

# Parental fear breeds cotton-wool kids: study

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Katherine Fenech

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Modern parents are becoming increasingly protective of their kids, but where will it end? *Photo: Stephen Baccon*

Even though there is no evidence that it is more dangerous for children to go to the park or walk to school without adults, parents are increasingly wrapping their offspring in cotton wool, a Perth study has found.

Children's mental development and health were also being threatened by their parents' fear of strangers, which was often cited as the reason parents did not let children leave the home without supervision.

The research, exploring the role parental fear for their child's security plays in limiting their physical activity and independence, was undertaken by University of Western Australia Assistant Professor Lisa Wood, in conjunction with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research's Professor Stephen Zubrick.

It found that even though abduction, robbery, assault and homicide statistics had not risen substantially over the past 50 years, parents were more anxious not only about what could happen to their children but also about how other parents perceived them.

As a result children were leading less-active lives, were less likely to walk or cycle to school or play in parks, Assistant Professor Wood said.

"It is very rare for a child to be abducted by a stranger. What has changed is that there is so much more media and community attention now if a child is abducted so it's in parents' faces constantly," Assistant Professor Wood said.

"Parents will greatly over-estimate the danger their children are in if they walk to school or to the park. It's really terrible when (something bad) happens but there's a huge gap between the likelihood of it happening and it actually happening."

She said children as young as 10 should have developed the skills necessary to allow them to go out on their own.

"We also should be fearful if our children are not active, if they become overweight, if they don't have the life skills like negotiating traffic, peripheral vision, and social skills," she said.

"By not allowing children to move around their neighbourhoods kids are missing out on some skills and physical activities and parents are so fearful that they get caught up in a spiral themselves."

Changes to family life in Australia, such as both parents working and the need for care outside the home, were also a factor in the changing attitudes, Professor Zubrick said.

"These factors, and changes to daily activity and routine, impart clear restrictions on where children can be left unsupervised, who can supervise them, the rules for transferring duty of care, and general tolerance for children having a 'freer range' of independent mobility," Professor Zubrick said.

The study recommended a number of strategies to combat the problem, including empowering parents to be less fearful and implementing transport systems that promote cycling and walking.

The issue of the freedom given to children has attracted recent controversy after the publicity given to American mother Lenore Skenazy, who has started a movement called [Free Range Kids](#).

Ms Skenazy was branded "America's worst mom" after making a controversial decision in 2008 to drop her nine-year-old son in downtown Manhattan to take the subway home alone.

Skenazy, a columnist and author, responded to the attention by launching a crusade to urge parents to teach their children independence and social skills by loosening the reins.

Her parenting style includes taking her two sons to the park and leaving them there to meet other kids, play unaccompanied and find their way home when they are done.

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»How depressing. We are breeding a generation of fat children that can't handle real life situations into adult hood. Some of these helicopter parents need to pull their finger out. If some scary pedophile is going to attack your kid, its a 90% chance it'll be from your own family or someone they know and trust.«

»«

Dee | NSW October 06, 2010, 6:57AM

“ »«

»I remember walking to school unaccompanied (except for some friends) from the time I started year 2. Some parents these days are so fretful over their children being the next statistic that the poor kids don't know what to do. When my boys, aged 3 and 4, know how to cross a road safely and how to handle situations with strangers (the same way I was taught), I have no qualms with them walking to school. Some may say I'm a bad parent, but the example set by my parents must be a valid one as I'm still here and know how to handle day-to-day situations in more ways than just turning on the tv and hiding from the world around me.«

»«

Thulstrea | Perth October 06, 2010, 7:21AM

“ »«

»You're right, abduction (and variations) doesn't happen often - and it is not 'real life' - I certainly can do without my children being subjected to that - no for me, but for them. Isn't it my job to give them the best possible outcome I can? I think people forget, kids are not all the same, some need more attention than others - as an observer, who among us can immediatley judge another for what we believe to be 'inappropriate' or 'unnecessary'?...certainly not I, as every day my children remind me how inadequate I am at understanding their signals - which they put out to me every day - in various ways. I'd really like to let my kid walk down the street, to the park and other attractions, 40 years ago I did - but I never had a knife put to my face. I grew up in Broadmeadows - Skin Heads, Lebanese Tigers and the like. Times have changed, we need to either adjust with them, and/or help improve them...for all - so we all feel safe, and if my kid is in trouble, that someone would intervene to help, rather than video it and put it on UTube.«

»«

Tagg | Melbourne October 06, 2010, 7:26AM

“ »«

»Your kids can still be active without having to walk the streets unattended.. It just requires more active involvement, as in taking them to the park and playing with them, which I'm sure most parents already realise..«

»«

LK | October 06, 2010, 7:35AM

“ »«

»For a well informed, intelligent, healthy and privileged generation how is it that we are stuffing this up?«

»Sounds extreme but we need to have a revolution. Governments, certain societal practices, prison reform, the justice system. We have had 222 years Australia. Im not saying we need carbonated spring water in public drinking fountains but good, solid, consistent governance and direction would be nice. Ease the anxiety there and who knows how far that will trickle down.«

»Clearly we are having a problem trusting the world outside our own doors.«

»«

tba | October 06, 2010, 7:36AM

“ »«

»love the blase comment.. its really terrible when something happens, but..«

Well, as a parent I'm going to do my best to make sure that if something happens, it won't be to my kids, and I find it a bit creepy to have other adults who don't know me or my children to insist I should be anything other than vigilant. Children develop at different rates, and the best person to decide appropriate boundaries for them are their parents. This is what we expect of parents - to be their to teach their kids things like how to cross roads ( and yes, we'll all talk about the infinitesimal number of pedophiles and completely fail to mention the dangers of traffic) and how to behave in public.

*Kids can learn by doing things with their parents. They don't need to be left to do something risky on their own in order for the lesson to be worthwhile. I suppose you all believe that a little bullying is good to help kids toughen up as well?*

*I used to work in social services. There are thousands of 'free range' children in Australia, in fact most of the children in the juvenile justice system could all be described as 'free rangers'.*

*Frankly, I want better than that for my kids.«*

»«

**c** | October 06, 2010, 7:39AM

“ »«

*»FFS I used to walk to school and home by year 2 - including crossing the Webster and Stafford Rd intersection. We need to harden up.«*

»«

**tim-e** | sydney October 06, 2010, 8:04AM

“ »«

*»My Mum used to let me walk to primary school (I was 7) with my best friend. Until they found a dead body near the footpath. Suddenly, she picked me up and drove me everywhere. I wasn't even allowed at friends houses after school. Nor was I allowed out on weekends until 16 and even then only during school holidays.«*

*»Sadly, my relationship with my Mum has suffered greatly as a result of this smothering and I'm determined not to repeat the same patterns with my son. I have also struggled for years with intense social phobias. As an amusing aside, I revert back to childhood with my son and relish playing freely on the monkey bars and swings, more than what he does!«*

*»Parents - I know you only want the best but what is best for you is not always what's best for your kids.«*

»«

**Miss D** | October 06, 2010, 8:18AM

“ »«

*»@c sounds very much like a "helicopter parent" justifying their own over-protective actions. The point is not that children are incapable of learning in the presence of adults, it's that they don't develop a sense of responsibility for their own actions - which sounds very much like the children in the juvenile justice system that he/she mentions. Giving children some independence is not the same as neglect.«*

»«

**Lord Botherington-Smythe** | Blandings Castle October 06, 2010, 8:19AM

“ »«

*»In reply to "c" I don't think there is a vast difference from being neglectful and allowing your children to be independent. Unlike a lot of other people who claim that "no damage" was done to them by being allowed to roam the streets I think they fail to notice that the world has changed. I was a child of the 80s and I spent a lot of my time visiting friends and cycling around the neighbourhood... but that's because it was a neighbourhood. I knew all my neighbours and they knew me and who my parents were. While my parents may not have been there I never felt I was unsupervised, as I knew where to go and who to talk to if I ever got into trouble. As I got older families moved and new people moved in and suddenly the neighbourhood I grew up in disappeared. On the rare instance I see a child on the street I have no idea who their parents are or where they live, and I am a stranger to them also. I suppose my point is that "stranger danger" is a real thing but suddenly in Sydney's suburban neighbourhoods everyone is a stranger these days.«*

»«

**James** | Sydney October 06, 2010, 8:21AM

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