

Travelling to school: Habits of Australian families



Poll report

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Report highlights

- The majority of Australian children (58%) are driven to or from school by car most days of the week
- 71% of Australian children do not walk or ride to school in a typical week
- One in five (20%) teenagers never travel to or from school without an adult
- The main worries parents have about independent travel relate to safety of their child, including stranger danger, traffic hazards and bullying
- One in five (18%) parents report using a tracking device to monitor the location of their child when travelling independently

In a survey fielded in August 2018, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their behaviour, attitudes and experiences in relation to children’s travel to and from school. Questions explored parent and child behaviours, as well as barriers and motivators to active travel (walking or riding) and independent travel (without an adult) to and from school.

Across a sample of 1745 parents, data were collected on a total of 2849 children aged from 5 years to <18 years. This included, 1684 primary-school-aged children aged 5 to <13 years and 1165 teenagers aged 13 to less than 18 years. The median parent respondent age was 45 years and 54% were female. The median number of children per parent was two, and 52% of children were female.

How do children travel to and from school?

The most common way for Australian children to get to and from school is by car, with 58% of children being driven to or from school most days in a typical week. Twenty-two per cent travel by public transport most days and 20% walk or ride.

The vast majority of primary school-aged children travel by car to school, with two-thirds (66%) of children reportedly driven most days of the week and only one quarter (23%) walking or riding. Being driven to school was also the most common mode of transport for teenagers with almost half (46%) being driven most days of the week, followed by public transport (38%) and walking or riding (16%). Teens were more likely than primary school-aged children to take public transport (38% vs 11%)) to school and less likely than primary school-aged children to walk or ride

to school (16% vs 23%) (see Figure 1). In a typical week, 71% of children do not walk or ride to or from school at all. There was no meaningful difference in the prevalence of active travel (walking or riding) to or from school based on regional or metropolitan location, family income or language spoken at home.

How far do children travel to school?

According to parent report, the majority of children live less than five kilometres from school (70%). Half of primary school-aged children (52%) live within two kilometres from school, with a quarter (26%) living within one kilometre. Yet 59% of parents think it is too far for their child to travel to school without an adult. Distance between home and school increased with the transition to secondary school, with almost one in five (18%) of teenagers living more than ten kilometres from school,

The most common mode of travel to and from school for Australian children in a typical week

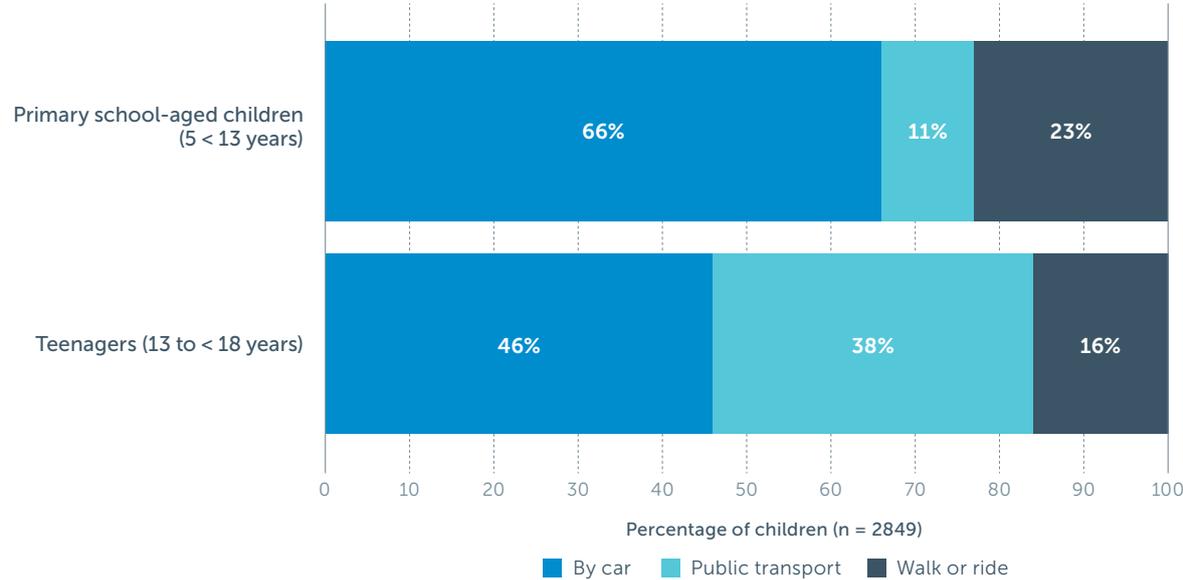


Figure 1.

compared to one in ten (9%) primary-school-aged children (see *Figure 2*). There was a notable difference in distance between home and school based on regional versus metropolitan location, with more than a quarter (27%) of all children in regional areas living more than 10 kilometres from school, compared to ten per cent of those children in metropolitan areas.

Why do parents drive children to and from school?

Among those parents who reported driving by car as the most common mode of travel to school, the reasons for doing so were: driving to school is the quickest form of transport (52%); driving to school is the safest form of transport (48%); driving to school fits in with the family schedule (46%); driving to school is a way to spend time with my child (19%); and driving to school is my child's preference (15%).

Most parents identified some benefits of active travel to school, including that walking or riding all or part of the way to school helps keep children healthy (87%) and that even a short car trip to school contributes to air pollution (57%).

How old are children when they travel to school independently?

Half of all school-aged children (50%) were reported to travel to or from school independently (without an adult) at least some of the time. Travelling without an adult was

more common among teenagers, with more than two thirds of teens (71%) travelling without an adult at least once a week and close to half (45%) every day. A quarter (24%) of primary-school-aged children travel without an adult at least once a week and one in eight (12%) every day. One in five teenagers (20%) never travel to or from school without an adult. Among those children reported to travel independently to school, the average age for first travelling to or from school without an adult was 10.8 years for boys and 10.9 years for girls, with a range of 9.0 to 13.0 years. There was no meaningful difference in the prevalence of independent travel to or from school based on regional or metropolitan location, family income or language spoken at home.

Beliefs about independent travel to and from school

Most parents identified benefits for children in travelling independently to school, including helping to build independence (84%) and problem-solving skills (77%). However, many also expressed concerns, including being worried that their child may be approached or harmed by a stranger (67%), that they may be unsafe crossing the road due to traffic hazards (59%) or that they may be bullied by another child (31%). Half (49%) of parents felt that there were too many risks these days for them to allow their child to travel to school without an adult. A quarter (24%) felt it was irresponsible to allow a child to travel to school without an adult and a further 30% were worried that others might think they were irresponsible

Distance between home and school as estimated by parents

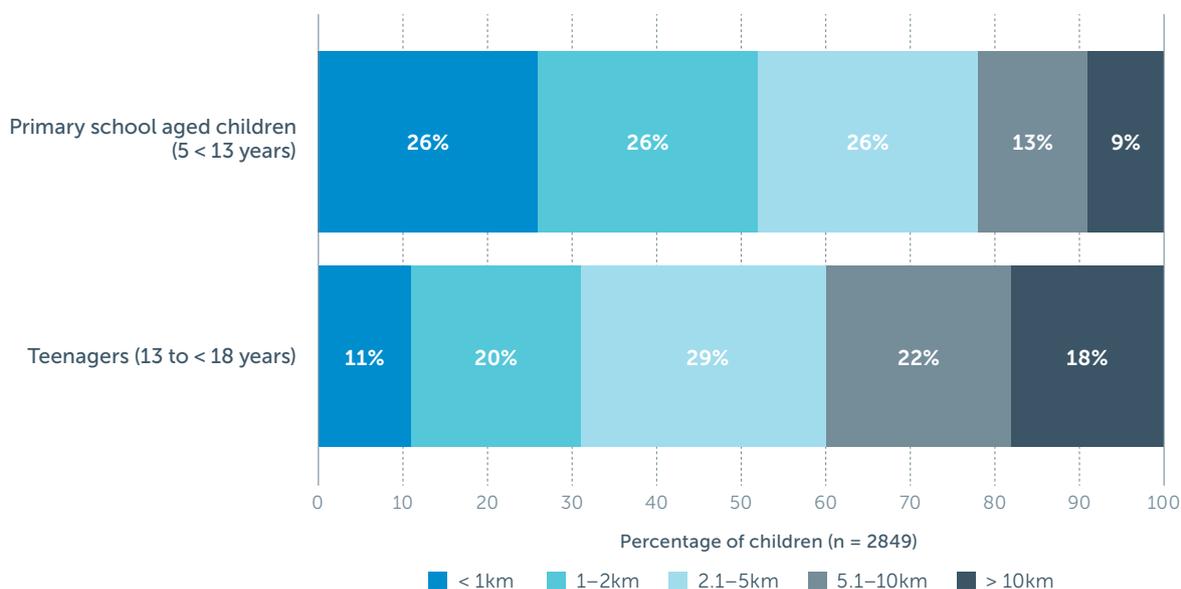


Figure 2.

if they allowed their child to travel independently to school. Most parents (71%) report that there are people they know and trust in their neighbourhood and half (53%) felt that they are sometimes too protective of their children. Three quarters (74%) of parents report that if their child is travelling without an adult they need to be able to contact them at all times.

Tracking children’s travel

Advances in technology mean that many parents are readily able to track the location of their children using geolocation devices, such as smart watches, GPS devices and smartphone apps. One in five parents (18%) report having used a tracking device to monitor the location of their child, with this behaviour being more common among parents of teenagers (24%) than primary-school-aged children (12%). Among those who did not report using a tracking device, almost half (45%) of parents said they would consider doing so in the future. Among children who travel to school independently at least once a week, one in four were reported to have their location tracked by their parents. The majority of parents who reported tracking their child (88%) said that using the device made them feel more comfortable with allowing their child to travel without an adult. Among those children being tracked, parents indicated that the majority were aware they were being tracked (87%). Almost half (42%) of parents reported only checking the location if there was a problem, and one in six (16%) said they continuously monitored their child’s journey (see *Figure 3*).

The reasons given by parents for tracking their child’s location were: feeling reassured about their child’s safety (87%); my child feels more secure knowing that I know exactly where they are (67%); and I am curious about where my child goes (47%). Almost a third (31%) of parents said that their child would prefer they did not use the tracking device and 19% said they disagreed with their partner about whether or not their child’s location should be tracked.

Implications

Active and independent travel to and from school have been demonstrated to have a range of health benefits for children including improved physical health and fitness, building motor, spatial and practical coping skills and fostering independence and responsibility. Active travel, that is walking or riding, also has potential additional benefits for communities, including increased social interactions on streets, improved community connectivity and reduced car congestion and environmental pollution.

This study suggests that most Australian children are not regularly engaging in active travel to and from school, with teenagers walking or riding to school less often than primary-school-aged children. For most children, the trip to school is relatively short, and yet the most common mode of travel is by car. Parents report choosing to drive their children to school because it is the quickest, safest and most convenient option for their family’s schedule.

Parent beliefs and attitudes about tracking the location of their child

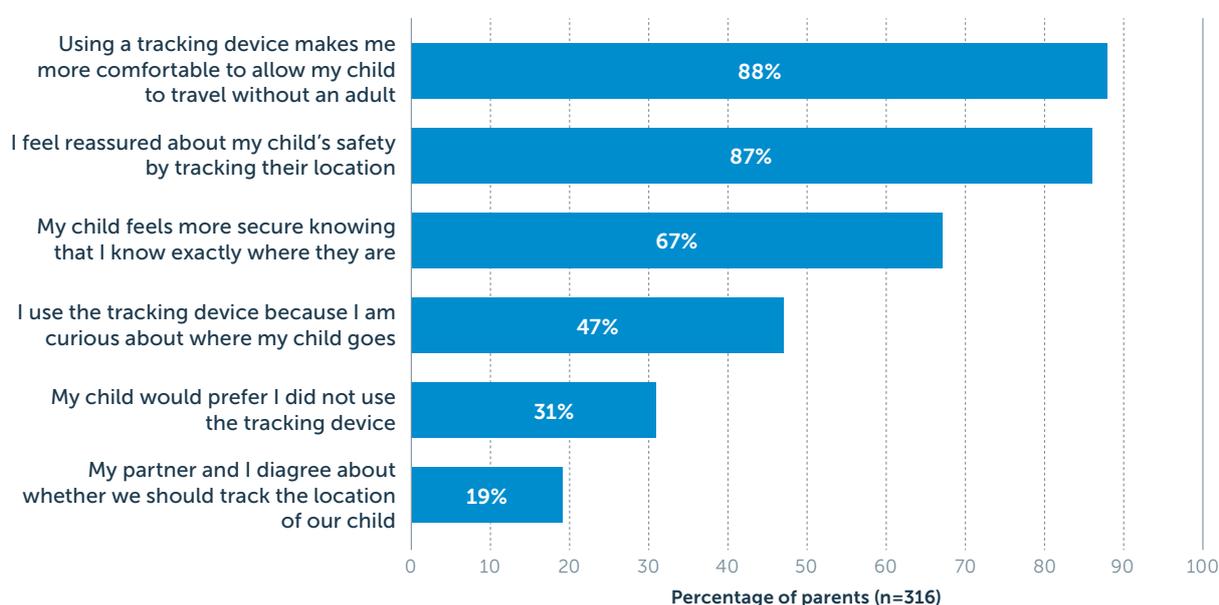


Figure 3.

71% of children don't regularly walk or ride to school



While many parents felt that independent travel to and from school helps to build children's independence and problem-solving skills, only one third of children travel to or from school without an adult in a typical week. Worries about stranger danger and traffic hazards are the main concerns parents have about their children travelling independently to school.

Recent advances in geolocation technology allow many parents the option of tracking the location of their child. This poll found that this practice is quite common, with one in five parents reporting they track their child's location and a further half of parents saying they would consider doing this in the future. Tracking their child's location allows parents to feel reassured about their child's safety and whereabouts, hence reducing some of the fears that might make a parent reluctant to allow their child to travel independently. It is not clear how the use of a tracking device impacts on a child's development of problem-solving skills and independence, and amongst those parents who tracked their child's location, a third reported their child would prefer not to be tracked.

The findings of this Poll highlight the many factors that affect a parent's decision about how their child travels to and from school. Active and independent travel have potential physical and mental health benefits for children and yet many Australian children are not regularly engaging in these activities, with most being driven to school by car. A combination of fear of strangers and perceived traffic hazards contribute to parents discouraging tweens and teens from independent travel. The challenges of family scheduling and convenience further add to parents choosing car travel over walking or riding to or from school. Policy makers should consider these factors in the development of physical, social and regulatory environments to support parents and families in choosing active and independent travel for their children. Geolocation technology has the potential to alleviate some of the perceived fears among parents and children about independent travel risks, but further research is needed to understand the impact of this practice on parent-child relationships, actual child safety and the development of independence in children and teens.

Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from August 17 to August 28, 2018, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1745). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between five years and less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 77%.

References

For full reference list please contact:
child.healthpoll@rch.org.au

The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2019). Travelling to school: Habits of Australian families. Poll Number 13. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.