

# **Free Range Kids: Independence and the Urban Child**

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**Anna Russell, 3240760**

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1 – Setting the Scene .....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Introduction	
1.2 Research objective	
1.3 Methodology	
1.4 Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 2 – The Health and Wellbeing of Australian Children .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 The health of Australia’s children	
2.2 The importance of activity and play to children’s wellbeing	
2.3 Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 3 – Understanding Children’s Independence .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Definitions and measurement of independence	
3.2 Why independence matters for children	
3.3 Broader social benefits of children’s independence	
3.4 Intergenerational changes in children’s independence	
3.5 The influence of gender, age and culture on children’s independence	
3.6 Location characteristics impacting children’s independence	
3.7 Family and parent characteristics impacting children’s independence	
3.8 Parental concern and children’s independence	
3.9 Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 4 – Key Results from Primary Research .....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 Characteristics of parents and neighbourhoods in the research	
4.2 Independence given – an overview	
4.3 Perception of age-appropriate independence	
4.4 Influence of family and neighbourhood characteristics	
4.5 What worries parents about giving children more independence?	
4.6 Statistical risk of harm for Australian children	
4.7 Relationship between risk of harm and parental concerns	
4.8 Conclusion	

**Chapter 5 – Understanding the Factors behind Parental Concern ..... 36**

- 5.1 Social trends: Anxiety and risk aversion
- 5.2 Family dynamics and parenting practices
- 5.3 Neighbourhood and community dynamics
- 5.4 Urban form and traffic
- 5.5 Conclusion

**Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Opportunities ..... 41**

- 6.1 Conclusions: some key observations
- 6.2 Opportunities for intervention

**References ..... 43**

**Appendices ..... 47**

- Appendix One: Project Information Statement and Consent Form
- Appendix Two: Parent interview questions
- Appendix Three: Expert interview questions
- Appendix Four: Quantitative data sources and manipulation techniques

## Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

*‘Children, like chickens, deserve a life outside the cage. The overprotected life is stunting and stifling, not to mention boring for all concerned’*

*Lenore Skenazy, 2008*

### 1.1 Introduction

The broad concept for this research project is the idea of ‘free range kids’. ‘Free range’ children have freedom to explore their environment, facilitating age-appropriate social, physical and problem solving skills. The proportion of children permitted to independently access the urban environment has significantly declined over the last 50 years, both in Australia and other developed nations (Whitzman, Worthington and Mizrahi 2009). A 2009 study by the British television channel Eden found that sixty four percent of British children played outside less than once a week and twenty percent had never climbed a tree (Stokes 2010). In Australia ‘one in twenty children never leave the inside of their homes to play’ (Malone, cited in Whitzman and Pike 2007, p.10).

Children’s independent mobility has also been a concern for some time. Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) found that from 1971 to 1990 the proportion of children walking to school alone fell by a multiple of five, whilst Gaster (1991) observed noticeable decreases in the freedom and activity of New York children from the 1930s to late 1960s.

A reduction in children’s independence does not, on the surface, appear to be a pressing health concern, but there are indications that it may have far-reaching and substantial impacts on numerous aspects of children’s health. Reduced freedom to explore and play independently increases anxious attachment and reduces social competence (Hattenmoser 1995). Isolation from the natural environment and its diverse stimuli compromises physical, intellectual and emotional development (O’Brien 2004, Tranter 2007). Reduced independent mobility has also been linked to higher rates of obesity, reduced self-confidence, and reduced emotional resilience (Arez and Neto 1999, Armstrong 1993, Prezza et al. 2001).

The health impacts of children's activity, play and independence has gained mainstream attention in response to recent media interest in the rates of child obesity and inactivity across the western world. Respected academics such as Tim Gill and David Engwicht and journalists, including Richard Louv, have used this opportunity to press home their message about the dangers of rearing a 'bubble wrap generation'. Speaking to 'Orion Magazine', Louv summarises his concerns, saying 'for tens of thousands of years of human history, children have spent most of their lives outside ... There have to be profound impacts on emotional, physical and spiritual health when that changes' (Louv 2007, p.1).

There is a substantial body of research on children's independence in Australia (Tranter 1993, Malone 2007, Thompson 2009, Gleeson 2008), but it focuses more on the impact of environmental factors such as traffic volumes, crime rates and urban sprawl. Although parents beliefs about age appropriate independence are addressed, but the social and psychological constructs behind these beliefs are given less emphasis. Given the role of parents as the 'gatekeepers' of independence, the current research is focused on understanding how parents concerns have developed, and how they in turn influence children's independence. Understanding why parents restrict their children's independence may assist planners and policy makers to identify ways to improve the health and wellbeing outcomes for urban children.

## 1.2 Research objective

This project explores the opportunities for independence granted to primary school aged children in urban Australia. In particular, I look at the role of parents as the ‘gatekeepers’ of children’s independence, and the way in which social and environmental factors influence the level of independence they permit their children to have.

The key research question is:

How do parental perceptions influence the level of independence given to primary school children in Australian cities?

Secondary questions addressed in this research are:

- i. What level of independence do primary school children have in accessing and using the urban environment?
- ii. What are the tangible environmental concerns and the limiting social factors preventing parents from giving their children greater freedom?
- iii. What changes would encourage parents to afford their children greater freedoms of mobility and play?

### **1.3 Research methodology**

This research incorporates both qualitative and quantitative primary research, supported by a comprehensive literature review. The primary research comprises three key elements – expert interviews, parent interviews and quantitative analysis of child safety and accident data. Prior to conducting the research, the proposal was submitted to, and subsequently approved by, the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Approval Panel (HREAP). In line with HREAP requirements, all participants were issued with project information statements prior to participating. Consent forms were obtained for all qualitative interviews and are available from the author on request. Copies of the project information statement and consent form are contained in Appendix One.

#### **1.3.1 Parent Interviews**

Parent interviews provide a means of teasing out the discrepancies between the actual physical risks faced by children and the risk of harm perceived by their parents in association with various independent activities. These interviews contextualise and explore parents' concerns around offering their child increased levels of independence.

#### **Sample selection**

Parents from ten families across the Sydney Metropolitan area were interviewed, representing a variety of child ages, socio-economic status, geographic location and parent characteristics. I used a purposeful sampling technique, obtaining as much information as possible about prospective participants beforehand to ensure a mix of information rich respondents.

First, I sent an email request to colleagues and acquaintances, briefly outlining the project and asking for participation or recommendation of potential participants. This generated a first wave of seven interviews with parents from a range of socio-demographic, professional and geographic backgrounds. Snowball sampling from interview participants was then used to obtain additional parent interviews within a socio-demographic cohort. Three families were recruited via snowball sampling, but one family withdrew from the research.

## Interview method

Parent interviews were semi-structured and based around a question guide contained in Appendix Two. This method allows the flexibility to explore individual differences in parents' perceptions, whilst retaining sufficient similarity in interview questions and topics for parents' responses to be compared.

**Figure 1:** *Geographic distribution of households interviewed*



## Classification of parents for analysis

Parents have been grouped using the same classification system employed by Tranter and Pawson (2001), using socio-economic status and neighbourhood traffic volumes. These dimensions were selected on the basis of prior research (Tranter 1993, Appleyard 1981, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990) in which both traffic volume and socio-economic status were significant mediators of children's independent mobility and parental risk perception. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has noted less positive perceptions of neighbourhood safety amongst parents in lower socio-economic areas (AIHW 2009), and Hart (1979) found an inverse correlation between levels of children's freedom and parental incomes.



In evaluating parents' responses, the urban density of each family's neighbourhood including key urban form characteristics was also noted, as again this has been previously identified as a key mediator in children's play behaviours (Ziegler, in Michelson et al 1979) and independence (Tranter 1993). Full details of parent and neighbourhood classification are contained in Chapter Four and the influence of these factors on independence is discussed in Chapter Five.

### **1.3.2 Expert interviews**

To supplement the learning obtained from parent interviews with academic and professional insights, experts in the fields of children's health, independent mobility and play, and social psychology were also interviewed. These interviews provided insights into the existing body of work in each expert's field, as well as a first-person perspective on the influence of parental perceptions on children's independence.

The experts interviewed for this project were Dr. Paul Tranter (Australian Defence Force Academy), an expert in children's independent mobility, and Dr. Hugh Mackay, a renowned social researcher and member of the Australia Council. Dr. Mackay's books 'Generations', 'Advance Australia Where' and 'Reinventing Australia' detail the socio-cultural changes in Australia across the past half-century. A third expert, who requested not to be named, provided a child health perspective including views on the importance of play, independence and access to natural environments.

These interviews were also semi-structured, each focused on specific questions pertaining to each expert's body of work, and that of their peers. A list of interview questions is provided in Appendix Three. Dr Tranter was interviewed by phone due to geographic considerations, but Dr Mackay and the child health expert were interviewed face to face.

### **1.3.3 Qualitative analysis techniques used**

To analyse the data I used a thematic approach, employing a blend of content and discourse analysis to identify themes and their inter-relationships in the transcripts. Initial thematic analysis during the research process was paired with a more detailed analysis of transcripts in which content was broken down into units, and then grouped into higher order themes as per the method recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). To ensure quality data for analysis, audio

recordings were made of each interview and then transcribed in full. Transcripts are not included in this report, but are available from the author on request.

The framework for analysis is strongly informed by the substantial existing body of research on children's independence, as outlined in Chapter Three. Themes identified in the primary research are connected back to this pre-defined framework in Chapter Five.

### **1.3.4 Quantitative analysis of environmental risk**

In addition to detailing parental risk perceptions and the associated levels of mobility ascribed to urban children in various settings, this research also looks at the relationship between parental fears and the probable risk of each form of harm occurring to unsupervised children. The three areas in which a comparative analysis has been conducted are:

- Road Safety - child pedestrian and cyclist accidents: fatalities and injuries
- Stranger danger – physical assault, sexual assault and abduction of minor children by strangers
- Child injuries – rates of children being injured or killed whilst at play

Data on each of the above was obtained from publicly available sources and combined to provide a picture of contemporary and historical risk of harm. Where possible, statistics were translated into rates per 100,000 to control for population growth, and time series data is used to show historical trends. A full list of data sources and the manipulations applied to achieve incidence rates is contained in Appendix Four.

### **1.3.5 Research constraints**

All research has some limitations. In relation to the present study, the primary limitation is the small sample size necessitated by project timelines, although this is somewhat offset by the choice of information rich interviewees. The qualitative interviews provide feedback from ten parents, representing nine Sydney families, as well as the perspectives of three experts in relevant fields. Purposeful sampling has been used to maximise variability between families in the research, however a number of groups were over or under-represented.

The final sample skews towards middle to upper socio-economic households in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs and North Shore. Whilst prior studies (Tranter and Pawson 2001, Hillman, Adams and

Whitelegg 1990) suggest there are more substantial issues of curtailed independence amongst higher socio-economic groups and in high-density locations, it would have been useful to obtain feedback from other social strata for comparison.

## **1.4 Conclusions**

Chapter One has outlined the context for and focus of this project. There are increased recognition of the child health and wellbeing concerns associated with a decrease in children's independence. The current research explores how parents' perceptions influence children's independence. The research method is predominantly qualitative, interviewing parents as well as experts in the topic area. These findings are supplemented with quantitative analysis of risk data.

Chapter Two looks at the state of and influences on Australian children's health and wellbeing, and is the first of two chapters reviewing the body of literature and research on child independence.

## **Chapter 2: The Health and Wellbeing of Australian Children**

This chapter looks at the health and wellbeing of contemporary Australian children, and the role of play and physical activity in healthy child development.

### **2.1 The health of Australia's children**

The Key National Indicators of Child Health Development and Wellbeing produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009, p.10) suggest that, on some measures, Australia's children are extremely healthy indeed. Infant mortality rates halved from 1986 to 2006, injury deaths fell by close to forty percent from 1997 to 2006 and immunisation rates have reached an all time high of ninety three percent for two year olds. Dental health, literacy and primary school attendance rates remain world leading. But despite these positive indicators, the health and wellbeing of Australia's children is declining. In *Children of the Lucky Country*, Dr Fiona Stanley describes the rapid increase in rates of childhood obesity and diabetes as 'so dramatic and so recent that they have really caught doctors napping' (2005, p.51) and warns that 'the present generation of children may be the first in the history of the world to have lower life expectancy than their parents.' (2005, p.52)

#### **Chronic physical conditions**

In 2005, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2004-05 National Health Survey found that forty one percent of Australian children have at least one long-term chronic health problem, of which the most prevalent are asthma and diabetes. 2006 data from the National Diabetes Register shows that the incidence of diabetes is rising, increasing from 19 cases per 100,000 in 2000 to 23 per 100,000 in 2006. The rise in diabetes incidence cannot be accounted for by genetic causes, indicating that environment and lifestyle play a significant role (Chong et al 2007, AIHW 2009).

#### **Obesity**

Overweight is a significant contributor to diabetes risk and has, in itself, been flagged as a significant health concern amongst Australian children. Obesity is a risk factor for other serious childhood health problems including asthma and sleep apnoea (AIHW 2009), as well as the

psychological distress caused by discrimination, bullying and teasing amongst peers (Griffiths et al 2006).

Rapid increases in the incidence of overweight and obesity have been observed across the last 30 years, rising from below five percent in 1960 to an estimated one-fifth of children in 2007. Six percent of school children now classed as 'obese' and a further seventeen percent classed as overweight, placing Australia second to the United States on rates of child obesity and co-morbid conditions.

### **Mental health concerns**

Children's health encompasses mental as well as physical aspects. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2004–05 National Health Survey found that nine percent of Australian children aged four to fourteen years have a mental health problem, and that one fifth of mental health related medical visits in this age group are related to ADHD (ABS 2006). The most common mental health issue for Australian children is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), with a prevalence of three to five percent, although Orgill (cited in AIHW 2009) suggests that incidence in the school age population may range between ten and twenty percent. Of particular concern is the prescription of psychotropic stimulants to treat ADHD, as the long-term effects of these stimulants on the developing brain is unknown (Mackey and Koprass 2001, cited in AIHW 2009).

Anxiety related problems are also increasing amongst children and has an incidence ten times that of diabetes (AIHW 2009). Anxiety may have profound effects on the development of pro-social and adaptive behaviour, lasting through to adulthood (Mackay 2007).

### **Overall wellbeing**

The health indicators listed above combine to paint a picture of children who, despite having better health opportunities are 'fatter, sicker and sadder than ever before' (Gleeson 2005). Poorer mental and physical health outcomes have occurred concurrent to a marked reduction in children's active play and independent mobility in Australian cities, and there is evidentiary support for a causative relationship between the two trends (Stanley 2003, Thomson 2009, Gleeson 2005, Mackett et al 2007).

## **2.2 The importance of activity and play to children's wellbeing**

Children need adequate activity, good nutrition and the physical, cognitive and social stimuli to encourage age appropriate skill development. Physical activity and unstructured play have been identified as areas in which Australia is slipping, and it is therefore useful to understand the role these elements play in determining child health and wellbeing. The importance of physical activity and play to healthy child development is outlined below.

### **The role of physical activity in child health and wellbeing**

Children need to be active for physical health and also to facilitate the development of age appropriate skills. Physical activity develops fine and gross motor skills, proprioception and spatial awareness. Actively engaging with the environment teaches problem solving, improves risk perception and, if activity is undertaken in a group, stimulates social and linguistic skills. Physical movement may also have distinct mental health benefits. Children with ADHD who spend time outdoors demonstrate significantly improved concentration skills (Louv 2007), whilst regular physical activity can reduce anxiety and improve mood in children vulnerable to depression (Kingham and Ussher 2007).

Australian children do, for the most part, meet the minimum health requirements for daily physical activity, but their lifestyle is more sedentary than previous generations. 74% of nine to fourteen year olds meet the minimum health requirement of 60 minutes of moderate exercise per day, but this is increasingly achieved through organised activities rather than play. Electronic entertainment has widely replaced active play - the average primary school child in NSW spends fourteen hours per week in front of a computer or television screen (AIHW 2009). In addition to physical health risks, children who favour screen time over play are at risk of losing the social connections, communication skills and personal growth opportunities that interactive play affords (Stanley et al 2005).

### **The importance of play in child development**

Children left to their own devices express their energy and activity in various ways, however their self-directed activity often takes the form of play. Play has a critical role in the development of

cognitive, social and motor skills and is a necessary - albeit not solely sufficient - condition for healthy child development (Edgar and Edgar 2008).

Corkery (1987, in van de Water 1999) identifies four categories of play that each has different and important contributions to child development. Active play such as climbing or running develops gross motor skills. Creative play such as craft or building blocks develops fine motor skills and problem solving. Social or dramatic play is cooperative and improves development of social and negotiating skills. Finally, quiet play includes reading and other restful activities and supports emotional development. All four forms of play are necessary for healthy child development (Corkery 1987, Edgar and Edgar 2008). It should be noted here that there are distinct differences between play initiated independently by children and play supervised by adults; this is addressed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Opportunities for play are considerably repressed amongst the current generation, both in volume and variety. Australian children spend less than ten percent of their time engaged in traditional non-electronic play (AIHW 2009). Five percent of Australian children never play outdoors (Malone 2009), and fewer than four percent have unrestricted opportunity to play outside, compared to thirty percent a generation earlier (Tandy 1999). There is mounting concern (Gill 2006, Mackay 2007) that this generation of children will be poorly equipped to face real world challenges when they emerge from their suburban cocoons.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Chapter Two outlined the current health status of Australian children, highlighting a worrying picture of a ‘fatter, sicker, sadder’ generation of children burdened by chronic disease and poor wellbeing despite their opportunities. The reduction in two mainstays of childhood, physical activity and independent play, may have significant negative effects on children’s mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. These two elements play a significant role in healthy child development. Chapter Three explores the particular benefits of independence in both play and mobility, as well as recent trends in children’s independence across developed countries. Social and environmental factors behind these trends are discussed, and the role of parental risk perception in dictating children’s independence is introduced.





## **Chapter 3: Understanding Children's Independence**

The previous chapter presented some concerning statistics on the health of Australian children, and examined the benefits of physical activity and play to children's wellbeing. This chapter looks more specifically at independent play and mobility. Trends in children's independence are explored and a widely used method for measuring independence is detailed. The social, cultural and environmental factors contributing to changes in children's independence are also explored in more detail.

### **3.1 Definitions and measurement of independence**

Children's independence is the opportunity to undertake an activity without the presence or supervision of adult others, be they parents, carers, teachers or guardians. Obtaining independence to complete an activity alone may signal a developmental milestone (such as riding a bike or tying a shoelace), or a social milestone such as obtaining a drivers license or staying home without a parent. The definition of 'independence' used in this research encompasses both independent mobility and independent unsupervised play.

#### **Types of independence**

In the following chapters, 'independent mobility' collectively refers to children's unsupervised active transport by foot, bicycle or other self-propelled means. This is synchronous with its definition in previous research (Tranter 1993, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990). 'Independent play' refers to other unsupervised activity such as climbing trees, ball games, exploring public (or private) space and role-playing games. Both independent mobility and independent play refer primarily to activity that takes place outside the home.

#### **Measuring independence**

Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) introduce the concept of 'licenses of independence' in their 1971 and 1990 studies of children's independent mobility in England. Licences of independence are a list of activities ranging from walking to school to going out at night alone. This measure has been adopted in subsequent research (Tranter 1993, Tranter and Pawson 2001,

Mackett et al 2007) and provides a consistent means to measure the freedom given to cohorts of children.

### **3.2 Why independence matters for children**

Children's intellectual and psychological development benefits greatly from the opportunity to actively explore the environment (Nicholson-Lord 1987) and they cannot do this from the back seat of a car.

The creativity, range of activities and amount of energy expended in play and active travel is significantly greater when children are unsupervised. In 2007, Mackett et al conducted a study in which children were equipped with GPS tracking mechanisms and their activity patterns monitored. The study found that, when accompanied, children move more rapidly in a linear direction but when unaccompanied they move more in total, exploring their environment, and also expend significantly more energy. De Monchaux (1981) concurs, finding that 'except when restrained by adults, children are almost perpetually active, searching for things to do... these activities are often referred to as play [which is] a complex and important activity allowing children to learn and grow' (p. 11). Unsupervised children exhibit different play and travel patterns, indicating supervision is a significant inhibitor of the natural play needed for positive development (Mackett et al 2007).

### **3.3 Broader social benefits of children's independence**

Cities that encourage children's independent mobility are cities that provide high amenity for citizens of all ages. Europe's 'woonerf' and the UK's Home Zone program both promote residential street design that emphasise the social and pedestrian uses of the street; such environments are ideal for children and also encourage greater community interaction benefiting all age groups (Handy, Cao and Mokhtarian 2008). 'Child friendly' transport systems emphasise public transport and safe bicycle and pedestrian routes, easing traffic congestion and providing healthy transport alternatives for adults (O'Brien and Tranter 2006).

Improvements in children's independent mobility can also provide substantial economic benefits. In Australia, the Victorian Travel and Activity Survey found seventeen percent of peak hour vehicle trips consist of parents driving their children to school and eight percent of all trips to and

from home are due to parents driving their children to and from various activities (Morris, Wang and Lilja 2002). The direct and indirect cost of driving children has been estimated at twenty billion pounds per year in the UK excluding externalities from pollution and accidents (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990). An increase in children's independent mobility and active transport both reduces public health costs associated with child obesity and reduces household expenditure on vehicle transport. There are also environmental benefits from a reduction in carbon pollution.

### **3.4 Intergenerational changes in children's independence**

As Chapter 2 highlights, the current generation of children are less active and appear to have fewer opportunities to engage in the unstructured play necessary for healthy development. A preference for electronic games and television is certainly a contributor but there is a growing body of evidence that children are less active by necessity not choice. Most children will play outside and walk to school if given the opportunity, but such opportunities have been significantly curtailed (Tandy 1999, Mackett et al 2007).

Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) report that in 1971, eighty percent of English seven and eight year olds were allowed to walk or cycle to school alone. By 1990 this had fallen to nine percent. Gaster (1991) observed a decline of similar magnitude in the freedom and activity of New York children between 1930 and the late 1960s. In Australia, Clements (2004) has documented a substantial shift in intergenerational independence: seventy one percent of contemporary mothers recall playing outdoors as a child but only twenty six percent permit their own children to do so. Declines in independence have accelerated over time - participation in outdoor activity fell by up to fifty percent in some child cohorts between 1997 and 2003 (Hofferth 2006). Greater parental risk aversion and improved access to high quality electronic entertainment are major contributors to this trend (Hofferth 2006, Clements 2004).

### **3.5 The influence of gender, age and culture on children's independence**

There are statistically significant differences in the licenses of independence held by children of different generational cohorts, age groups and nationalities. Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) found age to be the strongest influence on license holding for both English and German children. Controlling for age, independent mobility is also significantly mediated by gender, household car ownership and areal characteristics. These include distance to school,

neighbourhood traffic volume and the quality and reliability of public transport. In New Zealand and Australia where cities are less compact, distance has a particularly strong influence on the licenses of independence granted to children (Tranter 1993, Tranter and Pawson 2001).

**Table 3.1:** *International comparison of licences of independence: Percent of children granted each licence, by research location*

<i>Licence</i>	<i>Sydney (1993)</i>	<i>Canberra (1991)</i>	<i>Christchurch (1993)</i>	<i>Germany (1990)</i>	<i>England (1990)</i>	<i>England (2007)</i>
Come home from school alone	48	57	59	96	51	49 <sup>1</sup>
Visit places other than school alone	34	43	33	80	38	49 <sup>2</sup>
Cross main roads alone	56	77	75	90	76	63
Catch buses alone	17	24	17	58	32	32
Cycle on main roads	23	43	64	46	31	33

<sup>1</sup>Item 'travel to organised activities' used as proxy for comparison

<sup>2</sup>Item 'go out for a walk' used as proxy for comparison

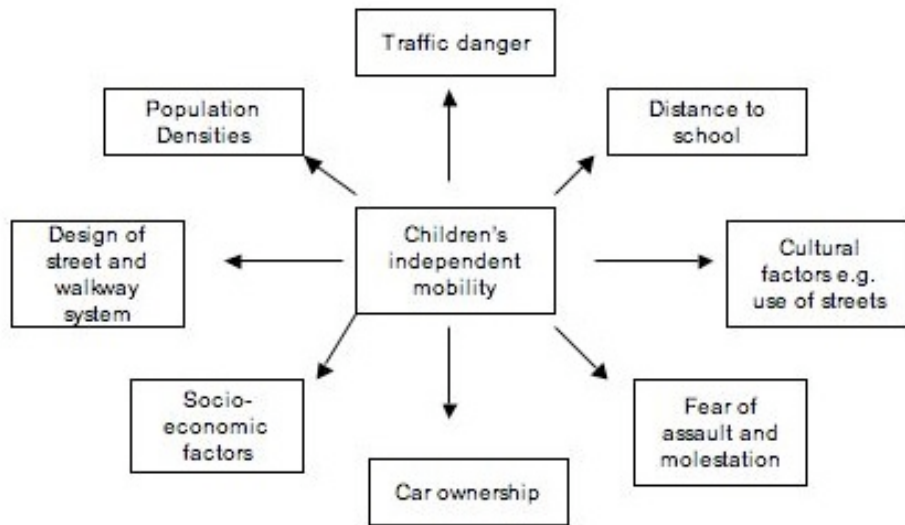
Sources: Tranter and Pawson (2001), Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990), Mackett et al (2007).

Children's independence is more restricted in English speaking countries whilst children in continental Europe (Germany, the Netherlands and Italy) are afforded relatively greater independence. This is despite no significant differences in risk of harm, suggesting culture may be a strong mediating factor (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990, Mackett et al 2007).

### **3.6 Location characteristics impacting children's independence**

A number of areal characteristics affect children's independent mobility. Tranter (1993), in a study of children's independent mobility in Canberra, has identified eight potential factors that may mediate children's opportunities for independent mobility; these factors align with those identified for British, Canadian and German children (Mackett et al 2007, O'Brien and Tranter 2004, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990).

**Figure 3.1:** *Factors that may influence levels of children's independence*



Source: Tranter 1993, p.7, Figure 1.2

### **Street use and traffic volume**

In 1978 Ward warned that ‘the street life of the city has been slowly whittled away to make room for the motor car... Whole areas that were once at the disposal of the explorer on foot are now dedicated to the motorist’. (Ward 1978, cited in Rosenbaum 1993, p.12) Thirty years on, streets in many cities are dominated by vehicle traffic at the expense of pedestrian traffic and street life.

Engwicht (1992) notes that this shift from ‘streets for living’ to streets as movement corridors can have a devastating effect on children’s independence. His 1992 study of residents in Ashgrove (Brisbane) found adults reported having significantly more freedom as children than contemporary children in the same locality. Increased traffic damages the social potential of residential streets for all ages. Appleyard (1981) found increases in traffic volume reduce both roaming radius and community interaction in affected neighbourhoods. Once entrenched, this triggers a negative feedback loop – with less foot traffic, cars go faster as drivers worry less about hitting pedestrians. This increases the danger of pedestrian travel and further reduces a street’s potential as a hub for neighbourhood interaction. Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) find traffic danger is a strong influence on children’s independence and that, ironically, increased traffic danger results in more parents driving their children, further increasing the risk of harm to child pedestrians.

## **Urban sprawl and asset privatisation**

From the 1960s, Sydney has followed a car centric pattern of expansion. Public transport access from outer suburbs is generally poor. Instances of distance precluding active transport amongst urban children have increased as wider school catchments and increased private school attendance extend the distance to school (Morris, Wang and Lilja 2002). This may also hamper children's independence outside of school hours as, even if not in a low-density suburb, children are often distant from their schoolmates (Tranter and Pawson 2001).

### **3.7 Family and parent characteristics impacting children's independence**

Changes in social norms and labour force structure mean that maternal workforce participation is now common and, for many families, necessary. Bianchi (2000) finds that despite parents' fears, increased labour force participation has not reduced the amount of time mothers spend with children – but has resulted in greater emphasis placed on 'quality time'. Helped along by a plethora of 'expert' advice, parenting has become an exercise in 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2002) in which children are enrolled in 'systematic and meaningful leisure activities' (Paat 2010, p.94). This has reduced children's opportunities for unstructured independent play – they go from school to after school care or activities instead of going home to play. Although it may appeal to parents eager to excel in the business of 'parenting', research suggests such zealous over-parenting may be as dangerous, or more so, than under-parenting (Mackay 2007, Edgar and Edgar 2008).

### **3.8 Parental concern and children's independence**

Parents are, ultimately, the gatekeepers of children's independence. In response to continued media coverage of negative events, 'parents implement measures to manage the risks of living in an increasingly unsafe world' (Thomson 2009, p.8). Parents' most prevalent concerns around giving their children more independence are abduction, sexual assault and traffic accidents. These concerns, and the consistent over-estimation of their likelihood, are consistent across English speaking nations (Godfrey et al 2008). The tendency of media to blame parents when their children are harmed adds an additional burden of fear, driving conservative biases.

Traffic danger is the greatest concern for parents of young children. They worry that their child will not have the skills to negotiate traffic and that their small size will make them invisible to motorists (Malone 2009). Stranger danger and assault dominate concerns as children reach adolescence (Thomson 2009), particularly for parents of teenage girls. The independence of older children is more likely to be curtailed when neighbourhoods are perceived as high in crime, whilst young children are more restricted when parents believe traffic danger is high (Carver et al 2008, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990).

### **3.9 Conclusions**

This chapter outlined the role of independence in child development, and the pattern of decline in children's independence across developed countries.

Societal shift towards smaller families, formalised 'parenting' and less socially cohesive neighbourhoods has contributed to the restriction of independence. Above all, parental risk perception and concern plays a central role in determining children's independence. Managing and offsetting parental concerns is a key component to improving children's opportunities for independence.

## Chapter 4: Key Results from Primary Research

This chapter presents the primary research results and their similarities – and differences - to prior research. Participant families are profiled, and their attitudes and behaviours in relation to children’s independence presented. Prominent parental concerns are compared to statistical risk of harm, and conclusions drawn as to the relationship between actual and perceived risk.

### 4.1 Characteristics of parents and neighbourhoods in the research

Table 4.1 provides a brief taxonomy of parent characteristics including self-rated engagement with their neighbourhood community and their level of anxiety around parenting. The latter metric was determined through analysis of interview content.

**Table 4.1:** *Parent and family characteristics*

<i>ID</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Parent interviewed</i>	<i>Child age &amp; gender<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Parent anxiety and neighbourhood social characteristics</i>
01	Bondi	Mother	5 (m), 5(m), 3 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extremely anxious</li> <li>Not a close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
02	Hornsby Heights	Mother & Father	10 (f), 7 (f), 5 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relaxed, not anxious</li> <li>Close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
03	Hornsby Heights	Mother	10 (f), 6 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Somewhat relaxed, a little cautious</li> <li>Close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
04	Naremburn	Father	8 (m), 6 (m)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Somewhat anxious/ cautious</li> <li>Not close neighbourhood, and family overseas</li> </ul>
05	Lane Cove	Father	8 (m), 6 (f), 4 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extremely relaxed</li> <li>Very close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
06	Alexandria	Mother	7 (f), 4 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relaxed but cautious</li> <li>Very close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
07	Five Dock	Mother	9 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extremely anxious</li> <li>Not a close neighbourhood community</li> </ul>
08	Haberfield	Mother	10 (m), 6 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very relaxed</li> <li>Neighbourhood friendly but not close</li> </ul>
09	Voyager Point	Mother	10 (f), 4 (f)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extremely anxious</li> <li>Not a close neighbourhood</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> (m) refers to male child, (f) to female. Number shown is child age in years.

Parents interviewed represent a wide variety of personalities, backgrounds and family structures. A majority of families interviewed have both parents in paid employment, although several are single income households. Occupations are varied but skewed towards white-collar professional.



Ethnicity and cultural background is also diverse - one mother grew up in Guam, another family is Nepalese and yet another is strongly connected to the Jewish community.

The neighbourhoods in this research have been profiled against key urban form characteristics that affect children's independence (Tranter and Pawson 2001, Appleyard 1981, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990). The characteristics profiled are socio-economic status, using the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Socio Economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) classification, main road traffic volume, housing type and housing density (Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2** *Characteristics of participant neighbourhoods*

<i>ID</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>SEIFA profile</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Nearest Main Rd</i>	<i>Main Rd Traffic Volume</i> <sup>2,3</sup>	<i>Housing type</i>
01	Bondi	91	Bondi Rd	29,247	Medium density, Terraces, townhouses and apartments
02	Hornsby Heights	96	Hornsby Heights	4,847	Low density houses and townhouses
03	Hornsby Heights	97	Hornsby Heights	6,744	Low density houses and townhouses
04	Naremburn	97	Willoughby Rd	24,052	Medium density mixed use area, apartments
05	Lane Cove	95	Epping Rd	50,668	Low density houses
06	Alexandria	96	Mitchell Rd	15,337	Medium density, terraces & semi-detached
07	Five Dock	85	Parramatta Rd	86,941	Estate, medium density, townhouses/ units
08	Haberfield	88	Dobroyd Pde	58,353	Low density, single houses
09	Voyager Point	96	Heathcote Rd	21,066	Planned community – low density houses

<sup>1</sup> Neighbourhood socio-economic status is determined based on overall socio-economic classification at a suburb level contained in the 2006 Census SEIFA index (ABS, 2006). SEIFA status is assigned as a state level percentile with 100% as the highest socio-economic band.

<sup>2</sup> Traffic volume has been determined using the most recent Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) data released by the NSW Roads & Traffic Authority (2006). Traffic volumes of the closest measured road in each area were used to provide neighbourhood traffic volume.

<sup>3</sup> Appleyard's (1981, in Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990) classification of traffic volumes has been used as a basis for defining neighbourhood traffic volume in this research. Appleyard describes a volume of less than 2000 cars a day as 'light' traffic, 8,000 vehicles a day as 'moderate' and 16,000 vehicles per day as 'heavy'. This has been used as a basis for defining traffic volume levels.

Families in this research are predominantly affluent and their neighbourhood profiles reflect this, skewing towards higher percentile ranks in the SEIFA index. Other than their affluent bias, these neighbourhoods are diverse, representing a mix of housing types and a range of household

income and education bands. Of the nine families in this research, six live in neighbourhoods with high main road traffic volume (over 16,000 vehicles per day), three of whom are in locations that experience traffic volumes of 50,000 vehicles per day or more.

## **4.2 Independence given: an overview**

Children's independence varies considerably between families, and is influenced by child, parent and neighbourhood characteristics.

When asked what their children do outside school hours, eight of the nine parents interviewed began by listing the organised activities their child participated in – in some cases, many. This leaves little time for unstructured play, especially on weekdays. Although several parents admit they would rather have their child in organised activities for safety, others express concern that their children are losing the ability to 'be children' and to self entertain.

‘When they have holidays they don't actually know what to do because they are so used to having completely structured time, and they beg to go to vacation care... they don't want to stay home [and] have to amuse themselves’

Mother, Haberfield (6:29-7:2)<sup>1</sup>

There are certainly some forms of independence that parents find more comfortable to consider. Amongst parents in this research, the independences most readily granted involve a known landscape and/ or the presence of other children. Parents are more comfortable with their child walking to a friend's house, catching the school bus with siblings, or playing with others in a nearby street – there is safety in numbers and the location is known.

‘They will often walk next door by themselves and play in the lane without supervision, but [they are] with the other kids – we put the bins at the end of the street to stop cars, and the kids can all play, it's fairly safe.’

Mother, Alexandria (2: 23-26)

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<sup>1</sup> For confidentiality, parents' comments are referenced by gender and location; these can be cross-referenced against tables 4.1 and 4.2 for further contextual detail. Page and line references are in the form page: line – line, and refer to the quote's location in each interview transcript.

Across the board, parents agree that they give their children less freedom than they were given themselves as children.

‘If they go down to the park we’ll go with them - we wouldn’t let them go by themselves. And we wouldn’t really let them ride their bikes by themselves either, which is kind of funny because I remember as a kid just hopping on my bike and being gone, and mum just knew that I’d be back at lunchtime, or when it got dark.’

Mother, Haberfield (4: 21-24)

Being judged by other parents is something that parents in this research are highly aware of. For some, particularly the more anxious, this has a strong influence on how much independence they permit. Even parents who are confident in their parenting decisions admit they are very aware of being judged at times.

‘There have been a few conversations we’ve been in where people have made comments to my wife about allowing our son to go down to the park unattended... comments that intimate a judging, or judging your character as a parent in allowing a child to go unattended, meaning they hold in the highest regard the importance of controlling and knowing where their child is at all times’

Father, Lane Cove (3: 7-14)

### **4.3 Perception of ‘age appropriate’ independence**

Parents vary greatly in their attitudes to children’s independence – but how does this translate to behaviours? To understand the relationship between attitude and behaviour, parents were asked to give the age at which they would permit their own children to have various licences of independence. Table 4.3 lists these results.

The average age at which children are permitted to play in the street or walk to a friend’s house is noticeably younger than the age at which other licenses are given. Parental comfort with these two activities is increased by the presence of other children, a known destination and the ability to confirm their child’s location with other parents.

**Table 4.3:** Age at which licenses of independence are granted by parents

ID	Walk to school	Cycle to school	Walk to shops	Cycle on main rd	Cross main rd	Use public transport	Walk to friend's house	Play in street	Go out at night
1	10.0	10.0	-	Never	10.0	-	8.0	7.0	-
2	10.0	12.0	10.0	12.0	10.0	9.0	8.0	-	13.0
3	9.0	9.0	9.5	-	7.5	-	8.5	-	13.5
4	10.0	10.0	11.0	13.0	9.0	-	9.0	11.0	16.0
5	10.0	10.0	10.0	Never	10.0	12.0	8.0	8.0	15.0
6	12.5	12.5	8.0	12.5	-	-	8.0	4.0	13.5
7	12.5	12.5	11.0	14.0	12.0	-	10.0	Never	14.5
8	12.0	12.0	10.0	12.0	10.0	12.0	7.0	6.0	14.5
	9.0	9.0	8.5	8.5	8.0	9.0	6.0	6.0	14.5
9	8.5	8.5	8.0	-	6.5	-	7.5	7.0	14.0
Mean	10.4	10.6	9.5	12.0	9.2	10.5	8.0	7.2	14.3
N	10	10	8	6	9	4	10	6	9

The journey to and from school is perceived as a more risky activity – and for good reason. The Federal Office of Road Safety (1996) reports that twenty seven percent of child pedestrian fatalities occur during the journey home from school. Parents are most concerned about driver error when assigning this license. Consistent with previous research (Tranter 1993, Ziviani, Scott and Wadley 2004), permission to travel alone to school is also influenced by distance from school and the modes of transport required in the journey.

‘If his school was the local school he’d probably be walking to school now - but because we’ve got a bus and a train, its just a little bit more complicated than just walking.’

Mother, Haberfield (9:1-3)

The age at which children are permitted to cross or cycle on main roads is strongly mediated by *perceived* traffic danger. Several parents stated that they would not want to see a child of any age – or indeed an adult - attempt to negotiate nearby main roads on a bicycle. When compared to actual traffic volumes though, parents’ perceptions of ‘dangerous traffic’ levels vary greatly – there is not a strong relationship between actual traffic volume and perceived traffic danger.

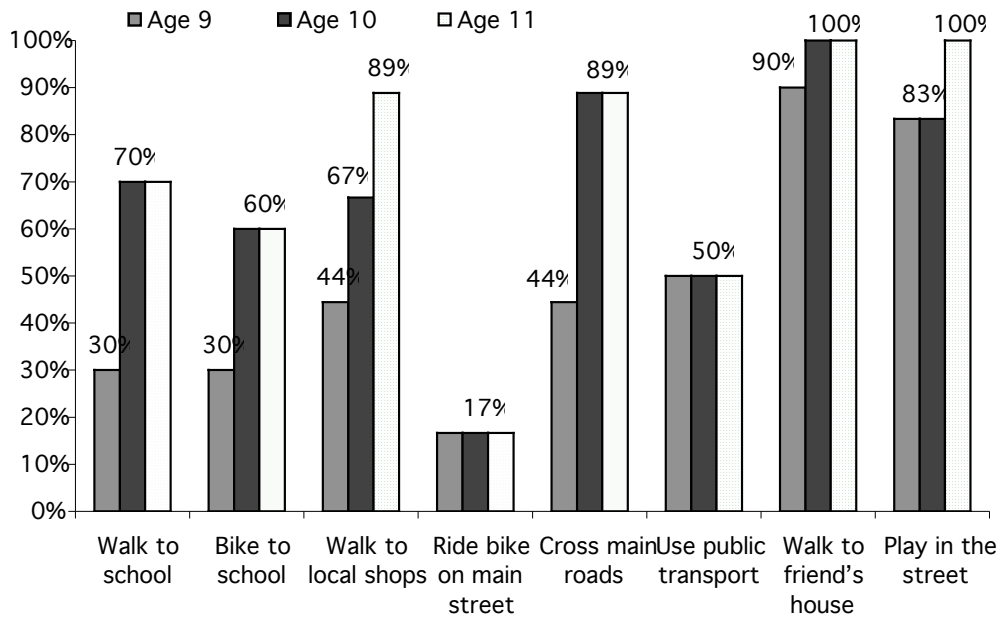
Reaching ‘double digits’ is a significant milestone for licenses of independence (see Figure 4.1). Between the ages of nine and eleven years there is a marked increase in the proportion of children granted each license. At nine years, walking to a friend’s house and playing on the street are the

only licenses widely permitted. By eleven years a majority of children will be granted all licenses except cycling on main roads and going out alone after dark. Reaching double digits also represents a transition from primary to intermediate and secondary school, and often a shift to a school further from home. The longer journey to school and social perception of ‘high school’ as a more mature stage of development may encourage the increase in independence for children aged ten to twelve years.

‘In primary school they are still very much children whereas once they get to twelve or thirteen they are going into their teenage years and that just seems the right age to give them that independence.’

Mother, Five Dock (8: 31-34)

**Figure 4.1:** *Proportion of children granted various licences at nine, ten and eleven years*



#### **4.4 Influence of family and neighbourhood characteristics**

Chapter Three identifies distance from school, traffic volume and children's age, gender and competence as significant factors in children's independence. The current research finds considerable but not total similarity to these findings in prior research. Distance from school - and from shops and friends' houses - is a practical consideration when permitting independent mobility. A number of parents would allow their child to walk to school or to a friend's house if distance permitted.

'I'm a bit far from the school, but if I drove halfway there, then [my daughter] could do it now or next year. I would feel comfortable with that, if it was not too far, but we're 3 km from the school, which is a bit of a walk. If it was half that I'd probably let her go now or next year.'

Mother, Hornsby Heights (10: 19-22)

These findings support Dr. Tranter's assertion that urban sprawl and wider school catchments are reducing children's independent mobility. He advocates returning to more localised school catchments as a way to improve opportunities for children's independent mobility and play.

'The argument that consolidation and privatisation is more efficient completely ignores that when there are fewer schools two things happen: schools are further apart so children need to be driven to school, and secondly their friends are scattered a large distance apart.'

Tranter (3: 22-25)

Gender is a less apparent influence on children's independence in this research than in previous studies (Tranter 1993). Certainly parents of girls do admit to being slightly more protective of daughters than they are – or would be – with sons. Results indicate that age remains a key driver of independence, as discussed in 4.3 above. Parents also confirm the importance of relative maturity, common sense and street smarts in granting licences of independence as children mature. Within families, the age at which various independences are permitted frequently varies between siblings based on their perceived sense, maturity and ability to comprehend risk.

‘He’s a sensible kid, and I think that comes into your judgement, I really truly think that comes into your judgement.’

Father, Lane Cove (9: 8-11)

#### **4.5 What worries parents about giving children more independence?**

Parents in this research express concerns consistent with previous studies (Tranter 2001, Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg 1990, Mackett et al 2007). Traffic danger and ‘stranger danger’ are their greatest concerns in relation to children’s independence. Parents also believe they are more worried about their children than they recall their own parents being.

##### **Traffic danger**

The concern mentioned most is traffic danger. Parents worry about driver capability and care, and also about their children’s ability to cross roads safely. Walking to school raises the most concerns about driver error as many have observed distracted parents driving erratically around the drop off zone.

‘You see them do all the wrong things like stopping on pedestrian crossings to let kids in and out of cars, parking where they shouldn’t park, pulling in and out of driveways, all of those little things that are actually quite dangerous.’

Mother, Five Dock (3: 30-32)

Parents with young children worry that their child may not be able to assess vehicle distance and speed correctly. They also worry that a young child is easily distracted and may unintentionally step out in front of a vehicle. This fear dissipates as children become older and more cognitively mature.

‘She hasn’t yet gone that step of understanding that she’s only small and cars can’t see her, and that they are moving harder and faster and that if they hit her – she’s got no concept of weight or movement that type of thing just yet.’

Mother, Haberfield (3:32 – 4:2)

## **Stranger danger**

Parents understand that their child's actual chance of being abducted or molested is low. Despite this, their horror of abduction leads them to overestimate its likelihood. Parents who are most worried about abduction express a broad mistrust of strangers coming into contact with their children.

'I don't trust anybody with my children unless it's my intimate family.'

Mother, Voyager Point (7: 10)

None of the parents in the research have first-hand knowledge of abduction but all could share a 'hearsay' example from their general area. Many of these examples were learned of via news coverage. Despite their fears, the parents in this research also speak of the need to balance fear of abduction against the negative impacts of warning too much about stranger danger.

'At what level do you want to put fear into children about talking to people, being friendly? I mean there's a fine line there... I don't want her to be scared to talk to anyone. It's nice that she will go up to grown ups and talk to them.'

Mother, Hornsby Heights (7:33 – 8:03)

## **Injury, accident or misadventure**

A concern that is expressed more strongly in this research than in previous studies is the fear of accidental injury or a traumatic experience. Parents worry that if their child travels alone they may become lost or panicked. Fears of this nature are reduced when children undertake activities in a group – there is a clear sense of safety in numbers.

'It's more a case of if something happened, then she hasn't got a phone, and would she be able to articulate things like this is where I live. Whereas if she's got a friend with her it's just a safety thing - if something happened to one of them they are old enough that [the other] could get help.'

Father, Hornsby Heights (12: 23-29)



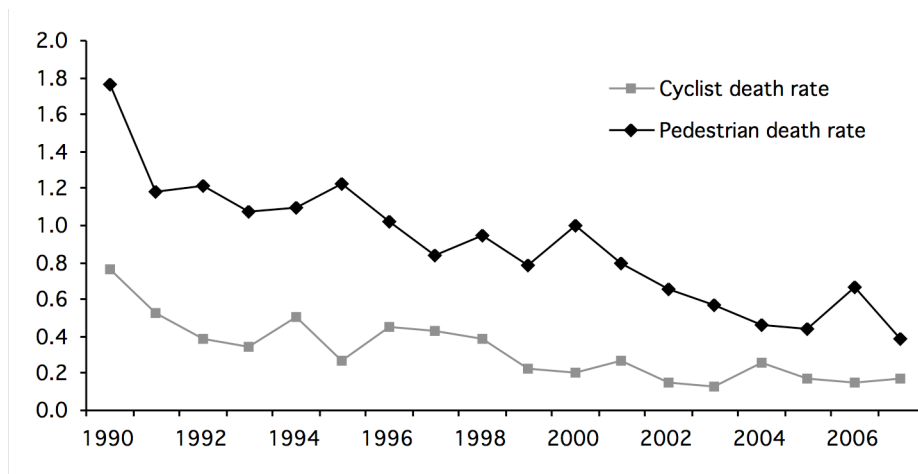
## 4.6 Statistical risk of harm for Australian children

This section reviews Australian statistics on the three areas of parental concern: traffic accidents, abduction and injury at play. Comparing actual risk to parental fears provides an indication of whether parental fears are well founded or whether, as Mackay (2007) suggests, fears are an anxious over-reaction and not proportional to actual risk of harm.

### Traffic accidents involving child pedestrians or cyclists

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009) reports that transport accidents result in just two deaths per 100,000 primary school children each year, with an additional 232 serious injuries requiring hospitalisation (AIHW National Mortality Database, 2009). Whilst overall risk of harm is low, boys are twice as likely as girls to be injured in traffic accidents. Primary school children (aged five to twelve) are most at risk of becoming traffic fatalities when walking home from school (27%) or when involved in after school activities (31%). The morning journey to school is least likely to result in a fatal accident, accounting for only 7% of child pedestrian deaths (Federal Office of Road Safety, 1996).

**Figure 4.2:** *Child pedestrian and cyclist death rate per 100,000 children, 1990–2007*



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS (2008) 3303.0 - Causes of Death, Australia

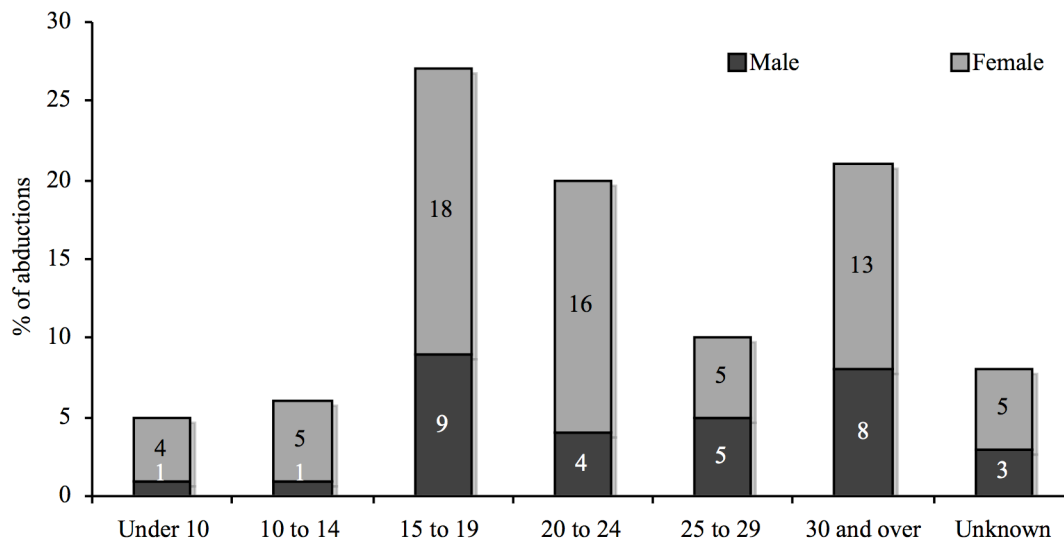
Accidents in Australia involving child pedestrians and cyclists declined substantially from 1990 to 2009, but there is concern that these decreases have been ‘bought’ at the expense of children’s independent mobility, which has simultaneously fallen (Roberts et al 1995).

From the data it is clear that whilst traffic danger does pose a credible threat to children who are playing or walking independently, the probability of a child being killed in a traffic accident at play remains extremely low - less than 0.001%.

### ‘Stranger Danger’

Figures from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) show that from 1995 to 2004, the overall rate of abductions and assaults in Australia rose from 2.5 to 3.8 victims per 100,000 of population. Teenagers comprise a significantly majority of these victims, with females aged fifteen to nineteen years at the greatest risk of harm. Abductions of younger children by non-family members are relatively uncommon; of the 768 abductions recorded in 2004, only 5.86% or forty-five abductions were of children aged nine years or younger (AIC 2005). The majority of child harm reported to authorities is child abuse by family members or close acquaintances (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009). Even more so than traffic accidents, this data suggests that abduction does not constitute a significant threat to children in Australia.

**Figure 4.3 – Age and gender distribution of abduction<sup>1</sup> victims, Jan-Jun 2004**



Source Australian Institute of Criminology 2005

<sup>1</sup> The statistics shown above are the total numbers – including assault and abduction by family members and other ‘known persons’: the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) states that 30% of child abductions were by family members or other known persons, further reducing the probable incidence of ‘stranger danger’.

## **Accidental injury and death rates**

Accidental injury is the most common cause of harm when children are engaged in independent play, however the bulk of these injuries are neither life threatening nor likely to cause irreversible harm. After the elderly, children aged one to fourteen years have the highest rates of accidental injury requiring hospitalisation at an average rate of 1474 injury hospitalisations per 100,000 children per year (Hayen and Mitchell 2005). Falls comprise forty three percent of injury hospitalisations for children in this age group, followed by being struck by objects (11%) and non-motor vehicle road accidents such as falling from bicycles (7%).

Although injury rates are relatively high, the incidence of severe and disabling injury is extremely low. Most injuries in school children are limb fractures – 41% to 76% depending on age – and pose little risk to the child’s survival. Moreover, children are significantly more likely to sustain these injuries when at school (52%) or when participating in organised sports (30%) than when playing independently (Hayen and Mitchell 2005).

These statistics indicate that the risk of serious harm or disablement as a consequence of independent play is low compared to risk of injury whilst at school or engaged in organised activity. Moreover, the severity of injury is typically low, indicating that there is not a significant risk of severe or irreparable harm.

## **4.7 Relationship between risk of harm and parental concerns**

Consistent with prior research, parents’ primary concerns when permitting their children to travel or play independently are traffic danger and the risk of abduction. Moreover, as in Carver et al’s (2007) research, permitted independence is influenced by perceived traffic danger not actual traffic danger: the current research finds no consistent relationship between traffic volume and the extent to which parents cite traffic danger as a concern.

Widespread media coverage of abduction cases and child pedestrian accidents has served to inflate perceived risk well beyond the reality shown by accident and crime data. In fact, the most prevalent parental fears – traffic danger and abduction – are highly unlikely events. A third concern, that of serious accidental injury, is more likely to occur but is still a low probability event. In fact, children are significantly less at risk of harm when playing independently than

when they are at school, participating in organised activities, or being transported in a motor vehicle. Independent play is, relatively speaking, the safer option for children's leisure.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

This chapter summarises the primary research conducted in this project, outlining levels of independence and the associated parental concerns. The level of independence given to contemporary primary school children in Sydney is considerably less than that given to previous generations, but remains at relative parity to that observed in Canberra in 1991 and in Sydney and Christchurch in 1993 (Tranter 1993, Tranter and Pawson 2001).

## **Chapter 5: Understanding the factors behind parental concern**

Chapter Four highlighted the impact parents' concerns have on children's independence. In particular, more fearful parents tend to over-estimate risk and curtail independence accordingly. This chapter looks at the social changes driving increased anxiety and how this filters down to parental attitudes. It also examines the influence of family dynamics and urban form on parents concerns, with a view to identifying interventions to boost children's independence.

### **5.1 Social trends: Anxiety and risk aversion**

Over three decades of social research in Australia, Dr Mackay has observed an increase in general anxiety that, he believes, is a response to rapid social and technological change.

'The pace of change has made a lot of people feel uneasy in a vague way; they don't quite know what they're uneasy about... and because people are feeling vaguely anxious, almost like a background anxiety, that makes them inclined to over-react to anything specific.'

Mackay (1: 26-31)

A more anxious society is characterized by less trust and this is apparent in the way that parents in this research speak of their fear of abduction or harm. Fear of 'stranger danger' is inflated to encompass all strangers. For some particularly fearful parents, unknown adults are viewed with suspicion – guilty until proven innocent.

'If I can't see [the girls] or they can't see me, it's not safe. I wouldn't trust anybody with them - I mean you don't know anybody fully. I'm very cautious with where I let them go'

Mother, Voyager Point (5: 3-5)

Parents' fear of harm, Dr Tranter observes, has expanded from a practical desire to keep children from serious harm to a state of extreme risk aversion. In his work with parents and educators, Dr Tranter says, 'there is a notion that if a child gets injured it's someone's fault, and a lack of understanding that sometimes injury can be a good thing' (Tranter, 4: 35-36). Faced with such attitudes, and fearful of lawsuits, schools and councils remove any potentially harmful play items and restrict children from activities that might result in harm.

Removing the opportunity for children to learn risk and consequence through small accidents means they may reach adulthood with poor risk assessment skills – potentially catastrophic when, for example, they get behind the wheel of a car. Both Dr Tranter and Dr Mackay express serious concern that the desire to remove risk from childhood is misguided and may have far worse consequences than scraped knees.

‘Parents do think they want to reduce the risk to their kids, smooth the way, but they’re doing their kids an enormous disservice because it’s much better for the kids to take a few risks and graze a few knees, all that sort of stuff.’

Mackay, 3: 15-18

In this research, more than half the parents spoken to express high levels of anxiety as described above. A minority do not. The one factor the latter group have in common is a strong sense of community in their neighbourhoods. Dr Mackay suggests this is not coincidental – strong community engagement can reduce anxiety and mistrust.

## **5.2 Family dynamics and parenting practices**

In this research, there is a distinct correlation between family size and parental anxiety around independence. However, as Dr. Mackay points out, a causal direction to this relationship is unclear.

‘My general impression is that those who have 3 or more kids probably cope better. I mean they’re probably having 3 or more kids because they’re more relaxed anyway – once they’ve got 3 or more kids they have to be more relaxed, because you can’t be so over-vigilant when you’ve got a little tribe so I think number of kids is a factor, but whether it’s a cause or an effect... I think it’s a bit of both’

Mackay (2: 2-7)

With smaller families, ‘parents [are] inclined to be more protective - over protective, and over indulgent just because there are fewer kids around than there used to be’ (Mackay, 4: 19:21). Parents in this research agree that their concern is far less when their child is with a group of others. The benefits of safety in numbers are not so easily achieved within the family unit due to

smaller family sizes, so the potential benefits of living in a socially cohesive neighbourhood are greater than for previous generations. When parents can be confident of their child being with others – children or known adults – they are more comfortable with permitting independence.

A second trend in family dynamics that has had significant impact on children's independence is the intensification in parenting practices – in particular the formalisation of child rearing into a complicated science termed 'parenting'. With a set of rules and regulations laid down by parenting 'experts', parents are less inclined to trust their own instincts. Worry about 'getting it wrong' is a new and concerning pattern for this generation.

'Parents are now terrified of traumatising their kids or damaging their kids. All parents will damage their children, its part of the process of muddling along and trying to be a reasonable parent, but I think there's this almost obsessive desire to avoid that.'

Mackay (2: 12-15)

Several parents interviewed admit to relying on parenting books for advice, particularly around milestone independences such as travelling unsupervised. Others rely on the advice of friends and family to identify the 'right thing to do' when making parenting decisions. Identifying ways to counteract this trend and return to more natural parenting is likely to encourage opportunities for children to be 'free range kids' (Skenazy 2008).

### **5.3 Neighbourhood and community dynamics**

At the outset of this research, I hypothesised that there would be a relationship between the physical and social characteristics of a neighbourhood and the independence given to children residing in that area. Tranter and Pawson (2001) and Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) found traffic volume, distance to school and socio-economic status to be influential on levels of independence granted. The results of the current research do not entirely concur with prior research. Amongst parents interviewed, the social cohesion and sense of community in their neighbourhood was a far stronger predictor of child independence than any element of urban form.

A neighbourhood with a sense of ‘community’ is a strong offset to parental concerns, partly because the network of relationships allows parents to share the task of keeping track of children. There is also the benefit of safety in numbers when local children play together.

‘They will often walk next door by themselves and play in the lane without supervision but with other kids – we put the bins at the end of the street to stop cars, and the kids can all play, it’s fairly safe. The other parents all have their doors open onto the lane, and we’re not too far, there’s always parents within yelling distance, and the kids can ride their bikes up and down and play with a ball and stuff.’

Mother, Alexandria (2:31 – 3:2)

Parents who are more comfortable with children’s independence speak of a sense of ‘community’ in their neighbourhood as key to their reduced anxiety. The research suggests that community minded families gravitate to neighbourhoods designed to facilitate interaction, and that it is this social element rather than built form per se that influences levels of independence given.

“It’s a very healthy community that we live in... good parenting, active involvement in the community, all the kids are involved in sports, and ballet and athletics, so you get to know people ... Phil down here’s been digging holes to save himself money rather than get a plumber in so I’ll go down and help him dig a hole, and have a couple of beers at the end of that on Sunday afternoon.”

Father, Lane Cove, 5: 20-24

#### **5.4 Urban form and traffic**

Whilst the social characteristics of neighbourhoods appear more influential on children’s independence than built form characteristics, physical environment does still have some influence on parental concern.

Traffic volume is a lesser concern than traffic speed, dangerous driving and erratic driving. Fear of driver error is paramount; parents are generally more confident in their child’s capability to negotiate traffic than of drivers’ showing adequate care. These concerns suggest that Engwicht’s (1992) recommendations for traffic calming devices to enhance driver attention would be beneficial to children’s independence: a street with sufficient visual surprise and intrigue would reduce potential for thoughtless driver behaviour. Such initiatives would also have a second



benefit: streets with more people on them are considered by parents to be safer – and low traffic speeds are conducive to increased use of the street as a liveable space.

Density and housing type are to some extent related, however because the majority of families in this research were in low-density neighbourhoods, describing the housing type allows more distinction between areas. A strong correlation was observed between neighbourhoods populated with older homes – freestanding or terraced – and a greater degree of child independence. However, these neighbourhoods are home to the more relaxed families interviewed, who also speak of having a strong local community. It is probable that this type of urban form attracts families with a greater desire for community and lower anxiety, more than the urban form itself influencing opportunities for independence.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the ways in which broader social structure, family dynamics and neighbourhood characteristics influence parents concerns. The broader theme of anxiety may be difficult to counter, but the symptomatic behaviours of risk aversion and restriction can be addressed through education and example. The Sydney Playground Project (Bundy, Luckett and Tranter 2009) is one such initiative where, by gradually introducing less ‘safe’ elements into school playgrounds, researchers have been able to engender a shift in parental attitudes to risk and independence.

The most prominent way in which urban design influences children’s independence is through the design of road networks in residential areas. Limiting the speed of vehicles and encouraging more alert driving through traffic calming measures may be an effective way to increase opportunities for street play. Engwicht (1992) provides a number of practical recommendations in this regard.

Neighbourhood social cohesion and the associated opportunities for safety in numbers and passive surveillance appears to be the strongest mediator of children’s independence.

This suggests that social and community planning initiatives as well as modification of environmental hazards may have a beneficial effect on levels of child independence.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Opportunities**

At the beginning of this research I posed the question “how do parental perceptions influence the level of independence given to primary school children in Australian cities?”

At the completion of this project, a clear and unambiguous answer has emerged. Parents perceptions matter. A lot. More than actual risk of harm, more than neighbourhood design, more than a child’s capability to negotiate the environment safely, parents’ perceptions of risk dictate the freedom their child receives. Parents are acutely aware of the potential dangers of allowing their children to roam free. However there is little acknowledgement of the dangers of not allowing it.

### **6.1 Conclusions: some key observations**

The age at which licenses of independence are granted by parents in this research is comparable to those seen by Tranter and Pawson (2001) and Mackett et al (2007), suggesting that whilst children’s independence has not increased over the last decade, it hasn’t declined further. However there is evidence that parents’ fears when granting independence have increased, in particular the low level fear of mishaps such as falling off bicycles, becoming lost or being frightened. This low-grade anxiety has the potential to further curb meaningful independence.

There is considerable variation in the independence given to children of a similar age. Parent and neighbourhood characteristics, particularly self-confidence and social connectivity, are the strongest influences on children’s independent mobility and play.

Children who are granted a greater degree of independence are those who:

- Live in established low density neighbourhoods e.g. Alexandria, Haberfield, Hornsby
- Come from larger families and/ or neighbourhoods with lots of children
- Live in socially connected neighbourhoods with a sense of community
- Had parents with a high self confidence and low anxiety about parenting
- Were trusted by their parents and had been well taught about safety

## **6.2 Opportunities for intervention**

The findings of this research suggest that addressing the issue of children's independence sits more in the sphere of social planning than urban design. Initiatives that encourage neighbourhoods to form community bonds would clearly be beneficial given the correlation observed between strong neighbourhood communities and increased children's independence. Dr Mackay suggests that programs of activity based around local schools and libraries are effective ways to engender community engagement. Activities such as school based 'walking buses' offer both the immediate benefits of activity and an opportunity for both adults and children to engage socially within their neighbourhood.

At a more micro level, initiatives to increase parents' confidence and counteract their fears would also be useful. Tranter (2010) describes the positive shift in parental attitudes observed in the Sydney Playground Project – although not the primary objective, researchers noted parents becoming more comfortable with 'sensible' opportunities for risk exposure after observing that they had no ill effects.

Parent 'groups' or school-initiated events allowing parents to articulate their concerns may also be useful. After completing the parent interviews for this research, I was re-contacted by two parents who told me that, following our discussion, they had given their child an opportunity for more independence – and nothing bad had happened! Simply questioning the rationale behind their beliefs had led to a positive change in behaviour.

It is not practical to suggest dramatic changes to density and housing type in established suburbs of Sydney. However the introduction of traffic calming devices in residential streets may be beneficial. Traffic calming devices increase localised independent mobility and encourage residents to use their street as living space (Engwicht 1992). More pedestrian traffic further encourages driver caution and may offset parents' concerns about traffic danger.

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## **Appendices**



## **Appendix One: Project Consent Form and Information Statement**

## PROJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT

Date: 12 August 2010

Project Title: *Free Range Kids: Independence and the Urban Child*

Approval No.: 105069



BUILT ENVIRONMENT

### Participant selection and purpose of study

You are invited to participate in a study of the barriers to independent play and travel for urban children. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are the parent of a primary school aged child within the geographic study area, and your perspective on this issue is important.

### Description of study

If you decide to participate, we will interview you about the activities and distance of travel your child is currently permitted to engage in unsupervised, and the concerns that you have as a parent in permitting your child to travel and play without adult supervision. The interview will be conducted at a time and place convenient to you, and will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Participating in this project offers you the opportunity to share your concerns about children's safety and independence, and contribute to the body of research on this subject. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

### Confidentiality and disclosure of information

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, or except as required by law. If you give us your permission, we plan to record the interview to ensure your views are accurately captured, and will discuss the results with classmates and supervisors in the Masters of Planning program, and will publish the findings of this research in a Masters of Planning thesis. Results may also be used to contribute to academic papers or journal articles.

### Recompense to participants

Participants in this project will not be offered financial or other incentives.

### Your consent

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with The University of New South Wales or other participating organizations. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice by completing the statement below and returning this entire form to *Anna Russell* at City Futures Research Centre, UNSW Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052 Australia

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask *Anna Russell* via email at [z3240760@student.unsw.edu.au](mailto:z3240760@student.unsw.edu.au) or by telephone on (02) 9236 2435 during business hours. If you have any additional questions later, Dr Susan Thompson, (02) 9385 4395 or [s.thompson@unsw.edu.au](mailto:s.thompson@unsw.edu.au) will be happy to answer them.

*Anna Russell*

**REVOCATION OF CONSENT.** Project Title: Free Range Kids: Independence and the Urban Child  
(Please send this entire form to the above address.)

I hereby wish to withdraw my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that such withdrawal will not jeopardise my relationship with The University of New South Wales, other participating organisations or other professionals.

.....  
Signature    Please PRINT name    Date

**PROJECT CONSENT FORM**

Project Title: **Free Range Kids: Independence and the Urban Child**



BUILT ENVIRONMENT

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in a research project.

This PROJECT CONSENT FORM enables you to indicate your preparedness to participate in the project. By signing this form, your signature indicates that you have decided to participate.

You will be given a PROJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT that explains the project in detail, and that statement includes a revocation clause for you to use if you decide to withdraw your consent at some later stage. The PROJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT is your record of participation in the project.

This PROJECT CONSENT FORM will be retained by the researcher as evidence of your agreement to participate in this project.

Please complete the information in this box.

Please indicate which of the following options you agree to by ticking one of the following options:

- I consent to being quoted and identified
- I do not want to be identified but am prepared to participate anonymously

.....  
Signature of Research Participant

.....  
Please PRINT name

.....  
Date

Name of researcher: *Anna Russell*

## Appendix 2: Parent Interview questions

The project is about children's independence, more specifically about understanding the extent to which primary school children in Sydney are allowed to do various activities and travel to various places without adult supervision.

What I'll be asking you about in this interview is your experiences and opinions as a parent around giving children independence to play or to travel alone.

If asked for more detail:

- The activities that your child is allowed to do alone, and those that require supervision
- How far and in what ways (i.e. on foot, bicycle or by public transport) your child is allowed to travel alone
- What your concerns are about giving your child more independence at their current age

*Get consent form signed*

*Get agreement for audio/ video recording if possible*

### About your children

To begin, could you tell me a bit about your children?

- How many do you have and what ages?
- How would you describe them? e.g. active, sociable, introverted, mature for their age...
- What year at school?
- Where do they go to school?
- How do they get to school?

Time use:

- Do your children do any organised sports or activities outside of school?
- What activities do they enjoy / do most outside of school?
- When they're not at school or doing sports etc, what do they tend to do?
  - Play alone?
  - With other children?
  - Do you have to arrange things for them to do or are they happy to be left to their own devices?

### Neighbourhood

Tell me a little about your neighbourhood.

What are your neighbours like?

- How well do you know them?
- If your children are playing outside, do you feel you could depend on neighbours / other members of the community to keep an eye on them?

How safe do you feel it is in your neighbourhood?

- For children in general?
- For your kids in particular, given their age etc?

Are there particular parts of the immediate neighbourhood that you feel are safer than others? *Probe: Why? Traffic volume, familiarity, lighting etc*

### Activities

At your child's current age, what do you let them do alone?

- *What are you comfortable with them doing?*
- *Probe: how close to home? In sight or just known location?*

What do you consider is safe to permit a child of your child's age to do without adult supervision?

*Probe: geographic distance, activities etc – list or free response?*

*Why are these things safe?*

Which areas in the neighbourhood do you let your child play or walk in without adult supervision?

- *Tell me about the safe areas – what makes you comfortable with your children playing or travelling there without an adult.*
- *And in the other areas, what are the reasons you don't let your child play or walk alone? Distance from home, 'stranger danger', crime, busy roads, don't know neighbours?*

### **Travel distance and mode**

I'd like to get an understanding of what sort of travel you are comfortable with your children doing alone.

Probe: where to? So, what distances (time or km) are you happy with? Crossing roads?

*Licenses of independence:*

- *Walk to / from school*
- *Cycle to/ from school*
- *Visit other places alone*
- *Cycle on main roads*
- *Cross main roads alone*
- *Play in the street*
- *Go to a friend's house*
- *Go out at night alone*

### **Generational change**

Do you recall if this is different to the freedom you were given when you were young?

*Probe: What were you allowed to do at that age? What do you think has changed?*

### **Concerns**

As a parent, **what are your concerns** about giving your child more freedom?

- When you let your do things without adult supervision, what concerns do you have?
- What are the reasons you are reluctant to let them do certain things alone?
- Can you recall any particular event or information that made you concerned about permitting your child to... walk alone, cycle alone, cross main roads etc.

What / who influences your views on how much independence your child is permitted?

Probe: partner, grandparents, teachers, other parents

Does your partner have the same view as you? Are they more or less willing to give the child independence?

## **Appendix Three: Expert Interview questions**

### **Interview Questions: Dr. Paul Tranter**

1. Could you tell me about your area of focus and how you came to work in this area?
2. From your perspective, why do you believe it is important for children to have the opportunity to play and travel around independently? What do you think it contributes to their mental, physical and emotional development?
3. You've been carrying out research in the area of children's independent mobility since the early 1990s. What changes have you noticed in children's behaviour over that time? What changes in parents? Urban form?
4. I found it interesting that in your 1993 paper on mobility in Canberra the parents raised such a wide range of concerns when determining where children were allowed to go independently, and there was a lot of variation in the concerns between parents. Was this something you had expected to see at that point?
5. In your work in Australia, what seem to be the main reasons parents are concerned about giving their children more independence?
6. If I read the findings correctly in the paper you sent me about children's access to local environments in Christchurch, socio-economic status and traffic volumes both had an influence on parents' level of concern about giving their children independence. Could you tell me more about what you found in this area?
7. Were there other factors that you found were important in determining how much freedom children are given?
8. You talked about social traps as a variation on the prisoner's dilemma concept. Could you tell me about some of the social traps you identified in your research?
9. Do you think that children's independence is continuing to decrease?
10. You make the link between child friendly cities and sustainable cities in a couple of your papers. Could you tell me a bit more about why these are related?
11. Do you think this is something that urban planners and policy makers can address, or do you believe there are broader issues of social change at work that urban planning/ social planning can't influence?

## **Interview Questions: Dr. Hugh Mackay**

*Note: These are the questions taken into the interview as essential questions to ask. They do not comprise the total list of questions asked, as this interview was not heavily structured.*

### **Social context and family dynamics**

1. What are the social or socio-cultural changes that are driving parents today to behave so differently to one generation ago?
2. Over the last 30 years since you wrote *Generations*, what have been some things that have really stood out as major shifts in Australian culture, the way we live, the way we think?
3. And what about families in particular? What do you see as the major changes there?
4. In *Advance Australia Where*, you gave a very vivid picture of the increased focus parents have on the business of parenting and being the ‘best’ parent. How widespread is that type of parenting, and where – what concerns and insecurities – do you think it comes from?
5. Do you see any connection between smaller families, children being born to older parents and the shift in parenting styles? Or is the change in parenting prevalent across all ages/ family sizes?
6. Do you think this trend towards more intensive and protective parenting is here to stay?
7. What impact do you think this will have on how the current generation grow up, and their competence/ confidence as adults?

### **Safety and independence**

8. You pointed out in *Advance Australia Where* that there wasn’t room in Australia for all the suburban creeks that the Baby Boomers played in as children – that’s a great mental image. In your research, what have that older generation had to say about today’s parents?
9. What have you seen in your research about the extent to which parents have rational or irrational fears about giving their children more freedom? How has this changed?

## Appendix Four: Quantitative data sources and manipulation techniques

### Traffic accidents: child pedestrians and cyclists

- Data type: Time series
- Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Data used: Data set contained traffic accident deaths per year, segmented by age group and role in accident (pedestrian, driver, passenger, cyclist)  
Pedestrian and cyclist death data for children aged five to fourteen years was selected
- Manipulation: Data was converted to rate per 100,000 using national population 5-14 years as a base for each year:  
$$I = N/P * 100,000$$
  
Annual incidence rates were plotted as a time series

### Child abductions and assaults

- Data type: Non-sequential data points from various sources
- Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Kidsafe NSW
- Data used: Raw incidence data for victims of abduction, sexual assault and assault in 2009, segmented by state, gender and age group.  
National incidence of actual abductions occurring from January – June 2004, segmented by age group and gender
- Manipulation: Incidence rates calculated by raw incidence divided by population for that age group. Ages 5-14 used as a base for state level data, ages 0-14 used as base for national level data.  
$$I = N/P * 100,000$$
  
No time series was plotted. The most recent data available (AIC 2005) was presented



## Accidental injury data

Data type: Single point in time (2004-05)

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare,  
Kidsafe NSW

Data used: Raw occurrence and incidence rates per 100,000 of hospitalisations by cause and  
location. Segmented by age group. NSW data only.

Manipulation: Comparison of incidence rates for ages 5-14 against total incidence rates  
(indexing).

$$\text{Indexed incidence rate} = \text{incidence (5-14 yrs)} / \text{incidence (total)}$$

No time series was plotted.

*I = incidence rate per 100,000*

*N = raw number of incidents occurring*

*P = population relevant to incident data.*