

HALF AN ACRE FOR EVERY CHILD

(Half an acre is approximately half a football pitch)

The following is based on the response by Fair Play for Children to the Play England document "Embedding the Play Strategy". It was written by Rob Wheway.

Introduction

Children's play is often taken for granted or regarded as merely an occasional activity. It is, however, the way children learn social and organisational skills and the way they develop both physically and mentally.

Children's freedom to play has been under attack primarily by the motor car for many years. The increase in obesity is a clear indication that this has happened. Children also appear to be losing the skills to organise themselves and therefore develop the ability to play their part in neighbourhood or community organisation.

"Play" is an everyday activity for children and not a therapy, treatment or curriculum-based activity. There is also a failure to differentiate between play, defined as "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" and other organised activities.

Background

To realise how far children have been restricted we need to look back to the early 60s and for generations before then. The vast majority of children lived in houses in side roads and were free to play in the street outside their own house. They played unsupervised but with the security of knowing that they could run home if they felt threatened.

Both then and now parents and children liked play to be within sight and sound of their front door or within sight and sound of a friend's parent's front door. Then as now they preferred to play out and be part of the community rather than restricted to their own back garden.

The space therefore they had for play would approximate to half the size of a football pitch (half an acre).

Children therefore got healthy exercise virtually every day. Half the days in the year (holidays and weekends) children could spend most of the time playing outside and on school days there was time to play outside. This would average out to somewhere between 2 and 4 hours per school day over the year.

Not only were they getting healthy exercise but they were also developing their social and imaginative abilities.

Any game requires children to learn to take turns, for each one to play a part and to unselfishly admit when you are out. Games also require children to develop basic skills of organisation and rule making, a vital part of their development into healthy adults.

All these benefits are without adult supervision or coaching. Children learn them naturally through their play.

What my research has shown is that even nowadays where the road traffic is very slow, such as in short cul-de-sacs or where there is significant traffic calming, children still play out and also interestingly the parents talk about the friendliness between neighbours and how they “keep an eye out for each other’s children” (known as social capital).

The lack of traffic also benefited older members of the community who could walk and talk in their road with their friends without fear of being mown down. It is the children and the elderly who, in many ways, bind the community together and it is the domination of the car which is preventing both from fulfilling that role.

Unless we change the whole status of residential side roads from priority for the car to priority for pedestrians, children will continue to be worse off than children were up to the early 1960s.

There is no way that the provision of play areas can anywhere near approach the space to play that children previously had. Even if the Government or Local Councils were to insist that 2 or 3 houses were knocked down in every street to provide a play area, the children would still not be able to use them as the traffic would still be too fast for parents to allow them to play out. My research shows that 20mph is still too fast.

Recommendation: Government should aim within 10 years to enable 80% of school-age children to be able to play out in their own street in safety.

Children’s Travel

Again if we go back to the early 1960s and before that to the introduction of compulsory schooling the usual practice was for children to walk to school unaccompanied.

Typically a parent would take a 5 year old to school for the first few times but after that they would go unaccompanied or perhaps with a sibling or friend. By the age of 8 children would go unaccompanied to their local church or community building to attend a uniformed organisation or to a local library or other facility. They would also undertake errands to the local shops.

A high proportion of primary school children from 5 years old upwards also came home at lunchtime unaccompanied. They were, therefore, making 4 unaccompanied journeys per day.

The walking to school is clearly not play. However, it is a reasonable assumption that if children were allowed to walk to school on their own then they would also be allowed to play out in their own street and probably go into the next street if a friend lived there.

There is, therefore, almost certainly a very strong correlation between children's ability to walk to school unaccompanied and their freedom to play out within their own neighbourhood.

Observing children coming out of a primary school now it is usual that almost all are accompanied. It is, therefore, almost certain that very few have the freedom to play out now as their parents or (great) grand-parents would have enjoyed.

There is no reason other than the speed of traffic on residential roads which has made it less safe for children to travel unaccompanied. There has been no increase in "stranger danger". What happens is that children travel round their neighbourhood less, therefore everybody knows each other less and so the fear of "stranger danger" goes up - but it is the fear rather than reality. This can clearly be seen when children on the same estate play out on quiet roads but do not on busy roads. If the fear of strangers was the thing that prevented children playing out, the level of playing out would be constant across the whole estate.

I believe that children's freedom to travel to school unaccompanied is a reasonable proxy indicator of whether or not they can play out. It has the advantage that it would be very simple to collect the data as it would take a school class 2 or 3 minutes to indicate, probably by show of hands.

It is also the fact that successive Governments have not recognised children's walking around their own area as part of "transport", yet where they can play out children make thousands of short journeys each year.

Recommendation: Within 10 years at least 50% of 5 year olds should be able to travel to school unaccompanied and that at least 80% of primary school age children be able to travel to school unaccompanied.

Recommendation: The Government includes children's walking/cycling around their neighbourhood as part of its policy and calculations on transport.

National Indicators

Local Authorities are encouraged to use National Indicator 199 to gauge children's satisfaction with local parks and play areas, but this will not give the sort of information required as it concentrates on the output of the number and quality of playgrounds rather than the outcome of children's freedom to play.

A child who is taken to an excellent play area by their parents once a fortnight (as long as it's not raining) is likely to give that playground a high satisfaction rating but the reality is that they might be confined indoors for the rest of the time and have no freedom to play out.

Conversely a child who can play happily on the green verge or between the garages in their estate and does so as part of daily play may not have a playground within reasonable distance and the nearest may actually be a poor playground.

The former child will be counted as having good play opportunities which would be completely untrue and the latter child will be deemed to have poor play opportunities which again would be equally untrue.

This is therefore a poorly thought-out concept and should be abandoned except where a local authority is looking at specific improvements at individual playgrounds.

Recommendation: Surveys to discover children's play opportunities should find out what proportion of children can play out happily in front of their own houses or within sight of those houses.

The Play Strategy

The Government (2009) has a Play Strategy which is giving funding for "at least 3,500 free play areas and 30 fully staffed adventure playgrounds or parks". It is a most welcome development and is more than any recent government has allocated. However it is unlikely to improve the everyday play of more than 1% of the children of this country. Even if twice as many children benefit as we think, that is still less than 2%.

Some will argue that it is a much higher number. However for children their "right to play" is paramount rather than their right to an occasional visit when a parent has the time to take them. Whilst the destination playgrounds are important family facilities, they do not cater for everyday children's play.

In fact the Play Strategy will increase children's freedom to play by much less than the 1% indicated above. At many places what it will do is improve the opportunities available at existing playgrounds rather than provide new opportunities for children who previously could not play out. If children do not have the freedom to play out in an area, the mere provision of a playground, however exciting, will not increase that freedom.

Recommendation: The Government change its focus from one of provision of play facilities to one which gives priority to the child's right to play.

Conclusion

Play strategies need to emphasise "the child's right to play" not "the child's right to an occasional visit with a parent, when the parent has time", nor "the child's right to have fun activities at school premises".

The key question is "are children free and able to play out within sight and sound of their own front door". If the answer is "no" then they have almost certainly lost the right to play.

For 50 years children's play has been increasingly restricted. We should be committed to drastically reversing that trend.

Rob Wheway MSc, MEd, MILAM, MCMI, FRSA
Director
Children's Play Advisory Service

Note

Rob Wheway is a leading children's play consultant. This article is based on his observational and consultation research for many Local Authorities. More information can be found on the CPAS website (www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk).