



'I'll be driving you to school for the rest of your life': A qualitative study of parents' fear of stranger danger



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ABSTRACT

Parents' concern about children's safety is a recurring theme in studies exploring children's independent mobility and play. However, few studies have investigated neighbourhood features influencing parents' fear of strangers harming their child, nor the extent to which this fear is influenced by socio-economic status (SES). We explored i) parents' perceived risk of, and fear of, stranger danger; ii) physical and social environmental factors influencing parents' fear, including differences by SES; and iii) strategies to manage parents' fear. Seven focus groups were conducted with 34 parents of 4–12 year olds living in low, mid and high SES suburbs in Perth, Western Australia. Physical neighbourhood features influencing parents' fear of stranger danger included visibility, people, streets, dwelling type and neighbourhood upkeep. Social environment factors included SES, neighbourhood network, sociocultural influences and media. Findings support the creation of neighbourhoods that enhance natural surveillance and encourage social interaction.

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1. Introduction

Parents' concern for their children's safety is a recurring theme in studies exploring the determinants of children being allowed to walk or ride to destinations (Faulkner, Richichi, Buliung, Fusco, & Moola, 2010), engage in active free play (Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006), and roam independently in their neighbourhood (Foster, Villanueva, Wood, Christian, & Giles-Corti, 2014; O'Connor & Brown, 2013). While the term 'safety' captures concepts such as road safety, personal injury, bullying, and harm from strangers (Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008), parents have been shown to be more fearful of strangers harming their children (i.e., stranger danger) than any other sources of harm (Blakely, 1994; Valentine, 1997). Furthermore, parents continue to fear strangers despite knowing the probability of a stranger abducting or abusing their child is low (Little, 2013; Lorenc et al., 2012). Indeed, children are less likely to be harmed by strangers than by family or acquaintances (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000).

Parents' efforts to protect their children may have a number of unintended consequences for child development and wellbeing. Adult accompaniment of children has increased in recent years in parallel with declining levels of children's outdoor play and independent activity (Fyhri, Hjorthol, Mackett, Fotel, & Kyttä, 2011; O'Connor & Brown, 2013). Restricting children's independent activity can limit children's development in terms of physical activity (Page, Cooper, Griew, & Jago, 2010), cognition (Kyttä, 2004), friendship formation (Prezza, 2001), and self-esteem and autonomy (Joshi, MacClean, & Carter, 1999). Furthermore, parents' insistence on driving children to activities may compromise neighbourhood safety by contributing to traffic congestion and reducing natural surveillance from passing pedestrians (Little, 2013). Natural surveillance is 'the ability of everyday users to be able to see into and across space by virtue of physical design and site layout' (p. 22) (Schneider & Kitchen, 2007).

Given the apparent mismatch between parents' fear of stranger danger (an emotional response to potential victimisation) and the perceived risk of stranger danger (a cognitive response to potential victimisation), as well as the potential impact of parents' fear of stranger danger on their child's wellbeing and development, understanding the modifiable factors that influence fear is warranted. Specifically, is it possible to design neighbourhoods that mitigate

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parents' concerns?

While adults' fear for themselves can be reduced by improving neighbourhood aesthetics, maintenance and social cohesion (Foster, Wood, Christian, Knuiman, & Giles-Corti, 2013), it is unclear whether these features alleviate parents' fear for their children's safety. Recently, however, Cote-Lussier, Jackson, Kestens, Henderson, and Barnett (2015) found that parents' perceived lack of safety in Canada was strongly associated with indicators of disorder and a lack of community involvement (e.g., graffiti, poorly maintained buildings, and low perceived collective efficacy and trust) (Cote-Lussier et al., 2015). Similarly, using a sample of 1210 parents in Western Australia, Foster et al. (2015) found that parents' fear of strangers was negatively associated with neighbourhoods containing local retail and service destinations, better street connectivity, more low traffic roads and parks/nature reserves (Foster et al., 2015).

Socio-economic status may also alter the extent to which neighbourhood features influence parents' fear for their children's safety. Compared to Australian parents living in high SES areas, parents living in low SES areas have been found to be more fearful of strangers and report perceived higher levels of risk (Foster et al., 2015). This same study found that the presence of proximate retail and service destinations was negatively associated with parents' fear of stranger danger in high but not low SES areas, and the proportion of land allocated to parks and nature reserves negatively influenced parents' fear in low SES areas only. By contrast, the perception of more pedestrians in a pleasing, friendly setting was consistently associated with less fear across all SES levels, as was the indirect association between parents' fear and more vehicle traffic and awareness of media reports about strangers (Foster et al., 2015). More generally, Kimbro and Schachter (2011) found that maternal fear was higher in more deprived neighbourhoods, while Cote-Lussier et al. (2015) found that parents and children with lower household income levels perceived less neighbourhood safety. Thus, child development may be particularly compromised in low SES areas if parents choose to constrain their children's independence and mobility in response to higher perceptions of risk and subsequent fear.

To date, most of the research regarding parents' fear of stranger danger has been quantitative in nature, despite qualitative studies being particularly suited to new and nuanced areas of research (Punch, 2000). Nonetheless, qualitative studies have explored parents' concerns for their children's safety in the context of active travel and free play (Faulkner et al., 2010; Jago et al., 2009; O'Connor & Brown, 2013; Veitch et al., 2006). O'Connor and Brown (2013) explored the construction of parents' fear relating to independent active school travel in a middle class white suburb in Australia. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 24 mothers of primary school students. The authors identified a number of factors influencing parents' fear (or lack thereof), including aesthetically pleasing environments, recognisable strangers, media and personality. Veitch et al. (2006) also explored parents' perceptions of factors influencing children's active free play in their investigation of where children play and why. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 78 parents (92% female) of both males and females (47% male; mean age 8.3 years) from five primary schools. Safety emerged as a key theme, with the presence of teenagers in public space acting as a safety-related deterrent to their child's park use, and streets such as cul-de-sacs considered safe places for play.

Veitch et al. (2006) adopted a social ecological model when investigating parents' perceptions of the individual, social and physical environmental influences on children's active free play. Similarly, O'Connor and Brown's (2013) study was guided by a framework that considered person, social and environmental

factors that impacted fear. Social-ecological frameworks are commonly used in public health research to identify determinants of health outcomes. By recognising the interdependence between individuals and their social, physical and policy environments, social-ecological frameworks acknowledge that health behaviours can be influenced by factors beyond an individual's control (Sallis et al., 2006; Stokols, 1996).

Guided by a social-ecological framework, this study expands both O'Connor and Brown's (2013) and Veitch et al.'s (2006) qualitative work into active travel and free play by focusing on perceived neighbourhood safety. More specifically, this paper investigates the impact of neighbourhood settings on parents' fear of strangers harming their children (hereafter referred to as 'parents' fear of stranger danger'). The study aims to gain insights into i) perceived risk of, and parents' fear of, stranger danger; ii) physical environmental and social environmental factors that aggravate or alleviate parents' fear of stranger danger, including differences by socio-economic status; and iii) strategies that might help manage parents' fear of stranger danger.

2. Methods

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study, with focus groups providing detailed data by encouraging discussion and reflection amongst group members, and allowing researchers to probe cognitive and emotional responses to topics (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005).

2.1. Participants

Between June and August 2014, seven focus groups were conducted with 33 mothers and one grandmother/primary carer (i.e., parents) of children aged four to 12 years. The seven focus groups contained between three and seven people, who were aged 22–55 years (mean 36.8 years) and had lived in their suburb for a mean of 5.8 years. The socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample appear in Table 1.

2.2. Procedure

A purposeful sample captured parents living in low ($n = 13$), mid ($n = 12$) and high ($n = 9$) socio-economic status (SES) suburbs in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. The suburbs represented by participants in this study were typical of Perth's general landscape, in that they were sprawling suburbs characterised by low-density developments and a heavy reliance on private vehicles. Although detached houses dominated these suburbs, semi-detached duplexes and units were also present. Area-level SES was determined using the decile ranking within Western Australia of the State Suburb (SSC) Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). For this study, low SES suburbs were chosen from Deciles 1 and 2; mid SES suburbs Deciles 5 and 6; and high SES suburbs Deciles 9 and 10. Catholic primary schools located within these suburbs were then contacted by telephone, and notices were placed in school newsletters requesting that the parents telephone or email the research team if they were interested in participating in the study. Additional parents were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, with recruitment ceasing once data saturation was achieved. Parents were eligible to participate if they were proficient at speaking English, more than 18 years old, and cared for at least one child attending primary school (kindergarten through to Year 7). Despite efforts to recruit "parents", only females responded to the call for focus group participants.

The focus groups were attended by two researchers, neither of

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