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Responsibility at a distance: parents' accounts of their children's unaccompanied travelling

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ABSTRACT

Young children's movement in public places outside adult supervision tends to be regarded as problematic and may be met with scepticism. This study builds on interviews with parents in Norway whose children (age 5–11) have travelled by public transport without an adult caregiver. Using a discursive approach, the focus is on parenting and how parents account for their children's travelling. The analysis examines the discursive resources parents use to build credible accounts and thereby manage issues of facticity as well as expectations of parental responsibility. By accounting for how they work to ensure that their children can cope with the journeys, the parents position themselves as responsible also while they are physically distant from their children. The study contributes knowledge on the relation between parents, children and their mobility in public space through an investigation of the discursive construction of children's unaccompanied travelling and responsible parenting.

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Introduction

When interviewed about her child's unaccompanied travelling, one mother talked about how her colleagues reacted to her decision to send her child alone on an aeroplane to visit a relative. She explained that 'one of them thought it was shocking that I would send off a 5-year-old, that I dared to do that'. The mother went on to describe how she felt she had to explain and justify her choice as a parent. This illustrates some of the controversy that pervades discourse on parenting, children and their movement in public space. While young people are expected to learn how to move around without caregivers at some point, there is uncertainty and disagreement relating to when it can be considered 'appropriate' to let a child out of sight and out of reach in public environments. Parents who let young children travel on public transport without a known adult might, therefore, be expected to account for this decision. So how do they reason and argue that this is something their children can handle?

The present study, exploring parents' accounts of their children's unaccompanied travelling, is based on interviews conducted in Norway with parents whose preadolescent children have travelled without an adult caregiver by aeroplane, train or bus. Taking a discursive approach (Potter 1996; Edwards 1996), the study investigates how parents construct accounts for the journeys. The analytical focus is on both the *hows* and the *whats* of the interview talk (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Nikander 2012), which here means focusing on the discursive resources parents use to build

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credible accounts and how the relation between parents, children and their movement in public places is constituted in their accounts.

Parenting and children's movement in public space

Literature on children's mobility and use of public space has shed light on cultural tensions relating to where, when, how and with whom children should and should not move (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Murray and Cortés-Morales 2019; Christensen and Cortés-Morales 2017). Studies have shown that in Western countries, including Norway, chauffeuring and accompanying children has become increasingly common, while their opportunity to move around without adults, often referred to as 'children's independent mobility', seems to be declining (Marzi and Reimers 2018; Bates and Stone 2015; Fyhri et al. 2011). This has been treated as a worrying trend as moving around without adults has been linked to children's physical health and development of skills and autonomy (Malone 2007). As parents are seen as holding the 'licences' for children's mobility (Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg 1990), one concern has been to understand why parents restrict their children's movements. However, the main focus has been on the shift from 'active' modes of transport, such as walking or cycling, to chauffeuring by private car, while less attention has been paid to the use of public transport (Goodman et al. 2014).

Studies of parenting and children's mobility have found that worries about strangers, traffic and other 'risks' in public places are common reasons for restricting children's movements outside adult supervision (Murray 2009; Valentine 1997; Francis et al. 2017). A conception of children as emotionally priceless (Zelizer 1985), vulnerable and less competent renders them dependent on adult caregivers to move around safely in public environments (Valentine 2004). Consequently, there is a strong social expectation that parents monitor children to protect them from harm (Pynn et al. 2019; Malone 2007). However, studies have also shown that such expectations may conflict with other ideals, such as the notion that spatial freedom is key to a 'good' childhood and children's development (Rixon, Lomax, and O'Dell 2019; Jenkins 2006). Thus, when making decisions about where and how children move, parents have been found to engage in a balancing act between protecting their children and enabling them to move on their own (Visser 2020; Joelson 2019; Clemensen 2020).

While much attention has been paid to adult restrictions on children's mobility, some studies have looked into the ways in which children still move around unaccompanied by adult caregivers. Norms and practices around children's mobility may vary between countries (Shaw et al. 2015; Fyhri et al. 2011) and between social class and gender (Barker 2011; Karsten 2015). Research from the Nordic countries has shown that children make their way to school through urban public environments (Kullman 2010) and commute between parents living separately (Winther 2015). Kullman (2010) found that parents supported their children's experimentation with being in public environments, allowing them to gradually develop skills to move on their own. Farstad and Aarsand (2021) showed how adults guided children in developing travel competence in situated activities at the start of unaccompanied journeys on public transport. These studies show that despite the trend towards escorting and accompanying children, there is substantial variation in how children move around in their everyday lives. Furthermore, they show that parents do not only set spatial boundaries for their children, but also prepare them for moving on their own. The collaborations involved in such journeys indicate that children's unaccompanied mobility may perhaps be better understood in terms of interdependence rather than independence (Nansen et al. 2015; Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). However, less is known about how parents legitimise young children's movements in public space.

In the present study, parenting practices relating to children's mobility are considered as linked to broader cultural notions of what constitutes 'good' and responsible parenting. The parent-child relation is regarded as an asymmetrical relation in which children have certain needs and rights, and parents have a moral and legal responsibility to provide for these (Ramaekers and Suissa 2012;

Gillies 2008). Parental responsibilities involve taking actions that will lead to a desirable outcome, such as a child that is happy, well-adjusted and emotionally stable. To ensure this, parents are expected to know what they are doing, for instance by seeking out expert advice on good childrearing practices (Aarsand 2014; Assarsson and Aarsand 2011; Ramaekers and Suissa 2012). Thus, when parents engage in practices that diverge from what is considered ordinary, they may be expected to justify them.

In this article, the explanatory, argumentative and constructive aspects of parents' talk are in focus. While previous studies have addressed why parents restrict their children's movement, the present study rather explores parents' talk about why they let their children travel on their own. Here, the explanations, reasons and arguments that parents provide are understood as situated accounts produced in a particular interactional context to perform social actions.

Accounts and stance taking

Accounts are explanatory forms of talk used in conversation to explain how something is or came to be, or to justify or excuse actions (Antaki 1994; Potter 1996). When people are asked about *why* or *how* they did or did not do something, the answer is typically an account. However, accounts can also address implied questions whereby a participant in a conversation replies to a heard problematisation of their actions or position on an issue (Antaki 1994). Such explanatory forms of talk are frequently produced in interviews (De Fina 2009) as research participants are invited to talk about their own actions, experiences, assessments, thoughts and so on.

Accounts often comprise descriptions of people, events and places. Descriptions are neither neutral nor objective as there are always multiple ways of describing something. When describing events, people attend to norms and expectations and their own responsibility in the events, and select one version of what happened (Edwards 1996). Thus, descriptions do not simply mirror the world but rather construct versions of it while simultaneously countering potential alternative versions. In this sense, accounts have both an action orientation and an epistemological orientation (Potter 1996); they are social actions produced in response to the demands of the situation to accomplish some interactional work, and at the same time construct versions of reality. When parents talk about their children's journeys, they are thus not just reporting events, but rather managing social expectations of parenting and 'actively shaping the social world' (Abell, Stokoe, and Billig 2003, 181).

A main concern when producing accounts is that they are treated as factual and plausible (Abell, Stokoe, and Billig 2003). To ensure this, speakers work to construct *out-there-ness* (Potter 1996); presenting descriptions as referring to something being 'objectively' out there, independently of the person who is describing it, by employing various discursive resources. In the present study, the focus is on how parents use footing and stance taking as resources in building credible accounts.

An important aspect of managing facticity concerns the relation between what is being said and who is saying it. Goffman (1981) uses the notion of *footing* to describe how interlocutors can shift between different positions other than simply 'speaker' and 'hearer' to take varying degrees of responsibility for the talk produced. In the present study, the concept of footing is used to show how parents manage accountability for what is being said by shifting between such positions as an individual parent and a generalised parent, and how they use reported speech to animate the characters in their accounts. For instance, when narrating past events, participants may re-enact parts of a dialogue to demonstrate what they or others did or typically do, thereby building the facticity of an account by providing evidence of what 'really' happened (Holt 2000).

To investigate how accounts are built in interaction the concept of *stance taking* is useful. Participants use this to position themselves and others in relation to objects, or to assign value to objects (Du Bois 2007). Through *evaluative* stances, participants evaluate objects, events or actions as good or bad, easy or difficult and so on. Taking *epistemic* stances involves positioning oneself and others as knowing or unknowing in relation to an epistemic domain, for instance through claims

about knowing something (Heritage 2012; Du Bois 2007). Furthermore, participants *align* with each other's stances through agreeing or disagreeing with what the other has said, thereby calibrating the relationship between stances and stance takers. Stance taking thus emerges dialogically (Kärkkäinen 2006) and is guided by norms for social interaction, for instance concerning who has the right to know more or less about something in a specific situation (Stivers, Mondada, and Steensig 2011). For example, when talking about their own children, parents may assert *epistemic primacy*, that is, the relative access and right to know more about their children.

The concepts of footing and stance taking are used in this study to investigate how in their accounts the parents construct versions of reality in which the journeys become manageable for the children. How do parents use such discursive resources to construct out-there-ness? What constructions of children, parenting and movement in public places – and the relation between them – are constituted in the accounts?

Data and methodology

This article builds on data from a study of children's unaccompanied travel. All in all, seven children and nine parents from five different families were the participants in focus, while other family members, friends and public transport staff participated in parts of the research. All participants have given their informed consent and the project has been approved by the Norwegian centre for research data (NSD). The families, recruited through social media, schools and other organisations, were chosen because they had one or more children between 5 and 11 years of age who had travelled by any mode of public transport, such as bus, train or aeroplane,¹ without the presence of an adult caregiver. All the families lived in urban areas with relatively good access to public transport systems, and based on the parents' levels of education could be described as middle class. Apart from this, there was variation in terms of how and where they lived and the circumstances of the children's travelling. The children either travelled shorter distances daily, longer distances less frequently, or both. The journeys thus varied from local bus trips of about 30 min to go to school, to long-distance travelling by aeroplane or train to visit relatives on school holidays. From 5 years of age, children are formally allowed to travel by aeroplane as 'unaccompanied minors', receiving special assistance from airline personnel for an extra fee. For other modes of transport, it is largely up to parents to evaluate whether their children can handle the journeys, and children are not always guaranteed special treatment.

Various methods were used to gain insight into different aspects of children's travelling, including video observations prior to journeys and interviews with children. However, the present study specifically focuses on data from interviews with the children's parents. All but one of the interviews were conducted with two parents present, and each interview lasted for approximately 1 h. The interview guide centred around broad themes such as practices, experiences and assessments with regard to their children's travelling. The interviews were video recorded, which allowed for detailed analyses of not only verbal utterances but also visible conduct. In processing the data, the interviews were first roughly transcribed and then organised according to emerging patterns of talk. In the present article, the focus is on ways of reasoning and arguing that legitimise the journeys. The excerpts presented here were chosen to illustrate reasoning patterns recurring in the data. These have been transcribed in detail using a modified version of conventions within conversation analysis (Jefferson 2004), first in the original language (Norwegian) and then translated into English. The transcription symbols used here are explained in the [appendix](#). All personal and place names are pseudonyms with the exception of the interviewer's name.

The interviews were analysed as social interactions which involved attending to the local organisation of talk as well as the cultural knowledge and meaning-making it constitutes (Nikander 2012). Even though interviews are staged interactions that differ from everyday conversations, they can be analysed as talk-in-interaction much in the same manner as naturally occurring interactions (Aarsand and Aarsand 2014; Nikander 2012). The data are treated as being co-produced by

all the participants, including the interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Rapley 2001). By asking questions, the interviewer makes relevant and problematises aspects of the children's journeys and thereby initiates and shapes the accounts the parents give. To show what the interviewees' talk orients to, the interactional context of the excerpts is described, including questions asked by the interviewer and what was talked about immediately before.

Parents' accounts of children's unaccompanied journeys

How do parents build credible accounts of their children's journeys without adult caregivers? Broadly speaking, the parents described their children's travelling as good solutions to a range of concerns, such as maintaining relations with relatives living far away, avoiding car dependency and granting children more spatial freedom and the opportunity to develop and test skills. At the same time, the parents oriented to this practice as somewhat out of the ordinary, and some described varying degrees of scepticism from other adults. The possibility that allowing one's child to travel without an adult could be construed as problematic can be understood to underpin how parents explain and reason about the journeys and their own practices. Below, excerpts from three interviews are presented to illustrate patterns of accounting for the journeys that recurred across differences in the age of the children and the type of trip. I have labelled these patterns (1) the capable child, (2) preparatory practices and (3) supportive arrangements.

The capable child

Recurring in the interview data were sequences in which parents made descriptions of their children, for instance by characterising them as independent, responsible, confident and proper. This could involve stories about how their children would typically act in different situations or contrasting their own children with other children who would easily become anxious or distracted. In the following, such a manner of reasoning is illustrated in an excerpt in which two parents account for their child as being the type of child who is capable of travelling without the presence of an adult caregiver, thereby legitimising such a practice.

Excerpt 1 is from an interview with Lena and Martin, whose son Peter (11) had been travelling unaccompanied in flights since he was about 7 years old. Peter would normally travel on school holidays to visit relatives. Prior to the excerpt presented here, the interviewer (Ida) has asked whether Martin and Lena could remember if they made any preparations ahead of the first journey. In posing this question, the interviewer suggests that this might be expected of parents in such a situation. Martin replies that they tried to create some predictability, but not much else, before Lena takes over and starts accounting for what they had done before the journeys. Note that in the following excerpt the word *jo* is kept in the original language (Norwegian) as there is no English equivalent. *Jo* is an adverb used in the Scandinavian languages to stress the epistemic status of an utterance (Borthen 2018), typically to appeal to shared knowledge (Heinemann, Lindström, and Steensig 2011). Here it can be understood to mark what is being said as something that is self-evident.

Excerpt 1: Lena and Martin on preparations

1	Lena	And then I think we:: sort of (.) without remembering it specifically but I (.) would think that we at least were a bit
2		like u:h paid attention to (.) whether he (0.7) expressed something
3		(1.0)
4		questions or something like that
5	Ida	Mm
6	Lena	Uncertainty around anything (0.5) because n:: i:t (.) I can imagine that it was like if we (.) would try to talk about it
7		then (.) 'oh' ((shakes head, gestures)) he doesn't wonder about anything or
8	Ida	No

- 9 Lena ((looks at Martin))
 10 Because I can't remember that he's [asked questions about anything
 11 Martin [No he doesn't ask any questions no
 12 Lena Like that: ((shakes head))
 13 Ida No
 14 Lena Uh: because I (.) we have *jo* =
 15 Martin =Don't problematise it [or anything like that
 16 Lena [No
 17 Ida No
 18 Lena Because I think about like if he suddenly has to go to the toilet on the plane and so on something like that we
 19 haven't gone through
 20 Ida No
 21 Lena But then I reckon that then he'll go jo to the toilet
 22 Martin Yes
 23 Ida Yes (0.5) mm
 24 Lena And if he's wondering about anything then he'll ask jo someone
 25 Ida Yes he he
 26 Martin Mm he he mm
 27 Lena Ehe so that we haven't sort of gone through
 28 Martin [Mm
 29 Ida [No
 30 Lena: Because he is the type that he is

Lena begins her account by taking an epistemic stance that she and Martin paid attention to whether Peter expressed questions or concerns about the upcoming journey (lines 1–). Using the epistemic marker 'I think' (Kärkkäinen 2006), Lena downgrades her commitment so she does not claim that it happened exactly like this, but rather that paying attention to what Peter expresses is something they would typically do. This serves to establish herself and Martin as attentive parents able to read their child's expressions. Lena goes on to state that she can imagine a scenario where she and Martin would try to talk about the journey with Peter, and then produces what can be understood as a brief re-enactment, whereby she shifts footing to animate Peter's reaction to their initiative (lines 6–8). Here, Lena moves her hand in a shrug-off gesture while shaking her head, adding that 'he doesn't wonder about anything'. Peter is thus positioned as someone who does not display uncertainty and would typically reject his parents' attempts to have a preparatory talk before a journey.

Lena qualifies this stance by adding that she does not remember him asking questions about anything, which Martin corroborates (lines 11–12). Lena then goes on to state 'Uh: because I (.) we have *jo*' but is cut off by Martin saying 'don't problematise it or anything like that' (lines 15–16). Although Martin does not use a pronoun here, it appears that he is speaking on behalf of himself and Lena, as she follows up by providing the example of going to the toilet on the aeroplane as something they have not 'gone through' (lines 19–20). Thus, going to the toilet on the aeroplane is made relevant as an activity that a child could potentially need instruction to manage, but which they have avoided problematising. Lena accounts for this by stating 'but then I reckon that then he'll go jo to the toilet' (line 22) and 'and if he's wondering about anything then he'll ask jo someone' (line 25). Here, '*jo*' marks the solution to needing to use the bathroom or wondering about anything as self-evident, implying that this is unproblematic for their child. Peter is thus positioned as capable of dealing with this on his own or alternatively asking for help if needed. Moreover, it is taken for granted that 'someone' will help him. Lena then provides a reason for why this is unproblematic by stating 'because he is the type that he is' (line 31). Her commitment to this stance is underlined with an emphasis on the verb 'is', presenting it as indisputable. Here, Lena can be heard to assert epistemic primacy on behalf of herself and Martin concerning the personality of their own child.

In this excerpt, the parents co-produce an account for why they considered travelling unaccompanied by aeroplane to be manageable for their child, even without extensive preparations. The parents do not refute the interviewer's assumption that preparations for such a journey may be necessary, but rather construct an account for why it has not been necessary with *their* child. As parents, they claim access to their own child's emotional state, personality and competence, which puts them in a position to evaluate what he will or will not be capable of handling on his

own. By taking stances in relation to how he typically acts and what he expresses, they construct their child as a particular type of child: a child who is untroubled, confident and capable of taking relevant action without his parents' presence. This accounts for why they consider him capable of travelling on his own, but also implies that this is not necessarily something all children can handle. Thus, they position themselves as attentive and knowledgeable parents who make sure that their child is capable of travelling but take care not to burden him with unnecessary instructions.

Preparatory practices

Constructing the child as competent could be used to account for why the child can handle travelling even without extensive preparations. In contrast to this, parents also described various preparatory activities made before their children's first journeys on their own, as well as routines they had established to create a sense of predictability for their children. Some parents described holding 'courses' for their children when travelling together with them to prepare them for subsequently undertaking the journey on their own. Verbal instructions on how to handle specific aspects of the journey, such as getting off at the right train station, were also a recurrent theme.

Excerpt 2 is from an interview with Agnes and Lars, parents of two children aged five and nine. Their eldest child, Elise, has regularly flown on her own since she was 5 years old to visit relatives. Her younger brother has recently started to fly on his own as well. Before the excerpt presented below, Lars has described routines he and Elise had developed at the airport, as he was usually the one who accompanied her to her flight. As the excerpt begins, Agnes takes over and starts describing routines they follow at home before going to the airport.

Excerpt 2: Agnes and Lars on packing routines

1	Agnes	Yeah and then it sort of starts with (.) actually before (0.5) packing the backpack (.) because the backpack is hand
2		luggage
3	Ida	Mm
4	Agnes	U::h 'what do you have <u>in</u> it? That you say sort of 'here it <u>is</u> ' because it's also something about (2.0) let's say one of
5		them has an accident on the plane of one kind or another (.) spills all the soda or
6		Mm
7	Agnes	'Where are the extra clothes? What extra clothes do you <u>have</u> ?' And then say 'here I put a bag of extra clothes' (.)
8		'it's right <u>here</u> , it has <u>this</u> in it'
9	Ida	Mm
10	Agnes	'If something happens you just pick from <u>that</u> '
11	Ida	[Mm
12	Lars	[Mm
13	Agnes	'Here you have' <u>show</u> sort of what it is <u>exactly</u> that the backpack has in it
14	Ida	Mm
15	Lars	Mm
16	Agnes	And 'what <u>is</u> it' kind of (.) and this (0.5) Elise has <i>jo</i> had her <u>phone</u> with her
17	Ida	Mm
18	Agnes	'Okay then you have to remember to put it in flight mode' so you go through the (.) the routines that will happen
19		inside the actual plane when we're not (.) in that hour
20	Lars	Mm
21	Ida	Yes
22	Agnes	There's none of her legal guardians he he
23	Lars	Yes mm
24	Agnes	Mm
25	Lars	And then we have to hide all the biggest teddy bears and then they can pick which one to bring he he
26	Agnes	Yes and then it's a matter of which teddy bear but maybe not ((laughs))
27	Ida	Mm
28	Agnes	And so I think that it's very rare that there's much that actually gets picked <u>up</u> from that backpack but it's sort of
29		that preparation (.) they know sort of (.) physically themselves u::h take part in <u>really</u> packing and planning

Agnes builds on Lars's account of routines by stating that they start at home with the packing of the backpacks the children carry on board the plane (lines 1–2). Agnes begins by accounting for the packing routine, but instead of describing the routine, she re-enacts what could be understood as a typical packing scene. Posing the question 'what do you have in it?' (line 4), she can here be heard shifting footing to speak from the position of a traveller, thus formulating a question that a traveller should be able to answer. She goes on to report what 'you' do to make the child aware of this, stating 'that you say sort of here it is'. Using 'you' as an indefinite pronoun, she can be heard as if she is speaking from the position of a generalised parent. She thus formulates such preparations as not only something they do, but as something any parent in this situation would or should do (cf. Yates and Hiles 2010).

Next, Agnes provides an account to explain why it is relevant to inform children about what they have in their hand luggage, using as an example a hypothetical scenario where one of the children has had an accident, such as spilling their soda (lines 5–6). Posing the questions 'where are the extra clothes' and 'what extra clothes do you have' (lines 8–9), she points to relevant knowledge for handling such a situation. Agnes continues the re-enactment with a demonstration of an instruction scene (lines 11–14), putting stress on such words as 'here', 'this' and 'that' to highlight what is important to convey to the children. She cuts off the re-enactment to comment on the purpose of such a preparatory routine, which is 'showing sort of what it is exactly that the backpack has in it' (line 14), thereby underlining the importance of showing, rather than just telling, to prepare children for travelling.

In line 17, Agnes introduces the fact that Elise has her phone with her when she travels as another aspect that warrants preparation. Using reported speech, she demonstrates reminding Elise to switch the phone to flight mode (line 19). Shifting footing again, she explains the purpose of such preparatory practices from a parent's point of view, which is to go through what will happen 'in that hour there's none of her legal guardians' (lines 19–23). Instructions and reminders prior to the journeys are thus formulated as enabling Elise to take relevant action during the time when she will be physically separated from her parents. The use of the formal term 'legal guardians' underlines the duties and responsibilities Agnes and Lars have in relation to Elise as a minor. While travelling, Elise is temporally outside their direct supervision and will have to manage on her own what her 'guardians' would normally do for her or help her with.

Having so far been silent except from aligning with Agnes by saying 'mm', Lars now interjects in a humorous tone that they also have to hide the biggest teddy bears before the children can pick which ones to take with them (lines 26–27). The comment provides a contrast to the 'seriousness' of the prior talk and shifts attention to a more child-centred aspect of the packing routine by underlining that the children have a say in what to pack. Agnes implies there might be negotiation about which teddy bear to bring before the talk erupts into laughter and becomes inaudible (line 28). Finishing up the account of the preparatory routines, Agnes takes the epistemic stance that she does not think anything is picked out of the backpack very often, but that the preparation allows them to know 'physically' what they are taking with them so that they 'take part in really packing and planning' (lines 30–31). The notion of knowing something physically implies that being actively involved in packing the backpack prepares them in a different way than simply being told. Furthermore, this is depicted as having an important preparatory function regardless of whether or not the children find themselves in the situations they have prepared for.

In this account, packing routines and instructions are constructed as pedagogic activities that prepare the children for both ordinary (putting the phone in flight mode) and extraordinary (spilling soda) events during the journeys. Re-enactment and reported speech about the packing routines work to demonstrate these routines, thereby providing evidence of how events typically unfold. Moreover, the use of the indefinite pronoun here presents this preparatory routine as not just what *they* do as parents, but as corresponding with what can be expected from any parent in such a situation. Through elaborate demonstrations of preparatory routines, Agnes positions herself and Lars as knowledgeable in relation to what may occur and what is important for a

child to be able to do during the journeys. Moreover, the emphasis on the children's active involvement in packing implies a distinct understanding of how children learn and how to act pedagogically as a parent. Preparatory practices are constructed as enabling children to take relevant action when responsible caregivers are not physically present, and thus accounts for the journeys being manageable. While preparing children is depicted as a parental responsibility, children's agency is also made relevant by pointing out that they have a say in what to bring.

Supportive arrangements

In addition to describing their children and preparatory practices, the parents' accounts encompassed talk about arrangements that support the children while they are travelling. For instance, when talking about aeroplane travel, the parents would make relevant their trust in the 'system' as well as the personnel looking after their children during the journeys. The parents also described different informal arrangements for ensuring that in case of unexpected events, the children would have someone to assist them.

In excerpt 3, we meet Olav and Elinor, parents of two children aged 8 and 10 who used public transport without adults both locally and on longer trips. Prior to this excerpt, the interviewer has asked whether they had experienced any problems during the journeys, to which Olav replies by talking about an occasion where he was unable to get a hold of the children by phone, which he describes as 'uncomfortable'. In response to this, Elinor comments that 'it has always gone well though' and states that in her opinion nothing has ever occurred that she would call a problem. As the excerpt begins, Olav starts talking about a specific aspect of travelling: train changes.

Excerpt 3: Olav and Elinor on train changes

1	Olav	But it <u>is</u> a bit like that with changes as well though that you're dependent on getting someone (0.5) who (.) when
2		they're changing in Haugen for instance
3	Elinor	Mm
4	Ida	Mm
5	Olav	It's not <u>that</u> easy to change in Haugen
6	Ida	[No
7	Olav	[I have <i>jo</i> taken part in that
8	Ida	Mm [mm
9	Olav	[I know that you have to <u>walk</u> under this thing and there it's like
10	Ida	Yes
11	Olav	And there's are a <u>lot</u> of people because the Haugen train (.) there's often a lot of commuters and so on and it's
12		exactly <u>then</u> that they arrive
13	Ida	Yes
14	Olav	[So yeah
15	Elinor	[There's plenty of time though
16	Olav	Yes
17	Elinor	On a normal schedule there's
18	Olav	[Yes
19	Elinor	[a lot of time (.) so you have u:m and then there's (.) but the thing <u>is</u> that there <u>is</u> always someone who <u>helps</u> them
20	Ida	Yes
21	Elinor	That's – we found that out from the first moment
22	Ida	Yes
23	Elinor	A:nd you connected someone (.) a few times [as well when you put the children on
24	Olav	[Yes (.) sure you can talk to them right so if you're going to deliver
25		them then you have to find someone
26	Ida	Yes
27	Olav	((gesturing)) ' <u>Are</u> you', 'are you going' (.) right
28	Ida	Yes
29	Olav	And then you sort of get a contact

Olav's account can be heard as a response to Elinor's previous claim that the children never encountered any actual problems. He begins by introducing train changes as events that may be problematic or challenging for the children, as 'you' as a parent in this situation are dependent on getting someone to help them (lines 1–2), and in this way makes this an aspect of the journey the children may have difficulty managing without an adult. Olav continues by providing an example of a specific train station where the children have to change trains, and takes the evaluative stance that 'it's not that easy to change in Haugen' (line 5). To account for this evaluation, Olav asserts epistemic primacy and speaks from the position of someone who has undertaken this train change himself (line 7). Here he formulates this part of travelling as problematic, not necessarily just for children but for travellers in general.

Olav then describes what the train change looks like: you have to walk under a 'thing' (an underground passage) and there are 'a lot' of people (lines 9–11). The physical design of the station as well as the number of people present are thus depicted as aspects that complicate the train change. Olav provides further details by stating that there are many commuters passing through this particular station at exactly the time when the children arrive (lines 11–12). Categorising the other travellers as commuters invokes the notion of a crowd of busy adults that the children need to move through to find the right train.

Elinor interrupts Olav's talk by saying 'there's plenty of time though' (line 15). While she does not refute that the train change may be challenging, her stance works as a moderation of Olav's evaluation of the train change as problematic. She argues that having much time to perform the change downgrades the difficulty and makes it manageable for the children. Elinor qualifies her stance by adding that provided the train is running on a normal schedule, there is much time to make the change (lines 17–19). This stance works to position herself as 'knowing' (Heritage 2012) in relation to the train schedule and thus what the children will have to manage. However, she simultaneously implies that the train is not always on schedule, and thus acknowledges that they may not always actually have that much time. Elinor continues by providing another reason for why the train change is manageable, stating that 'the thing is that there is always someone who helps them' (lines 19–20). The preface 'the thing is' marks a strong commitment to this epistemic stance and establishes it as indisputable. Furthermore, by using the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) 'always' she emphasises that this is a regular occurrence without exceptions. She provides evidence for this claim by pointing out that they discovered this 'from the first moment' (line 22), thus underlining that this is something they know from extensive experience.

Elinor then introduces another argument for why the train change is manageable for the children as she directs her talk towards Olav and states that he 'connected someone' when he put the children on the train (line 24). A subsequent explanation (not included in the excerpt) makes it clear that 'someone' here refers to unknown train passengers who are headed the same way and are asked to keep an eye on the children. Olav aligns with Elinor and provides an account of this 'connecting' practice, speaking from the position of a generalised parent: what 'you' need to do at the train station is to find another traveller to talk to (lines 25–26). He demonstrates how this is done with a re-enactment of how he would ask people where they are going to recruit a person who can serve as a 'contact' for the children during their trip (lines 28–30). Here, the metaphors of 'connecting' and 'contact' work to counter an alternative image of the children as being left to handle challenging parts of the journey completely alone.

In this excerpt, the parents co-produce an account that renders travelling as potentially challenging. However, the parents take somewhat different stances on *how* challenging it is for the children. Using a particular train change as an example, Olav describes the circumstances that complicate it, while Elinor works to downgrade the problem by accounting for circumstances and practices that mitigate the challenge. She gives relevance to having much time to perform the change, helpful strangers and the practice of establishing contact with someone to assist the children during the journey. Through epistemic stances substantiated by first-hand experience, the parents position themselves as knowledgeable in relation to what the journey entails and how it usually transpires

for the children. In this way, they produce an account in which the challenges of travelling are recognised, yet solvable. A key part of the account is the notion that even when they are unaccompanied by known adults the children are not left alone, but rather moving through public spaces populated with people who are predominantly helpful. While a crowd of strangers or 'commuters' is framed as a complicating element, individual strangers become resources that are mobilised to support the children when their caregivers are not present.

Discussion

Research on children's mobility in public space has drawn attention to how adult restrictions on children's movement are legitimised by a construction of children as vulnerable and incompetent (Valentine 1997; Forsberg et al. 2020; Porter, Spark, and de Kley 2021). The parents interviewed in this study, however, had let their children travel on their own, which involved moving through and being in public environments for a period of time outside the direct care and supervision of an adult. As parents are seen to hold the primary responsibility for their children, it can be argued that in doing this, they are taking a position establishing that this is something they consider their children are capable of doing. At the same time, by accounting for their own child, preparatory practices and supportive arrangements, they orient to a notion that this cannot be taken for granted.

In the parents' accounts, making sure that a child is able to travel unaccompanied involves various forms of parental work relating to specific constitutions of the child and the journey in question. While individual children construed as particularly capable might require minimal preparation, it is nevertheless implied that children, in general, cannot simply be assumed to cope with travelling on their own. Thus, assessment and pedagogic work are key to making sure that a child can handle moving through public spaces on their own (cf. Kullman 2010; Joelsson 2019). Yet, being able to travel without parents does not necessarily mean that children will manage all aspects of the journey entirely without adult assistance. When they travel, children are in the presence of unknown adults who can become resources to support them if needed. In contrast to the 'stranger danger' discourse which posits unknown adults as a threat to children's safety (Valentine 1997; Pynn et al. 2019; Jenkins 2006), the strangers the children encounter in public spaces are here constructed as primarily benevolent and helpful, and willing to accept some responsibility for the children in the absence of their primary caregivers. The emphasis on the work they do as parents as well as the support offered by strangers establishes travelling as not something the children do alone or independently, but rather in collaboration with others. Their accounts thus resonate with findings from previous studies concerning how relations of interdependence figure into facilitating children's mobility (Kullman 2010; Nansen et al. 2015; Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). In the present study, the notion that the children are enabled and supported works to account for why the journeys are considered manageable.

It has been argued that in contemporary Western societies parenting responsibility is increasingly associated with physical proximity and supervision (Bond 2014; Pynn et al. 2019).

The parents in this study, however, construct accounts in which it is also possible to be a responsible parent when physically distant from their children. Throughout their accounts, the parents worked to show that when they let children travel on their own, they know what they are doing. They asserted insight into their child's personality and what the child is capable of, how children learn and how to act as a parent to prepare children for future events. Furthermore, they displayed detailed knowledge concerning what the journeys entail, how the places they move through look like and what the children will be required to manage on their own or might need assistance to manage. In sum, the parents positioned themselves as responsible through displaying that the decision to let children travel alone was not heedless, but rather grounded on knowledge and careful consideration.

Children's movements in public space touch upon several issues that have not been addressed here, including children's rights, empowerment and independence. Moreover, while the focus in

this article has been on parenting, further research is needed to also explore how children talk about travelling on their own and position themselves as travellers. The present study has sought to contribute to research on the complexity of the relation between parents, children and their movements in public environments (e.g. Joelsson 2019; Kullman 2010) through an investigation of parents' accounting and discursive construction of children's unaccompanied travelling and parenthood. The findings can be understood as embedded in a particular social context, and thus shaped by local circumstances, parenting norms and conceptions of safety and risk. Norwegian society is seen as characterised by a high degree of generalised trust (Skirbekk 2012), and it is likely that parents' accounts of travelling in environments deemed less safe might be constructed differently. For instance, it can be suggested that the notion that strangers can be mobilised to assist children presupposes a shared understanding that most people are trustworthy. At the same time, the work that the participants in this study engage in when accounting for the journeys indicates that letting young children travel without adults can also be contentious in Norway. By attending to the interactive production of interview accounts, the present study sheds light on how parents manage social expectations of parenting when letting their children undertake such trips on their own. Justifying and reasoning around one's own practices can be considered integrated aspects of the work parents do to enable their children to move unaccompanied in public environments.

Note

1. I use the term public transport broadly to refer to modes of transport that in principle are accessible to anyone with a ticket. While it can be discussed whether an aeroplane is public transport, the key issue here is that these are places where children encounter adults unknown to the children themselves and to their parents.

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Appendix. Transcription symbols

[word	Overlapping talk
=	Equal signs indicate no break between the lines
(0.5)	Numbers in parenthesis indicate silence (in seconds)
(.)	Micro-pause of less than 0.2 seconds
wo::rd	Colon indicates stretching of the preceding sound
(())	Double parentheses contain transcriber's description of events
<u>Word</u>	Underscore indicates stress by pitch or amplitude
<i>Word</i>	Italic type indicates words in Norwegian
'word'	Quotation marks indicate speech heard as reported speech