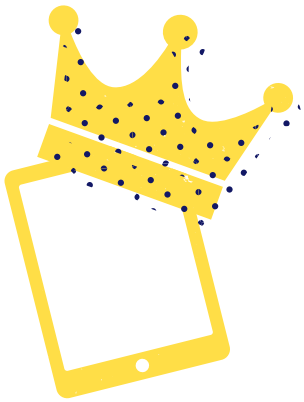
PROCHAIN ARRÊT

THE FORESIGHT SERIES BY KEOLIS



Lord of the Screens

When children no longer travel on their own

A shrinking radius of independence

An ADEME study published in September 2025, conducted among 5,500 parents (5,000 in mainland France, 500 in the overseas territories), paints an accurate picture of a quiet transformation: the average age at which a French child first travels on their own is now 11.6, compared with 10.6 in the previous generation. One year of regression in a single generation. In practice, French children now begin going to school on their own at the start of secondary school, in Year 7, rather than in Year 6 as used to be the case for their parents. Nine children in ten live in a household with a personal vehicle; seven parents in ten continue their journey onwards to another activity after dropping the child at school. Only one child in three owns a public transport pass. Girls, at the same age, are granted less independence than boys — a pattern that the parents surveyed explicitly attribute to fear of assault.

The phenomenon has long been documented by international research. The foundational study by Mayer Hillman, John Adams, and John Whitelegg, One False Move (Policy Studies Institute, London, 1990), measured a collapse in children's independent mobility in the United Kingdom between 1971 and 1990: the proportion of 7 to 8-year-olds allowed to travel to school on their own fell from 80% to 9% in less than twenty years. Subsequent research in Germany (Fyhri et al., 2011), Italy (Prezza et al., 2001), and France (Olm, Chauffaut & David, 2005; Granié, Torres & Huguenin-Richard, 2016; Forum Vies Mobiles, 2024) has confirmed a convergent trajectory across wealthy countries. First experiences of independent pedestrian mobility now emerge at secondary school entry rather than in primary school.

Three families of causes

The first cause cited by parents is fear. The ADEME study shows that 90% of them worry about the behaviour of motorists, and a very significant proportion cite the fear of dangerous encounters as a central reason. The statistical paradox is well known: accidents involving child pedestrians are falling, but this decline is largely attributable to the fact that children are no longer walking in the street unaccompanied. As the association Rue de l'avenir puts it, the reduction in accidents reflects less an improvement in safety than a withdrawal of children from public space. The perception of risk, meanwhile, is not falling — it is self-reinforcing: the less visible children are outdoors, the more hostile the street appears, and the more they are kept away from it.

The second cause is urban and automotive. Mass car ownership, dependence on the car for the "school–shopping–work–home" chain, residential sprawl, and the functional separation of neighbourhoods have mechanically lengthened distances and made solo journeys rarer. Walking school buses, piloted in several French cities since the 2000s, are a partial response that struggles to spread because it requires the coordination of volunteer adults available at fixed times.

The third cause is the screen. Here, the figures speak for

KEOSCOPIE
DESIGNING TOMORROW'S MOBILITY

themselves. According to the Esteban study by Santé publique France (2014–2016, still used as the reference in official reports), six to 17-year-olds spend on average 4 hours 11 minutes per day in front of a screen outside school time. The report by the expert commission Enfants et écrans : à la recherche du temps perdu (April 2024, submitted to the President of the Republic) provides more details: 4 hours 48 minutes per day for 11 to 14-year-olds, rising to 5 hours 10 minutes for 16 to 19-year-olds. The Elfe cohort of Inserm and Ined, which follows children who were born in 2011, measures screen time from the earliest age: 56 minutes per day at age two, 1 hour 20 minutes at three and a half, 1 hour 34 minutes at five and a half. The Enabee study by Santé publique France (2022, first results 2025) confirms that virtually all children aged three to 11 are exposed daily to at least one type of screen. The screen does not mechanically cause immobility, but it offers a powerful substitute: a child who has a whole world in their bedroom no longer has the physical need to go outside to meet friends, play or explore.

Cascading consequences

The retreat of children's independence produces a cascade of interlocking effects. On the health front, sedentary behaviour increases, physical fitness declines, and excess weight progresses, as shown by successive Esteban and INCA surveys. On the cognitive and developmental front, several studies suggest that spatial learning — the ability to mentally map a journey, estimate a distance, anticipate a route — is built through practice: a child who has never walked to school on their own will not have developed the same mental representation of their neighbourhood as a child who has done so every day for five years. On the social front, independence is also about learning to interact with others: crossing paths with people, saying hello, becoming known to local shopkeepers, knowing how to ask for directions. On the psychological front, several international bodies of work, including that of American psychologist Peter Gray and the analyses of Forum Vies Mobiles, argue that the withdrawal of children from public space contributes to the rise in anxiety disorders that has been observed among adolescents since the 2010s — a fear of the world, which has taken root over time, becomes fear in their own minds.

For transport operators, the consequences are both operational and strategic. School transport, already in demographic decline (smaller cohorts of children) and economic decline (rising costs, driver shortages), is losing one of its implicit foundations: parental trust that their child can use it on their own. With this much parental input, the journey naturally becomes confined to the private car. More fundamentally, the public network is losing a cohort of learners: a child who has never taken a bus on their own at age 11 will be far less likely to do so at 25. Habits are formed either in childhood or never. This is a strategic issue for Keolis, and an under-discussed one.

Looking ahead to 2044: the encapsulated child

By 2044, if the trends detected by ADEME and Santé publique France continue, the median age at which a child first travels independently will be around 13. Children in their final year of primary school will barely go anywhere on their own at all. There will be more private services: on-demand school taxis (already emerging in some cities), shared parental shuttles, companion robots that provide a physical link between the front door of the building and the school gate without ever leaving the child to manage for themself. Screen time will continue to rise: a conservative estimate projection, extrapolating from Esteban and the citizens' convention curves, is of five and a half hours to six and a half hours per day for 11 to 19-year-olds in 2044 — equivalent to a full working day.

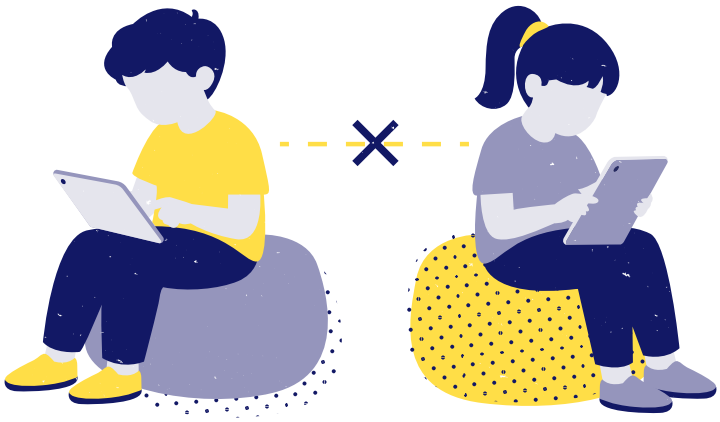
Three systemic effects can be anticipated. First, a sociological bifurcation: educated, urban families will invest heavily in the "return to independence" (outdoor Montessori schools, street schools, nature holidays, Forest School programmes), while children from working-class backgrounds will remain, by default, glued to their screens for lack of the resources to organise anything else. The fracture in children's independence will layer on top of existing social fractures. Second, a transformation of school transport, which will shift from a mass public service towards a hybrid service combining a residual collective offer with individualised premium options. Third, a delayed effect on adult use of public transport: the 2030–2040 generations, raised on transport-screen-cocoon travel, will be more sensitive to quality and perceived safety, and far more likely to defect to individual alternatives (autonomous pods, ride-hailing) than their elders.

The story

An encounter at Mudchute
London, Isle of Dogs, May 2044

Ralph was ten and had never left the apartment block on his own. This was an unremarkable fact in his Year 6 class at Pier Street Primary School: none of his twenty-three classmates, to his knowledge, was allowed outside to go anywhere, even for the shortest amount of time, on their own. Allowed. That was the word they used among themselves at breaktime. Amelia was 'allowed' to go to the bakery on Manchester Road, but only with her big sister. Idris was 'allowed' to wait for his mother downstairs for five minutes, but only inside the glazed entrance hall, under the eye of the concierge's camera.

Ralph's mother, Helena Brookes, had been working from home since 2031 as a portfolio manager for a Scottish energy cooperative. She would walk Ralph to school every morning — seven minutes along Westferry Road, two junctions, a notoriously dangerous pedestrian crossing at Hesperus Crescent — then return upstairs to work. At 3.30, she would go back down to pick him up. She would logically have saved herself some time if she had been able to let Ralph go on his own, but the question had never seriously arisen. Helena had started going to school on her own at nine, in a village in Kent in 2003; she did not envisage the same for her son in the middle of the Isle of Dogs in 2044. Something, in the intervening forty years, had changed in a way she would have struggled to put into words.



The block Ralph lived in had sixty-four flats spread across eight floors. It housed, without anyone having ever kept a record, twenty-eight children under twelve. Ralph would cross paths with four or five of them in the hall on lucky days, as they were being dropped off of picked up by their parents. He had never once invited any of them over without a formal arrangement made a week in advance between their mothers. And yet, at ten years of age, Ralph did have three close friends.

These friends lived on the Forest Lords server, an online game created in 2038 by a Finnish studio that by 2044 had nine million European players between the ages of eight and 14. Forest Lords was built around a persistent universe: a magical forest where players took on the roles of clan leaders, built cabins, negotiated alliance and repelled invasions. Ralph had been playing in the same guild — the Bluetits — for eighteen months with Jack, Henry, and Simon. They connected every day from 5.00 to 7.00, and on Wednesday afternoons. Jack was their undisputed leader: at ten, he had built the guild's third-tallest tower, negotiated an alliance with a Polish guild, and held a four-hour siege without sleeping. Henry was the intellectual: he knew the statistics of every spell, optimised builds, and wore round glasses in real life, judging by his profile picture. Simon said little, but always saw attacks coming before the others did; the others had nicknamed him "the sentinel".

On Tuesday 14 May 2044, at 5.03, Ralph logged in as usual. Jack was already there. Henry too. Simon, strangely, was nowhere to be seen. At 5.22, on the voice chat, Jack surprised everyone: "You know what? I've seen Simon." Henry asked: "In real life?" Jack: "Yeah, in real life. Yesterday at Asda on the Isle of Dogs with his mum. I recognised his voice. He lives near me." Henry: "Did you go up to him?" Jack: "No. I didn't want to. And his mum was there, anyway." A long silence, broken by Henry: "So where do you live then?" Jack: "Mudchute. East Ferry Road." Ralph removed his headphones for three seconds, then replaced them. His own street. He found his voice. "Me too. Number eighty-eight." Henry: "Me too, ninety-two."

All four of them lived on the same road, barely a hundred metres apart. They had never met in person.

The discussion that followed lasted ten minutes. Four ten-year-old boys who had fought and formed alliances for hundreds of hours in a virtual Finnish forest were discovering that they shared a pavement and the same DLR train. Henry, true to his methodical nature, suggested that they meet the following Wednesday 15 May at 2.00 in Sir John McDougall Gardens bordering the Thames on the western edge of the Isle of Dogs, halfway between their buildings. Jack said yes immediately. Simon, who had just joined the call, accepted too. Ralph hesitated.

He went to find his mother in the sitting room and said: "Mum, can I go to McDougall Gardens tomorrow at two o'clock?" Helena, without looking up from her screen, said: "Who with?" Ralph: "With friends from my Lords game who live down the road." Helena looked up. "Have you ever met them in real life?" Ralph shook his head. Helena paused ten seconds. "I'll come with you. I'll sit on a bench nearby." Ralph was torn between relief and disappointment. He went back to his room, opened the weather app, confirmed that the next day would be fine, and spent five minutes staring at the lit screen without moving.

On Wednesday 15 May at 1.50 pm Helena and Ralph came downstairs from their flat. The walk to Sir John McDougall Gardens was four hundred and twenty metres: Ralph had calculated it on his screen before leaving, because he found it unbelievable that he had lived for ten years just a stone's throw away from his three friends without knowing it. The route took them past Mudchute DLR station, which he used twice a week on his way to seeing his grandmother in Greenwich, always with his mother. The DLR glided silently overhead, automatic, driverless ever since it opened in 1987 — half a century before Ralph was born. His mother walked beside him in silence. At the park, two boys had already arrived. The taller one was wearing a Forest Lords T-shirt (limited edition, a paid accessory costing four pounds): that was Jack. The second, shorter, with round glasses: Henry. Simon arrived three minutes later with his father in tow.

They studied one another other. They said hello. And then they had no idea what to do.

In the Finnish forest, they knew everything: who led, who followed, who went ahead to scout, who negotiated, who defended. In the park on the Isle of Dogs, they knew nothing. Jack tried to recount a recent attack; Simon replied in monosyllabic terms; Henry took out his phone to show a screenshot; Ralph stared at the ground. Silence descended upon the group. A woman passed them, walking her dog. A Deliveroo delivery cyclist swerved around them. Helena and Simon's father exchanged an amused look from their bench, ten metres away. In the distance, the Thames glimmered in the sunshine. In the distance, on the far bank, the rooftops of the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich could be made out.

After twelve minutes — Ralph had counted them, because he no longer knew what else to do but count — Jack suggested: "Shall we log on again tonight at five?" Everyone nodded with visible relief. They stood up. They shook hands awkwardly. They split up and each headed back to their apartment blocks. Helena and Ralph walked back up East Ferry Road in silence. As they passed Mudchute station, a DLR train was departing southbound towards Island Gardens, gleaming and lightly loaded at that hour of the afternoon.

That evening, at 5.02, all four of them were back in the magical forest. Jack was first to attack a Polish guild and lost two soldiers. Simon spotted an ambush. Henry recalculated the statistics. Ralph held his position. They were the best friends in the world again. They never mentioned Sir John McDougall Gardens again. Three months later, when Jack moved away to Edinburgh, they continued to log on every day at five, as if nothing had changed. And indeed, nothing had.

Three forward-looking scenarios

WHITE SCENARIO

Gradual recapture

In the optimistic scenario, the 2030s are a decade of national public policy for children's independence. The calming of urban speeds (widespread 30 km/h limits, more school playgrounds on streets, motor vehicle bans around schools, new traffic management schemes) makes walking safer and more pleasant. Schools integrate sequences of "guided mobility" from Year 1, then "independent mobility" from Year 3. Walking school buses become a publicly funded service, organised by the public transport authority with adult supervisors paid for the role. Operators such as Keolis adapt their school transport offering: youth fares, dedicated routes, in-school training in how to use the bus, tram or automatic metro. Average screen time, without mechanically decreasing, ceases to grow. At age 11, nine children in ten once again make their first journey on public transport on their own — as their grandparents did in 1995.

GREY SCENARIO

The drop-off service market

In the intermediate trajectory, the average age of children's first unaccompanied journeys continues to creep upwards, towards 12.5 years. The public mobility service for young people does not collapse but contracts in less densely populated areas. In its place, a drop-off service market takes off: private on-demand school transport companies, shared parental shuttle subscriptions, companion robots marketed by start-ups ("Walk-with-me", "AI Buddy"), continuous video monitoring services along routes, GPS tracking applications. Public and private operators coexist. Children have never been more monitored, nor less independent. Inequalities widen: affluent families pay for personal premium services (to get to activities), while more modest families revert to screen time for want of being able to organise anything else. The issue is no longer treated as a societal challenge but as a growing market.

BLACK SCENARIO

The encapsulated generation

In the pessimistic scenario, children's independence collapses. By 2044, the median age of first independent travel reaches 14 in major cities, and 15 in some residential suburbs. Collective school transport loses 40 to 60% of its ridership over fifteen years. Operators cease to run certain school routes for lack of passengers. An entire generation of children has never crossed a road on their own, never taken a bus on their own, never asked a stranger for directions. As young adults, they invest massively in autonomous pods and ride-hailing, which offer the 'cocoon mobility' they have been accustomed to since childhood, and durably desert collective transport. Anxiety disorders surge in this cohort; diagnoses of agoraphobia and panic disorders rise significantly between the ages of 18 and 30. The public network becomes a service for the oldest and the poorest; it loses its historic universality. With hindsight, the moment a society gave up teaching its children to travel on their own was the moment it relinquished a great many other things.

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