‘So that we don't spoil them’: understanding children's everyday mobility through parents’ affective practices

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ABSTRACT

Children’s everyday mobility and freedom of movement have been closely linked to parental practices, or what has been referred to as parental ‘mobility permits’ or ‘mobility licences’. Most research tends to focus on parental restrictions, while this article explores the affective practices Swedish middle-class parents use in order to enhance their children’s mobility, i.e. how emotions are perceived as enabling parents’ and children’s spatial experiences and thus their feelings of safety and security; as well as how emotions are talked of as disabling or disrupting the potential for children’s mobility. These affective practices are analysed in relation to the parents’ self-reflexive positioning on a continuum between ‘the helicopter parent’ and ‘the engaged and enabling parent’. The material for the article is comprised of 33 interviews with the children’s parents, carried out within a larger ethnographic research project on children’s everyday mobility in Sweden.

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Introduction

I thought it was a little uncomfortable the other night when she did not come home as I thought she would from [name of location]. Then you start thinking. [Tanja: What kind of thoughts came up?] Well, mostly if she had met someone and that she would not be able to handle the situation properly. That’s what I was thinking. And it’s the same on the bus if she ends up in situations she cannot handle. Because she has become a bit more anxious. [Tanja: What kind of situations are you thinking about?] Well, if someone would talk to her or stop her. (…) Not the traffic in itself, I think, it’s no problem for her. It’s more other people, if someone would attack her. (Henrietta, mother of Lotta, 12 years old)

When parents talk about what they most fear regarding their children’s presence in public space, the answer given by Henrietta is not an unusual one. Research around children and public space in the West has touched in diverse ways upon the issue of a changing cultural landscape of fear, risk and ambivalence, with stranger-danger and traffic cast as the most prominent problems (see, e.g. Valentine 2004). Consequently, parenting can be regarded as a key arena for constructions of risk and for risk management (Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010), which impact not only children’s mobility and their presence in public space, but contribute to what is termed the institutionalisation of contemporary childhood in the Global North (Zeiher 2003). Parental influence over children’s mobility has hence come to take centre stage, conceptualised as ‘mobility permits’ or ‘mobility licences’ (Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg 1993; see also Shaw et al. 2015 for an international review).

Here, my focus is on Swedish middle-class parents situated perceptions of their children’s mobility (see Joelsson, Forthcoming, for children’s views of their own mobility in the same
Parenting cultures beyond the risk society

When children, mobility and public space are discussed from qualitative vantage points in research, at least three themes emerge as important to highlight. First, on a more general level, there is a need to address the conceptual use of ‘risk’ and uncertainty (cf. Burgess 2016; Zinn 2016); a second theme relates to how risk and public space constitute contemporary ideas of childhood (Valentine 2004); and third, it is vital to understand how the shifts in the contemporary risk and probability society affect parents and children’s situated risk management perceptions and practices in relation to mobility and public space (Burgess 2016; Adams 2016; Zinn 2016). Hays (1996) and Shaw (2008) hold that a change in ideologies of parenthood has taken place, to what they refer to as ‘intensive parenting’. Similarly, Forsberg (2009) argues that the cultural middle-class ideal of ‘involved parenthood’ is pervasive in contemporary Western society. Relationships between children and parents have changed and tend to be more oriented towards the emotional: involvement and intimacy are highlighted as important features of the parent–child bond. This shift in parenting culture is also related to the ideal of the dual earner in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. The dilemma between the parenting and dual-earner ideals contributes to parents’ experience of time pressure: the need to compensate for the quantitative lack of time by spending quality time with children (Forsberg 2009; cf. Daly 1996; Dowling 2000; Karsten 2005). More importantly, these parenting ideals are both gendered and class-related, in that the involved parent still tends to equal maternal involvement, and recreates middle-class practices and values as the norm for good parenting (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Laureau 2003). Laureau (2003) talks of the discourse around natural growth vs. concerned cultivation and holds that the first discourse is more common among the working-class parents in her study, whereas the latter is more common among the middle-class parents. It should be noted, however, that both discourses exist among the parents and that a straightforward link between social position and parenting cultures are difficult to establish (see also Talbot 2013). Holloway (1998), in her study of local childcare cultures in the UK, discusses how the local social organisation of non-parental educational childcare provision, also creates ‘a moral geography of...
mothering’, i.e. a local discourse within which moral stances around right and wrong in the raising of children are reflected.

The notion of the time-and-emotion-expensive task of rearing children has emerged in parallel with pervasive discourses of children ‘at risk’, thus placing risk-consciousness at the very heart of contemporary parenting (Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010). Parents’ practices become important arenas for the display and (re)production of what is considered risky or not (Talbot 2013). How risk is managed by parents is highly central for parenting, and as Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow (2010, 293) argue, parenting has become a key site for ‘the development of the risk-centred society and risk-consciousness’. If we indeed have moved beyond the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992) into a society where ‘our lives are now shaped by probability calculation, the underlying essence of risk’ (Burgess 2016, 3), much of what we perceive as risk can instead be perceived as uncertainty. Zinn (2016) finds risk and uncertainty as mutually constitutive, making uncertainty relevant ‘when it comes with the expectation of a potentially undesired future which requires response’ (350). Risk is hence not only undesired but holds a potential to affect the decision maker’s life. Put another way, risk and uncertainty provide arenas for testing skills or competences, a central enterprise during childhood (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2008). In light of this, Zinn (2016) proposes to distinguish between direct strategies of risk management and strategies for undesired events, which may be negative events that cannot be prevented but are nevertheless expected and prepared for. This again would suggest that parents (and children) are involved in intergenerational social negotiations of being in and learning about the world through risk and uncertainty (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2008). These family negotiations are again part of a ‘broader knowledge base including ‘well informed guesswork’ of (lay) experts which underpins decisions rather than explicitly proven knowledge’ (Zinn 2016, 352) making risk management a collective and social enterprise. Moreover, Zinn (2016) finds everyday risk negotiations to be fruitfully distinguished between rational, non-rational and in-between strategies in a non-hierarchical typology. Here, in-between strategies of trust, intuition and emotion are of most interest, utilising people’s tacit or experiential knowledge rather than conventional expert knowledge when managing risk and uncertainty in everyday life (Zinn 2016). Such an ‘affective’ approach to risk and uncertainty is more apt when studying people’s everyday practices and meaning making, and become fruitful in an understanding of how parents and children manoeuvre ‘a spatial politics of fear’ (Ahmed 2004:15). Seen from this light, parents (and children) are partaking in affective practices, following ‘the emotional as it appears in social life’ as ‘embodied meaning-making’ (Wetherell 2012, 4, emphasis in original). The processes are not fixed but in motion, and something accomplished jointly with others. In this article, I align myself with Wetherell’s (2012, 97) suggestion of the domains where affective practices can be sought as those (...)) where the body has been more intrusive than it ordinarily is. These are domains, too, (...) where there is notable talk occurring about emotion and feelings, and domains where something personally significant seems to have occurred that someone wants to mark.

The parenting ideals of involvement and intimacy can be partly understood in relation to the broader shifts in risk perception and risk management discussed above, where (some groups of) children can be argued to be monitored and surveilled (by parents, adults or others) to a greater extent than before, and to a greater extent than other groups of children. However, risk and uncertainty is also at times desired, expected and voluntary, and the social management of risk and uncertainty in relation to children’s mobility entwined in emotional and affective processes.

Finally, although this article is not primarily dealing with children’s perspectives and practices but parents’, stressing the agency of children and the ambiguity of parental influence on children’s mobility is of fundamental importance (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). The parenting cultures that arise are not only constructed in relation to parent–child bonds, but also parent-parent and to the broader sociocultural context, and they have moral and normative implications (Holloway 1998; Lind et al. 2016). For instance, parents contemporary ‘over-parenting’ due to popular parenting
ideals has been analysed as ‘paranoid’ (Furedi 2002) or ‘anxious and narcissistic’ (Hendrick 2016), and emerge in relation to what Furedi (2002) has termed parental determinism, i.e. that children’s development is determined by parents’ choices and practices in everyday life. Nevertheless, parenting must be addressed and understood as historically and socially situated forms of childrearing varying across national and local contexts as well as between time periods.

**Methodological notes**

The material for this article consists of 33 recorded and transcribed interviews with the parents of children who have participated in an ethnographic research project around children’s mobility in Uppsala, Sweden. The research project focused on children’s perceptions of their physical environment, their (experiences of their) everyday mobility and mobility-related factors such as freedom, independence, safety, security and risk. Five urban districts (predominantly white, middle-class households) and one peri-urban community in Uppsala County in Sweden were chosen, and the sample was drawn on two occasions from Statens Personadressregister (SPAR; The State Address Register) on the basis of geographical criteria (postal code) and age (children between 8 and 12 years). Once I received a positive response that a research participant wanted to be involved in the study, I made contact with their parent/guardian and arranged for a meeting at a convenient place, usually their homes. The parents were interviewed at the end of the project, after the children had completed all their research tasks.

The interviews with the parents were semi-structured and lasted from 30 minutes to around one hour. Of the 33 families, 22 of the interviews were carried out with the mother only, two with the father only and nine with the mother and father together. In some of the interviews, the children were also present. The themes covered included: reasons for choosing where to live and where their children should attend school, perceptions of their child’s mobility and movement, concerns around their children’s everyday mobilities, and how the parents experienced their own everyday mobility. During the interviews, the parents used maps to indicate their perceptions of the mobility range of their children. They were also asked to rank concepts that I had printed out on cards, first, from the perspective of their child and second, from their own perspective. The concepts were: independence, freedom, risk, sustainability, maturity, safety and security. The parents were allowed to include other words that they thought fitted their child as well.

Uppsala municipality is located in the mid-east of Sweden and is the fourth largest municipality in the country with 215,000 inhabitants. Uppsala is the county town of Uppsala County. Five other counties, among them Stockholm County, share borders with Uppsala County. Compared to the national average (NA), the unemployment rate in the municipality is lower (4%; NA 6%). A majority of the population has upper secondary education (35%; NA 43%) or higher education (55%; NA 45%), partly due to the region’s university being the third largest employer. Uppsala has a very rapid population growth, with approximately 21% of the total being children under 18 years of age (Uppsala Municipality Statistics 2015).

The families live in single-family housing (Slom, Vilsta, Norringe), mixed housing neighbourhoods (Moby) and in areas with mostly high-rise buildings (Ellby, the inner city). Ellby and the inner city are in different stages of a densifying process of the city core. Norringe is located around 15 km from Uppsala city, and can be considered peripherally urban. Of the interviewed families, 22 live in the single-family housing areas, three in the mixed housing areas, and eight in the high-rise areas. The households are positioned as middle class due to parental occupation and place of residence. The vast majority of the households own at least one car, and most of the parents hold driver’s licences. In Norringe, it was more common to have several cars.

In the following, I will first delineate the affective practices parents engage in as they utilise and evoke different emotions, as well as draw on various affective discourses, in their talk of their own and children’s mobilities. These affective practices are then discussed in relation to parenting
cultures, and especially the parents self-reflexive balancing between ‘the helicopter parent’ and ‘the engaged and enabling parent’.

The sensibilities of transitional space: constructing an emotional relation to place

Choosing where to live is considered one of the more important choices during a life course. Most of the parents spoke of making a conscious decision to move to a particular neighbourhood, whereas some spoke of more or less ending up where they lived. Most parents were satisfied with their current place of residence, and they also experienced that their children were satisfied. The parents in this study mentioned several aspects which had contributed to their choice of residence. Closeness to work and schools came up as important, as was closeness to green areas or to cultural or consumption opportunities. Feelings of safety and security, of belonging and affinity, and a sense of community, were also prevalent among the interviewees’ answers. On a question on what makes Anne, mother to Pia, 10 years old, living in the mixed family housing neighbourhood Vilsta, feel safe in her neighbourhood, she responds that:

There are quite a lot of people in motion, if you only look at that aspect. As it is a villa area, even people in the houses are quite close to the streets in a way. Then it’s the conventional things, there are street lights and there are no dark passages really. But then again, I’m not so, I do not think I’m so afraid myself either. It can be [that I feel] fear of darkness making it scary biking through the woods when it’s dark but at the same time, why should I think it’s scarier at half past five in December than half past five in June? Or seven in December and seven in June?

It’s the same people who actually move during the day, I think.

Anne’s sense of the safety of her family’s place of residence is here linked to both social factors, to aspects of the physical environment and to the seasons: other people from the same neighbourhood moving around, windows of the houses faced to the street, proper street lights and the absence of dark and murky areas. Many of these things have been reported as important for people’s feelings of safety in physical planning. Especially women’s sense and experience of public space has been explored by feminist geographers, highlighting the gendered nature of public space and feelings of public space as ‘a geography of fear’ (Valentine 1989; Pain 1991; Koskela 1999; Listerborn 2002). Anne in the quote above states that she is not ‘so afraid myself either’, and continues to question her own fear of cycling through the woods after dark by utilising rational arguments, thus minimising the emotional and embodied facets of her mobility. In the interview with Anne, she talks of her 10-year old daughter Pia’s mobility, and explicitly finds Pia’s mobility to be more conditioned by having company when moving around, than fear of traffic or strangers: ‘I think she for the most part finds it nice to have company (…) that she hasn’t let go of us yet.’ Anne suggests that her own attitudes and perceptions of public space and mobility are passed on to her daughter. In this sense, the emotions Anne talks of are on one hand related to the gendered ‘geographies of fear’, constructed in many ways as ‘adult’ perceptions. The negative emotions arising from parents relations to place are seldom associated to their children’s own understandings of their mobility, and many parents spoke in general of the necessity to remain calm and rational when dealing with their own fears, and especially to avoid transmitting the fears onto their children. Regina speaks about the mobility of Mona, age 9: ‘I want it to be me who’s afraid, not her.’ Fear, this mother suggests, should be carried by the parent’s, not the children. Daniela, mother to 11-year old Rut, similarly admits to being ‘nervous’ when Rut is cycling around alone, but that these emotions need to be managed in order to promote Rut’s mobility. Rationalising and distancing oneself from the (irrational) emotions was a common strategy parents mention.

There were, however, emotions connected to place, which were not rationalised or disregarded. The single family housing neighbourhood Vilsta and high-rise area Ellby is geographically close to two neighbourhoods which are perceived as ‘problem areas’. Some parents in Vilsta and Ellby touched upon this in vague ways, whereas others were more explicit about not wanting their child/ren to go to the ‘problem ridden’ neighbouring city districts. Pernilla, mother of twins Bo
and Per, is straightforward in stating that ‘I do not want them to go to [neighbourhood] when it’s dark. Not during daytime either really.’ Anders parents elaborate below how feeling safe in their neighbourhood is connected to place attachment and one’s own and others perceptions of where you live (cf. Van der Burgt 2006).

Fredrika: I think the important thing is that society is built so we can be … it feels great that in the store, Anders can ask an adult, and the adults, they take responsibility for the children even if they do not know them. It is very important.

Henrik: Yes, but it feels good that you do not have to be afraid of … these things. Which can happen if you are in another residential area.

Vilsta is here constructed as safe, as a place where you need not be afraid and were adults are responsible and help children out in case they need it. The kinds of stigmatisation processes places can undergo, and their cultural, social and spatial consequences, have been documented in research (e.g. Wacquant 1999). Fredrika and Henrik engage in a process of distinction between their own and the stigmatised neighbourhood, with connotations to both social class and ethnicity. The people living in the two neighbourhoods come to carry certain characteristics in some of the interviewees accounts, which are associated to assumed differences in social ties and ultimately to differing or contrasting parenting cultures. Not all parents subscribed to these views, however, but spoke of Vilsta and Ellby as heterogeneous communities, particularly in relation to social class: ‘it is not a normal view of a community, there is such a high standard of living here so I have to remind my children that this is not how the world looks like’ (Regina).

Recognising the emotional work parents carry out together with their children indicates that the transitional space Kullman (2010) talks of in relation to how children become mobile, need to be complimented by a closer look on how affective practices are bound up in the (negotiations of) children’s everyday mobilities (cf. Barker 2003). The affective practices can be seen as central to how parents manage their relations to risks, in order to enhance their children’s maturity and independency, which again are considered essential for their mobility. We will return to these aspects in the following sections.

The mature child and the emotional child – affective opportunities and obstacles for children’s everyday mobility

A pervasive theme among the parents was to reason around the children’s ‘maturity’. In general, many parents perceived their child(ren) to be cautious and mature in that they perceived them to be capable of moving around and handling situations of an unforeseen nature. Being mature (enough) to expand the range and distance of one’s mobility, as well as manage complex environments, was attributed both to the child’s personality and to spatial training. Many parents saw spatial training as strongly associated with maturity and being able to cope with unforeseen situations. Anne explains that maturity for her 10-year-old daughter Pia is connected to competence in managing various situations that might arise:

First, you should be able to predict when something could become difficult. And also, to find out how to solve a problem. I mean if a shoelace gets caught in the pedal, ‘what should I do?’, ‘what should I do if I fall?’, ‘what do I do if I’ve lost my key?’, ‘how do I manage the situation that occurs?’

In the families, the routes between home and school, and to organised leisure activities, become important arenas for children’s spatial training. For instance, when Rosa (10 years old) switched grades, she became too old to ride the school bus. Rosa and her parents then decided that it was time to start practising walking to school. Her father commutes, and the school route incorporated his walk to the train station. Initially, he walked with Rosa all the way to school, but after a while he stopped at the train station while Rosa continued to school on her own. After some time, Rosa started walking the whole way to school on her own, but instead of taking another route she continued to walk through the train station. She thinks it is a strange way to go, since none of her friends walk the
same way as she does. Moreover, initially, she walked to school but not back home, since she did not know the way home, but she gradually expanded her mobility to incorporate the route home as well. During the research project, Rosa changed school route. Her mother Klara explains the reasons for the change:

[the route via the platform] was very practical when we both commuted, then we went with her and she waved us off on the train (...). Then I got a job here so I’ve stopped commuting and her father leaves early and I’m home for a while longer with both girls so she does not have the walking company and then we agreed that we thought the platform might not be the best route after all since it’s, well, industrial and very heavy traffic with the trains, and then there is no vegetation and Rosa is very fond of greenery and trees and shrubs and flowers and things like that (...) then we decided she would change her school route. (...) [W]hen she took a picture of the platform [to the research project] as one of the pictures she didn’t like, then we felt like ‘this is true, if it’s an environment she doesn’t like and it feels so dangerous anyway’ as I think the platforms are and since she no longer has this company, which was the incentive to go there before, that was my starting point. We started talking about which roads were nicer and looked more fun and so on.

Rosa is by no means alone among the research participants in undergoing training in order to be able and perceived to be able by parents and themselves to walk or cycle to school. In fact, this is very common. Rosa’s case clearly illustrates how this training also creates a sense of safety and security in both child and parents, and that it is not necessarily perceived as negative, but in some cases is even requested or demanded by the child. Above all, Rosa’s school route has changed from being part of her parent’s way to work, toward prioritising other values that are more in line with what Rosa likes (nicer, more aesthetically pleasing roads). As the child is perceived as mature enough, other priorities can arise where the child’s perspectives and wishes are made more central.

There were also parents who explicitly referred to their child as ‘being clueless’ when moving around in public space. Martin’s father Glen did not regard his 9-year-old son to be responsible or mature enough to be able to walk or cycle around in the city. The family had moved from a smaller community to a bigger city, experiencing a shift in the built environment that resulted in differences in the mobility of their two children. Paula, the 11-year-old sister, accordingly, experienced more freedom due to the move to the city, whereas her younger brother Martin became more restricted. Glen mentions that he is good at thinking safety, and mother Fiona remarks that her husband basically ‘minimizes all the risks before they even come up’. At the moment, Martin’s parents work hard on his spatial training.

He has a rather poor risk awareness regarding traffic. He didn’t understand what a pavement was before we moved here. But it has become much better. In the autumn when he starts [school again] (...), he will have to start walking to and from school. (...) [W]hen we go to school, I try to keep one step behind to monitor that he is in control of the traffic, at his pace. But the other day, when we came down the stairs to the park near the station gallery, there’s a cycle path that crosses, one from the left and one from the right and cyclists coming from the other side. And he is not really aware that they come from three directions. (Glen, Martin’s and Paula’s father)

Martin is cast as not only ‘clueless’ but also emotional and driven by impulses. During our walk to school one morning, Glen and I talk about Martin’s school route and when he thinks Martin can walk by himself. Glen finds this scenario to take place in ‘two-three years’ time’ and illustrates his point with an example that happened the other week, when Martin apparently opened the car door and stepped right out on the street without looking.

The impulsive child is in many ways present in traffic safety discourses, as a reason for traffic safety education among children. A very common understanding among the parents was that children lack the cognitive capacity to navigate in dense traffic environments, or to move in traffic altogether, before reaching the age of 12 years. This age number stems from a Swedish study conducted in the 1960s (Sandels [1970] 1995), which have had an enormous impact in Sweden, and remains an influence on parents’ understandings, as well as on many schools’ and authorities’ policies and recommendations concerning children and traffic to date. The impulsive child is, contrary to the mature child who learns to predict and manage unforeseen situations, instead creating
unforeseen situations by being impulsive. For example, Pernilla, mother of 11-year olds Per and Bo, hesitates of letting her sons bicycle to school, ‘it feels somewhat uneasy’ because ‘they might compete’. Something similar is brought up by Frans, father to Måns aged 11, when he speaks about his worries around Måns mobility:

It is the [road name] because it’s so busy, especially in the mornings and afternoons you notice the growing tails of cars created behind the buses and there’s no space between them. And it’s clear, if they get going, a bunch of young guys, riding their bikes and then start chasing each other and then you go right across the road. I think about this sometimes, it may not happen to him but sometimes you get caught up in things …

Here, the parents talk of their child’s potential impulsivity due to becoming caught up in competition or chases which might impede on their judgement and ability to act ‘maturely’. Public space is perceived to be composed by rational actors with predictable behaviour, implying a powerful order between bodies differentiated by age, impulsivity and maturity.

Another way in which parent’s describe their children as too emotionally affected is when the child forgets to keep in touch. Daniela speaks about how her daughter Rut gets ‘so excited’ so she forgets to let her mother know that she has arrived at her friends’ house:

I know where she is cycling. I know whether it’s to the football [practice] or home. And then I know which road they take. And if it’s to Tia’s or home, then I know about which route you [Rut] take, and roughly how long it takes too. Sometimes when she comes to this friend, they get so excited, sort of. And I always say ‘you have to get in touch immediately when you arrive’, but it’s not always that she does it. Then I’ll get in touch. (Daniela)

Even though Daniela speaks of Rut as responsible and mature, she might get so caught up in the excitement when meeting her friend that she does not hold her share of the communication agreement with her mother. Emotions can in these cases work against the perception of the child as ‘mature enough’ to be able to enjoy (more) freedom of movement. Maturity is at times seen as the opposite of emotionality and impulsivity by the parents, at times rather positioned along a continuum. This continuum can associate to other essential continuums regarding children’s mobilities: between dependence and independence, and between ‘helicopter parenting’ and ‘the engaged and enabling parent’, to which we now turn.

Self-reflexive parents: moving along the continuum of ‘helicopterering’ and being ‘engaged and enabling’

In Rosa’s case, her mother Klara admits to having a ‘mother-nervousness-thing’ about her children’s mobility, making Rosa one of the children having undergone extensive spatial training. Teresa, mother of Gustav, 8 years old, talks of herself as ‘a curling parent’ and sees no reason to stop chauffeuring her son to school and leisure activities up to ‘a rather high age’. Even if both Klara and Teresa talk of themselves as having a high degree of surveillance and control over their children’s mobility, they are very aware of how their worries and fears might impede on their children’s pathway to maturity and independence. Becoming mature and competent was hence often associated not only with the more systematic spatial training, but also with more general ideas of letting children ‘do things’ so that they become familiar with ways of handling other, similar situations. Regina finds it important that her daughter Mona can do things on her own: ‘You have to let them do things otherwise they become so very …’. Fear, as Regina suggests, should not restrict children, even though parents may feel afraid for their children’s sake. For example, although most parents (and children) mentioned that they did not have any particular rules or explicit restrictions on their children’s mobility⁹, the emphasis on and sensitivity towards the children’s own perceptions of and signals for more freedom of movement, is striking. Helena, mother of Måns, 11 years old, discusses how she struggled with herself in order to be able to let go when Måns indicated that he wanted to go to school without adult accompaniment:

You can’t force it, he chooses it. It started with him walking home alone because my parents were here and they met with him, and he walked on his own and discovered that this works really well, going on my own and what
freedom. So he started walking home by himself and then I accompanied him because it’s on my way to work so it was not strange to go with him. Then he wanted me, before we arrived at school, ‘no it’s enough’ and then I went away. And then he didn’t always wait for me so he went ahead, but it’s surely about him wanting to walk on his own.

Måns’ mother finds her son to ‘enjoy company’, but not necessarily physical accompaniment. So even though Måns has made it clear through various strategies that he does not need his mother or father to accompany him physically to school, being accompanied with the help of the mobile phone is another way of keeping close contact and avoiding the experienced boredom of walking home alone.

This balancing act of being conscious of perceived spatial and social risks in the neighbourhood while wanting, and wishing for, their children to become mature and independent is very common in the parents’ reflections on their children’s mobility. Sigrid, mother to Amy, Ina (10 years old) and Tobias (12 years old) explains:

We find it important that they are outdoors and move around10, and that they are, well, that they can manage by themselves too. So that we don’t spoil them.

Likewise, Kristina, Molly’s mother, somewhat rebelliously expresses how the public use of ‘safety’ has reached a certain point of saturation making her avoid using the word herself in relation to her daughter’s mobility:

I think there has been redundancy in the safety concept. Over a period of five-ten years almost every advertisement address this, ‘if you eat these you’re safe’, ‘if you use this detergents you can be sure to become clean’, ‘get this insurance company and you will be safe’, ‘use this sanitary pad, you will feel safe’…

Regina, Sigrid and Kristina were particular about not ‘helicoptering’ their children, since being too cautious or restricting – by elevating fears and worries – would not benefit their children’s mobility. The engaged and enabling parent is instead encouraging, sometimes even pushing for, the child’s mobility to expand in range and distance. Most parents are in this way parenting in relation to the idea that mobility is good for children, and that maturity and increased mobility are connected. This again would suggest that parents perceive expanding and increased mobility as essential for children’s development, not only in relation to public space (cf. van der Burgt and Cele 2014), but in a more general sense.

Concluding remarks

The social, spatial and cultural context shapes parents’ meaning making of their practices related to their children’s mobility and use of public space, making them ‘risk managers’ and ‘risk experts’ (cf. Beck 1992). The individualisation of risk and, more generally, of mobility in ‘the age of heightened responsibilisation’ (Zinn 2012), creates a discursive and material space for parents to become risk managers and risk experts. In this way, parents are seen to follow a cultural logic by which the shift of responsibility leaves parents with few choices. One aim in this article has been to move beyond the discourses of risk management when analysing parents meaning making around their children’s mobilities. A way of doing this is by understanding children’s ways of becoming mobile as a transitional space, constituted as a hybrid phenomenon: not only of subjects and objects but also of emotions and affects. The turn to emotions echoes the most recent theorisations on risk, where people’s trust, intuition and emotion are central in their strategies to manage risk and uncertainty in everyday life (Zinn 2016). Most parents in this study balance between what Valentine and McKendrick (1997) have termed ‘holding back’ and ‘letting go’, but agree upon the primary importance of their children’s freedom of mobility. They strive in many ways to enhance their children’s freedom of movement by using various in-between strategies of risk and uncertainty management (Zinn 2016). As I have showed, the parents talk of their own sense of their neighbourhood, most notably in their experience of the neighbourhood’s safety, thus displaying how emotions are central for their spatial relations. In addition, they remain reflexive about how their emotions may come to
matter for their children’s spatial and social relationships. Here, managing their fear and worries by locating them to the adult world as opposed to the imagined innocence of the child world could be seen as an affective strategy to protect their children. However, negative emotions related to neighbourhood stigmatisation processes of so-called problem areas (Wacquant 1999) were for many of the parents’ not rationalised or disregarded. Whereas the absence of explicit rules for their children’s mobility in general can be said to characterise this study’s parent cohort, ‘no-go’ areas and the distinction to other people and parents in these neighbourhoods were at times explicitly created in the emotional work parents carry out. In this sense, the affective practices parents use have moral implications (Holloway 1998). The close connection between what Ahmed (2004) has termed a spatial politics of fear where emotions are part of the construction of ‘the other’, and the project of nation building in relation to ‘normative layers of parenthood’ is here exposed (Lind et al. 2016, 3).

Other affective practices were at work in the parents talk as well, namely, the construction of the emotional or the mature child. The children are positioned along a continuum between emotionality and maturity, which appeared to be decisive in negotiations of their mobility. Spatial training but also personality is thought of as vital in the continuous assessment of the children’s level of maturity. The child’s management of emotions is here particularly important, as impulsivity and other emotions may become obstacles for the children’s ability to make rational decisions when moving around in public space.

The balancing act between protection and encouragement can be seen as a central aspect of contemporary normative parenting cultures (cf. Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Nansen et al. 2015) and as a self-reflexive way of doing the engaged and enabling parent (cf. Giddens 1992). Involved and intensive parenting ideals constitute an important backdrop for understanding the meaning making around their children’s mobility the parents in this study engage in. The parents are then also placing themselves along a continuum between helicoptering and being engaged and enabled. Whereas some parents embraced their over-protective approach, others refuted what they saw as an over-emphasis on safety.

Although the sample is small and the parents all have a similar socio-economic position, the findings indicate that we need to carry out more situated analyses of children’s mobilities, where notions such as ‘mobility licences’ and ‘mobility permits’ are contextualised within what Kullman (2010) has termed transitional space. Children become mobile in relation to objects and subjects in their surroundings, and children’s mobilities are enmeshed in social, collective and intergenerational relationships. I have furthermore illustrated how the parents employ various affective strategies in promoting their children’s freedom of movement, arguing that emotions need to be taken into account if we are to fully understand the intergenerational and social dimensions of children’s mobilities.

Notes

1. All the names of children and their parents are fictional to ensure anonymity. The quotes are originally in Swedish, all translations are the author’s.
2. Forsberg (2009) notes that this experience of time pressure is not statistically proven, since the data suggest that parents in Sweden in fact spend more time with their children than ever before.
3. 59 children aged between 7 and 13 years participated in the larger ethnographic project. The findings from this part of the project are under publication (Joelsson, Forthcoming).
4. The first sample generated 306 hits over four city districts, in which a letter of request to participate in the study was sent out by mail during the autumn to all the children in the sample via their parents/guardians. A second sample was drawn from SPAR, generating 951 hits with the same selection criteria. In this sample, 200 children were randomly chosen, and a letter of request was sent to them by mail. In addition to the research participants responding to the request letter, three children from two families were recruited through personal contacts.
5. Sometimes the children had been interviewed separately just beforehand and stayed for the parents’ interviews; sometimes the child was interviewed together with the parent(s).
6. In Sweden, since the early 1990s, households have been responsible for choosing where their children attend school. Prior to the school choice system, children were placed in schools by the proximity principle, i.e. the
Research indicates that socio-economic and ethnic segregation has increased due to the school choice system (Ambrose 2016).

7. The names of the city districts have been anonymised.
8. One research task with the children was to accompany the child to or from school. During the walk to school with Martin, Glen was present.
9. It appears as the absence of rules in relation to mobility is uncommon in an international perspective, see Shaw 2015 for an international comparison on these matters.
10. The Swedish phrase ‘röra på sig’ does not only translate to ‘move around’ as in moving geographically but also have a strong emphasis on being physically active, which is important here.

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