

## WHAT DO PARENTS LOOK FOR WHEN PURCHASING SCHOOL SHOES?

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### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the footwear worn to school by children in Australia was dictated by school uniform codes and footwear policies that were strictly enforced in many schools. As such, school children typically wore a low-heeled, rigid, lace-up shoe with a leather upper, most commonly black or brown, similar to an Oxford shoe (Rossi, 2000). However, over the last decade, many schools have relaxed their uniform and footwear policies, such that a wide variety of footwear is typically worn to school by Australian children as their principal daily footwear, including the more traditional leather shoes, athletic footwear, as well as “fashion shoes” including features such as high heels. Current school shoe selection also appears to be dominated in many cases by recreational footwear fashion trends whereby basketball shoes, skate shoes and the like are proving to be a popular alternative to traditional leather footwear.

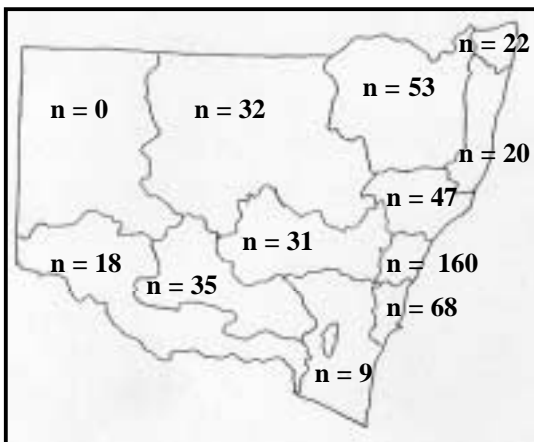
Due to this change in the types of shoes being worn by children to school, school administrative staff and parents are now beginning to question what should constitute a school shoe. For example, in terms of their duty of care to children while attending school (i.e. occupational health and safety considerations) which shoe features are necessary to protect children’s feet from the diverse range of tasks they experience both inside the classroom and in the playground? Apart from safety concerns, which shoe features are required to enable the shoes to serve the diverse functional needs of children during a typical school week?

Children in Australia typically attend school approximately 6 hours each day for 5 days per week, 40 weeks per year (NSW Dept of Education and Training, 2003). Therefore, the footwear selected as their principal daily school shoe has the ability to greatly influence the loads sustained by these children, particularly during their formative growing years. Despite the importance of appropriate school footwear selection, only limited research or reports have been published pertaining to what constitutes an appropriate school shoe upon which to guide schools and parents when formulating school footwear policies (Australian Podiatry Association QLD Inc, 2003). Before any such intensive laboratory-based research pertaining to school shoes can be conducted it is imperative to better understand the current school shoe wearing habits of children and factors that influence parents when purchasing these shoes for their children. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to investigate factors parents considered important when buying footwear for their children.

### METHODS

A 36-question survey, validated using focus groups, was designed to determine what factors parents consider important when they purchase shoes for their children. The first 12 questions sought information pertaining to demographic, anthropometric, and foot fit and pathology details of the parents and their children (e.g. age, gender, shoe size, diagnosed foot problems). The next 12 questions focussed on characteristics of the children’s principal daily school shoes whereas the final 12 questions examined characteristics of these children’s athletic footwear. Only those questions relevant to children’s principal daily school shoes will be discussed in this paper.

Subjects for the survey (n = 495 children and their parents) were recruited from one independent and 26 government primary schools in New South Wales, Australia who consented to participate in the study. New South Wales was selected as the target state as it has the largest population in Australia and encompasses a wide variety of socio-economic and geographical locations (eg. coastal, rural, inner city, and suburban) and a variety of climatic zones. To identify potential schools, New South Wales was divided into areas according to the 1996 Australian Census (ABS, 2001; see Figure 1) and the amount of children in these areas was then determined based on Census information to provide sufficient subjects, where possible, from each region.

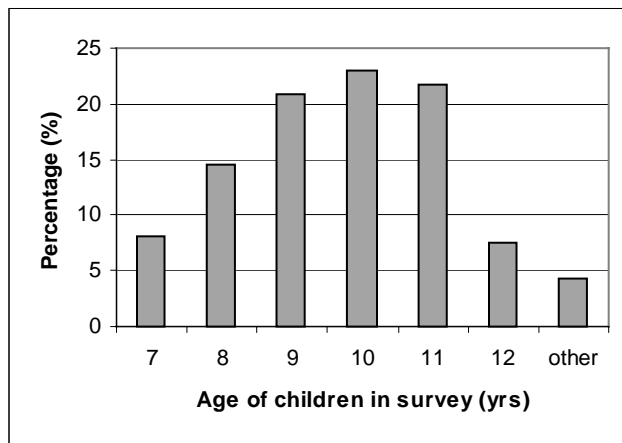


**Figure 1.** Map of New South Wales divided into Census regions with the number of children sampled in each region.

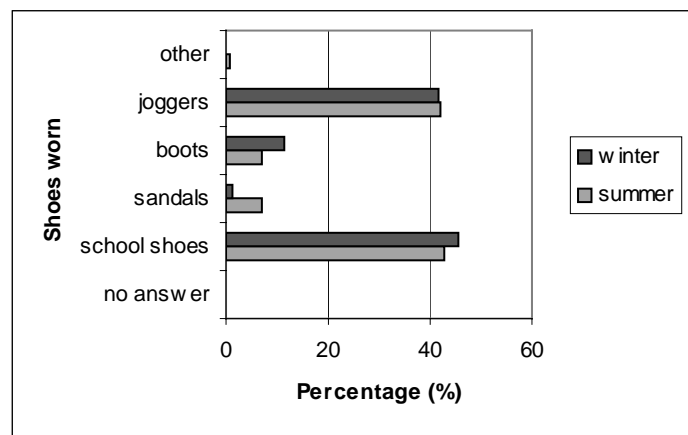
The coded anonymous surveys were completed by the consenting parents and returned for analysis via their children’s schools. Data from each survey was coded, tabulated and frequencies analysed for each question. Chi-square analyses were then applied to the data to determine which factors significantly differed with respect to the other responses for a given question.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The age distribution of the children whose parents participated in the survey is depicted in Figure 2. This distribution reflects the age range of Australian children attending primary school (Years 3 – 6) who consented to participate in the study.



**Figure 2.** Age distribution of children partaking in the survey.



**Figure 3.** The footwear worn to school in the summer and winter seasons.

The principal daily footwear worn by children to school was characterised predominantly by a lace-up shoe (77%) with a leather upper (73%) and purchased from a specialist shoe store (72%). Shoe type tended to be season-dependant with more children wearing sandals to school in the summer months (see Figure 3), although footwear policies did not permit the wearing of sandals to school in many schools due to safety concerns. The high percentage of athletic footwear worn to school (Summer: 42%; Winter 41%) may be overestimated as some parents provided multiple answers for their child's principal daily footwear and may have included the shoes their child wore for sport days as well. This became evident when data pertaining to school shoe brand was analysed; only 8.8% of respondents listed an athletic sports shoe brand as the primary shoe worn to school by their children.

A major finding from the survey was that parents considered fit and comfort as the most important factors when purchasing school shoes for their children whereas fashion and brand were the least important. Nearly half of the respondents (41.6%) noted that they had to replace their children's school shoes by half way through the school year. This was due to a combination of factors, including the children's feet outgrowing the size shoe their parents had purchased and, of concern, because the shoes had worn out, particularly around the toe box and sole. Many parents commented that the toe region of their children's school shoes were not strong enough to withstand the vigorous activities that their children partook in during a school day, especially children involved in ball games that involved kicking.

Interestingly, 60% of respondents noted that there were restrictions placed on the footwear worn to school by their children, whereby most of these restrictions related to shoe colour (60%) or safety concerns (i.e. the need for a closed shoe (26%)). No restrictions addressed any functional requirements. Features that parents would like included in the ideal school shoe varied substantially but, apart from fit and comfort, mainly focussed on durability characteristics rather than functional performance that may assist to attenuate the loads experienced by growing children while performing daily school activities.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study have given insight into important factors parents consider when purchasing shoes for their children especially school shoes. It would appear that, although factors such as fit, comfort and foot safety features are important consideration when parents purchase shoes and schools formulate footwear policies, minimal consideration is given to how school shoe characteristics may influence the loads imposed on children when performing activities during a typical school day. Therefore more research is urgently warranted to investigate the functional characteristics required by children in their school footwear.

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