

**‘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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## **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 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 and colleagues (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, Jackson, Kestens, Henderson, & Barnett, 2015). Similarly, using a sample of 1,210 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 to 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) (ABS, 2011). 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 whom were known to participants. Focus groups were facilitated by the first author, who had experience conducting focus groups and interviews as a doctoral student and postdoctoral employee. The second researcher assisted in preparing venues, greeting participants and disseminating information. Focus groups were conducted in private rooms at primary schools, local libraries and community centres. An information sheet, consent form and participant information form were disseminated at the beginning of each focus group. The participant information form captured demographic details such as length of residence, age, gender, employment, marital status and children living at home. A discussion guide with open-ended questions was developed for this study and explored topics such as children’s use of public space within the neighbourhood, interpretations of stranger danger, neighbourhood influences (i.e., physical and social environmental) of parents’ fear of stranger danger, and strategies for alleviating fear of stranger danger. Approximately 10 photographs of public spaces around the Perth metropolitan area were used as prompts for discussion. The photographs depicted residential roads and greenspaces containing different quantities of people, traffic, buildings and vegetation. The photographs also varied in the quality of vegetation (kempt and unkempt), types of buildings represented (single-story and double-story

residential and commercial) and age-group and activities of people (e.g., children and adults socialising in parks and at community events).

Each focus group was audio-recorded after gaining permission from participants, with focus groups lasting approximately 45 minutes. Participants were provided with a \$20 voucher at the end of each focus group to thank them for their time and to cover transportation costs.

Focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim before being analysed with the assistance of qualitative research software package, QSR NVivo and subjected to a qualitative content analysis. The coding framework was based on the factors underpinning the project's social-ecological framework – individual (biological, psychological), social environmental (interpersonal, cultural), physical environmental (built, natural) and policy (laws, rules, regulations) – as well as the study aims and discussion guide. The framework was then refined as the transcripts were repeatedly read and specific sub-themes relating to each set of factors emerged from the focus group data. While the emphasis of this paper is on neighbourhood influences (social environmental and physical environmental) of parents' fear of stranger danger, this study also sought to determine parents' perceived risk of stranger danger with regard to their children (i.e., an individual factor) and the strategies that might alleviate parents' fear (i.e., individual and policy factors). Themes were confirmed by a second researcher, with only minor differences noted. Differences were discussed until a consensus was reached. Only recurring themes have been included in the final results and illustrative quotes have been linked to the age and gender of the mother's oldest child in primary school.

### **3. Results**

### *3.1. Perceived risk of, and fear of, stranger danger*

Perceived risk of stranger danger and fear of stranger danger emerged as two different constructs. When asked to consider the actual risk of a stranger harming their child, most parents in the high and mid SES neighbourhoods felt that the risk of strangers harming their child was low. By contrast, many parents in the low SES neighbourhoods felt the risk was moderate to high, and that this influenced their children's independent mobility.

[My daughter] said 'when can I start walking to school?' I said 'never, I'll be driving you to school for the rest of your life' (parent #26 of girl aged 6, low SES).

However, even parents who felt the risk of harm was low were still fearful of strangers harming their children. As one parent noted, 'for some people that small chance is always going to be too great' (parent #13 of boy aged 6, high SES).

While many participants acknowledged that they were fearful of strangers harming their children, a number of parents expressed concerns about road safety and harm from known individuals.

I know that it's not just strangers [who harm children], it's mostly people that you know...So I focus more on that than just random people (parent #5 of boy aged 7, mid SES).

Participants also noted that parents' own anxiety levels and experiences might influence how fearful they are:

I'm sure if you have had an experience, or know of someone close that's had an experience, it would just completely change your feelings about it. I know from having children who've hurt themselves a lot, that my anxiety levels about that is heightened, and I would imagine that it's the same if you've had a near miss with a stranger danger incident (parent #7 of boy aged 7, mid SES).

### *3.2. Physical environmental factors influencing parents' fear of stranger danger*

#### *3.2.1. Visibility*

Children's visibility and the opportunity for natural surveillance emerged as a major theme when discussing parents' fears for their children. Environments in which views of children are obstructed, such as restrooms, laneways, tunnels, dense vegetation, and crowds, were thought to aggravate parents' concerns about stranger danger. Restrooms were particularly feared for their ability to shield perpetrators and victims from passing pedestrians and for being enclosed spaces that restricted children's ability to run away or 'escape'. Concerns over restrooms were heightened by extensive media coverage and posed particular problems for parents whose children were a different gender to themselves.

I don't know how long ago it was, but that little girl that got killed in the public toilet at [the] shopping centre. Every time I can't be bothered going to the toilet with my kid in the shopping centre I just have to think of that and go 'under no circumstances are you going without me' (parent #17 of girl aged 11, high SES).

Laneways, underpasses and tunnels were similarly criticised for being enclosed spaces that shielded perpetrators and victims from passing motorists and pedestrians.

I always say I don't want them walking up the laneway by themselves ... I tell the kids you're safer in a more open space, because it's a bit more public ... there's cars going past, you see other people. Laneways are more private (parent #9 of girl aged 8, mid SES).

Similarly, the absence of people in more open spaces also made many mothers uncomfortable.

I always feel more secure if I know there's other people who might keep an eye on my kids or might help my kids if they need help (parent #9 of girl aged 8, mid SES).

#### *3.2.2. Presence of people*

Paradoxically, crowds were also considered unsafe by some parents for increasing children's exposure to potential perpetrators, obscuring parents' view of their children, and interfering with parents' ability to hear what their children were saying. The majority of parents felt most safe in public spaces within the neighbourhood when surrounded by their friends and family.

If it's a bunch of strangers, they're not going to look out for your child if they hurt themselves or wander off, whereas family will (parent #30 of girl aged 7, low SES).

The appearance and behaviour of the people present in public spaces and able to provide passive supervision also influenced how fearful parents were of strangers harming their child. Parents were said to be more trusting of other families who seemed similar to themselves, whereas people who appeared 'out of place' were viewed with suspicion.

When we go to football, we won't sit right next to a playground, but I can sit where I can still see them. And sometimes you can see men that are walking dogs and standing around. I don't like that - it's like, why do you need to be near the playground area if you've just got a dog and you don't have children? That's when I will make my kids come back and sit with me (parent #30 of girl aged 7, low SES).

Some parents felt more wary of people who looked homeless or whose appearance was unkempt, while public spaces that exposed their children to "adult behaviours" were said to heighten fears surrounding safety.

If it's not a family environment they're not necessarily watching their language, they might be drinking alcohol, smoking.... If it's a family event, you'd think that other people are conscious that there are children there (parent #13 of boy aged 6, high SES).

### *3.2.3. Types of streets*

Comments about neighbourhood streets also referenced visibility and natural surveillance. There was no consensus during the focus groups as to whether parents preferred their children walking along a quiet, suburban street or a busier road. While some parents preferred the natural surveillance that might accompany streets full of cars and pedestrians, there was also talk of ‘infamous’ abductions taking place on busy highways. However, almost all parents agreed that they felt less fearful for their children’s safety when streets were conducive to outdoor play and interactions between neighbours. For example, cul-de-sacs and narrow streets that were surrounded by houses appeared to alleviate parent’s concerns.

The street is just a cul-de-sac in a closed off estate. The houses are all quite close to each other and facing the street and there are probably half a dozen basketball hoops... The kids are always out the front, and there’s older kids and younger ones and then parents supervising the younger ones, so I’m quite happy with that (parent #17 of girl aged 11, high SES).

Streets that facilitated interactions between neighbours also emerged as important.

Sometimes the smaller streets have more community and so your kids are actually safer because they know every single person. Not necessarily cul-de-sacs, but tighter, narrower streets, houses closer together. I mean, I’m on a big street ...When you’re out the front of your house, you can’t really just chat to someone ...and you’re less likely to cross the road, and then another verge (parent #9 of girl aged 8, mid SES).

#### *3.2.4. Dwelling type and garden*

Some focus group participants thought low-cost units attracted tenants who participated in high-risk activities. In many cases, parents restricted their children’s activity within the neighbourhood for fear of these tenants harming their children.

I’m in a unit, and where I am, there’s another block of units that’s over in the corner, and Homeswest [public housing authority] has put like, they’re just drunks, and you can see that they’re drug addicts, and it’s all

them kind of people .... there was a time there when there was police going down into there every day. A lot of bad things have happened in that little spot (parent #30 of girl aged 7, low SES).

Residential blocks that allowed for a front garden were said to alleviate fears about stranger danger, particularly when front gardens contained signs of childhood activity.

Because the backyards aren't so big, a lot of the trampolines and the kids are in the front yard, which means the parents are out there too (parent #17 of girl aged 11, high SES).

Although front gardens that were frequently used helped to alleviate parents' concerns about stranger danger, participants living in high SES neighbourhoods noted that the presence of large blocks and backyards can reduce natural surveillance and make parents feel more fearful for children moving through the neighbourhood.

I find in [high socio-economic area] the blocks are big, and people are out in their yard less. So we see our neighbours less. There was a great community in [middle socio-economic area] and I knew everyone. You couldn't even go out and check your mailbox without getting stuck there for half an hour chatting to someone (parent #18 of girl aged 4, high SES).

### *3.2.5. Neighbourhood upkeep*

The level of neighbourhood deterioration and presence of physical incivilities often influenced parents' fear of stranger danger. While heavily vandalised areas (e.g., smashed glass and windows) made parents more fearful, graffiti was generally associated with children and teenagers, who were not feared to the same extent as adults.

I don't necessarily think that people who do graffiti are there to harm children. I don't like it and it might look dirty or whatever but I don't necessarily think it's less safe (parent #3 of boy aged 9, mid SES).

Nonetheless, graffiti was said to be an indicator of the people who lived in the area and could reflect how responsive local authorities were to problems in the neighbourhood.

You see graffiti and you just know that it's a common occurrence there. So if something bad was happening the police may not come as quickly, whereas in a nicer area they would respond quicker maybe (parent #5 of boy aged 7, mid SES).

Contradictions were also noted during the focus groups. Many of the parents who stated that graffiti did not aggravate their fear of strangers simultaneously noted that they felt safer (both for themselves and for their children) when living in well-maintained areas.

We used to live in [low socio-economic area], and most of our street was quite rubbishy, like a dumping tip. But now we've moved and the street we live on, it's all well maintained. Nice gardens, it's green, it's lovely. It does make me feel safer (parent #25 of boy aged 11, low SES).

### *3.3. Social environmental factors influencing parents' fear of stranger danger*

#### *3.3.1. Area socio-economic status*

Area socio-economic status emerged as a recurring theme throughout all of the focus groups when discussing parents' fear of stranger danger. Despite feeling safer in well-kempt neighbourhoods, parents noted that people living in high SES areas were not exempt from feeling unsafe and may be lulled into a false sense of security. Some parents even felt that high SES areas were less safe than their low SES counterparts.

Our street has got wealthier, because it started off being lots of [State] houses and rental houses and there was lots of domestic violence and screaming all the time. And now it's become mega wealthy, and nobody's home anymore because they're all at work to pay for their houses, so it's less safe (parent #12 of boy aged 12, mid SES).

However, participants living in low SES areas faced issues that participants in mid and high SES areas did not mention. For example, many low SES participants were wary of visiting their local shopping centre:

You've got, like, adults who are drunk. And they ask you for money. And they're all nice to you while they're asking for money or a smoke, but as soon as you say no, the abuse starts coming. So if I get that as an adult, why would I let my children [go alone]? (parent #25 of boy aged 11, low SES).

The presence of 'unsavoury' looking characters was also more pronounced in low and mid SES areas:

I know from moving from [middle SES area] to [high SES area], I feel safer in one way, because there seems to be just generally nicer, more friendly people around. And [middle SES area] had that as well, but then it had these unsavoury characters which you'd run into fairly frequently (parent #18 of girl aged 4, high SES).

Low SES participants also commented on low-cost or multi-unit housing more frequently than high SES participants. Some participants felt that low-cost housing attracted tenants involved in high risk behaviours. A common complaint during the low SES focus groups was that residents' often felt their concerns were ignored by local authorities. For example, one participant spoke of a neighbour who waited up to seven hours for police to arrive after finding her stolen car in a nearby street, while others felt ignored by government departments and other neighbours during times of need.

Well, we used to have a house in our street that sold drugs. I would write letters to anybody and everybody...but literally nothing happened until they moved out because the house was being renovated (parent of boy #22 aged 5, low SES).

### *3.3.2. Neighbourhood networks*

Knowing one's neighbours was generally considered an important factor in alleviating parents' fear of stranger danger. While listening to neighbours' negative

stories about the neighbourhood frightened some participants, others found it reassuring to know that their neighbours were conscious of what was happening in the neighbourhood and mindful of children on the street.

We know all our immediate neighbours to an extent, not necessarily having gone around for drinks or anything, but just have had a chat in the street ... It definitely means there's going to be other people looking out for your kids. If your kids were playing outside and a van pulls up, then you think that somebody would say something (parent #13 of boy aged 6, high SES).

Similarly, being part of an organised group or taking part in local events was seen to alleviate parents fear.

One of our neighbours threw a Christmas party, and we were new to the neighbourhood, so we thought that was great. We got to meet pretty much everyone who lives around us, within 3 or 4 houses. Even though I don't necessarily see any of them, and haven't seen some of them since that party, I know where they are now, and that makes me feel better (parent #18 of girl aged 4, high SES).

Just as important as knowing one's neighbours, however, was knowing they were home.

I'd often had the discussion with my Mum about why it was okay for me to walk to school at five on my own... my children are nine and seven and I would never consider allowing them to walk on their own. I just think that there are more people in the community that aren't home during the day. You know, more working mothers, etcetera. When I walked to school I would know all the houses down the street. I would know that all the mums were home so if I ever felt like I had to [seek help], there was somebody there (parent #3 of boy aged 9, mid SES).

Not all parents felt they benefited from knowing their neighbours, with many noting that 'it depends on who your neighbours are'. Still, most parents' said they would prefer to know where 'undesirable' residents lived.

Most of the time if I was walking past a house that needs to be avoided, I'd go on the other side of the street, I wouldn't walk straight past there, because I don't want my kids to be exposed to certain behaviour (parent #29 of boy aged 6, low SES).

Some participants were unaffected by knowing their neighbours given their understanding that most harm against children is conducted by people known to the child or family.

It's actually less about strangers, it is more about the people you know. I don't feel any more secure, it's not that I go around feeling insecure, but I don't perceive there to be any greater danger amongst a group of people where they're all known versus strangers. I think it's pot luck as to whether or not one of those people happen to be grooming predators (parent #11 of girl aged 6, mid SES).

Indeed, fears regarding playdates and sleepovers also emerged as a strong theme:

You might know the mum and dad, but how do you not know that someone else is not going to pop in. How do you not know that they have a stepbrother? (parent #29 of boy aged 6, low SES)

### *3.3.3. Socio-cultural influences*

Broader social and cultural influences were also discussed in relation to parents' fear of strangers. For example, one participant felt that parents' protective behaviours had less to do with fear of strangers, and more to do with social norms and judgement from other parents.

I think people are more worried that other parents would criticise you if something did happen, so it's not so much the actual danger, it's the culture that's changed... I don't let my granddaughter do as much as I let my kids do and it's got nothing to do with the danger. It's got to do with the fact that there's so much criticism around (parent #12 of boy aged 12, mid SES).

By contrast, social norms transmitted via conversations between parents was also said to allay fears, or at the very least encourage parents to provide their children with more independence.

[Conversations] make you reassess... it can prompt you to try things you might not, or to say, 'no, I know we're not there yet'. That conversation then made me think OK, I will let [my son] go and buy milk at the corner store, because it is only around the corner and he rides his bike there already, and for him it's a big deal... it helps to get you balanced from other conversations (parent #7 of boy aged 7, mid SES).

I think it's really good talking about it too, because then you learn who's on the same page as you, and you start thinking hey, maybe down the track [our daughters] could walk to each other's houses, or all meet up at the park, you know ... It's nice to know the other parent has the same awareness or sensitivities that you do (parent #10 of girl aged 8, mid SES).

#### *3.3.4. Media*

Parents were generally conscious that the media exacerbated their fear of strangers harming their children within the neighbourhood.

So many of my thoughts are influenced by things you hear in the media. You kind of go okay, well how much of it is just media hype, but when you hear stories like the little girl in Hyde Park that was abducted or killed in the toilet ... whereas you might have previously let your kids go to the toilets, once that little girl was killed that changed it for everybody (parent #1 of boy aged 7, mid SES).

Social media also concerned parents, with sites like Facebook criticised for potentially exposing children to predators pretending to be children, and for raising awareness of local crimes:

I was addicted to looking at that WA crime reports on Facebook. So you'd constantly see and hear bad things happening, and then it made me really edgy. It just puts ideas in your head (parent #14 of boy aged 4, high SES).

Similarly, television programs that focused on crime and court dramas were seen to aggravate parents' concerns by instilling fear and normalising sexual abuse.

#### *3.4. Strategies for alleviating parents' fear of stranger danger*

Participants adopted a number of strategies to safeguard their children and alleviate their own concerns about stranger danger. These included conversations with their children about strangers and safety, such as when to answer their front door, what to do when lost in public places, and what was considered appropriate touching and by whom. A number of parents found these conversations difficult given their reluctance to scare their children or make their child's body appear dirty or shameful. Parents' were also aware that blanket statements (i.e., don't talk to strangers) can sometimes be harmful.

[My daughter] went off wandering down the beach... Two different sets of strangers had said to her 'are you OK?' and she had cried to them and said 'I'm not allowed to speak to strangers'... After that we started doing scenarios, you know, what happens if you are at the park and someone comes up and offers you a sweetie (parent #11 of girl aged 6, mid SES).

Parents are hovering all the time ...always putting these ideas in the kids head about strangers and getting hurt and getting lost and getting hit by a car ...Parents talk to strangers all the time, so it doesn't make any sense. It is a good idea to talk to strangers when you go in a shop, when you want to talk to a police man, when you need directions. But you do need to be safe, and trusting your gut instinct is a much safer way to teach kids than saying not to take this from a stranger or that from a stranger (parent #12 of boy aged 12, mid SES).

The importance of teaching children to listen to their gut instinct was a recurring theme, although a number of parents thought it was hindered by a culture and school environment that teaches children to respect their elders and authority figures.

School teaches you to be a certain way to please your teacher and do the right thing. The fear of not doing the right thing is what would make [my son] go with somebody (parent #3 of boy aged 9, mid SES).

Nonetheless, school was also acknowledged as a place where children learn about strangers and protective behaviour, which somewhat allayed parents' fear of stranger danger.

In addition to conversations about safe practices and stranger danger, parents employed practical strategies to maintain a sense of safety and control without compromising their child's development. For example, parents set independent tasks within certain time frames (e.g., cycling to and from the shop within 15 minutes) and talked with other parents about who would be present during parties and playdates.

Participants also described strategies they used in public places, such as working with the child to identify landmarks and meeting spots in case of separation, noting the uniforms worn by employees of a venue should children require help, and dressing their children in matching outfits or taking photos of their children in case parents needed to contact police. Notably, parents often told their children to request assistance from female (rather than male) staff members or other mothers with young children.

Some parents also altered their own behaviour after noting that familiarity with an area influenced how comfortable they were letting their children attend places on their own, such as the local skate park.

Once [my son] started going there on his own, I said to [my husband], we need to be out there more. We all need to go as a family to the park and become familiar with what they're like .... The more we do that as a family, the more I feel comfortable letting the kids go, because I know where they're going and how they handle it (parent #10 of boy aged 11, mid SES).

Parents also identified features they wanted in their neighbourhood that might alleviate some fears they had for their children's safety, such as security cameras, lighting and open parks and play spaces. Security watch services were also considered useful when participants were concerned about potentially

minor issues (e.g., unfamiliar noises) that they were reluctant to bother the police with.

#### **4. Discussion**

This paper has reinforced the discrepancy between parents' fear of, and perceived risk of, stranger danger, illustrating how parents' fear of stranger danger can prompt parents to constrain their child's independent mobility. Such constraints have the potential to interfere with a child's wellbeing and development, thus it is important to understand and embed social and environmental measures that will lessen, or at least manage, parents' fear of stranger danger. This qualitative study used a social-ecological framework to identify factors influencing parents' fear of stranger danger as well as strategies that may alleviate this fear.

Our findings support other papers which acknowledge low perceived risk of crime does not necessarily alleviate fear of crime (Lorenc et al, 2012; Foster et al, 2015). The message that children are less likely to be abused by strangers than people known to the child and their family was recognised by participants, with the statement reiterated many times during the focus groups. However, rather than reassuring parents and making them less fearful of strangers, the awareness that abuse more often comes from family or friends only appeared to increase participants' suspicion of people they know. Such findings could reflect a cultural shift towards a more fearful society generally (Furedi, 2005). However, this study also pointed to the importance of encouraging communication between neighbours to change fearful social norms, as the focus group discussions prompted some participants to reconsider their restrictive stance on children's independent mobility. Community building strategies which increase awareness of one's neighbours and their availability to assist in times of need

may help to allay fears caused by large proportions of working mothers and their subsequent absence from the neighbourhood. Other papers have noted that social marketing strategies which inform parents of the benefits of independent mobility may help to overcome fears arising from the inflated risks promoted in the media (Foster et al., 2014). Social marketing may also need to be tailored in recognition of parents' different experiences. As one participant noted, parents who have a history of negative interactions with strangers may be more fearful and thus, controlling of their child's behaviour. Thus, strategies to alleviate parents' concerns not only need to emphasise the benefits of independent mobility and the statistical probability of a stranger harming their child, but also actions parents can take to minimise the risk of stranger danger. For example, in Western Australia, the Department of Education suggests a number of harm-minimisation strategies that children can use when walking to school, such as travelling as a group, facing oncoming traffic, staying in well-lit areas, and removing earphones that might interfere with hearing.

In keeping with O'Connor and Brown (2013), our findings highlighted the complexity of concepts such as fear, with many of the same features seen to aggravate *and* alleviate parents' concerns. Indeed, parents were able to argue both for and against all nine of the built and social environmental factors influencing parents' fear of stranger danger that were identified in this study. For example, strangers could be seen as both perpetrators of crime and providers of support, while natural environments promoted both relaxation and fear depending on the presence of potential hiding spaces. While many participants preferred seeing people in public spaces who could provide passive supervision, our findings also suggest that a threshold may exist, after which point parents become more fearful for their children's safety and susceptibility to predators (e.g., crowds). In addition to the number of people present, the appearance

and behaviour of strangers also influenced parents' fear of stranger danger, reflecting reports that people often feel safer in the company of people similar to themselves (Covington & Taylor, 1991; Day, 1999). Venues that potentially increase sense of neighbourhood connectedness and cohesion such as parks, community centres, neighbourhood cafes and play areas not only act as meeting places, but may alleviate parents' fear of stranger danger by exposing residents to people of different ages, races, and socio-economic status'. This study's participants emphasised the importance of becoming familiar with the neighbourhood spaces their children occupied, as well as the users of that space, before allowing their children to attend those spaces independently.

Although participants took responsibility for educating and safeguarding their children, they still desired neighbourhoods containing physical and social characteristics that enhance safety perception and reduce actual risk. Physical features of the neighbourhood that influenced parents' fear of strangers were either indicators of the type of people who may be present in the neighbourhood (e.g., graffiti and low-rent apartments were considered indicators of unsavoury residents) or were related to opportunities for natural surveillance. For example, factors that potentially aggravated parents' fear of stranger danger included restrooms (toilets), obstructive vegetation, laneways, quiet streets, large block sizes and the absence of front gardens. Factors that alleviated fear included obvious landmarks in public space, the presence of lighting, and highly visible, open spaces. The presence of features that support natural surveillance and walkability have often been linked to feelings of safety in the published literature (Foster, Giles-Corti, & Knuiiman, 2010; McMillan, 2007). While signs of disorder, such as graffiti and litter, can have a negative impact on personal safety by signalling a breakdown of community and social control (Jackson & Stafford, 2009; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992), our study found that some parents were unconcerned by

graffiti, generally attributing it to ‘harmless’ children or teenagers. Further research is needed to explore this lack of concern, and if it is dependent on the extent of graffiti or the absence of other disorder.

Factors seen to influence parents’ fear of strangers were generally common to parents from all of the focus groups, regardless of SES. However, parents in low SES neighbourhoods expressed more concern about the people they encountered at local shopping centres, with participants who had moved from mid to high SES areas also noting a reduction in ‘unsavoury’ characters. These findings support other studies which have shown that mothers living in low SES areas are more fearful of crime (Kimbrow & Schachter, 2011), and that physical incivilities are more common in low SES and non-residential areas (Foster et al., 2015; Perkins et al., 1992). Thus, one challenge for governments and local authorities is to implement policies that improve the safety of retail areas, and reduce incivilities within lower SES neighbourhoods, such as graffiti and broken glass. Notably, participants who had experienced life in a range of SES neighbourhoods reported that mid SES areas often had the greatest sense of community, with less working mothers and smaller block sizes leading to more frequent interactions between neighbours.

Many of the physical and social environmental correlates of fear identified in this study can be addressed via local government through the inclusion of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) design principles. CPTED is a crime prevention strategy that promotes the design and use of the physical environment to reduce fear and crime, and improve quality of life (Crowe, 2000). The strategy is supported by the United Nations and governments in many countries (Cozens & Love, 2015). CPTED focuses on creating opportunities for surveillance, defining both boundaries and preferred use of space, and creating and maintaining appealing spaces

(Cozens & Love, 2015). Examples of CPTED measures have included reducing escape routes for perpetrators of crime, improved lighting and signage, CCTV, night-time security patrols, and fencing (Cozens & Love, 2015). Reviews of CPTED case studies indicate that CPTED interventions generally reduce crime (Cozens & Love, 2015). In particular, an Australian review of crime prevention interventions found evidence supporting the effectiveness of CPTED with regard to reducing residential burglary, malicious damage, and stealing from motor vehicles and people (Morgan, Boxall, Lindeman, & Anderson, 2014). Regardless of the strategies adopted, policy makers need to be mindful that changes made to neighbourhoods to enhance safety do not result in unintended consequences for other health and social outcomes. For example, removing laneways or excluding them from new developments could increase walking distances to destinations, thus decreasing physical activity. However, while incorporating CPTED elements could positively impact on parents' fear of stranger danger by reducing crime and fear of crime, the relationship between CPTED design principles and children's safety specifically, requires investigation.

#### *4.1. Strengths and Limitations*

A strength of this paper has been using a social-ecological framework to consider a comprehensive list of factors at the social environmental and physical environmental level (Veitch et al., 2006). While other studies have investigated neighbourhood influences on safety within the context of larger health outcomes, such as independent activity, few qualitative studies have investigated parents' fear of stranger danger as the main outcome, nor included a cross-section of SES perspectives. Nonetheless, our study has limitations to consider. As participants were made aware of the study topic before the focus groups, they may have been inclined to provide socially

desirable responses (Veitch et al., 2006). Given our study sample consisted of volunteers, it is also possible that participants were more concerned about safety than the general Perth population. In addition, as all study participants were female and proficient at speaking English, the results cannot be generalised to males, nor people who struggle to speak English. While people of different ethnic backgrounds were included in the study, a limitation of this study is that information about ethnicity and religion were not recorded. Differences in ethnicity and religion may influence how parents perceive, experience and respond to potential hazards in the neighbourhood. Lastly, although two researchers analysed and discussed themes presented in this manuscript, instances of disagreement between researchers were not calculated using a kappa value. Future researchers are advised to consider this.

## **5. Conclusion**

Reducing parents' fear of strangers harming their children is no easy task. Many competing perspectives and experiences are framed around the concept of keeping children safe. For many parents, the fear of strangers is real, and the consideration that people they know could be more likely to hurt their child aggravates rather than alleviates this fear. Strategies to allay parents' fear for their children's safety need to address both perceptions of fear and physical and social environment elements of the neighbourhood. Our findings support the creation of neighbourhoods that enhance natural surveillance and encourage interaction between neighbours. Such findings may assist policy makers in designing public health interventions that alleviate parents' concerns while ensuring children's safety and optimising their development.

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