

How to help your kids get around safely on their own



One of the most important aspects of being a parent is teaching your children to become independent. But sometimes it's easier said than done, especially when you have such a strong instinct to protect them.



We all understand the benefits of letting children walk to and from school on their own, or go and meet a friend at a local park. They're learning to be independent and generally being more physically active and healthy.

On the other hand, it's perfectly natural to feel a bit anxious about letting them walk, ride a bike or scooter, or catch public transport without any adult supervision. In fact, our research shows that almost half of all Victorian parents worry about their children's safety when they aren't with an adult because a stranger might approach them.

That's why we've developed some tips on how to help your child travel safely on their own. First, let's look at the many benefits of 'independent mobility' for children.

Why allowing children to get places on their own is so important

Increased 'independent mobility' gives children the opportunity to:

- Develop self-confidence
- Get some exercise, including playing outdoors, which makes it easier for them to get the recommended one hour of physical activity a day
- Play with friends, including making new friends
- Learn responsibility and independence
- Get to know the neighbourhood
- Learn coping skills, which is very important to build resilience, a key factor in children's mental wellbeing.



What you can do to make it easier for your child (and you!)

The secret is to help your child become independently mobile in stages that are appropriate for her or his age, skills and the environment. So it's a gradual process, going from being fully dependent on you or another adult, to 'pre-independence', and finally independence.

Practice travel skills with your child before allowing them to travel independently, as it teaches and reinforces the skills that they'll need to do it safely. It can also alleviate a number of concerns you might have, such as:

- The level of your children's walking, cycling and road safety skills
- Their familiarity with the route
- The likelihood of risk
- What to do if something 'bad' happens (e.g. getting injured or approached by a stranger)
- The actual travel time and distance.



How will you know when the time's right?

As parents, you're in the best position to judge when your child is 'ready' for independent mobility. There are a number of things to consider, such as:

- Your child's age and maturity
- How 'child-friendly' your local area is, i.e. are there other families out walking, do people keep an eye out for each other, are there good footpaths and crossings, are the roads quiet?
- Your own concerns, particularly in regard to 'stranger danger'
- Your level of confidence in your child's ability to travel independently
- How much it might benefit your child to have more independence
- Whether you think other parents, family members or the school might disapprove
- Whether your child has access to a mobile phone
- How a change in routine can provide opportunities for your child to be more independently active
- What other parents and families think is a 'normal' or acceptable age for children to be able to get around on their own.



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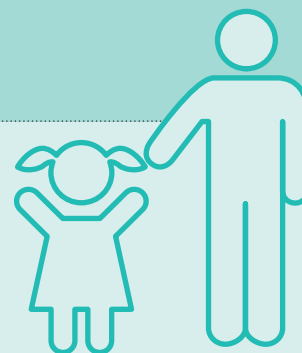
The steps to helping your child become more independent

1

Dependent

Younger children (usually under five) who aren't ready to become independent just yet

- Set a good example by walking or cycling to local places, such as to kindergarten.
- Look for ways to encourage appropriate independence with everyday activities like getting dressed or playing in the garden unsupervised.
- Observe your child's behaviour and independence, and look for signs of readiness.



2

Pre-independent

Children who are moving from dependent to independent with your support

- Walk/ride with your child around your neighbourhood, or to the shops, park or school, to:
 - demonstrate safe travel and healthy activity
 - practice and reinforce the skills your child needs to travel and play safely, such as riding a bike and knowing the road rules
 - create opportunities to discuss safety issues and strategies
 - recognise and praise improvements in your child's skills and behaviour
 - help your child become familiar with the local neighbourhood
 - identify the safest routes (e.g. where there are safe road crossings)
 - judge when your child is ready to start being independently mobile.
- Make a plan with your child about possible strategies for when things go wrong, such as getting lost, if a stranger approaches them, or if they or their friend gets injured.
- Slowly build independence by letting your child do things like visit a friend's house down the street or ride their bike around the block.
- Look for ways to expand your child's independent mobility, e.g. going to the local shop or park instead of just to school.
- Agree on a plan with your child for the transition towards independence, and set milestones and boundaries.



3

Independent

Children who have freedom to move around in public spaces without adult supervision

- Remind your child about strategies for when things go wrong, such as what to do if approached by a stranger.
- Renegotiate and agree with your child on any milestones and boundaries as she or he gets more capable and confident.
- Consider and encourage your child to use a mobile phone to support their independence.

