

COUCH PRISONERS?

CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND PLAY

Government figures predict that by 2020 a third of girls and a fifth of boys will be obese. Rob Wheway takes a look at how poor residential environments are making our children fatter.

This fact sheet was the basis of an article which appeared in "Spaces & Places" (issue 25, February 2007), the journal of the Institute of Parks and Green Spaces.

Obesity in children is not a disease yet Government, doctors, drug companies and a wide variety of therapists/trainers are treating it as if it is. Obesity is caused by the poor environment in which our children are forced to grow up. Most children can no longer play out in the streets as they have done for countless generations.

If I may draw a parallel with filthy state of London in the mid nineteenth century. People were dying from dysentery and cholera. No doubt all sorts of potions, therapies and cures were peddled and I assume Government would have listened to those appearing to have remedies (they were, after all key stakeholders). They would have encouraged businesses to develop these remedies (did they give grants to voluntary organisations?), they may well have encouraged people to eat more healthily.

BUT what happened was they got a man called Bazalgette to build the sewers. A healthy environment was thereby created and there was a massive leap forward in improvements in health and reductions in the diseases.

Equally we now need to create a healthy environment for our children. A medical model of drugs, surgery and therapies is as useful for the vast majority of children as the quack remedies offered in previous centuries.

There is little evidence that our calorific intake has risen. Fifty years ago children were encouraged to eat the fat on meat because it was "good for you", sugar was not felt to be dangerous so therefore copious amounts were sprinkled on breakfast cereals and stirred into drinks. A healthy diet is important but will not solve the obesity problem.

Children need and want to play out. They are not couch potatoes but rather they are couch prisoners where, because of the traffic parents, quite reasonably confine them to the home. The research is clear it is traffic NOT stranger danger which causes this.

My research for Local Authorities and Housing Trusts has shown that where traffic speeds are slow children play out as they always have. Photos from 50 to 100 years ago of street scenes show children of all ages and adults in the street moving round making friends and playing.

This still happens where the environment is safe from the car, parents as they always have down, let children from as young as three play out in the front garden or on the front step. As they get older and gain in confidence they are allowed further. This activity is not supervised by the parents but it is usually close to home so that should there be any apparent danger a child can run for help. Gradually as the child goes further they are allowed to be near a friend's parents or near another trusted adult such as a play leader, park warden etc.

The journeys children make when they are free to do so are massive in number. In our research for Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) we estimated that on an estate with 100 children if only 50 could play out they would make over 280,000 journeys per year. These journeys are an incredible amount of healthy exercise being all walking, cycling, skateboarding, etc.

Sadly neither transport planners nor the Government consider these journeys to be transport, so they are ignored. They are vastly underestimated by those who claim to be health experts. The level of their ignorance can be gauged by the fact that ones considered "enlightened" think that the journey to and from school is the most important regular exercise. Whilst safe routes to school are valuable, children do only go to school half the days in the year and consequently those journeys are a small fraction of the potential journeys children could make. The other half of the year (weekends and holidays) are completely free play days for children and even on school days children have a significant time in which to play.

Purists might argue that the journeys I have mentioned above are not actually play and therefore are not necessarily of interest to play and recreational professionals. It may not be play in the strict sense and certainly, when consulted, children underestimate the amount of time they spend travelling. What is true, however, is that any outdoor play activity depends on children having the freedom to travel to it whether it be at a friend's house, at the playground, public open space or merely the patch of grass or hard surface which happens to be in the public sphere.

For too long, parks, leisure, recreation departments have been regarded as one of the lowly parts of Local Government yet in fact the contribution they can make is much greater than is generally realised. For reasons of time alone their contribution is greater than schools. If we look at what we call "children" are in fact up to late teens or even into their early twenties. Conventional playgrounds are used by children up to the age of 15 or so and ball game areas and skateboard facilities are used by children up to the early 20's. In this way much more provision for youth is made by parks and leisure departments than is made by the youth service.

More crucially there is an understanding that the majority of recreation is informal. People wander to the play area or park at a time of their own choosing, they stay as long as they want to and they come away when they've had enough. Sometimes they'll drop in for a few minutes, a quick walk or jog and other times stay for hours. In other words the emphasis is on catering for their lifestyle and assisting it to be healthy, rather than assuming that everything must be a treatment or therapy which is delivered or an activity which is certificated.

So what needs to be done?

In residential (non-distributory) roads priority must be given to the pedestrian. Motorists should expect to drive the last 50-100 metres to their front door at less than 10 mph. Where this happens already, eg cul-de-sacs and well-designed estates, children do play out. What's more parents "keep an eye out" for each others children, so social capital or neighbourliness is increased.

We are unlikely to knock down houses to build pocket parks but, by giving children the safety and confidence to travel the same distances (ranges) they travelled before the car, we can double our effective provision without one extra blade of grass. Remember the range is the radius; increase it and the area available increases exponentially (πr^2).

The need is urgent. A child generation is about 5 years (5-10 years old or 6-11). Each five years that go by is a generation that has lost out to developing a healthy lifestyle. We cannot afford to wait for costly Home Zones or similar to be installed.

Once children and adults can walk round their neighbourhood we should improve the public sphere. A tree (or two), is an attractive focal point, provides shelter and shade as well as being the "rally" point for hide and seek and "den" for tig.

Children's dimensions for play are small, football is often played on a hard patch between garages 5m or 6m by 6m or 7m; a popular "field" turns out to be little more than a verge.

Of course children will sometimes be a nuisance (who didn't play rat tat ginger or keep losing the ball over someone's garden) but we need strategies of mediation not an immediate use of ASBO's.

An environment fit for play will give healthier, physically active, fewer obese children living in more sociable and less polluted neighbourhoods.

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