

Accent column in The Courier-Mail – 4 May 1999

Walking home alone

Allowing children to walk home alone from school is a freedom many parents will be even more reluctant to grant after the tragic disappearance of nine-year-old Rockhampton girl Keyra Steinhardt.

This horrific incident, involving an evil stranger, reinforces the reasons so many parents build careers around ferrying children home by car every afternoon.

It will make parents even more cautious and children even more car-bound.

But the sad thing is that being trusted to travel home unsupervised is an essential rite of passage.

It is recognition of children's growing independence as they move towards teenage years. There ultimately comes a day when all parents have to snip the cord and let their offspring go it alone, but knowing when to grant this freedom is increasingly tricky.

The police are certainly not prepared to put an age on when it's appropriate for children to walk home from school alone.

They say it depends on the maturity of the child, whether they have to walk solo and how far they have to go.

Police no longer peddle the "stranger danger" line because it's often a stranger who can help them in a sticky situation; it's now known that children are sometimes more at risk from a relative, a social "aunt" or "uncle", or someone else they know.

With the holidays a mere memory and second term marching on, the 3pm school-day circus is back at full tilt and the parent-driver behaviour as erratic as ever.

Seeing some of the dodgy driving generated by congestion at schools, one wonders whether children are more at risk of being knocked down by a car than they are of other unspoken dangers.

In this noble endeavour of keeping children safe in cars, we subject them to road chaos in which double-parking, illegal U-turns across solid lines and running amber/red lights are commonplace.

Every now and then, police arrive wielding radar guns and ticket books to pull everyone into line but their restraining influence doesn't seem to last.

While safety is the primary reason children are ferried by car to and from school, there are other factors too such as the distance from school, the terrain, lack of public transport, parents' work commitments, children's extracurricula commitments, the added sun exposure, the lack of siblings or other children walking, or simply a dearth of footpaths.

If children don't see others walking to school, this feeds their reliance on motor engines rather than shanks's pony.

But the downside of all this driving to and fro is the mounting evidence that keeping children safe in the family saloon actually stifles their development physically, emotionally and even academically.

The Courier-Mail recently reported that children who walk or cycle to school are rising to the top of the class.

New British research shows they are fresher, brighter and tend to do better in exams than those who are driven in cars every day by their parents.

Then there's the question of actually learning the rules of the road.

Eventually most children will need to walk around the streets on their own. The RACQ has also suggested that driving parents are robbing children of vital lessons in road safety.

On the other hand, government initiatives such as the Queensland Transport safe walking and pedalling programme and the Brisbane City Council's safe schools programme are endeavouring to improve the situation.

The council's safe schools programme has set up a guidebook that offers an action plan to raise safety awareness using tools such as cardboard cut-out police officers, bumper stickers, awards, school book labels and tickets for offenders.

Based on the four Es – education, encouragement, enforcement and engineering – the council's plan is to work with individual safe school travel committees at every Brisbane school to prioritise student safety.

And the Queensland Police Service has produced two brochures to inform children about safety issues – *I Don't Have To Go* and *My Body Belongs to Me*.

As the incidence of childhood obesity grows in Australia, there's no doubt that for many children the only exercise they get is the token walk from car to school gate and back.

Then there is the issue of empowerment and independence.

So what about the tricky decision of when to let the children walk home alone?

If we, as parents, are unable to smother our fears, we clip the wings of our offspring.

Surely by the time they're into double figures and know the route backwards, we can confidently give them their passport to freedom?

Maybe not, if we keep reading about the grim details of the disappearance of an innocent Rockhampton schoolgirl.