

Children's Play Advisory Service

26 April 2020

Cobra Forgets Children

“Playing” is children’s biggest day-time activity. A fact Cobra forgets.

They assume that “school” is a child’s main activity. They are wrong. Children only go to school half the days of the year. The other half (weekends and holidays) are free for play all day. Even on school days children may play for up to 1-4 hours after school (dependent on age).

“Play” is vital for children’s development. Through play, they get healthy exercise for free at no cost to the Government or parents because it doesn’t require supervision.

More importantly, through play they learn how to take turns, reach compromises, make agreements (rules), and settle disputes. Crucially it is without adult guidance. Children learn to make sophisticated decisions for themselves.

But many children have lost the freedom to play. Parents quite understandably keep their children indoors because the roads outside (even side roads) are dominated by the car.

The results are seen in the increasing poor health and obesity of our children. It also explains increasing mental and emotional stresses from which children and young adults are suffering.

The lockdown has inevitably made matters worse. Many families do not have sufficient garden space for children to let off steam. Children are not allowed to go a few doors away (or even next door) to play with friends. How can parents cope with bored, inactive children bouncing off the walls or having tantrums because they cannot play with their friends? For families where there are already tensions the lockdown may well be the final straw.

Fortunately, parents are providing activities and walking/cycling for their children. There are also video links where the children can see and talk to friends, grandparents etc. Advice from play organisations, exercise routines/ programmes via TV or computers, do provide ideas for things to do.

This should not be seen as a permanent replacement for play. The danger is that it will reinforce the belief that good parenting is about keeping children indoors and only letting them out when it is under close supervision. It may well frighten children into believing that being outdoors is dangerous.

For its forward strategy Government need to realise that children’s play is an environmental issue rather than a facilities issue. Children have always played within sight and sound of home (or a friend’s home) for their regular everyday play.

Whether they can play out or not depends on the speed of traffic just outside their home. For the vast majority of children the nearest play facility is too far away for everyday play. Children do still play out in the road, on the verge, by the garages etc. as they have done for countless generations but the speed of traffic has severely limited where this happens. For over half of the last century most infant children walked to school unaccompanied because the roads were safer. They also played in the road.

As this crisis comes to an end there will need to be an exit strategy. It should enhance children's opportunities to play rather than limit them..

Government could encourage Councils to allow side roads to have priority for pedestrians so that children could play out in their own road – (both temporary and permanent are within current legislation). Where this happens, adults are more neighbourly.

Most "playgrounds" fall into 2 types. "Destination" playgrounds attract large crowds. Typically there are nearly as many adults as children because children need to be taken. Secondly the much more numerous local playgrounds attract small numbers of children and very few adults. The former have high risk of infection. With local playgrounds the risk is much lower

Where friends live in same street children should be allowed to play at or just outside each other's homes.

These strategies mean that there will be much less close contact with other children than in school where they sit very close together. They could therefore be implemented earlier.

Children's Play Advisory Service is happy to advise on these strategies for children's biggest activity so at least some good comes out of this crisis.

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