

MEDIA RELEASE

Opinion split on walking to school

7 February 2011: A new study of neighbourhood satisfaction has revealed older residents believe it is safer for children to walk to school than the parents of primary school-aged children believe to be the case.

The study, by Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Research Fellow Ms Catherine Underwood, examined survey responses from over 800 residents aged 60 years and over and from over 500 parents of students aged 5 to 12 years living in six Victorian municipalities.

The survey revealed that 79 per cent of older residents living in metropolitan areas and 69 per cent of those living in regional areas believe it is safe for children to walk or ride to school on their own. In contrast, only 40 per cent of parents living in metropolitan areas and 36 per cent of those living in regional areas agreed that it is safe for their child to travel to school independently.

There was similar disagreement between parents and older residents about whether it is safe for children to walk or ride to the local park or playground. Around 75 per cent of older residents living in metropolitan areas and 68 per cent of those living in regional areas agreed that it is safe for children to do so, compared to only 34 per cent of metropolitan parents and 49 per cent of regional parents.

Ms Underwood said the disparity between parents' and older residents' views on whether it is safe for children to independently walk or ride through their neighbourhood appears to be reflected in their perceptions of the danger presented to children by strangers.

'Stranger danger' was seen as a barrier to children's independent outdoor activity by 44 per cent of metropolitan older residents and 51 per cent of regional older residents.

Concern about 'stranger danger' was much higher among parents, with 76 per cent of parents living in metropolitan areas and 71 per cent of parents living in regional areas indicating that it is the most significant barrier to their child's physical activity in the neighbourhood. Road safety was the second most significant barrier identified by parents.

Around half of the parents surveyed (44 per cent of metropolitan parents and 51 per cent of regional parents) agreed that there is a lot of traffic along most nearby streets, making it difficult or unpleasant to go for walks. Here, older residents' responses were closer to parents', with 31 per cent of metropolitan older residents and 38 per cent of regional older residents agreeing that heavy traffic makes it difficult or unpleasant to walk.

"Despite their concerns about traffic, both older residents and parents had a very positive view of their neighbourhood," said Ms Underwood.

Analysis was based on data looking at children's independent mobility and active transport collected in 2010 with funding from VicHealth.

*****ENDS*****

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