

OUT AND ABOUT: THE BENEFITS OF WALKING EXCURSIONS

By Caroline Milburn



As child health experts become concerned about sedentary lifestyles among children, a new approach to road safety education is getting preschoolers out on to the streets, exploring their neighbourhoods.

Local walking excursions – where educators in early learning services take children on a stroll around the block, to a nearby park or shops – are becoming increasingly popular as a mechanism to teach preschoolers about road safety.

The excursions are part of a sea change in early childhood road safety education in Victoria where educators are embedding road safety education into their daily programming, rather than providing one-off activities or experiences.

The approach is being fueled by new national research which merges early childhood education and road safety evidence. This research, commissioned by the Road Safety Education Reference Group Australasia, resulted in the National

Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education, a set of eight practices guiding educators in evidence-based road safety education curriculum.

Putting this new research into practice challenges some commonly held beliefs about teaching road safety to children.

“Traditionally, what we’ve done as parents and early childhood educators is provide children with a dose of road safety education – you get it for a week and then you’re done,” according to Catharine Hydon, a leading early childhood consultant. “The shift in thinking involves what the research evidence shows about how children learn. They learn through encounters and participation.

“If we offer them one outing and one activity such as making traffic lights it’s not enough to embed those ideas into their thinking. But if educators and children regularly step out into their community then this real experience

provides a rich learning environment to assist children to develop skills and attitudes for safe road use – holding hands, being aware of driveways, road signs and traffic lights – children can participate in their own safety and the safety of others. Those sort of habits last for a lifetime.”

Originally developed in 1989, Victoria’s early childhood road safety education program, known as Starting Out Safely, responded to national changes in Australian early childhood education resulting in a renewed program. Since 2011, ELAA has been delivering the new program, and been instrumental in turning research into practice.

Starting Out Safely aims to reduce injuries and death to children from road trauma and to support children in being active community participants. The stakes are high, especially for young children.

Road trauma is the leading cause of death among children aged 0–14 in Australia and the second most frequent cause of hospitalisation, according to the World Health Organization. In Victoria, on average each year 35 children aged between 0–18 are killed and 839 are seriously injured on the state’s roads, according to VicRoads data.

So far under the statewide rollout of the Starting Out Safely program ELAA has delivered road safety education professional development, including resource materials, to more than 1000 educators in Victorian early learning services.

The resource materials include a play mat with accurate Victorian signage that reflects what children see outside on the streets. The play mat encourages conversation and learning about road safety. Educators extend on this learning by taking children on walking excursions along the surrounding streets or on other types of excursions using public transport.

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By encouraging services to introduce neighbourhood excursions Starting Out Safely also achieves a key goal of Australia’s national early years learning framework – to help children to be active participants in their community. And in an era of rising obesity rates the excursions have the added benefit of developing healthy exercise habits among children.

Ms Hydon said families and educators liked the idea of neighbourhood excursions but often raised concerns about whether they could be done safely and whether they had educational value. It was therefore crucial that educators consulted thoroughly with parents before implementing such excursions under the Starting Out Safely program.

“Parents have a legitimate anxiety about children being out in the world because as a society we’ve done a good job of telling children that the world is a dangerous place,” Ms Hydon said.

“But parents are also increasingly receptive to the idea of not wanting to bubble-wrap their children, of wanting them to go out into their neighbourhood and be part of their community.

“As educators we need to help parents understand the value of that and how it benefits their child’s learning.”

ELAA has collected many examples of neighbourhood excursions, sparked by ideas from children and educators. In a kindergarten in Melbourne’s northern suburbs, a child brought in a real estate brochure showing the new house his family had moved into nearby.

It led to a lively discussion. The educator collected more brochures from the local real estate agent and the children brought in photos of houses in their street. They created a map of their neighbourhood, put the houses on the map, discussed the streets and road safety issues and then went on excursions to locate the houses.

Other examples involve children drawing up a list of ingredients to cook something and walking to the local shops to buy the ingredients, or walking to the local park to gather sticks and leaves for a craft project.

“These are learning experiences dripping with literacy, numeracy, language development and team-work,” Ms Hydon said. “Parents often ask what children are going to learn about literacy and numeracy if they walk down to the shops. So it’s our job as educators to be really clear about the learning that takes place when we take children out into the community.”

At Poets Grove Family and Children’s Centre in the inner Melbourne bayside suburb of Elwood, children go on about six neighbourhood excursions each week, with road safety education embedded into each outing.

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Neighbourhood walk

Tips for creating a neighbourhood excursions program:

- Consult with parents and staff about the concept
- Be prepared: provide educational research and other material to answer parents’ questions about the program
- Explain all safety precautions to parents. For example what happens if a child becomes ill on an excursion?
- Ensure all staff follow risk assessment procedures before going on an excursion. Educators can download an excursion risk management plan template from the ACECQA website, www.acecqa.gov.au
- Take a first aid kit and a mobile phone on every walk



Photos: Poets Grove Family and Children’s Centre, Elwood.

“The more that teachers go out on neighbourhood excursions, the more they’ll be released from the fear of the unknown. Just like children, teachers learn from doing”, Kay Mondon, Manager, Poets Grove Family and Children’s Centre.



The 15-minute walk to the nearby beach is one of the centre’s most popular excursions. In spring, children go on daily neighbourhood walks with educators to examine plant growth and flowers blooming in gardens and parks.

The centre’s excursions have been operating for more than two years. Its parent management committee established the program because they wanted children to become more familiar with their neighbourhood. Ms Kay Mondon, the centre’s manager, said many early childhood services were reluctant

to get involved in excursions because of misplaced fears about legal liability issues.

“Centres are petrified about legal liability but that legal liability exists whether you’re with the children inside or outside”, according to Ms Mondon, a former co-ordinator of postgraduate education courses at a Victorian TAFE institution.

She said feedback from the centre’s staff revealed the excursions progressively became easier to supervise because the children became more knowledgeable about road safety and their neighbourhood after each outing.

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Ms Zora Marko, ELAA’s Road Safety Education project manager, said some early learning services are reluctant to embrace neighbourhood excursions. But that attitude is changing as more educators participate in the Starting Out Safely program. The program helps educators consider the benefits and manage the mandatory risk assessments for each outing.

Ms Marko said educators and families welcomed the shift to a more holistic approach to early childhood road safety education. “Road safety is more than just teaching children to ‘Stop, Look, Listen and Think’,” she said. “It’s about engaging with families and children, embedding it in everyday life and seeing it as an enabler for children to become active participants in their communities.”

LINK: <http://www.roadsafetyeducation.vic.gov.au/>