Judith Lumley Centre

Parental fear as a barrier to children’s independent mobility and resultant physical activity

Dr Sharinne Crawford, 9th May 2018
## Research team

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This project was funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)
Children’s independent mobility (CIM) – what is it and why is it important?

- Children’s freedom or ‘licence’ to move around in public spaces without adult accompaniment:
  - Includes travel to school and other destinations, and free play
  - Beyond just active travel to school (but a key starting point)

- Benefits for children’s development:
  - Important source of physical activity
  - Motor and cognitive skills, sense of identity
  - Independence, responsibility, confidence, self-esteem and social skills
  - Non-competitive, non-structured, social, inexpensive and accessible

(Hillman, 1990; Risotto & Giuliani, 2005; Malone, 2007; Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008; Rudner, 2012; Schoeppe et al., 2013)
Why was it important to know more about CIM?

- Many resources are directed into programs to promote CIM and active travel to school, but most programs report poor effectiveness (Villa-Gonzales et al., 2018; Crawford & Garrard, 2013; VicHealth, 2011).

- Research literature tells us:
  - Parents are the ‘gatekeepers’ to children’s mobility
  - Physical environment, social connectedness influence children’s mobility
  - Parents report many barriers to CIM – fear for their child’s safety is the most common – ‘stranger danger’ and traffic injury

- What was not known: Does parental fear actually influence children’s independent mobility?
Research aims

Phase 1:

- Explore the perceptions of Victorian school age children (8-15 years) and their parents regarding the process of becoming independently mobile, and the supports and barriers to being independently mobile.

Phase 2:

- Determine the unique association between parental fear and children’s independent mobility for parents of Victorian children aged 9-15 years, after taking account of associated family, socio-economic, parent, child and neighbourhood factors.
- Identify barriers and facilitators to parental fear as it pertains to children’s independent mobility.

Phase 3:

- Develop evidence-based recommendations for promoting the independent mobility of primary and secondary school aged children in Victoria.
Methods

Focus Groups (Phase 1)  
Survey (Phase 2)  
Expert Workshops (Phase 3)  
Recommendations
Phase 1 – Focus groups

- Focus groups were conducted in 7 Victorian schools:
  - 12 child focus groups (N = 132; 8-15 years old).
  - 3 parent focus groups (N = 12; with children aged 8-15).
Focus group findings

Children had a broad range of independence.

**Barriers and enablers - four key themes:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Fitting in with family life</th>
<th>“I'd like to not work every day pretty much so I could walk the kids to school easily but I have to work, so a lot of our travel decisions are made because of our circumstances.” (Mum)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhoods and knowing people</td>
<td>“You tend to know a lot of people, I kind of know everyone here... and so you feel safe when you're down the street.” (Grade 6 boy)</td>
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<td>Worried about the weirdos</td>
<td>“My mum is worried about me getting kidnapped or something like that... I feel a bit worried about that too.” (Grade 3-4 girl)</td>
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<td>Finding a reference point for decision making and boundaries</td>
<td>“I probably wouldn’t have let my kids do it but then I think well obviously that parent is confident with their child doing it... maybe I can instil a little bit more independence in them as well... so it takes sometimes another parent.” (Mum)</td>
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A complex issue for parents

After practicing the route to school and discussing possible risks and strategies with his 11-year old son, John allowed him to travel to school alone.

“...We were also sort of crossing our fingers and thinking what are the chances of there being someone [dangerous] within a kilometre and a half... it took us a bloody long time, and I’m okay. I can get to a point where I really trust him... but my wariness about others and in odd situations...”
Phase 2 – State-wide parent survey

Neighbourhood
- Socio-economic disadvantage
- Metro, regional area
- Likelihood of risk
- Liveability
- Distance to school
- Safe crossings, traffic volume, footpaths

Social & Community
- Disapproval from others
- Social capital

Individual & Family Characteristics
- Parent age, gender
- Child gender, disability
- Language spoken
- Family structure
- No. of children <=18
- Parent education, work

Parent Attitudes & Experience
- General fear; fear of strangers*
- Potential benefits of CIM
- Child competence
- Child carries a mobile phone

Independent Mobility & Parental Fear

*Parental Fear (4 items), e.g.
“I am always worrying about my child’s safety when they are out without an adult.”

Fear of Strangers (5 items), e.g.
“I am fearful my child will be approached by a stranger if they go out alone.”
Phase 2 – Statewide parent survey

Telephone survey of a random sample of 2,002 parents of children aged 9-15 years in Victoria.
Data Analysis

- Sample stratified by child age, 3 groups:
  - 9-10 years; 11-13 years; 14-15 years

- Multiple linear regression performed:
  - CIM and PF outcomes*

- Is parental fear related to lower CIM, alongside other factors?
  - CIM: Checklist of travel / play (school, park, library etc)
  - Each child had a range 0-15 activities

- What drives parents’ fear?
  - Using the 2 study-specific measures developed

*All analyses adjusted for: parent, child age and gender; location; child disability; family structure and no. of children; parent education; LOTE, no. of cars.
## Survey findings

Sample characteristics (N=2,002)

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Female Parent, n</td>
<td>1,401 (70.0 %)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female Child, n</td>
<td>944 (47.15 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Age, years, m(sd)</td>
<td>44.8 (6.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age, n</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9 - 10 years</td>
<td>562 (28.1 %)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 - 13 years</td>
<td>903 (45.1 %)</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 - 15 years</td>
<td>537 (26.8 %)</td>
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<td>Non-metro, n</td>
<td>580 (29.0 %)</td>
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<td>LOTE, n</td>
<td>405 (20.2 %)</td>
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<td>Tertiary Degree, n</td>
<td>915 (46.1 %)</td>
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Survey findings
What does CIM look like for Victorian children?

Number of independent activities children are permitted to do

% children with 1 or more independent trips to school per week
Survey findings
How ‘fearful’ were Victorian parents?

Range of Parental Fear (left) and Fear of Strangers scores
Survey findings

CIM and Parental fear according to age

Number of independent activities children are permitted to do

Parental fear for their child’s safety when independently mobile
Who are the ‘least mobile’ children?

Non-modifiable factors:
- Younger (9-10 years old)
- Have a disability
- Speak a Language other than English
- Girls
- Live in a metropolitan area
- Have a younger parent
- Have parents with lower educational attainment
- Live in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods
Children are less independently mobile when:

Modifiable factors:

Parents
- Are concerned about child safety and harm from strangers
- Doubt child’s ability to travel safely
- Perceive fewer benefits of CIM
- Perceive more disapproval from others

Children
- Don’t have access to a mobile phone when out and about
Parents who are more fearful:

- Have more symptoms of psychological distress
- Have a more protective parenting style
- Doubt their child’s ability to travel safely
- Perceive fewer benefits of CIM
- Perceive more disapproval from family, other parents and school staff
- Rate their neighbourhood as more ‘risky’, less safe and less liveable
Key findings

**Parental Fear**
- Psychological distress
- ‘Protective’ parenting style
- Neighbourhood risky
- Neighbourhood unsafe

**Children’s Independent Mobility**
- Doubt in child ability
- Others might disapprove
- Less value in benefits of CIM
- Parental fear
- Time pressures
- No mobile phone
Phase 3 – Key stakeholder workshops

- 4 workshops
- 47 professionals from broad range of sectors
  - Local Govt, Sport, Health, Research, Environment, Parent groups
  - Females (74.5%) and males (25.5%)
- Qualitative data were collected regarding:
  - Current work to promote children’s independent mobility
  - Identify potential opportunities to remove barriers, support parents and children
Phase 3 Findings

- Policy & Legislation
- Built Environment
- Social & Community
- Family
- Parent & Child
Study strengths and limitations

- **Strengths:**
  - Mixed methods include parents, children, stakeholders
  - First study to test the role of parental fear in CIM
  - Rigorous sampling, includes fathers, regional locations
  - Measure development in Phase 2

- **Limitations**
  - Cross-sectional, causal and reciprocal influences not known
  - Brief measures of complex constructs
  - Some parents under-represented in sample (sole-parents; recent migrants / LOTE)
Conclusions

- Parental fear is related to children’s independent mobility

BUT

- Transitions to independent mobility for children and parents are complex
- Children’s independence is influenced by a range of factors
- Parents’ responding to their own concerns, child needs and abilities, within their own environments
- Barriers to CIM will not be addressed by single-solution approaches
The steps to helping your child become more independent

1. Dependent
   - Younger children (usually under five) who aren’t ready to become independent just yet
   - Set a good example by walking or cycling to local places, such as to kindergarten.
   - Look for ways to encourage appropriate independence with everyday activities like getting dressed or playing in the garden unsupervised.
   - Observe your child’s behaviour and independence, and look for signs of readiness.

2. Pre-independent
   - Children who are moving from dependent to independent with your support
   - Walk/ride with your child around your neighbourhood, or to the shops, park or school, to:
     - Demonstrate safe travel and healthy activity
     - Practice and reinforce the skills your child needs to travel and play safely, such as riding a bike and knowing the road rules
     - Create opportunities to discuss safety issues and strategies
     - Recognise and praise improvements in your child’s skills and behaviour
     - Help your child become familiar with the local neighbourhood
     - Identify the safest routes (e.g. where there are safer road crossings)
     - Judge when your child is ready to start being independent mobile
     - Make a plan with your child about possible strategies for when things go wrong, such as getting lost or a stranger approaches them, or if they or their friends get injured
     - Slowly build independence by letting your child do things like visit a friend’s house down the street or ride their bike around the block
     - Look for ways to expand your child’s independent mobility, e.g. going to the local shop or park instead of just to school.
     - Agree on a plan with your child for the transition towards independence, and set milestones and boundaries.

3. Independent
   - Children who have freedom to move around in public spaces without adult supervision
   - Remind your child about strategies for when things go wrong, such as what to do if approached by a stranger.
   - Negotiate and agree with your child on any milestones and boundaries as he or she gets more capable and confident.
   - Consider and encourage your child to use a mobile phone to support their independence.
Does the media play a part in CIM?

“You think about these things that have happened and that you hear about... just from the media, the Daniel Morcombe type things...” (Mum)

“I reckon there's the same number of weirdos [than when I was a child] but you just hear more about them.” (Mum)

“On the news, I tend to watch the news, you know, you have incidents that happen every day of murders and all that.” (Grade 6 boy)
Media reporting of ‘stranger danger’ and other factors relating to children’s independent mobility

- An audit and examination of media representations of CIM during the telephone survey period and preceding month

- Aims:
  1. To identify CIM-related media coverage which coincided with a state-wide survey of parents’ attitudes towards CIM;
  2. To compare CIM-related media coverage to parents’ attitudes towards CIM, including:
     a) Parental fear
     b) Parents’ perception of CIM benefits

- Funded by La Trobe University
Methods

Retrospective search of databases to identify print, online and television reports meeting the search criteria over a 3-month period (September – December) in 2013.

- Factiva (newspaper and online news articles); Informit Complete (TV news programs 5pm-10pm)
- State-based and national (e.g. The Australian, ABC news) reports that were available to Victorian parents
- 2 separate searches
  1. Risks of CIM – strangers; environment (e.g. traffic)
  2. Benefits of CIM

Articles were included in the audit if they were:

- Relevant to children under 18 years old
- Directly related to CIM
Preliminary results

Factiva (newspaper and online news articles):
- Risks of CIM = 82
- Benefits of CIM = 6

Informit (TV news programs):
- Risks of CIM = 70+
- Benefits of CIM = 0
Stranger danger cases trigger warning to parents

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News, 1 November 2013, 115 words, (English)

Albury police have issued a warning to parents after two children were approached by strangers over the past two days.

On Wednesday, a 12-year-old girl was walking home from school along Douglas Road at Lavington when she was approached by a ...

Document ABCNEW0020131101e9b10003a

LEFT IN FEAR

Hannah Knight

Dangerous cyclists: Parents at an inner city primary school are terrified that cyclists commuting to work could kill or maim a child

Sandra Sully; John Hill; Duncan Gay; Karen Roach; Ryan Park; Harold Scruby

Ten 5pm News (TEN NETWORK); Time: 17:00; Broadcast Date: Thursday, 19th September 2013; Duration: 1 min., 52 sec.

Pupils pound the pavement to help health

Melton Leader, 29 October 2013, 134 words, (English)

PRIMARY school students are walking their way towards a healthier future. As part of Walk to School month in November, schools like Taylors Hill Primary School are urging students to make walking part of their daily routine.

Document MELBAC0020131029e9at0000n
Preliminary results

The graph shows the number of articles/programs over weeks for different categories:

- **Newspapers - risks**
- **Newspapers - benefits**
- **TV news - risks**

A notable event marked is "CATI started" which occurred at Week 1.
So what can we take away from this?

- Research ongoing; Next steps to map the Parental Fear scores against timeline and the parent Perceptions of Benefits, to assess parent attitudes in relation to media coverage.

- Early findings indicate an over-representation of risk vs benefits of CIM in mainstream media in Victoria in 2013 - 25:1

- Parents are being painted as ‘irrational’ and ‘overly anxious’ (O’Connor & Brown, 2013), accused of ‘bubble-wrapping’ and being ‘helicopters’
  - When we are seeing these images and messages in the media – is it any wonder that we are fearful?

- Academics, media, government, schools and other stakeholders should be highlighting the benefits of CIM, but also acknowledging the difficult decision-making context for parents.

- Overall, evidence-based strategies to build supportive environments to support parents are required e.g. schools, communities, neighbourhoods.
Worries, ‘weirdos’, neighborhoods and knowing people: a qualitative study with children and parents regarding children's independent mobility

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What Influences Parents’ Fear about Children’s Independent Mobility?
Evidence from a State-Wide Survey of Australian Parents

Shannon K. Bennetts, PhD\textsuperscript{1,2}, Amanda R. Cooklin, PhD\textsuperscript{1}, Sharinne Crawford, PhD\textsuperscript{1}, Fabrizio D’Esposito, PhD\textsuperscript{3,4}, Naomi J. Hackworth, DPsych\textsuperscript{1,2,4}, Julie Green, PhD\textsuperscript{2,4,5}, Jan Matthews, MEd\textsuperscript{4}, Lyndall Strazdins, PhD\textsuperscript{5}, Stephen R. Zubrick, PhD\textsuperscript{7,8}, and Jan M. Nicholson, PhD\textsuperscript{1}
Helping parents to support children to safely travel and play outside independently as they grow.

Resource 1: How to help your kids get around safely on their own (745KB)
Resource 2: Parental fear: a barrier to the independent mobility of children – Research highlights (2.8MB)
Resource 3: Parental fear as a barrier to children’s independent mobility and resultant physical activity – Final report (1.6MB)
Thank you

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Herald Sun, 17/09/17