Children’s Independent Mobility Study

We would like to extend our gratitude to all the families who participated in the Children’s Independent Mobility Study in 2010. We would also like to thank the 16 participating schools for their assistance in the data collection process; your help is very much appreciated! We received a great response: overall 430 primary schoolchildren and 258 secondary schoolchildren, and their parents completed our surveys. Among the schoolchildren, 441 attended schools in urban areas of Melbourne, while 247 attended schools in rural Victoria. Within this newsletter we have included some of the interesting results and related information.

Our study examined children’s independent mobility which refers to their freedom to move around their neighbourhood without adult accompaniment. We also examined children’s active transport which refers to walking/cycling for transport (or travelling by skateboard or scooter).

‘Mobility licences’: what do parents allow their children to do?

Among primary schoolchildren, 40% were allowed to travel home from school alone, around a half (55%) were allowed to cross main roads alone, few (2%) were allowed to go out alone after dark, around a fifth (19%) were allowed to cycle on main roads alone, and 11% were allowed to travel on local buses alone.

Among secondary schoolchildren, most (80%) were allowed to travel home from school alone, and almost all (97%) were allowed to cross main roads alone, but few (12%) were allowed to go out alone after dark. Over 60% were allowed to cycle on main roads alone, and to travel on local buses alone.

There was little difference in what parents allowed their children to do, according to whether they lived in urban or rural areas. However, on average, compared with girls, boys were allowed to do more of the above activities.
How do children travel to school?

Participation rates by primary/secondary schoolchildren in each travel mode on the journey to school are shown in Figure 1. Overall most schoolchildren (43%) travelled to school by car, but the school bus was the most popular method of travel to school among secondary schoolchildren (predominantly those living in rural areas).

![Figure 1: Participation rates in transport modes on journey to school](image)

When asked how they would like to travel to and from school, 30% of primary schoolchildren reported they would like to walk to school (this was about the same as the actual proportion doing so), while 36% reported they would like to cycle there. Among secondary schoolchildren, 21% reported they would like to walk to school, while 12% reported they would like to cycle there. Therefore, far more schoolchildren would like to engage in active transport to school than do currently.

Urban and rural schoolchildren tended to use different modes of travel to school (Figure 2 below). Most urban and rural primary schoolchildren travelled to
school by car. Among urban secondary schoolchildren, equal proportions travelled by car or public transport, while among rural secondary schoolchildren travel by school bus was most prevalent.

Figure 2: Participation rates in transport modes on journey to school

Independent mobility on the school journey

The proportion of schoolchildren who travelled to school without adult accompaniment is shown in Figure 3. The results contradict the usual pattern where independent mobility increases with age. For all groupings except urban
girls, lower proportions of secondary schoolchildren compared with primary schoolchildren were travelling to school without adult accompaniment. This is related to the lower participations rates in active transport among secondary schoolchildren as shown in Figure 2. Distance is a major barrier to walking or cycling to school, and secondary schoolchildren often travel further than primary schoolchildren do to school.

Figure 3: Proportion of schoolchildren who travelled to school without adult accompaniment

Independent mobility on weekends
Around half of all primary schoolchildren did one independent activity (e.g. go to the park, visit the library without adult accompaniment) on weekends. In urban areas, slightly higher proportions of boys compared with girls did so, while in rural areas slightly higher proportions of girls did so. Most secondary schoolchildren did at least one independent activity on weekends, and urban secondary boys tended to do the most.

Journeys to other destinations
Parents were asked about journeys that their child made to destinations other than school that were within walking distance. Less than a quarter (23%) of schoolchildren made these journeys without adult accompaniment, while 42% of schoolchildren were usually taken by parents to these destinations (the remainder were taken by parents on some but not all of the journeys).

Of those children (n=292) who were usually taken by parents from home to places within walking distance, most (81%) were attending primary school, and most (80%) did not walk or cycle on these journeys; instead travel by car was the usual mode. On average, parents accompanied their children on three to four non-school journeys per week. Concern about traffic was the most common reason for parents accompanying their child on trips that were within walking distance. The next most prevalent concerns were in relation to their child being considered too unreliable or too young, and in relation to danger from adults or ‘stranger danger’.

**Bicycle ownership and frequency of cycling**

Almost all schoolchildren (93%) reported that they owned a bicycle. However, few (primary, 27%; secondary, 17%) cycled at least three times per week, including weekends. This was in addition to the low rates of cycling to school reported earlier (primary, 10%; secondary, 4%).

**Mobile phone ownership**

While most secondary schoolchildren (84%) owned a mobile phone, less than a fifth of primary schoolchildren (18%) did so. Most parents (88%) whose child owned a mobile phone stated that this made them feel more confident about allowing their child to go out alone.

**Access to cars**

Car ownership was high. Only 1% of households did not have regular use of a car, and 72% of households had two or more cars.
How did parents travel to school when they were children?

When aged 8 to 9 years, most parents (67%) had usually walked to school, but few (6%) had cycled to school. Almost half the parents reported they had been allowed to get about alone at an earlier age than they would allow their child to because nowadays there is greater traffic danger (45%) and greater risk of harm from strangers (44%). A quarter of parents reported that greater access nowadays to a family car(s) was a contributing factor, while 30% of parents reported that they had more free time than their child who has more structured leisure activities. Few parents (7%) reported that nowadays there is a greater risk of bullying by other children.

Summary

Walking and cycling for transport can make important contributions to children’s physical activity. On our school visits we saw that many schools supported cycling to school through provision of bike sheds or racks, as well as Bike Education programs. However, in areas where distance between home and school is a barrier to active transport, it is important to concentrate efforts to promote active transport and independent mobility on trips to other neighbourhood destinations. Our findings demonstrated high levels of parental accompaniment and mainly travel by car on local trips that were within walking distance. In areas where there are appropriate pavements, walking tracks and bike paths, walking and cycling are highly beneficial for children’s physical and mental health, and also reduce carbon emissions and dependency on fossil fuels.
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