



LOTS OF FUN: Danielle and Charlotte play on a seesaw at a North Adelaide playground yesterday.

Picture: NAOMI JELICOE

Obesity fears over our cotton-wool kids



LIFESTYLE REPORTER
CALLIE WATSON

PARENTS have distorted perceptions of stranger danger, restricting their children's freedom and physical activity and putting their development and wellbeing at risk, research suggests.

Experts say the emergence and growth of "cotton-wool kids", whose parents hover over them to such an extent

they may miss out on playing with others, is resulting in increased obesity and the delayed development of social skills.

University of WA researchers examined parental anxieties in a new review and found fears about stranger danger did not match up with crime figures. Deputy direc-

tor of the university's Centre for Built Environment and Health, Associate Professor Lisa Wood, said: "We found the impact of parental fear on cotton-wool kids is leading to less active lifestyles and increasing obesity levels. What we also noticed is that there are real mental health ben-



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efits in allowing kids to be a bit free, that if they're not they're missing out on important social skills."

Associate Professor Wood said this did not mean children should "run free".

"There are findings, however, suggesting by the age of 10 the kids should be able to have a safe sense of walking to school," she said.

"But many parents believe kids of primary school age shouldn't be allowed to walk independently in their neighbourhood."

Associate Professor Jeff Walkley, an expert in obesity and children's activity at Mel-

bourne's RMIT University, agreed with the findings and said it was up to parents to decide when to let their children go places unattended. "It is an individual judgment thing," he said. "The stranger-danger concept is distorted, but when you've got parents saying they don't want to be that one rare case that could happen, it's hard not to understand and try to work through it."

He recommended parents walk in their neighbourhood regularly with their children and take a group of friends to the playground.

Mother-of-two Jenni Ma-

son said while society was not as safe as she would like for her children Jacob, 9, and Danielle, 7, it was important for them to "still be kids". "You can't hide them away from doing things. I prefer them to stay in a group so they're always around others and not vulnerable," she said.

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YOUR SAY
Are parents too worried about stranger danger?

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