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2-2012

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Recommended Citation

Underwood, C. (2012). Children's independent mobility and dog ownership : 8 to 12 year olds.
<https://research.acer.edu.au/cimat/4>

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Children's Independent Mobility: and Dog Ownership: 8 to 12 year olds

Many families are now acquiring pets to encourage children, to spend more time in the 'real', rather than the 'virtual' world.

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. Walking and physical activity is strongly linked to improved general health and lower risks of obesity and associated health problems. A growing body of research shows that pet ownership has a number of physical health benefits. Studies now associate pets, and particularly dogs with increased levels of physical activity.

Australian research indicates that dogs motivate their owners to walk more often and so more likely meet recommended levels of physical activity.² Timperio et al (2008) reported children who own dogs are less likely to become overweight or obese. In addition incidental play that children undertake with their dog in the backyard or house contributes to increased levels of physical activity.³ According to Wood et al. (2005) over 50 per cent of dog owners and 40 per cent of pet owners in general meet people in their neighbourhood as a result of their pet and over 80 per cent of dog owners talk to other people when out walking their dogs.⁴ Pet ownership has also been reported as being positively associated with social interactions, increased feelings of neighbourhood friendliness and sense of community.⁵

According to the UK Pet Health Council⁶, there's an increasing amount of research showing that pet ownership has considerable educational and therapeutic benefits for children. Studies demonstrate children who interact with animals have higher levels of self-esteem, have greater empathy and better social skills, and in certain cases, improved behaviour and better academic outcomes. Physical benefits include more exercise, and an improved immune system. Children who own pets are also less often self-centred than those who do not. Dog ownership has also been linked to teaching children the importance of responsibility, discipline, friendship and patience.

The UK Pet Council also refers to other studies that have demonstrated children who grow up with pets tend to have an increased attention span, better non-verbal communication skills, and better school attendance. In addition they are likely to be more emotionally stable, and less likely to engage in criminal activity later in life.

Overall, a child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development can all be supported by interaction with the family pet.

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 Cutt, H, Giles-Corti, B, Knuiaman, M. (2008), Encouraging physical activity through dog walking: Why don't some owners walk with their dog? *Preventative Medicine*. 46(2): 120-126.

³ Timperio, A, Salmon, J, Chu, B and Andrianopoulos, N. (2008), Is dog ownership or dog walking associated with weight status in children and their parents? *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*. 19(1): 60-63.

⁴ Wood, L, Giles-Corti, B, and Bulsara, M.K. (2005) The pet connection: Pets as a conduit for social capital? *Social Science and Medicine*. 61(6): 1159-1173

⁵ Wood, L. (2009). *Living Well Together: How companion animals can strengthen social fabric*. Petcare Information and Advisory Service Pty Ltd and the Centre for the Built Environment and Health (School of Population Health), The University of Western Australia.

⁶ The benefits of dog ownership for children.

<http://www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk/images/file/Pets%20and%20Children%20-%20PHC.pdf>. Accessed: 1 Dec. 2011.

Who owns a pet dog ...

Sixty per cent of children aged 8 to 12 years reported owning a pet dog. Of this proportion, 64 per cent of children regularly go on family walks with their pet dog. Thirty-five per cent of children regularly walked their pet dog on their own.⁷

I have ...

Dog ownership plays a major role in encouraging use of active transport.

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
a bicycle	94%	94%	87%
a scooter	81%	88%	74%
rollerblades	57%	56%	43%
a skateboard	58%	49%	39%

Children who own a pet dog (regularly walk dog or do not walk dog but play with their dog) were more likely to own equipment that enabled them to engage in active transport.

I know ...

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

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
how to ride a bicycle	98%	93%	92%
the road safety rules	93%	90%	90%
how to read streets signs	92%	89%	92%
how to use a mobile phone	88%	83%	82%
how to use public transport	67%	50%	52%

Children who walk their pet dog showed a greater awareness of skills needed to independently move around in their neighbourhood.

I know the way to walk or cycle to ...

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
the local park or playground	93%	84%	88%
the local shop	91%	83%	84%
my school	90%	87%	87%
to my best friend's house	85%	74%	72%

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. 504 parents completed a survey about their child's independent mobility, their neighbourhood and barrier to their child's independent mobility. This snap shot uses VicHealth funded research data collected in 2010.

With six per cent of the Victorian population aged between 8 and 12 years in 2010⁷ the information obtained from this cohort of students provides a useful picture of the impact dog ownership may be having on children's independent mobility and resultant physical activity.

Children who regularly walked their pet dog were more active and more independently mobile in their neighbourhood.

How much do you enjoy ...

Outdoor play has lots of benefits for children, including increasing their physical exercise and health. It increases their confidence, and provides them with opportunities to meet other children and improve social skills.⁸ Children who play outside also develop a familiarity with neighbours and a sense of belonging.

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
playing outside	85%	86%	80%
going for a walk with family or friends	78%	64%	71%
going to a local park or playground with family or friends	75%	67%	77%
riding a bike	69%	60%	65%
playing inside	55%	58%	63%

Children who regularly walked their pet dog showed a preference for playing outside and participating in outdoor activities with family members and friends.

I most like going ... with my friends

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
to the local park or playground	63%	52%	53%
to a friends house	36%	30%	37%
to the local shops	35%	36%	24%

Children who regularly walked their pet dog were more likely to like moving around in their neighbourhood.

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

Barriers in the neighbourhood impact on the extent to which children feel confident about, and want to move around in it independently.

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Does not own a dog
I need to cross the road(s) to play at the local park	73%	64%	75%
I am worried about strangers	55%	54%	64%
There are a lot of cars on the road near my house	42%	40%	39%
I am worried about dogs not on leads	26%	32%	32%
There are no children for me to play with near my house	27%	34%	28%

Children who regularly walked their pet dog reported more often that there were a lot of cars on the road near their house. However, this did not impede them from moving around their neighbourhood.

⁸ O'Brien, L and Murray, R. 2007. Forest School and its impacts on young children: case studies in Britain. *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, 6: 249-265.

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.

	Owns a pet dog	
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog
walk, cycle, skate or scoot alone during the day	76%	39%
play in the street	61%	39%
travel to places other than school	56%	25%
play in the local park	52%	29%
cross main roads	46%	14%
take public transport	15%	10%

Parents who let their children regularly walk their pet dog reported it was safe for their children to independently move around in their neighbourhood.

Travel to school ...

Overall, dog ownership made no difference in how children travelled to school, however, 61 per cent of children who regularly walk their pet dog were driven to school, while 36 per cent walked or rode their bicycle.

	Owns a pet dog		
	Walks dog	Does not walk dog	Don't own a dog
Passive mode of transport (i.e. car, bus or taxi)	61%	69%	65%
Active mode of transport (i.e. cycle, skate or scoot)	36%	27%	34%

In summary, children aged 8 to 12 years who regularly walk their pet dog demonstrated a greater participation in active transport and independent mobility in their neighbourhood than their counterparts who reported not walking their pet dog, or not owning a dog. In addition parents of children who regularly walked their pet dog were far less aware of barriers to letting their child move independently around in the neighbourhood. Parents of dog walkers also reported their neighbourhood as being a safe place for their child to move around in.

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Acknowledgement

ACER gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the children and parents who participated in the research.