

# Parental perception of social risk and of positive potentiality of outdoor autonomy for children: The development of two instruments

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## Abstract

An important factor that limits children's autonomy outdoors is parental perception of social danger and traffic danger. To obtain quantitative instruments for these dimensions, this work aimed to explore the validity and reliability of three scales. Two of them describe, respectively, problematic aspects of the area of residence linked to traffic and situations of social degradation that could constitute risk factors for the child's psychological and physical safety (Traffic Danger Perception Scale, Social Danger Perception Scale). The third scale investigates parental perception of the positive potentiality of outdoor autonomy for children's maturation and growth. Interviews were conducted with 377 mothers of children between 8 and 10 years of age residing in six different areas in Italy. The results indicated weak reliability of the Traffic Danger Perception Scale, which requires further investigation, and they confirmed the reliability and the construct validity of the Social Danger Perception Scale and the Perception of Positive Potentiality of Outdoor Autonomy for Children Scale. The perception of social danger was higher in mothers who live in larger urban contexts and who have more personal fear of crime and a lower sense of community. The positive perception of children's autonomy of movement was higher among mothers who live in greener areas, who have a greater sense of community and who have more neighbourhood relations.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, we have seen a worrying change in the daily habits of children in western countries. They are increasingly less occupied in play and free movement activities in the open and less present in public areas, being confined to the house and occupied in programmed activities and under adult surveillance. Studies carried out in many countries of the European Union (i.e. Italy, Great Britain, Finland and Sweden), in the United States and in Australia have warned of the dangerous progression of this phenomenon (Giuliani, Alparone, & Mayer, 1997; Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1991; Hillman, Henderson, & Whalley, 1973; Horelli, 2001; Johansson, 2003; Kytta,

2004; Prezza, Morabito, Piloni, Sersante, & Alparone, 2000). Concerning this, Gaster (1995) stated that one of the reasons why the studies on home-range have faded is that the home-range as a reality has faded. Maybe, as Carr and Lynch (1968) feared, children are already estranged from their neighbourhood.

The lack of independent mobility, the reduction in outdoor play and in getting around on foot have an effect on children's development and well-being. Particularly negative are the effects on their environmental knowledge, the development of spatial, motor and analytical skills (for a review, see Rissotto & Giuliani, in press), their sociability (Prezza, Piloni, Morabito, Alparone, & Giuliani, 2001) and their motor and social development (Hüttenmoser, 1995). Because a sedentary life often leads to an increase in obesity, some authors hold (Hillman, 1999/2000) that children who are less autonomous outdoors are more

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prone to weight problems. In fact, Mackett (2004) found that children who play outdoors burn more calories than those who are involved in structured after-school activities, such as clubs and tuition.

Many characteristics of the children, the environment and the culture have been individuated that facilitate or hinder freedom of movement.

Some studies have specifically dealt with the demographic characteristics of children. Independent mobility increases with age (Blakely, 1994; Giuliani et al., 1997; Prezza et al., 2001) and is differentiated for gender, supporting the widely accepted social stereotype that gives more freedom to males (Alparone, Prezza, Tucci, & De Ruosi, 2003; Giuliani et al., 1997; Hillman et al., 1991; Prezza et al., 2001; Spencer & Woolley, 2000). These factors are particularly important for parental evaluation of the child's maturation process and the consequent development of specific abilities considered indispensable for freedom of movement (care and skill when facing road danger, the intuition of danger, etc.). Parents' beliefs about the ages at which children should be able to cope with autonomous environmental experiences also depend strongly upon their cultural context (Hillman, 1997; Sauvage & Gauvain, 1998).

Other research has analysed the environmental characteristics that facilitate children's outdoor autonomy. They include typology of the neighbourhood (new vs. old, Prezza et al., 2001; van der Spek & Noyon, 1997), low degree of urbanisation (suburban vs. inner city, Anderson & Tindall, 1972; rural village vs. city, Kytä, 2002; small town vs. city, Alparone et al., 2003), and suitable spaces for play near home (Chawla, 1992; Prezza et al., 2001). On the contrary, the dangers of automobile traffic and of atmospheric pollution (Björklid, 1995; Bonanomi, 1994; Heurlin-Norinder, 1996; Hillman et al., 1991) hinder children's outdoor freedom. Road traffic dangers depend on the intensity, type of road (e.g. fast roads, lack of pavements, dangerous crossroads) or on the improper habits of drivers (e.g. parking on sidewalks, no respect for traffic lights). Fear of traffic is largely responsible for the changes in children's habits of movement and particularly for the fact that they are driven everywhere (Björklid, 1995; Heurlin-Norinder, 1996).

Added to dangers and fears related to traffic, parents and children also fear dangers of a social nature (Giuliani et al., 1997; Johansson, 2003; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Sissons Joshi, MacLean, & Carter, 1999; Valentine, 1997), such as being victimised by aggression and molestation. Social fears are mostly linked to micro-crime (drug pushing, drug addiction, bag snatching), to the presence of social groups that are targets for strong prejudice (gypsies, immigrants, homeless, people with strange dress and behaviour) and, to a lesser degree, to paedophiles and to the phenomenon of bullying (Björklid, 2003; Blakely, 1994; Cicognani, 2003; Johansson, 2003).

Some parents (Alparone et al., 2003) also pointed out that in cities people live anonymously, that it is difficult to

meet people you know on the street and to be recognised. The importance of being integrated in the neighbourhood was confirmed by Hüttenmoser (1995) and Prezza et al. (2001). These two studies demonstrated that children whose parents had a more extensive neighbourhood network enjoyed more independent mobility.

### 1.1. *General aim of the research*

Studies in this area have identified many factors that either facilitate or hamper outdoor autonomy. However, there lacks an understanding of the processes through which this influence is exerted. Research in this area has been primarily qualitative; therefore, it is difficult to understand if—and to what degree—the social and physical characteristics of the neighbourhood influence parental behaviour and that of the children through the parents' experience/perception of the neighbourhood and through their opinion on the children's independent mobility. Quantitative measures allow for easier testing of complex models that simultaneously consider the influence of many variables and the relationships between them.

Our general aim in this study was to obtain quantitative measures by constructing scales to reveal parents' opinions and perceptions associated with children's autonomy in the urban context. Specifically, the three scales regard parents' social and traffic fears and the importance they attribute to outdoor autonomy for children's growth and development. The scores obtained on these three scales will be related to different variables such as size of residential area, presence of green, fear of crime, sense of community and neighbourhood relations, as well as to many of the parents' socio-demographic characteristics. We will first analyse the constructs associated with the scales and will then describe the research hypothesis in detail.

### 1.2. *Parental fear of traffic*

Hillman (1999/2000) believes that, more than social fear, what is justified is parental concern over the risk of road injury to their children when they are alone. Indeed, children and young people are 100 times more likely to be killed by road users than by strangers (Sustrans, 2001). The level of traffic consistently influences the level of fear: Heurlin-Norinder (1996) found that parents living in areas where traffic is heavier are more worried about traffic than those living in traffic segregated areas. Also, intense traffic and a high level of car parking in the vicinity (as perceived by children from 7 to 11 years old) are accompanied by a perception of the area as not very safe from a social point of view and poor in neighbourhood relationships. "A downward spiral of fear can be created in response to road safety fears in which reductions in play, cycling and walking activities among children and young people can diminish the general social activities levels of an area which can heighten fears of stranger danger" (Mullan, 2003, p. 352). Skjaeveland (2001) did not consider fear of traffic

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