

Beyond Time and Cost: Parenting, Culture and the Social Practices of Car Use

Jennifer L. Kent, The University of Sydney
ATRF Behavioural Insights Research Group
August, 2026



Wangal Country.

Always was.
Always will be.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

CRICOS 00026A TEQSA PRV12057



OVERVIEW

1. About me
2. A social practice approach to private car use
 - a. Material structures
 - b. Feelings and emotions
 - c. Cultural Scripts
 - d. Altogether now...

“I'm a pessimist because of intelligence...”

Antonio Gramsci



A BIT ABOUT ME...

Mum

@Usyd since 2015 in School of Architecture,
Design and Planning and as an affiliate to
Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies

Co-Chair of the ATRF Scientific Committee

Academic Spokesperson, 30Now.

Research expertise:

- Transport and Health
- Methodological Pluralism
- Political and Sociological Theory





Rob Stokes (He/Him) • Following
Cities | Society | Sustainability
3d •

Slide of the year goes to **Jennifer Kent** from **Architecture, Design and Urbanism** at the **University of Sydney** to support her argument that pets be allowed on public transport at the Committee for Sydney's Sydney Summit today!

#Sydneysummit #petsonboard



Why can't we bring our puppies on all public transport in NSW?

Dr Jennifer Kent is a University of Sydney Urbanist and one of the world's leading experts on pets and public transport.



Dr Jennifer Kent
University of Sydney

**RAISING
the BAR
Sydney**

Cars, canines & cities: your commute can be better



**TRAVELLING
WITH A PET**



Are we barking mad to

Kent, J. L. and Mulley, C. (2023). "Travel with dogs: The need to accommodate "messy trips" in healthy and sustainable transport transitions." *Journal of Transport & Health* 28: 101559.

Kent, J. L., Mulley, C., & Stevens, N. (2020). Challenging policies that prohibit public transport use: travelling with pets as a case study. *Journal of Transport Policy*, 99, 86-94.

Kent, J. L. & Mulley, C. (2021). Understanding perspectives on policy change: The case of dogs on public transport in Sydney, Australia. *International Journal of Sustainable Transportation*.

Kent, J. L. & Mulley, C. (2017). Riding with dogs in cars: what can it teach us about transport practices and policy? *Transportation Research Part A*, 106, 278-287.

Why do we
travel the
way we
do?





Ways of thinking about why people travel the way they do

Utilitarian

- Time, cost, comfort

Psycho-social

- Empowerment, social norm, seclusion

Cultural...

- Culture (norms), political economy, structures of provision

Social Practice Theory

Kent, J.L. (2023) The Use of Practice Theory in Transport Research. Transportation Reviews, 40.



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.



Transport Practices: e.g. driving, walking, riding a bike



Practices facilitated by transport: e.g. schooling, working, shopping



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)

Social Practice Theory (SPT)



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.



material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)



emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)



cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)

“ENGINEERING IN” ACTIVE TRANSPORT

density



design



distance



destinations



diversity



Kent, J.L., Crane, M., Wildake, N.,
Stevenson, M., Pearson, L. (2023)
“Urban form and physical activity
through transport: a review based
on the d-variable framework”
Transport Reviews, DOI:
10.1080/01441647.2023.2165575/

Social Practice Theory (SPT)



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)



emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)



cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)

A study on feeling the car...

But what if it takes the same amount of time?

Locating people who drive, but could get to work faster using public transport ...

- Data obtained for 856 driving journeys to work in outer suburban Sydney
- Trip substitution analysis (eg. Car for train)
- “Ground truthing”
- 2 x 1 hour semi-structured interviews



Feeling Movement

Diane: Yeah, look, there's still traffic but it's flowing traffic, as opposed to 'stop' - I hate stopped traffic. So it might take me a little bit longer to get around there but ***you feel as though you're doing better*** because you're not stopped.

Chris: As a general rule the M2 will at least crawl along, so you've got ***this sense of progress***, you're not stuck in traffic, like on a bus.





Feeling Comfortable

Steph: ..in terms of viability, it [alternative transport] would get me to work. But in terms of comfort, I really prefer the car. I am being selfish because I am in my car and on my own..... In life, we have so many stressful situations. And it is not stressful for me to drive. **It feels good, just sitting there, relaxing.**

And what about time? Let's ask Frederick (again)....

"I remember, a long time ago, I used to catch the train to work. It was really busy, people always trying to find their way, and people trying to squeeze in, sometimes the door shuts too early. So then I think about taking my car, even if it's about 1 hour, 1 hour 15 minutes, even if it's longer, I don't care. I think, 'ah, it's fine', I have the air conditioning, I listen to a bit of music, best of the 80s, the news from the ABC."



Social Practice Theory (SPT)



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)



emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)



cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)



What in the world are “cultural scripts”?

- *Ways of thinking, being, doing, living that fit with ones’ perception of what is acceptable*
- *Shaped by experiences, life course, structures, dissemination, historical precedent.*
- *Difficult to see, let alone measure.*
- *Often viewed via proxy or as situational*
- *Influence on transport is usually indirect although there are examples of culture writ large on day to day experiences of travel*

“But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstance, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on’? ”

(Wittgenstein 1958, 154 cited in Thrift 1996, 8).

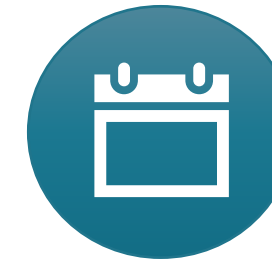
THE AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL TRAVEL SURVEY 2025



4968 families



7880 kids, 4-18



June 2025



Panel data

Original survey design : Jennifer Kent (University of Sydney), Emily Moylan (University of Sydney), Laya Hossein-Rashidi (University of Sydney), Alexa Delbosc, Monash University, Hulya Gilbert (UNSW)

Children's active transport to school



Why it matters?



Physical activity



Intellectual stimulation



Wayfinding skills



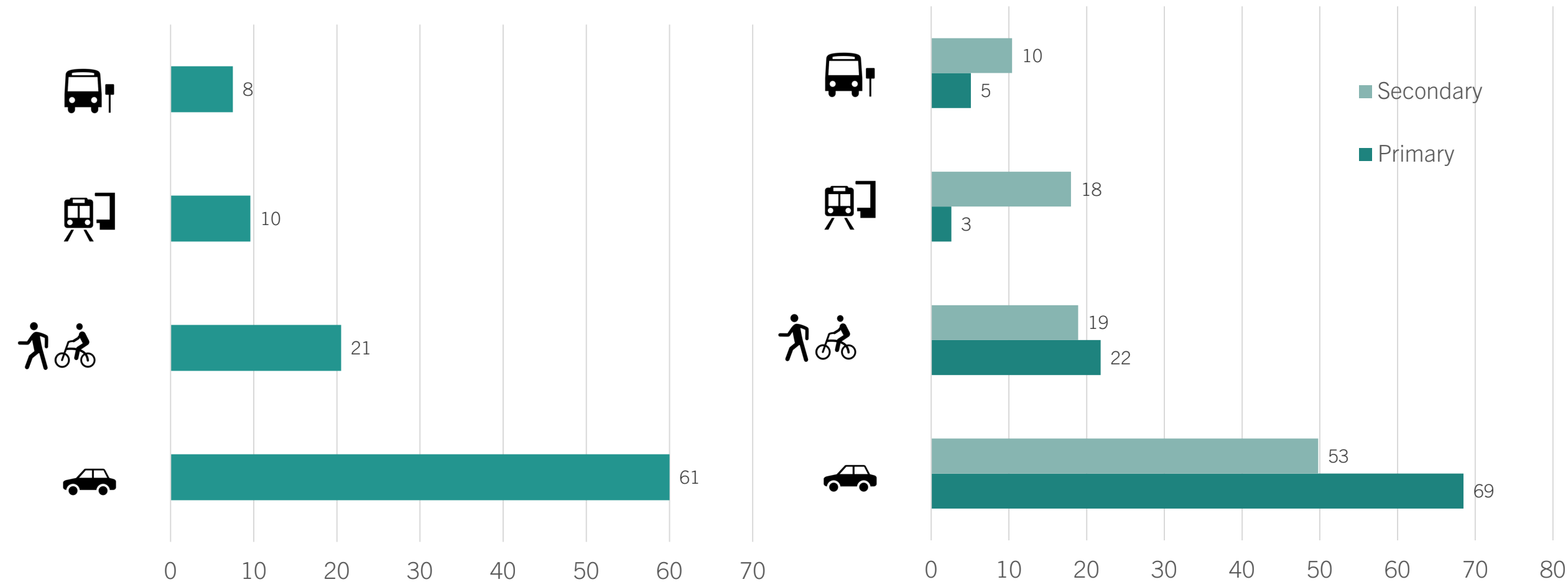
Social skills



Community building

SCHOOL TRAVEL - ASTS

Last week, how did this child get [to] [from] school each day?



“ENGINEERING IN” PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THROUGH ACTIVE TRANSPORT

density



design



distance



destinations



diversity





“A Systematic Review of Active School Travel Distances and Durations”

Kent et al. 2026



Systematic review of 149 studies published between 2003 and 2023.



Data from 492,416 children across diverse global contexts.



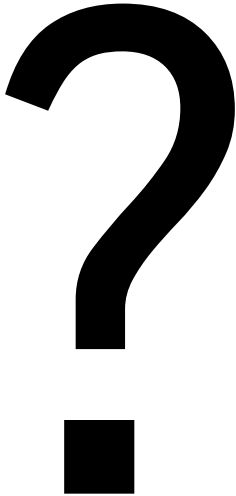
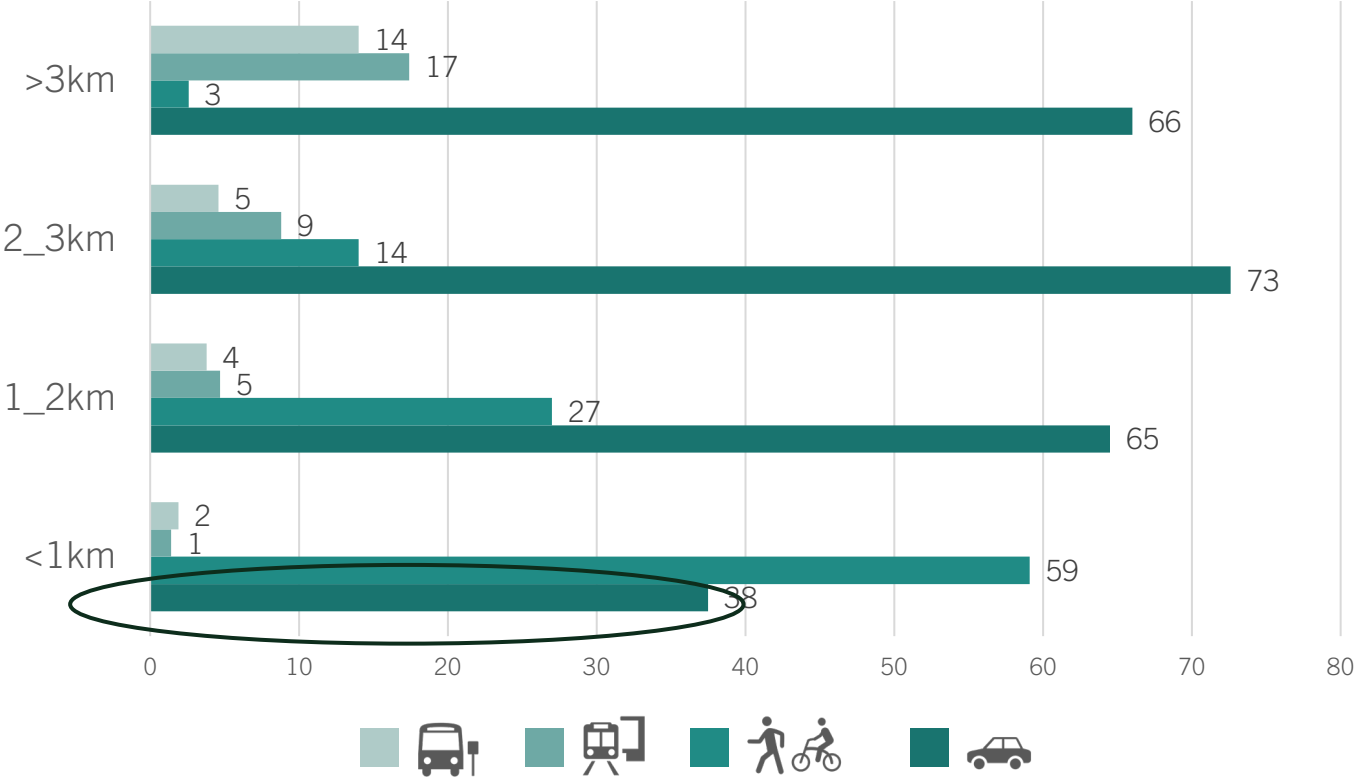
Across studies reporting averages, children walked a mean distance of **1.0 km** (14 minutes) and cycled 2.7 km (13 minutes).

Kent, J.L., Hossein Rashidi, L.; Moylan, E. et al. (2026) A Systematic Review of Active School Travel Distances and Durations, Transport Reviews, *under review*



SCHOOL TRAVEL – DISTANCE BY MODE

The ASTS asked parents to estimate the distance between home and school using the options <1km, 1-2km and 2-3km and >3km.







8.04AM, 20 MAY, 2019







PARENTING CULTURES



Kent, J.L. (2025) Car ownership through the parenting journey and beyond, *Travel Behaviour and Society*

Kent, J.L. (2025) Car-free not care-free – the social practices of parents without cars. *Mobilities*, 1–19.

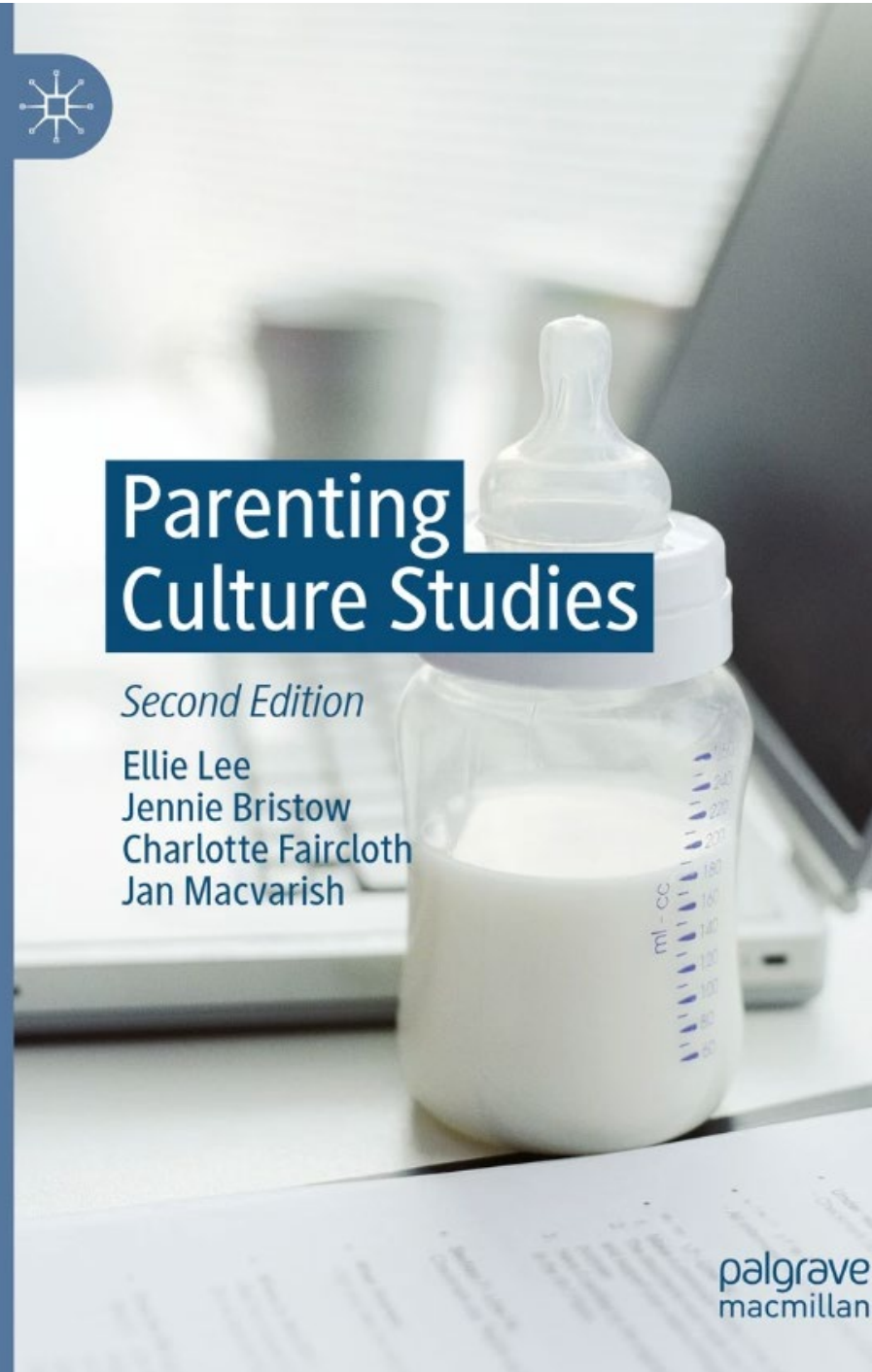
Kent, J. L. and A. Delbosc (2024). "Liquid lives – Blurred boundaries: Working from home and the transport practices of parents." *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 26: 101151.

Kent, J.L. (2024) The car-free journey to, and through, parenthood. *Transportation*,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-024-10466-9>

Kent, J.L., Mason, M., Virgona, N., Ryan, H. (2024) "Parenting in Proximity to others: the importance of transitions and trajectories" *Urban Planning and Research* 10.1080/08111146.2024.2305428

Kent, J. L. (2023) How are practices of care sometimes not fair? The case of parenting and private car use, *Australian Geographer*

Kent, J. L. (2021). The use of practice theory in transport research, *Transport Reviews*



Parenting Culture Studies

Second Edition

Ellie Lee
Jennie Bristow
Charlotte Faircloth
Jan Macvarish



The cultural script of intensive parenting...

- ❖ **Child-centred & all-consuming:**
Parenting organised around the child's needs above all else
- ❖ **Expert-guided:** Relies heavily on professional advice, guidelines, and “best practice” norms
- ❖ **Time-, labour-, and resource-intensive:**
Requires significant emotional, financial, and cognitive investment
- ❖ **Moralised ideal of “good parenting”:**
Especially mothers judged against high, often unattainable standards

How intensive parenting shapes transport – 3 impacts:

- Decreased children's independent mobility
- Increased enrolment in organised out of school activities (OOSA)
- Shift away from local schools to private or out-of-catchment schools



CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENT MOBILITY

Why did the child cross the busy road?

(Independently)

Because they were allowed to.

But why were they allowed to?

Because mum/dad said yes.

But why did mum/dad say yes?



I DON'T THINK SO

Because mum or dad is a well informed urban design professional/academic/advocate concerned with carbon emissions, or a child psychologist familiar with the need to give children independence, or a general non-conformist....

POSSIBLY (BUT MORE ON THAT LATER)

Because the default speed limit is
30km/h and there is a raised
pedestrian crossing?

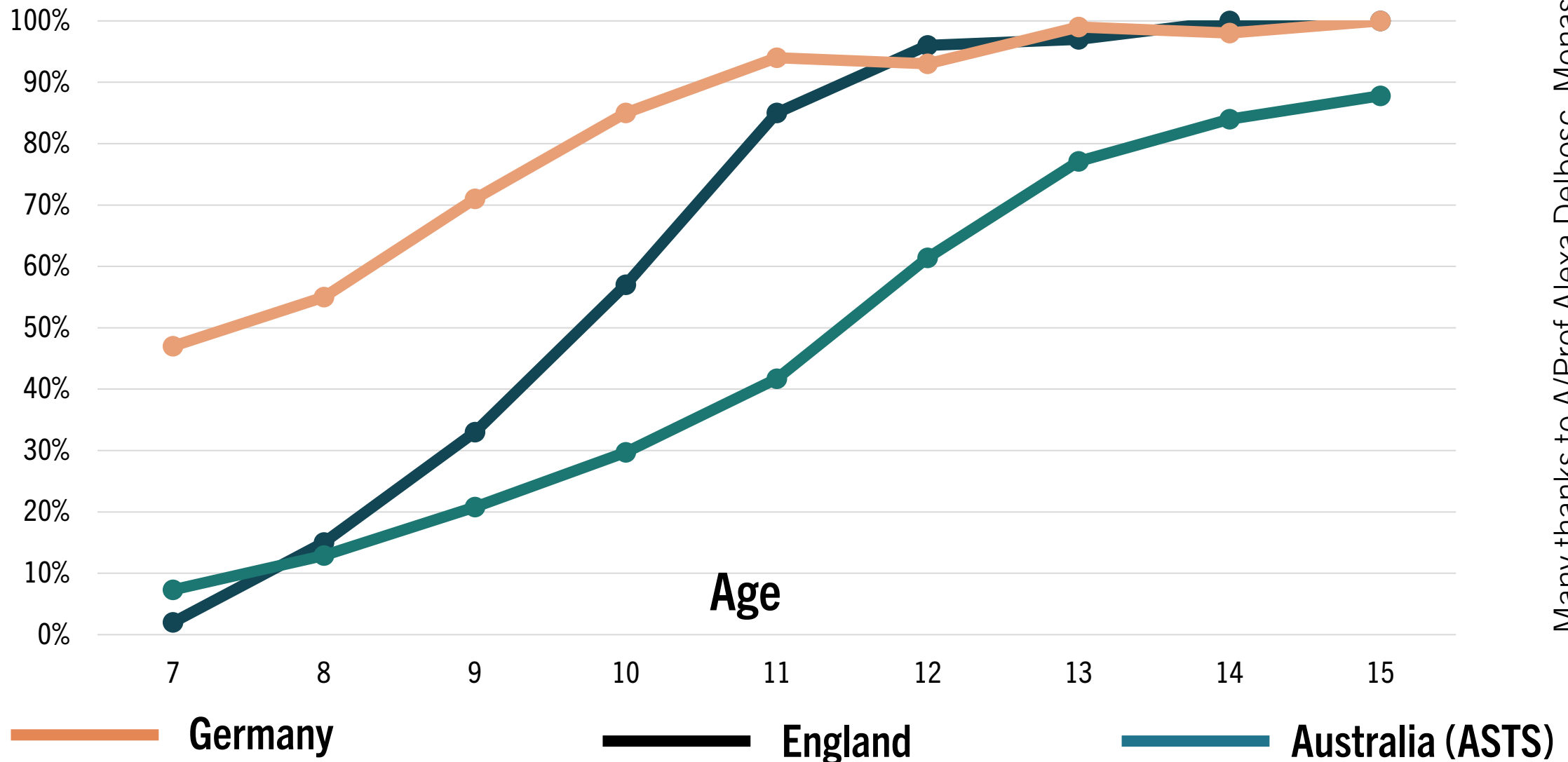


Because Val and Poppy and James and Thomas's parents
let them cross the road....
.....so it must be ok.



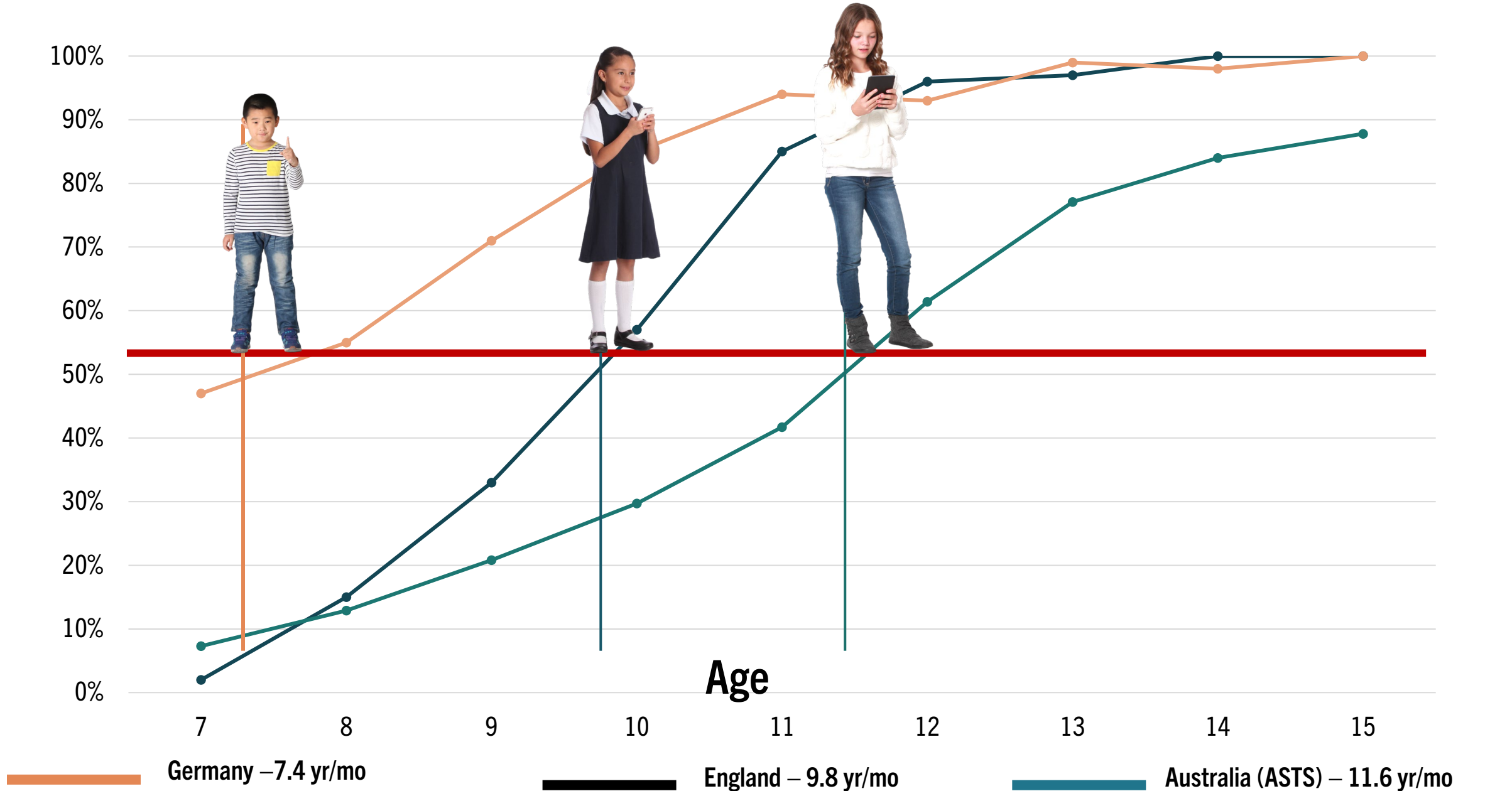
AUGUST 6, 2026

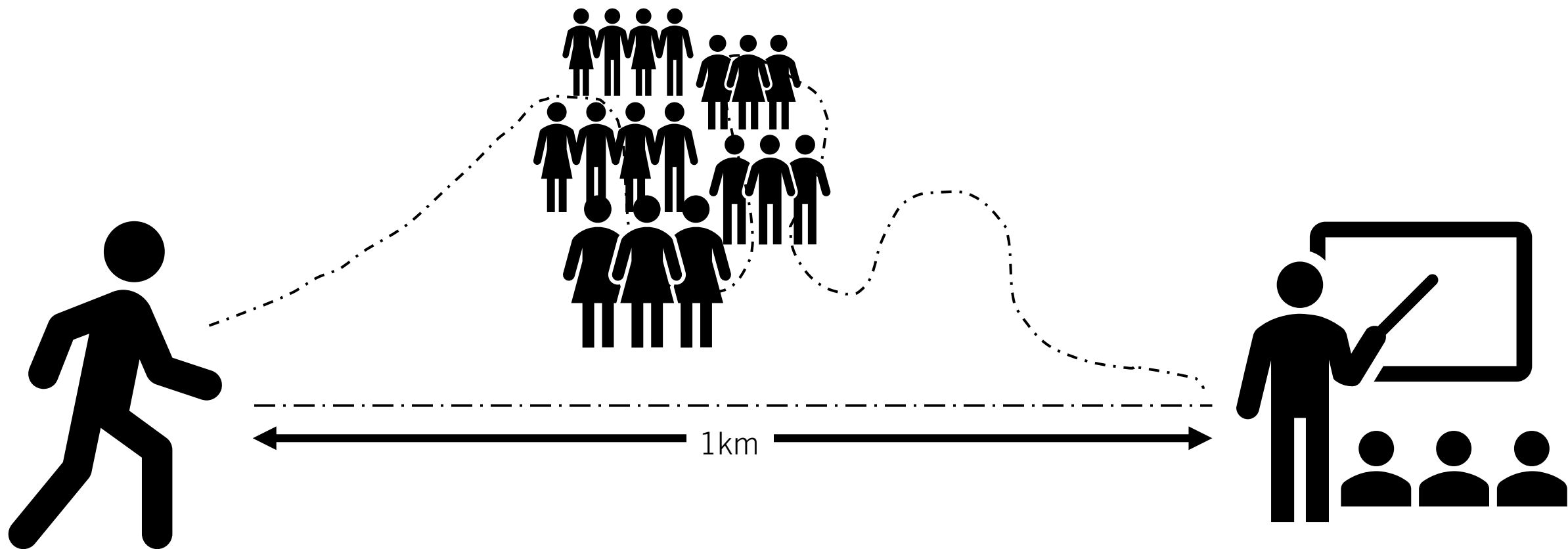
“Is this child ever allowed to cross busy roads without an adult?”



Many thanks to A/Prof Alexa Delbosc, Monash, for crunching this data on demand...

“Is this child ever allowed to cross busy roads without an adult?”





Our infrastructure is interpreted through a cultural lens

Social Practice Theory (SPT)



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.



Transport Practices: e.g. driving, walking, riding a bike



Practices facilitated by transport: e.g. schooling, working, shopping



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)

Social Practice Theory (SPT)



A practice is a “A routinised way of doing”.

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)



emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)



cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)



Practices are shaped by:

material elements
(e.g. infrastructure)

emotions and feelings
(e.g. scared, hot, tired)

cultural scripts
(e.g. norms, expectations)

But how do we
bring all that
together?



ll together?



s are shaped by:

rial elements
(infrastructure)

ns and feelings
(sweated, hot, tired)

ural scripts
(norms, expectations)



“Car-free not care-free – the social practices of parents without cars.”

Kent, J.L. (2025) Car-free not care-free – the social practices of parents without cars. *Mobilities*, 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2449517>

Key research contribution:

Better understandings of WHY people travel the way they do.

Key research questions:

1. What challenges do parents face when they don't have cars in Australian cities?
2. How do parents overcome these challenges?

Theoretical framing:

Social Practice Theory (looking at links between structures, cultural scripts and emotions)

Method:

- Interviews with 32 parents of children aged <12 who do not have regular access to a private car.
- Data analysed using social practice theory framing and *apriori* themes.
- Coding was both thematic and attribute.
- Subjectivity acknowledged throughout the research collection and data analyses phases.

Navigating public transport with kids

Worries about having children on public transport:

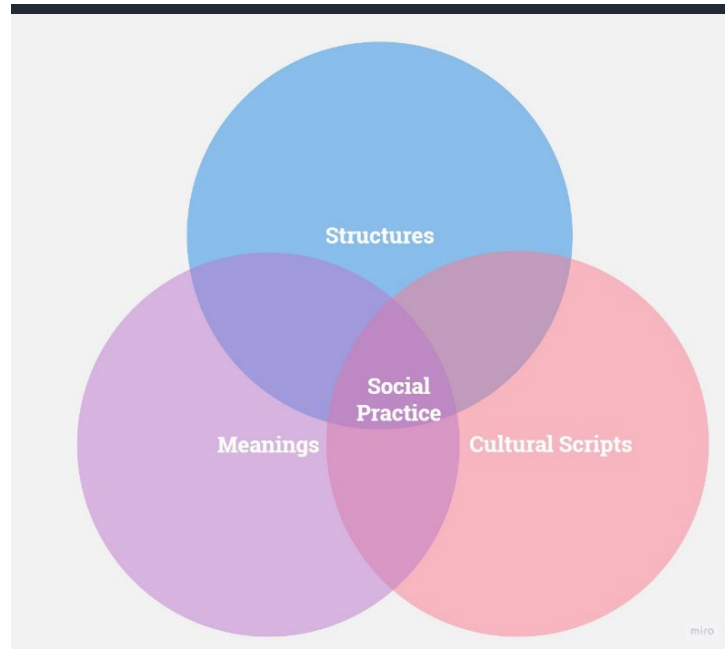
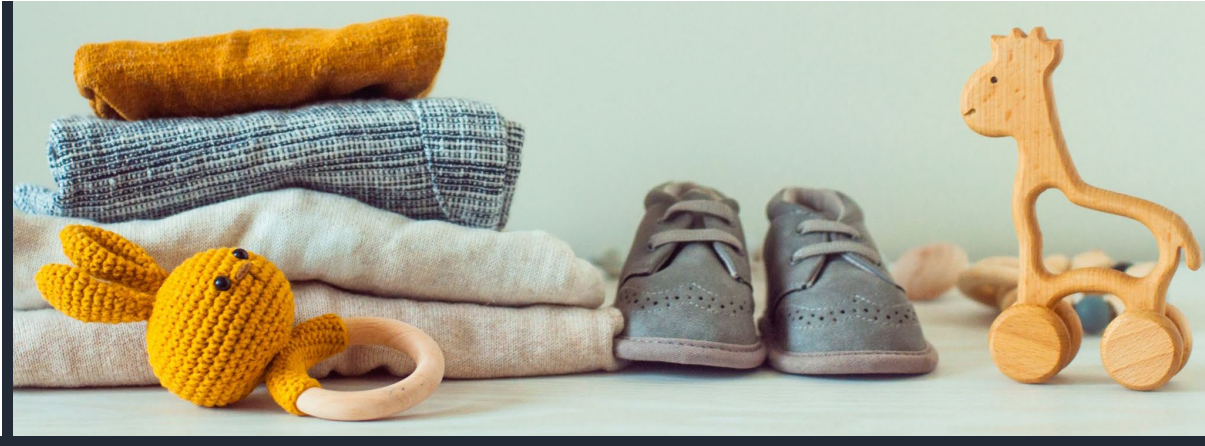
“Annie: It’s almost like as a mum on public transport, you’re almost public property. I’ve actually changed the way I dress. Because I thought people were seeing me on the bus with two kids and going “you’re too poor to have a proper life”. I used to just wear sweatpants all the time but then I found people would treat me much better if I was a mum on the bus if I was in a dress. Like I’d never take kids on a bus with dirty faces because people would think you’re not caring for the child. But if I had a car, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t care what I looked like or what my kids looked like.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Annie: Look if I’m honest it almost caused depression for a time. The fact that I had a bachelor’s degree and a career, but I was worried about people judging me for being on a bus as a mother, it made me feel like a failure. But now I just accept it.”



Analysing Annie



- Structures and materials: clothing, publicness, actual transport mode.
- Cultural script: “people would think you’re not caring for your child” and “you’re too poor to have a proper life” if you don’t have a car but you have kids.
- Meaning/emotion: Depressed yet resilient.
- Reinterpretation: I’ll change my clothing but not the way I travel.

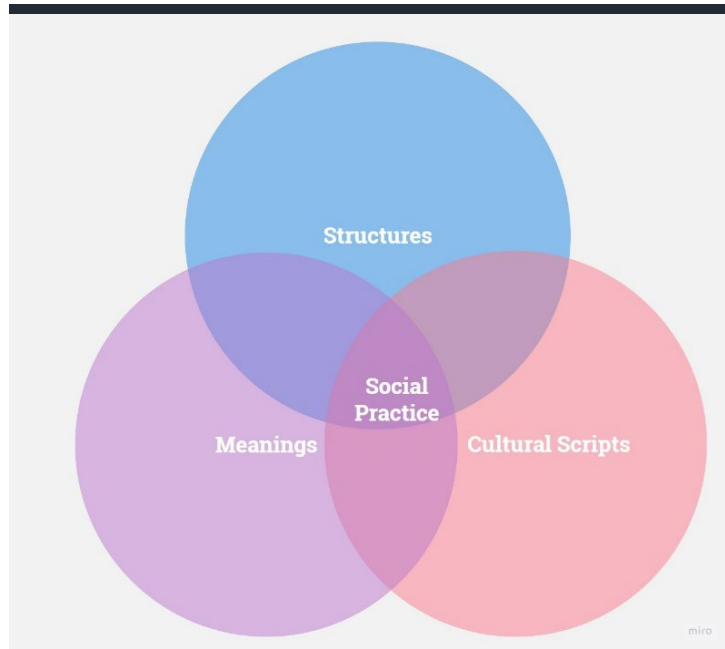
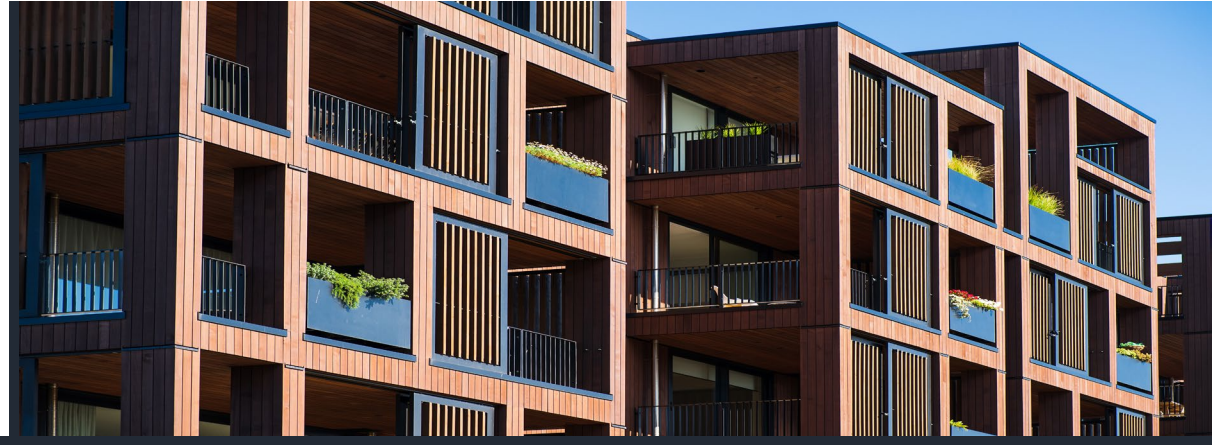
Living in higher density with kids

Most parents needed to live in apartment buildings, and they knew this might be thought of as “really odd”:

Emily: **We know we are doing things differently by living here**, especially now we’re parents. **One day we might grow up** and do the Aussie thing you know—big house, backyard, playing cricket, and having barbeques with the neighbours and all that, driving everywhere. **My sister-in-law thinks we are really odd**—they live north and have a really suburban life.



Analysing Emily



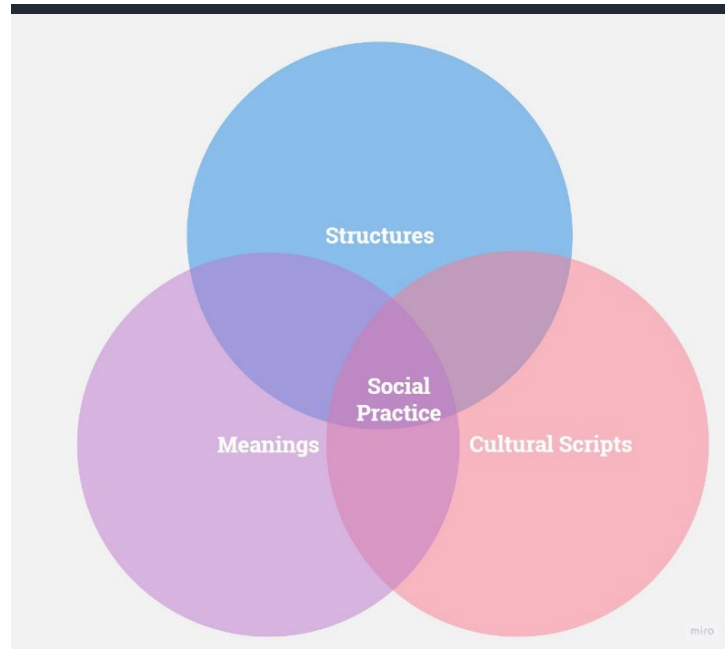
- Structures and materials: density, play spaces, publicness.
- Cultural script: “it’s odd in Australia to live in an apartment with kids”
- Meaning/emotion: acknowledge difference but be open to change.
- Reinterpretation: “it’s where we are for now”

Cycling with kids

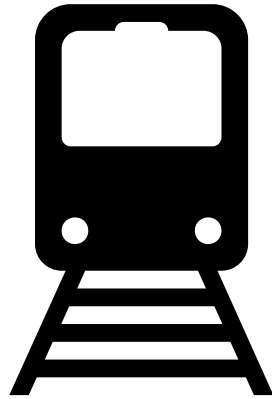
Kristina: “I remember one time very clearly, I was standing still in front of the traffic light next to a car waiting. And the mum pulls down the window. She had kids in the back herself. And she says “oh, that poor baby, in the back there”. Funnily enough **my son got very upset** about being called a baby. So I was trying to make a bit of light of it, like “oh, don't call him a baby. He's getting upset. He's a big man!”. So she then started going on and on about the dangers, telling me I shouldn't be riding a bike with a child. She ended up getting quite aggressive and I just said “look, I know what I'm doing, it's very safe”. Then the lights changed.”



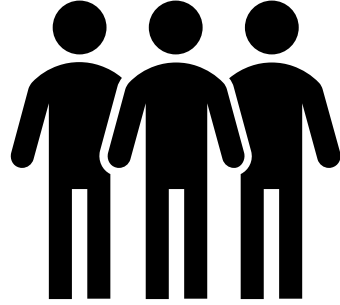
Analysing Kristina



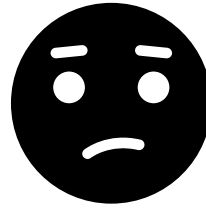
- Structures and materials: bikes, roads, cars.
- Cultural script: “it’s dangerous/irresponsible to ride a bike with kids”
- Meaning/emotion: defensive of child, frustration with the “system”
- Reinterpretation: “I know what I’m doing”



Structure



Cultural script



Emotions



New cultural script

“I'm a pessimist because of
intelligence...
but an optimist because of will”

Antonio Gramsci



Questions?

Jennifer.Kent@sydney.edu.au



Follow Dr Jennifer Kent



Download the study report



Kent, J.L., Rashidi, L.H., Moylan, E., Delbosc, A. & Gilbert, H. (2026) The Australian School Travel Survey 2025, The University of Sydney, Darlington. <https://doi.org/10.25910/25pj-2816>