

Unsupervised children are more sociable and more active

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Youngsters who are allowed to leave the house without an adult are more active and enjoy a richer social life than those who are constantly supervised, according to a study conducted at UCL and reported in a special edition of the journal *Built Environment* (19th December).

The project helped to inform the Government's new Children's Plan and was led by Professor Roger Mackett of UCL's Department of Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering. His team studied 330 pupils from two schools in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, all aged between 8 and 11. The children completed questionnaires, kept travel diaries, had their movements logged using GPS monitors and wore portable motion sensors to measure their speed of travel, changes in direction and the number of 'activity calories' they consumed. ('Activity calories' are those burnt during activities, rather than those used to maintain core bodily functions.)

Professor Mackett says: "We asked children whether they were allowed out without an adult and then looked at where they go and how they behave. In general, children who aren't constantly supervised tend to leave the house more often – exploring their surroundings, playing with other children and using up more calories than their sedentary, house-bound peers."

Key findings from the paper include:

-- Children allowed out without adult supervision are more active, being

found at home less often. Statistically, they are more likely to be found playing out or visiting the homes of friends than children who aren't allowed out alone.

-- Children walk faster and take a more direct route when an adult is present, but they do not use more energy than unaccompanied children. This is because unsupervised children move in a more meandering fashion as they investigate their environment and socialise with other children.

-- Access to local open space is a significant factor in determining whether boys are allowed out of the house without an adult. 71% of those with access to open space were allowed out, compared to just 51% of those without such access.

-- Of the three types of activity monitored during the study (walking, unstructured play and participation in organised clubs), walking used up the most activity calories.

Professor Mackett goes on to say: “Fears over road safety and ‘stranger danger’ need to be balanced against soaring levels of childhood obesity and poor health. Letting a child out to play is one of the best things a parent can do for their child’s physical health and personal development.

“Allowing children to leave the house without an accompanying adult has significant benefits, but we need to design and build environments that children feel comfortable in and that parents feel confident to let them use on their own. The health benefits are clear, but without action the less tangible benefits of increased independence, self-reliance and general ‘growing up’ are in danger of being lost.”

Source: University College London

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