D, Telford, A, and Salmon, J. (2004). Perceptions about the local neighbourhood and walking and cycling among children. *Preventative Medicine*, 38(1), 39-47.

³ Veitch, J, Bagley, S, Ball, K, and Salmon, J. (2006). Where do children usually play? A quantitative study of parents’ perceptions of influences on children’s active free-play. *Health and Place*. (12(4), 383-393.

⁴ Zubrick SR, Wood L, Villanueva K, Wood G, Giles-Cont B, and Christian H. (2010). Nothing but fear itself: parental fear as a determinant of child physical activity and independent mobility, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), Melbourne.

⁵ Vallentine G, McKendrick J. (1997). Children’s Outdoor play: Exploring Parental Concerns About Children’s Safety and the Changing Nature of Childhood. *Geoforum*; 28(2):219-235.

⁶ Victoria Police Crime Statistics (2011). Data extracted from LEAP. Produced by Corporate Statistics. Victoria Police.

Who is worried about strangers ...

Fifty-nine per cent of children aged 8 to 12 years reported they were worried about strangers. Of this proportion 39 per cent were boys and 61 per cent were girls.

Seventy-four per cent of parents believed to 'a moderate or major extent' that 'stranger danger' was a barrier to their children's physical activity in their neighbourhood, (girls: 77%; boys: 69%)⁷.

I have ...

Children's fear of strangers influences the extent to which they feel safe to move around in their neighbourhood.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
a bicycle	91%	90%
a scooter	76%	82%
a pet dog	57%	65%
rollerblades	47%	49%
a skateboard	47%	56%

Children who were worried about strangers were less likely to own equipment or a dog that enabled them to engage in active transport and physical activity.

I know ...

Children who can navigate their way around their neighbourhood show increased levels of skills needed for independence.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
how to ride a bicycle	94%	95%
how to read streets signs	92%	90%
the road safety rules	91%	90%
how to use a mobile phone	84%	85%
I am allowed to go outside and play with other children	66%	68%
how to use public transport	52%	62%

Children who were worried about strangers were less likely to know how to use public transport.

I know the way to ...

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
walk or cycle to my school	89%	86%
walk or cycle to the local park or playground	88%	90%
walk or cycle to the local shop	84%	88%
walk or cycle to my best friends house	77%	78%

⁷ The sample comprised 809 students attending 19 Victorian primary schools in Victoria. Students were asked to complete a survey asking them about their independent mobility, active transport, road safety knowledge and their neighbourhood. This snap shot uses VicHealth funded research data collected in 2010. 504 parents completed a separate survey.

With six per cent of the Victorian population aged between 8 and 12 years in 2010 the information obtained from this cohort of students provides a useful picture of the impact fear of strangers may be having on children's independent mobility and resultant physical activity.

There was little difference in children who were worried about strangers and those who were not with respect to their level of knowing how to get to places in their neighbourhood.

How much do you enjoy ...

Playing outside increases children's awareness of their neighbourhood and provides them with opportunities to meet other children and neighbours. Children who play outside also develop a familiarity with neighbours and a sense of belonging.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
playing outside	82%	85%
going to a local park or playground with family or friends	76%	70%
going for a walk with family or friends	75%	66%
riding a bike	66%	64%
playing inside	57%	62%

Children who indicated they were worried about strangers showed a preference for participating in activities involving family members or friends.

I most like going ... with my friends

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
to the local park or playground	51%	63%
to a friends house	32%	39%
to a sporting club	27%	38%
to the local shops	26%	37%
to a local library	17%	20%

Children who reported they were worried about strangers were less inclined to like moving around in their neighbourhood.

How many times in the last 5 days did you ...

Children who reported being worried by strangers were less likely to have independently done the following activities five or more times in the previous week.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
watch TV	74%	79%
use the Internet	45%	48%
play in the back yard	40%	43%
play with hand held devices (like Nintendo® and Wii® games)	36%	37%
play in the front yard	19%	26%
play in the street	19%	23%
walk, ride or scoot to the local park	10%	10%
walk, ride or scoot to a friends' house	8%	9%
walk, ride or scoot to the local shops	9%	10%
walk, ride or scoot to a sporting club	1%	3%

Barrier to children's physical activity in the neighbourhood ...

Barriers in the neighbourhood impact on the extent to which children are able to move around in it independently.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
I need to cross a road to play at the local park	73%	69%
There are a lot of cars on the road near my house	39%	41%
I am worried about dogs not on leads	39%	17%
There are no children for me to play with near my house	30%	28%

Children who were worried about strangers reported a higher incidence of needing to cross a road to play at the local park.

In my neighbourhood ...

Barriers in the neighbourhood impact on the extent to which parents feel it is safe to let their children move around in it independently.

	Parents worried about strangers	Parents not worried about strangers
you often see families out walking or cycling	74%	73%
I feel safe	72%	87%
my family knows many people	65%	63%
street crossings are safe for children to use	61%	71%
there are many sporting clubs or other community facilities for children	55%	53%
you often hear children playing in the street	36%	40%

Parents who reported being worried about strangers as a barrier to their children being able to move around independently in their neighbourhood had a higher level of concern for aspects of their neighbourhood related specifically to safety.

It is safe for my child to independently ...

Parental belief about the safety of their neighbourhood also influences the extent to which they will let their children move around independently in their community.

	Parents worried about strangers	Parents not worried about strangers
walk, cycle, skate or scoot alone during the day	37%	65%
play in the street	37%	57%
play in the local park	27%	52%
travel to places other than school	23%	48%
cross main roads	17%	29%
take public transport	10%	27%
go out after dark	2%	7%

Parents who reported worrying about strangers in their neighbourhood were less likely to see their neighbourhood as a safe place for their children to independently move around in.

Travel mode to school ...

Overall, children who reported being worried about strangers were slightly more likely to be driven to school than children who indicated they were not worried about strangers.

	I am worried about strangers	I am not worried about strangers
Passive mode of transport (i.e. car, bus or taxi)	66%	64%
Active mode of transport (i.e. cycle, skate or scoot)	31%	34%

In summary, children aged 8 to 12 years demonstrated they were less worried about strangers than the sample of parents⁸. Children who were not worried about strangers reported greater participation in active transport and independent mobility in their neighbourhood than their counterparts who reported being worried about strangers. Parents of children aged 8 to 12 years tended to be more worried about strangers as a barrier to their children's independent mobility and physical activity in their neighbourhood.

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⁸ The parent and student samples were not linked to each other.