



# Getting students **moving**



*Catherine is a Research Fellow in ACER's Program Evaluation research program.*

## A current evaluation of the Streets Ahead program uses children's artwork to study physical activity and neighbourhood awareness. **Catherine Underwood** explains this innovative approach.

'This is a map of my neighbourhood.'

Students' responses to this statement are forming part of an analysis of the physical activity and neighbourhood awareness of primary school-aged children.

The study of drawings by more than 600 Victorian students in Years 3 to 6 revealed that children are more likely to associate their neighbourhood with cars and roads than they are with 'green spaces' such as trees, parks and playgrounds.

ACER is conducting this study for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth, as an evaluation of a new VicHealth initiative called Streets Ahead.

Streets Ahead aims to increase physical activity in children aged 4 to 12 years through active transport, such as walking and cycling, and by improving their ability to move through public spaces without adult supervision, also known as independent mobility.

ACER is conducting a three-year evaluation of the Streets Ahead program, in order to determine whether the program achieves its goals.

The study asked children to complete two drawing activities and also involved surveys of students in Years 3 to 6, parent or carer surveys, a road safety knowledge test, a neighbourhood survey, pedestrian counts, and

interviews with school principals, project officers and representatives from their committees.

As well as drawing a map of their neighbourhood, students were also asked to draw 'How I got to school today and what I saw along the way.' The subsequent pictures revealed that only one in four children walks to school each day.

In general, children who walked to school depicted greater detail in their drawing of the neighbourhood. They included street names and identified specific houses (by occupant name or by description such as 'the grumpy lady's house'). They drew detailed elements of green space such as grass, flowers, ovals and lakes as well as images of people outdoors, people walking their dogs, children playing and people riding bikes.

In contrast, children who travelled to school by car tended to draw elements that were isolated and lacked connection to each other. The car and the road became the central theme as they drew images of traffic lights, road signs, office buildings and shops.

The content of these drawings suggest that children who walk to school demonstrate greater familiarity with their local neighbourhood environment whilst children who travel to school by car show a lack of awareness of



the neighbourhood beyond their own street.

Drawing activities were used to study children's habits because drawings allow for the collection of information in an informal and non-threatening way. Drawing allows children of all ages and educational abilities, and of differing language and speech abilities, to freely express themselves. Drawing is not demanding of children and does not require children to read or write.

This study found gender differences in the children's drawings as well as differences based on the age of the student. For example as children got older they tended to use words to write what they saw.

Once the drawings were completed, 10 broad themes were identified in the drawings. These themes were infrastructure, vehicles, buildings, houses, sky, green spaces, people, number of roads, fast food outlets and blank areas. The number of different items depicted that comprised a theme then became the specific 'theme' score. For example a drawing that included roads, traffic lights and crossings would score a three for Infrastructure.

This method enabled the frequency of themes appearing in the drawings to be measured. It was found that 38 per cent of children drew buildings other than houses and 27 per cent drew only

their own street, irrespective of mode of transport to school.

For children in Years 3 to 6, the information collected from the drawings could then be combined with survey responses in order to gain a wider perspective of their neighbourhood awareness and their level of physical activity as related to active transport and independent mobility.

Survey responses showed that the children who walked to school are more likely to know the way to the local park, the local shops or their best friend's house than are their counterparts in cars. They have greater awareness of their local neighbourhood environment.

Survey responses also showed that the children who walk to school are more independently mobile than the children who are driven to school. Forty-two per cent of the children who walked to school reported having travelled independently to their friend's house in the preceding week, compared to only 30 per cent of children who travelled to school by car. Similarly, 52 per cent of walkers made their way to the local shops compared to only 35 per cent of car travellers.

Considering that the children who walked to school spent significantly more time exploring the neighbourhood, it is surprising that the percentage of parents who believed

that 'stranger danger' was a barrier to their child's physical activity in the neighbourhood was about equal for children who walked or were driven to school (76 and 74 per cent respectively).

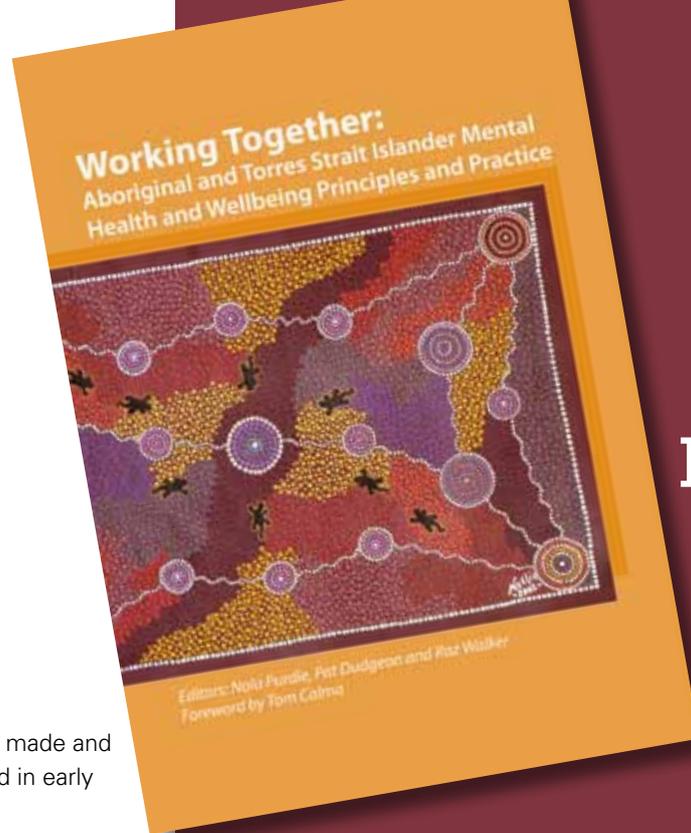
The children themselves showed much lower levels of concern; about half of both the walkers and car travellers said they were worried about strangers. However when broken down by gender it was revealed that while boys' worry for strangers was 43 and 42 per cent respectively for walkers and car travellers, the level of worry held by girls was much closer to their parents'; 62 per cent for children who walked to school and 64 per cent for children who travelled to school by car. It was also interesting to note that children's level of concern about strangers was lower when they were walking their dog.

These findings support the conclusion that children who walked to school showed a higher level of confidence and independence and were more actively engaged in moving around their neighbourhood than those children who were driven to school.

ACER conducted this research in 2009 to collect information as a benchmark for a larger evaluation of the Streets Ahead program. The larger evaluation involves 1 412 students in Years Prep to 6 from 19 primary schools in Victoria.

The same research methods will be used by ACER again at the end of 2010

# New resources to support Indigenous mental health



so that comparisons can be made and the study findings presented in early 2011.

The Streets Ahead program is being implemented in three metropolitan and three regional municipalities. Council project officers will identify and address local barriers to active transport and independent mobility. The program will put innovative strategies in place to encourage children to walk or cycle to school and to travel within their neighbourhoods without adult supervision where safe and appropriate.

Further information about the Streets Ahead program is available from the VicHealth website at <[www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)> ■



A unique new text is set to provide valuable cultural awareness information and practical resources in support of Indigenous mental health. The newly released book, *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*, is the first book of its kind.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has produced the book under contract to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health) in partnership with Kulunga Research Network. It forms part of the Federal Government's commitment to mental health.

According to co-editor, ACER Principal Research Fellow Nola Purdie, a set of resources dedicated to Indigenous mental health has been long awaited.

The book looks in depth at mental health issues that have hit Indigenous communities particularly hard including suicide, alcohol and other substance abuse, anxiety in young Aboriginal people, trauma, family violence and prenatal mental health. The

important issue of appropriate mental health assessments is also carefully addressed.

Previously unpublished models for mental health treatments and an Aboriginal model of healing are included. Other resources have been drawn from *Beyond Blue*.

The book is intended for practitioners and mental health workers as well as students training to be mental health workers. It is available free-of-charge from a website or in print copy by order.

*Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*, edited by Nola Purdie, Pat Dudgeon and Roz Walker with a foreword by Tom Calma was funded by the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, and was developed by ACER and the Kulunga Research Network, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

The book is available from [http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/kulunga/working\\_together/book](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/kulunga/working_together/book)