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Special Focus:
Increasing Children's Freedom of Movement

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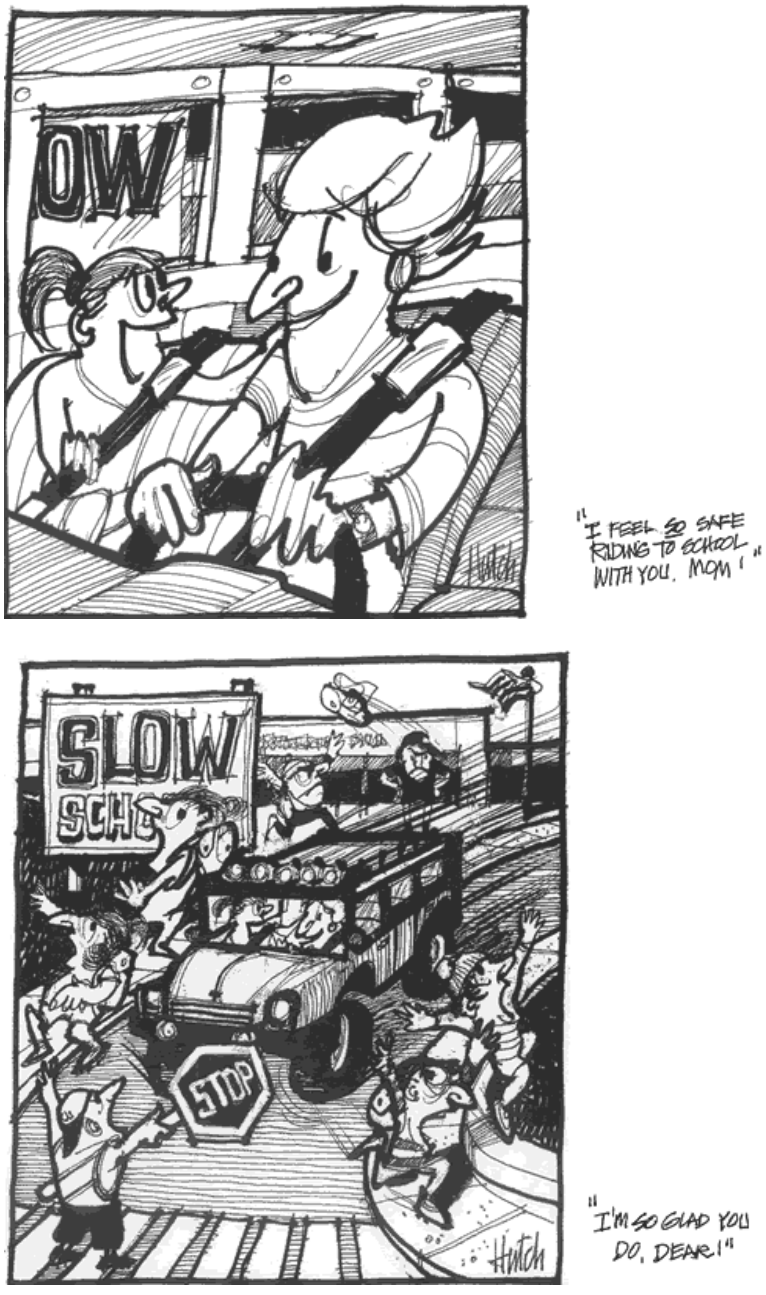

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Increasing Children's Freedom of Movement: Introduction

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The problem

Over the past few decades, many studies have expressed concerns about the decrease in children's freedom of movement. Modern cities have often been portrayed as negative places to live (e.g., White and White 1962), particularly when it comes to children's possibilities of exploring their neighborhoods on their own. Urban conditions tend to be depicted as being detrimental to children, with traffic and other hazards preventing them from playing outdoors unsupervised, getting enough physical exercise and traveling independently. Results from residential preference surveys have shown a small and declining minority of households favoring cities (Fischer 1984). Studies of neighborhood effects on children's activities and development have revealed the difficult challenges faced by children growing up in urban poverty (e.g., Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997a; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997b; Fauth 2004). Although research in this area has focused primarily on cities in high-income countries, the combination of poverty and urban conditions presents threats to the wellbeing and health of children in low-income countries as well (see, e.g., Bartlett et al. 1999). Recent literature suggests that processes of globalization have deepened trends of urban inequality and sharpened patterns of segregation with the effect of heightened deprivation of urban youth living in environments of disadvantage (Tienda and Wilson 2002). These negative developments are accentuated when we compare the neighborhood experiences of children today with those of children in the past.

There are only a few historical studies about children's daily lives in past decades. In a small study, Gaster (1991) investigated changes in children's use of public space in a New York neighborhood between 1915 and 1976. He concluded that children's outdoor play and free access to their neighborhood had considerably decreased over three generations. A large quantitative study of

children's travel behavior to school, clubs, and other children's domains, carried out by Hillman et al. (1991), similarly found a sharp decline in children's mobility between 1971 and 1990 and an increase in the age at which children were allowed to go out on their own (at night). Valentine and McKendrick (1997) also studied how children's experiences of outdoor play have changed over generations. They asked parents to compare their children's childhood with their own. Parents reported that their children play outdoors less often than they used to do themselves. In addition, children nowadays play more often in supervised locations close to home, such as private gardens. Bouw and Karsten (2004) likewise concluded in their oral history of growing up in Amsterdam that the outdoors has lost much of its appeal for today's children. While in the 1950s playing meant playing outside, at present children play indoors much more. This shift towards indoor play can be understood in relation to a fast growing number of cars and a sharp decrease in the number of children per street. In addition, parents have changed their views about raising children, leading to a more supervised, planned and organized childhood. Time after school and during weekends is less free and more programmed. Parents in the 1950s were also more convinced that their children were resilient and able to solve their own problems than is the case nowadays. Contemporary parents place more emphasis on the vulnerable side of their offspring and consider them more in need of protection. These historical studies are remarkably unanimous in their conclusions that children's territory has shrunk and that their freedom to explore space independently has diminished.

Whose problem?

Research demonstrates that children's limited mobility can cause problems. Of course, children themselves suffer from their restricted outdoor activities. It has been widely documented that children benefit from playing outdoors and moving around freely (Van Vliet—1983; Christensen and O'Brien 2003). It facilitates development of their physical, social and cognitive competencies. Recently, children's (lack of) physical exercise has also gotten a great deal of attention (e.g., Fjortoft 2004; Hume and Salmon 2005; Krizek et al. 2005; Timperio 2006). Child obesity is becoming a public health problem (e.g., Strauss and Pollack 2001; International Obesity Task Force 2002)

But not only children suffer when their freedom of movement is restricted. Parents struggle with the daily burden of constantly supervising their children. In an era that in which working parenthood is a matter of course, time is scarce. It is burdensome for parents to have to chauffeur their children from place to place. Often parents simply do not have the time to accompany their children everywhere, and consequently forbid their children to be outdoors on their own. Many parents are convinced of the positive value of playing outside, yet unable to solve their individual problems in a social way, with neighbors and friends. Initiatives that support the sharing of supervisory responsibilities would be a step in the right direction.

Cities as a whole also suffer when their youngest citizens are excluded from public spaces. Cities that do not accommodate children's outdoor life neglect a great potential for liveliness, participation, creativity and diversity. Young citizens make their own valuable contributions to urban life. However, many urban policy reports neglect the youngest citizens and children's facilities are typically described in terms of their (financial) burden. Some cities are beginning to

change this narrow-minded thinking. In Europe, the network of child-friendly cities has been founded to improve the livability of cities in general and children's daily lives in particular.

What Kind of Solutions?

Papers in this special issue of CYE shed light on approaches that may lead to greater independent mobility in childhood. Gill writes about children's mobility in relation to physical aspects of the residential environment. He outlines the history of the home zone, a concept in urban planning derived from the Dutch *woonerf* (see also **http://www.urban.nl/childstreet**). Home zones are streets that accommodate and facilitate children's play and neighborly interactions. Although many people are in favor of social life in streets, it is difficult to establish home zones. Car ownership has increased considerably over the past several decades and cars win out in the competition with children for space just outside the home.

Traveling from home to school and back is a daily activity for most children (and their parents). It is, therefore, logical to target this everyday routine in attempts to improve children's physical health. In this regard, Neuwelt and Kearns report on walking school buses in New Zealand—an initiative to create an alternative to motorized ways of traveling to and from school. Their study shows that children enjoy this walking alternative and parents and children alike perceive walking to school as positive for children's physical health.

Parents' roles are further emphasized in the paper on gender differences in children's active travel to school. McMillan et al. found that girls walk or cycle to school less frequently than boys. However, gender differences decrease if parents themselves regularly engage in walking: girls are more likely to walk if their parents walk.

Orsini and O'Brien also found parents to be an important influence in teenagers' choice to bike to school. Further findings from their exploratory study suggest that modeling biking to peers may be an effective way to increase bicycle usage among teens who would otherwise be driving cars. A field report in this issue details the Mayor of London's program to redress the lack of bicycle parking facilities at schools in the city with the goals of reducing vandalism and theft and promoting bking to school.

To counteract the dominance of children's motorized transport by adults, various groups in the U.S. have recently come together to establish the Safe Routes to School program. In another field report, Deb Hubsmith provides extensive coverage of this initiative, as she describes the program's components, lessons learned from the early experiences in some communities, and the challenges ahead.

In their analysis of spatial mobility data for youth in Ghent, Belgium, Witlox and Tindemans emphasize age as a crucial factor. Their findings indicate that the older children are, the more autonomous their travel behavior. The problem of the so-called "back seat generation"—children who are dependent on parents and cars to move around—peaks between the ages of six and eight: 60 to 70 percent of activity-trips in this age group are made by car. Children's age interacts with

the environment: it is in the countryside, not in the city, where children are transported most.

Finally, a research note based on a study of families in the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, The Netherlands, identifies historical changes in children's play behavior and independent mobility. Its findings point out that parents continue to attach great importance to their children's play outdoors. Such play requires child-friendly streets and public spaces with complex social and spatial dynamics. Parents and community residents are engaging with these dynamics in their efforts to re-claim their local environment. It is incumbent upon planners to support their efforts in the interest of children and all urban residents because a city that is good for children is a city that is good for all of its residents.

Lia Karsten (Dr. Ir.) is an associate professor of urban geography in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies. Her research interests include three interrelated themes: geographies of children and youth, family housing, and the use of urban public space. She recently completed, with Carolien Bouw, an extensive historical study of the changing position children in cities. She is currently conducting research on family life in new residential environments. Lia Karsten has worked on research and policy projects for national and local governments and has published widely in a broad range of national and international journals. She has been co-organizer of several conferences (most recently: Childstreet2005) and is a member of the international advisory board of Children's Geographies *and the editorial advisory board of* Children, Youth and Environments*.*

Willem van Vliet-- *is a mental laborer with undefined skills. He has a Ph.D. in Sociology (University of Toronto), etc., etc. He became immersed in children's environments and housing problems by birth, below sea level in an aporphyrogenic bunker in the postwar shortage-ridden Netherlands. A.K.A. El Capitán, he is in possession of an uncertified but authentic and persistent lunatic streak, evinced,* inter alia*, by his editing of the* Encyclopedia of Housing *and a growing stockpile of more and less odd ends. After coming to the University of Colorado, he has retained an abiding interest in heather morning glory and rock gardening.*

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