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Fearful parents 'make kids fat'

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Children are getting fat and missing out on important life skills because parents are too afraid to let them walk to school or play in parks, university research has found.

The report by WA researchers, commissioned by VicHealth, warns that Australians are creating a generation of "cottonwool kids" because parents have distorted perceptions of stranger danger.

Lead researchers Stephen Zubrick, from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, and Lisa Wood, deputy director of the University of WA's Centre for the Built Environment and Health, said fearful parents were stifling children's physical activity such as walking or cycling to school and playing in parks.

"The negative impacts of parental fear and the resulting 'cottonwool' kids are increasingly being recognised as having adverse impacts on children,

including less active lifestyles and increasing obesity levels," assistant professor Wood said.

She said people had elevated concerns about the remote risk of children being abducted by strangers, but were not as concerned about risks from excessive computer use.

"It's kind of easier in a way that your kids are home and you know where they are and what they're doing, but in fact there's all these other risks from these kids sitting in front of a screen for five hours a day."

Assistant professor Wood said she was concerned that parents could now buy global positioning system devices they could attach to their children so they would know their whereabouts at all times. "I find that a really disturbing trend," she said.

"That teaches children we don't trust them, we don't think they're competent. If kids are over-protected and never allowed to develop some of those skills for themselves . . . then that could backfire when they're a

teenager because they haven't developed that sense of responsibility and skills in self-management."

The report recommended improving walkways and recreational areas to encourage more people to be out on the streets and reassuring parents that risk of child abduction was low.

Karratha father-of-two Matt Zaffino said he thought awareness of stranger danger had increased but he did not believe obesity could be linked to over-protective parenting.

"Obesity is more the fact we have got lazy parents and lazy kids and that parents need to be role models when it comes to their kids for physical activity," he said.

Beechboro grandmother Anneta, who did not want her surname used, said her family did not let grandsons Joshua, 11, and Daniel, 10, out of their sight. "With our own kids we let them go to school alone," she said. "But the environment has changed."