

# Children's commutes to school are complicated by the coronavirus pandemic

1 September 2020, by Michelle O'kane



Starting the school year during the coronavirus pandemic raises many questions, including how children will commute to school. Credit: Shutterstock

For many children, September marks a return to school after several months' absence. With this comes the return of the school commute. In North America, [increased distances between home and school](#), [changing working patterns and commuting time](#) and [child safety concerns](#) have contributed to the "[backseat generation](#)"—[a significant increase in children arriving to school in a car at the expense of activities such as walking and biking](#).

This trend of children increasingly being escorted or monitored is also seen in other areas such as [unsupervised outdoor play](#) (replaced by structured sports and activities) and [latchkey children](#) (replaced with after-school care programs).

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted understandable anxiety in relation to many facets of everyday life, and children's return to school—and how they will get there—is no exception. This anxiety, plus the ongoing flexibility in the working arrangements of many parents, could lead to increased numbers of backseat and escorted children this September, making this even more of a norm.

## External judgment

Families who do not provide in-person supervision for their children are increasingly conscious of external judgment. In B.C., a recent high-profile example resulted in a parent, Adrian Crook, taking the Ministry of Children and Family Development to court for stating that his children, ranging from seven to 11 years in age, [could not use transit unsupervised to get to school](#).

When this case made the news, I was a researcher involved in a study that [interviewed parents about their children's outdoor unsupervised time](#). Many parents referred to this case and expressed fears about "being reported." As a [social worker](#), I found parents' confusion and worry about the policies of social work organizations concerning.

B.C. is among the majority of provinces and territories in Canada that does not set the age at which children can be unsupervised. [Manitoba](#) and [New Brunswick](#) specify 12 years and [Ontario](#) sets the age at 16.

## Reasonable care

A recent case reported in Manitoba suggests that [this age-based standard is being upheld](#). However, in each of these jurisdictions, an underage unsupervised child only becomes a child protection matter if the adult responsible for them has not made reasonable provisions for their supervision or care.

Deciding what is reasonable depends on various factors, such as [the capabilities of the child, their feelings about being unsupervised, their ability to respond to emergencies and any specific risks in the child's environment](#). The same concept of reasonableness also underpins decision-making in jurisdictions where age thresholds are not set.

The B.C. Court of Appeal [ruled in favor of Crook in](#)

July. However, this has not resulted in a change to B.C. law or policy regarding unsupervised children, [something that may not be clear from a simple glance at some of the media headlines](#). The final judgment instead reiterated that social work authorities cannot make decisions about a child unless the child is in their care or the authority has a legal order in regard to them.

Whether or B.C.'s Ministry of Children and Family Development had authority to direct the father's care and decision-making was the focus of the appeal, not the content of the decision-making itself. This is in contrast to cases in the United States that have [prompted policy change](#) and [legal amendments](#) underscoring that the focus of the child protection system is identifying harm or a quantifiable risk of harm to children.



Children playing in the Ole Bull fountain in Bergen, Norway. Credit: [Anne Worner/flickr](#), [CC BY](#)

### Standards of supervision

In order to assess the circumstances of unsupervised children and determine if there is a child protection concern, social workers need to speak to families and gather information. However, there is also a need to be reflective regarding the supervision standards that are being applied, since they vary.

In a recent study, [the average age at which children in five European countries were allowed to play](#)

[outside spanned from 5.8 years in Norway to 11.8 years in Greece](#). Other research has identified [an association between higher rates of outdoor play and unstructured activities and lower socio-economic status](#). It is therefore important to ensure that any standard set in law or enacted through policy does not reflect the cultural or class-based norms of only one group.

Unfortunately, applying a reasonableness standard does not provide parents with a clear and set answer to the question: When can my child travel to school alone? However, it does allow for flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of different families. The best approach is to discuss any plans with the child in advance and to follow guidance on how to prepare them.

This helps to reduce any risks to the child in being alone, but elimination of all risk in childhood is not achievable. A [risk-averse society](#) can lead to a risk-averse child protection system. Instead, we should seek the balance of [children](#) being ["as safe as necessary," not "as safe as possible."](#)

### Commuting in a pandemic

COVID-19 means this back-to-school season has new challenges. Children walking or cycling to school with others will need to know the guidance on maintaining physical distancing requirements or their social bubbles.

In areas where bus capacities are capped and mask use is mandatory, deciding if a child is ready to take transit to school alone or with peers will include additional considerations: How well can the child follow mask use guidelines when unsupervised? If they do not follow guidelines, how will they cope if challenged? How will they react if multiple, full-to-capacity busses do not allow them to board?

Plans may also need to change with the circumstances as the number of COVID-19 cases fluctuates. However, although adherence to these public health requirements is a challenge, a child's failure to follow these rules is, in and of itself, not a child protection matter.

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