



The West Australian

Danger exists but kids have a right to be kids

It's the ultimate dilemma for today's parents — how to protect your children from the evils of the world without stifling them or robbing them of the chance to just be kids. We face constant reminders of the dangers that lurk in the outside world, especially in our urban environment, to the extent that many parents are fearful of letting their children play without supervision in parks or walk to school alone.

At the same time experts warn that Australian children are fatter and unhealthier than ever — not just because of the ready access to junk food but because of a lack of physical activity.

The link between the two is impossible to ignore. It is backed by researchers from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and the University of WA, who argue in a new report that there is a distorted perception of urban dangers and this generation of “cottonwool kids” faces other risks from excessive computer use while shut up inside their homes.

There is no doubt that there is cause for parents to be wary — we can all point to well-documented, horrific cases of children

being abducted from Perth streets and murdered or abused. The danger is real. But the WA researchers suggest it is a small risk and that over-protective parents may be depriving their children of the chance to develop responsibility and independence by not letting them venture out without adult supervision.

Ultimately, these issues need to be resolved by parents based on assessment of their own situations but they also pose questions for the broader community about where our society is heading and how we want it to look in another 20 years or more.

These questions encompass the way our cities are designed and how we relate to others in our local neighbourhoods. The report suggests work is needed to improve walkways and public areas to encourage people to use them more, leading to a safety-in-numbers solution.

But we would also benefit by getting to know our neighbours and rebuilding the sort of trust that in previous generations led to far more natural interaction between children and families in suburban streets across the country.