Note, this is a draft of a forthcoming book chapter:


Mobilising children: The role of mobile communications in child mobility

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Introduction

The role of mobile phones in children’s mobility remains underexplored despite their growing take-up and use. The few extant studies of the phenomenon of children’s mobile communication are dominated by analyses of parent-child relations, and findings that mobile phones extend both child travel and parental intrusion (e.g. Fotel and Thomsen, 2004; Malone, 2007; Williams and Williams, 2005). There is, then, a clear need to consider the wider contexts, meanings and practices associated with children’s increasing and everyday uses of mobile technologies. In this chapter we explore ways mobile phones mediate children’s everyday mobility, extending research in the geographies of health literature that has addressed questions of mobile phone use in the context of children’s independent mobility. We report on two qualitative studies examining how children and parents perceive and use mobile phones to negotiate mobility: the first in an inner urban area of Moreland in Melbourne, Australia, during 2011 and 2012; and the second in inner city Auckland, New Zealand, in 2012. A total of 48 Australian children and 40 New Zealand children aged 9-12 years – a transitional age in social and educational terms – along with parents, were included in the research.

In the chapter, we use the term companion device to refer to the growing significance of mobile phones in accompanying children when they are out and about, and introduce the idea of media ecologies as a helpful theoretical approach. This allows us to situate mobile phone use within a broader field of social and technological relations characterising children’s mobility negotiations and communications. Thus we consider how children’s everyday mobility is negotiated through mobile phones within the contexts of family rules and routines, cultural influences, peer social connections, and neighbourhood environments. We detail three themes of mobile device ecologies – adoption, affordance and appropriation – in order to analyse the shifting significance of these companion devices in children’s everyday
mobility.

**Background and theoretical approach**

The implications of mobile phone usage have been explored within the contexts of family communication, interaction and organisation (e.g. Christensen, 2009, Davis, et al., 2011; Green, 2002, 2003; Licoppe, 2004), yet the role of mobile technologies in child mobility remains underexplored within health geography literature. Here the focus tends to have been on the broader social, physical and policy environments that have contributed to a dramatic decline in children’s everyday mobility, and particularly independent mobility (e.g. Carroll, et al., 2014; Malone, 2007; McDonald, 2007; O’Brien, et al., 2000; Thomson, 2009; Zubrick, et al., 2010).

Independent mobility – defined as freedom to travel or move about neighbourhoods without adult supervision (Tranter and Whitelegg, 1994; Shaw, et al., 2013) – is considered important for physical health, helping children to incorporate active transportation, such as walking and cycling, into their daily travel routines (e.g. Carver, et al., 2008; Garrard, 2009; Thomson, 2009). It is also valued for fostering children’s wellbeing more broadly, increasing their spatial, personal and social skills, and providing children with opportunities to access public space for play, recreation and citizenship (e.g. Malone, 2007; Ross, 2007; Skelton, 2009; Zubrick, et al., 2010). Studies have shown that factors contributing to a reduction in children’s independent mobility, include changes to built environments and transportation policies (e.g. Carver, et al., 2008; Whitzman, et al., 2009); shifts in parental perceptions and rules (e.g. Prezza, et al., 2005; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Zubrick, et al., 2010); and changing cultural norms, values and lifestyles (e.g. Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007; Thomson, 2009). Less is known, however, about the increasing role of mobile communication technologies in shaping children’s contemporary independent mobility. In this chapter we add to the evidence by reporting on two qualitative studies exploring how children and parents perceive and use mobile phones to negotiate everyday mobility.

Studies of mobile phone use in the context of independent mobility have tended to focus on teenage practices (e.g. Green, 2003; Williams and Williams, 2005), and research on pre-teen children’s mobile phone use is sparse. While this may be due to the historical lack of mobile ownership or use by pre-teens, evidence shows an ever-increasing ownership of mobile devices by children, and by increasingly younger children (ABS, 2012). Extant research has focussed on mobile phone use in child-parent relationships rather than use as part of children’s broader social relationships. The findings of much of this research note that
children gain a degree of empowerment and autonomy from having a phone, and that the mobile phone increases their spatial mobility; but at the cost of surveillance experienced as an invasion of their space by parents (e.g. Fotel and Thomsen, 2004; Malone, 2007; Williams and Williams, 2005). Thus phones may extend boundaries, but they simultaneously stretch parental authority and intrusion. Issues of surveillance notwithstanding, recent research on children’s mobility is beginning to consider ways mobile devices are reconfiguring parent-child relationships, with the potential to help reverse trends of reduced child mobility (e.g. Kullman, 2010; Nansen, et al., 2014; Shaw, et al., 2013).

Our goal is to explore the role played by mobile phones in mediating children’s travel, situating the use of mobile phones within the contexts of family rules and routines, cultural influences, peer social connections, and neighbourhood environments. We build on recent cultural geography literature that recognises that children increasingly live in a multi-mediated world where their everyday mobility is constructed and sustained through the quality of relations with, or attachments to, bodies, places and technologies (Kullman, 2010; Ross, 2007); where technologies quietly surround and attach themselves to their daily practices (e.g. Symes, 2007); and where the companionship of human others – family, siblings, friends and passers-by – as well as ‘non-human’ others such as pets and technologies, help foster children’s independent mobility (Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009; Nansen, et al., 2014).

In building on this research in cultural geography, we consider the companionship role of mobile phones in mediating children’s everyday mobility. The term companion device recently emerged in the lexicon of the consumer electronics industry to refer to a second screen or additional device (e.g. laptop, tablet, smart phone) that is kept close at hand and is used in conjunction with television viewing, and so becoming embodied in accompanying and adding a layer of complexity to this activity. We appropriate the term to extend it beyond the home environment to describe children and young people’s relations to and through mobile phones within their everyday mobility. We suggest that the term companion device speaks to qualities of use, experience and meaning attached to mobile phones by children.

Further, we adopt an ecologies framework to consider the broader social and technological relationships characterising children’s mobility. A socio-ecological approach has been used in health geography to examine the multiple and interrelated factors influencing health, including individual and interpersonal relations; institutional and regulatory rules; physical settings and environments; social norms and cultural contexts (e.g. Kearns, 1993; Garrard, 2009). An ecological approach has also been used within media and communication studies.
to explore the interrelations between multiple technologies, users and contexts of use (e.g. Fuller, 2007; Hearn and Foth 2007; Shepherd, et al., 2007; Strate, 2004). Here, the ecological metaphor shifts the focus away from studies of individual devices to encompass systems and contexts of media and communications interaction. We suggest an ecologies framework is useful for explicitly drawing attention to the role of mobile phones in shaping children’s mobility, without losing sight of the larger contexts in which they are situated.

Rather than treating mobile phones in isolation, the ecology approach suggests ways they mediate, amend and reconfigure practices of child mobility. We detail three themes of mobile device ecologies – adoption, affordance and appropriation – to analyse the shifting significance of these companion devices in children’s everyday mobility communications and negotiations: that is, the ways in which these companion devices are adopted and appropriated through their affordances.

The psychologist James Gibson (1977, 1979) coined the term affordances to describe physical properties embedded within an object, technology, or environment that enabled an individual to perform some action. It has been expanded to include properties (physical and symbolic) that users themselves identify or perceive (e.g. Costall, 1995; Norman, 1988). Kullman (2010) argues that the affordances of travel technologies (such as mobile devices) serve a material and performative role: as a resource for mediating children’s mobility transitions, and an aid to actively assembling contemporary forms of child mobility. This relational and interdependent understanding of affordance is made clearer through the concept of appropriation, whereby technologies exceed their intended design through user appropriation and innovation (e.g. Marvin 1988; Verbeek 2005; Wajcman 2008). Pain, et al. (2005), for example, argue that instead of bringing fundamental changes to the lives of young people, mobile phones have been appropriated into the existing ties, struggles and surveillance between young people and adults. That is, while the contactability and connectedness afforded by mobiles may expand the boundaries and modes of parent-child interactions or mobility negotiations, they fail to actually transform the dynamics of child mobility.

In contrast, Williams and Williams (2005) argue that, in facilitating parent-child negotiations that are no longer restricted to the home, mobile phones afford new forms of child agency that alter the experience and character of mobility. Mobile phones stretch these relations over distance and enable negotiations within a broader spatial framework in which children are increasingly playing an active role. Patterns of appropriation show that young people integrate and adapt mobile devices as part of a wider communications ecology, with the
mobile phone used for brief communicative gestures (Licoppe, 2004). Child mobility research has also shown that children appropriate mobile devices to subvert their intended purposes of adoption, such as remote parenting or surveillance. Young people decide how much to share with their parents (Pain, et al., 2005), or switch off their phone to avoid contact with their parents (Williams and Williams, 2005).

**A brief introduction to the research methods**

Both studies used mixed methods child-centred approaches. In the Australian study, ethnographic observations preceded focus group discussions with children in groups of 5-8 (n=48) centred around two visual photo-ordering exercises using images depicting places of travel and objects mediating their mobility (Morrow, 2001; Punch, 2002). A Year 6 to Year 7 cohort (10 and 11 year-olds) was selected because research shows the transition from primary to secondary school is a significant stage in children's mobility development (Shaw, et al., 2013), and an important period in the acquisition of mobile phones (ABS, 2012). Group discussions were followed by participant-guided mobile methods (Block, et al., 2014), which in this instance included 10 children from the focus groups individually taking researchers on daily travel journeys predominantly to and from school, but also to places such as shops and parks. Researchers used the same mode of transportation as participants (e.g. bus, walking, cycling). Parent and teacher interviews provided context and triangulation (see, Gibbs, et al., 2012; Nansen, et al., 2014, for detailed methods description).

The New Zealand study investigated how children and parents experience different neighbourhood environments and the focus was on relationships between urban design attributes, safety perceptions and children’s independent mobility and physical activity levels. Here we present data related to mobile phone use collected from 34 parents and 40 children aged 9-12 years living in inner-city apartments and townhouses during home-based semi-structured interviews with parents/caregivers and children; and neighbourhood go-along walking interviews with children (see Carroll, et al., 2015 for full details of methodology). As with the Australian study, the children were on the cusp of greater freedom as they transitioned from primary school (Years 5-6) to intermediate/junior secondary school (Year 7).

**Children’s adoption of mobile devices**

Our research supports previous findings that children often received their first mobile phones in response to increased travel unaccompanied by parents, in particular to and from school
In these studies this was during the transition between primary and secondary school for the Australian cohort; and between primary and Intermediate/junior high school for New Zealand participants. Mobile phones were principally given to children as travel companions by parents who wanted them to be contactable (Haddon and Vincent 2007; Ling, 2004; Wajcman, 2007) and initially the children’s use of these was limited:

Child, 10 years (year 6, Australia): Mine’s just for emergencies.

Child, 10 years (year 6, Australia): I don’t call my friends just my parents.

Father (of year 6 child, Australia): We will get him a mobile phone next year to be able to stay in touch.

In speaking about younger children being given a mobile phone once they transitioned from primary school, the main reason parents gave was the greater distance that children would travel to school unsupervised by an adult, as exemplified in the following account:

Liz, mother of Michael, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): It’s a bit early for him to have a mobile phone. His school is close to home so he doesn’t need it yet… but he might need one when he goes to intermediate.

Children appeared to accept this delay in acquiring a mobile phone and some younger children talked of getting one for intermediate (junior high) school. Some younger children who owned phones did not regularly carry them, as they were not seen as a necessary technology for mediating shorter travel journeys:

Jess, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): Oh no, not all the time.


Children knew the parental contact enabled by mobile phones meant adoption was often accompanied by forms of ‘remote control’ (Fotel and Thomsen 2004), and an ‘invasion’ of their space (Williams and Williams, 2005), particularly through having to communicate their arrival at school:

Child, 10 years (year 6, Australia): When we leave our house ‘cause our Mum’s gone to work we have to say we’ve left and it’s like 8.15 or something and then when we get to school we just say ‘we’re at school’.
Nevertheless, these children also felt that carrying a mobile phone provided confidence and a reciprocal sense of safety or security through the ability to contact parents or other adults if they felt unsafe, and even for companionship:

*Child, 10 years (year 6, Australia):* I text to let my parents know where I am.

*Child, 10 years (year 6, Australia):* If you are in danger you can call someone; or just to give you some company.

Adoption of mobile phones by children shows that whilst parents often delayed their provision until children transitioned to intermediate/junior high or secondary school, at these times of increased independent mobility they were generally perceived as valuable devices and travel companions within a wider ecology of companions and infrastructure supporting child mobility.

**Affordances of mobile devices**

Ambivalence about parental contact or monitoring through mobile phones became more pronounced as children became older, had their devices longer, and transitioned into secondary school. Some Year 7 children resented the rules for mobile phones and continued intrusion and remote control from parents:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* I’m not allowed to leave the house without my phone, like ‘just take your phone in case you get lost’. I’m not going to get lost!

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* My mum is so paranoid that I’m going to get in trouble she makes me call before I leave, when I get there, when I’m going to be back, what I’m having for lunch and dinner, if I’m staying there overnight!

Yet, older children also recognised that mobile phones enabled increased independent mobility. They acknowledged the reciprocal benefits of convenience in negotiating with parents using mobile phones, superseding the limits of located legacy landlines, contrasting with the importance of safety identified by younger children:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* With a mobile you can tell your parents where you are.

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* If I’m at a friend’s house I call them if I want to be picked up.

They still used mobile phones for parental contact and safety; but in addition they could re-schedule or re-negotiate meeting times/places with parents – thereby helping to mediate
ecology of mobility that enabled greater freedom:

Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia): If your parents say to you be home at like 7 o’clock, you can call and tell them you’ll be late.

Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia): Instead of going straight home, you can say you are going out with your friends.

Safety, convenience and surveillance were all seen as affordances by parents who favoured their children carrying around mobile phones. For instance, if children got hurt, climbing trees or falling off scooters they could phone for help. Thus they can be seen as both an enabler and a safety cushion:

Jane, mother of Nick, 11 years, (Year 6, NZ): Quite often Nick rings me on his cellphone and says his friend’s fallen off his scooter and he’s got scabby knees and we’re on the corner of such and such and such and such and such and such and you have to run up with plasters and towels in the car.

Convenience involved parents being able to readily contact children – and especially when previously agreed arrangements changed:

Sue, mother of Sarah, 9 years (Year 5, NZ): You can communicate with them easily…but it’s about convenience, not safety.

Lyn, mother of James, 11 years (Year 7, NZ): It’s a convenience if plans change, if I don’t know what is happening with my day.

Parental peace of mind was another reason parents gave for supplying their children with a mobile phone and having it accompany them in public:

Bev, mother of David, 11 years (Year 7, NZ): If he wants to go into town and things it worries me if he doesn’t have a phone. I’m concerned ‘cause I can’t get hold of him.

Sally, mother of Sam, 9 years (Year 5, NZ): I feel more comfortable.

This meant they could be in contact with their children from a distance, know where they were and that they were fine:
Lea, mother of Sophie, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): She must always have her cellphone on her and text me when she’s coming home. If she’s coming home on the bus she has to text me when she gets on the bus so that I know that she’s on the bus.

Safety was, however, also offered as a concern and reason by parents for children not to carry a mobile phone. Here mobile phones were seen as an unsafe companion because their material value could put a child at risk:

Judy, mother of Peter, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): I am scared they will be robbed.

Children were also aware that the affordances of connectivity offered by mobile phones could lead to distraction. Here the ease of using a mobile phone in situations whilst on the move was seen to pose potential traffic safety dangers:

Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia): Phones can be helpful but if you are using it wrong...Yeah like if you are walking across a road.

Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia): If you are texting while you are walking: boom!

Parents expressed similar ambivalence about mobile phone companionship, discussing how the range of functions afforded by mobile phones, such as texting or playing games, could distract children:

Ange, mother of Jim, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): It would be more dangerous to have a cellphone because they’d be like texting and walking and scootering...and playing games and not actually looking where they were going.

Some parents spoke about the affective dimensions of mobile phone companionship, expressing concern that a mobile phone could provide a false feeling of security, and that other measures, such as learning how to deal with difficult situations and having adults around they could turn to if they were concerned were important to ensure children were safe:

Rose, mother Mark, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): It’s not guaranteed if they have a cellphone they will be safer...that’s why I teach Jim to understand the situation, how to deal with it...I’ll ask him, ‘if you don’t have a cellphone, what should you do’?

One parent spoke about how he did not think a mobile phone would save his daughter in a
‘stranger-danger’ situation:

Simon, father of Rianna, 11 years (Year 6, NZ): If something was to happen to her, by the time she’d pulled it out, she would have been for it anyway…

Thus, both children and parents were ambivalent about the affordances offered by mobile phones as companion devices. They recognised the merits of children – especially younger children – having mobile phones, acknowledging the affordances they offered as companions to child travel, while questioning their utility for actually ensuring children’s safety within the wider ecology of infrastructures supporting child mobility.

**Appropriating mobile devices**

Following the transition to secondary school, students viewed phones as essential for their daily lives and their mobile devices became entwined with peer relationships and ecologies of communication. Appropriations grew to include organising schedules with friends, the use of built-in cameras, music players, casual gaming, and web browsers, as part of mobile companionship mediating daily travel:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* ...it’s like essential.

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* We text each other to work out if we are going to meet on the second-last carriage or whatever, or if we are going to meet at McDonalds where the train stops.

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* And you can play games...Like Angry Birds.

In appropriating mobile devices within their everyday mobility, children developed more nuanced mobile phone engagements and discussed having to negotiate material aspects of mobile phones, including their physical presence, battery life and affordability:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* You’ll have your mobile phone always on you in your bag.

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* My battery always dies.

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* Credit can be annoying...my friend keeps texting me but I don’t have enough credit to text him back.

Children also appropriated the mobile phone within parental negotiations for increased independence, leveraging the perceived affordances noted above. They viewed parental rules about safety as reasonable, but attempted to negotiate or challenge rules they saw as
unnecessary or overly restrictive. Tactics included approaches such as making a claim for maturity, nagging or selecting which parent to approach, but also involved mediators of mobility that parents promoted for safety. Thus children used mobile phone companionship as a tool to negotiate mobility with parents:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* I have my phone and say, ‘just give me a ring.’

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* I tell them that I’ll call you when I get there

Children spoke about their parents allowing them greater spatial mobility if they had a mobile phone with them. They gave instances of places they were allowed to go on foot, on scooters and on bicycles around the city without supervision, so long as they agreed to keep in touch and be back home at an agreed time; and of negotiating spatial and temporal changes by calling or texting their parents from their phone:

*Child, 11 years (year 7, Australia):* If I want to go shopping I text her. Sometimes she says no, sometimes she says yes.

*Lucy, 11 years (Year 6, NZ):* If we decided to go up P Road I would call her.

With many parents working, children were sometimes able to play out and about with friends as long as they kept parents informed of their whereabouts and were home by an agreed-upon time. Having a phone could thus also afford temporal flexibility:

*Matt, 10 years (Year 6, NZ):* If mum wants us back, well she can ring us, ‘cause we’ll take our phones.

Nevertheless, several parents spoke about a continued wish to keep their children under surveillance when they were out and about:

*Kath, mother of Jon, 10 years (Year 6, NZ):* When he comes out of school, if he hasn’t called me by ten past three, I’m calling him…

Other parents expressed concern about the limits of their surveillance capabilities once mobile phone use become habituated and increasingly multi-functional within the communication ecologies of young people. This had unexpected financial implications for some parents:
Gill, mother of Aaron, 9 years (Year 5, NZ): You can’t control whether they will use them to play games or whatever, so I worry about that.

Rachel, mother of Danny, 10 years (Year 6, NZ): He’s shocking; I’ve had huge phone bills because he’s downloaded stuff.

Thus we see a progression in the sophistication and usage of mobile phones as children get older, and whilst mobile phones become indispensable as companion devices for younger people, their diverse modes of appropriations within their peer communications ecology opens up new terrains of concern for parents.

Conclusion

Both studies demonstrate the role of the mobile phone as an important mediator in parent-child negotiations relating to child mobility. The findings from these Australian and New Zealand studies were consistent in showing that mobile phones were a resource for supporting mobility, typically provided to children when they transitioned from primary school, as a means of contact with parents (see also: Haddon and Vincent 2007; Ling, 2004; Wajcman, 2007). They helped to assemble children’s mobility through the cooperation and assistance of a range of people, objects and environments (Kullman 2010; Nansen, et al., 2014). In both studies, children, peers and parents collaborated with and through companion devices to provide real and virtual visibility of their location and activities (Kullman, 2010; Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009; Ross, 2007). Further, mobile phones exceeded their initial function as travel companions to become integral technologies within the communications ecology that stretch the temporal and spatial boundaries of of children and young people’s social lives.

We found that companion devices such as mobile phones play an increasing role in accompanying children on their everyday travel. Mobile phones were often handed down from parents specifically in relation to children’s developing mobility, and they mediated the connected presence of others at a distance. Primary students viewed mobile phones as helpful for being able to contact their parents, thus offering security or safety (see also Christensen, 2009, Nansen, et al., 2014). Although both parents and children recognised the potential for phones to distract and thus potentially reduce children’s safety as pedestrians, they described mobile phones as important mobile mediators enabling a sense of security, parental contact and child independence. Carrying a companion device to remain
contactable provided a reciprocal sense of comfort and security, in which children felt safer knowing they were able to access their parents, and thus parents were not simply remotely monitoring their children but able to help support their children’s developing mobility through a connected presence (Christensen, 2009). Thus the surveillance capacities of mobile phones can be viewed as part of a larger terrain of mutual surveillance, which in practice works as part of an arrangement in collaboration rather than control (Green, 2002). Here, phones do not operate in isolation but as part of a wider ecology of people, technologies and places that help to support children’s mobility and potentially increased physical activity.

Older children described the more nuanced engagement they developed with and through their mobile phones as these companion devices became embedded in their everyday lives and communication ecologies over time (e.g. Symes, 2007). Further, children began to appropriate mobile phones within a culture in which hanging out with and through these companion devices was both ordinary and sophisticated. The associated costs of increased phone usage and access to online games had unanticipated financial implications for some parents. Children used mobile phones beyond parental interactions within ecologies of communication to socialise, make arrangements with peers, access entertainment, and navigate urban environments. Children also leveraged their competency with mobile phones in negotiations with parents to further their ambitions for increased travel in public space. Rather than a digital leash for parental monitoring of children, mobile devices emerged as part of a repertoire of resources for scaffolding children’s mobility, supporting them as they ventured further afield.

Over time the affordances of mobile phones facilitated contact and convenience, but also concern about potential unintended hazards threatening physical and personal safety. Parents in New Zealand anticipated some of the unintended consequences of mobile phones; specifically that phones could be a target for theft, they could give children a false sense of security, and they may alter the nature of children’s play and social activities. The fears of parents and the appropriation of affordances by children reinforce the relationship between children’s agency and parental power and protective role. Children and parents alike could predict how mobile phones would contribute to a shift in power to children, which was reflected in the fears expressed by parents in New Zealand.

Taken together, the studies reflect the importance of research into the relationship between mobile phones and the independent mobility of children, particularly in the transition from primary school. Early ideas of a parentally controlled electronic leash have been replaced by the acknowledgement of affordances offered by mobile devices, and their appropriation by
children as travel companions. Some of these are expected consequences of the introduction of new technologies, such as increased active transport (Shaw, et al., 2013). Other unintended consequences are that while researchers and parents expected mobile phones to enhance children’s safety, children themselves appropriated the devices over time to increase their agency in negotiations with their parents (Pain, et al., 2005, Valentine 1997), to renegotiate mobility and independence in response to opportunities that emerged through the day (Williams and Williams 2005), and to support their own interests in relation to entertainment and communicating with friends (Haddon and Vincent 2007; Symes, 2007).

These contradictions highlight how mobile devices do not serve a singular or straightforward function. So whilst mobile phones may be contributing to shifts in the patterns and landscapes of negotiation between parents and children over mobility (Shaw, et al., 2013), they need to be considered within the wider social and communicative ecologies of use. Research examining children’s everyday uses of mobile phones requires more integrated and contextual approaches that place the use of mobile phones in the broader dynamics of daily life and communication (e.g. Haddon and Vincent, 2007; Kullman, 2010): why they are adopted, what they afford, and how they are appropriated. We propose that an understanding of wellbeing shaped through both social and technical determinants of an ecology approach may inform a cultural shift in the historical decline of children’s movement in public space.

In conclusion, this research supports the evidence that mobile phones have become central to parent-child negotiations relating to children’s independent mobility, and thus their health and wellbeing. Not only do they afford a sense of comfort and security to both parents and children, they also provide a means of increasing children’s independence over time as children negotiate new arrangements with parents in response to emerging opportunities while out and about. Yet, as companion devices, this research also points to the growing significance of mobile phones in accompanying children when they are out and about, and the ways their adoption, affordances and appropriation exceed strictly parent-child relations, becoming entangled in wider relational ecologies characterising children’s mobility negotiations and communications.

Given the recognition of the importance of independent mobility for children’s wellbeing and healthy development – and the role of mobile phones in fostering this – these companion devices can arguably be considered health promoting, at least within the context of children’s everyday mobility practices. The sense of security afforded both parents and children appears to allow greater independent mobility, which is in turn acknowledged as
important for increasing physical activity levels and, more broadly, developing children’s spatial and social skills. Thus the negative aspects of children’s mobile phone usage voiced by parents – such as children appropriating their mobile phones for their own purposes, having a false sense of security and potentially being dangerously distracted while out and about – appear to be outweighed by health and wellbeing benefits. Here, the adoption, affordances and appropriation of mobile phones by children helped to scaffold their opportunities for negotiated independent mobility and engagement with peers and local environments.

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