

IS MY NEIGHBOURHOOD SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN? "A CHECKLIST"

Repeated reports show that our children are at risk of being unfit, obese and suffering from "Toxic Stress" but blaming parents and schools is not the answer to children not getting enough physical exercise or having their healthy development prevented by a risk averse society.

Considerable research by the Children's Play Advisory Service has shown that it is the environment causing the problem. Children are quite reasonably being kept indoors because traffic has been allowed to dominate our residential roads so that children cannot play out every day as they did do for previous generations.

The checklist below will enable parents and planners to assess whether a neighbourhood is toxic for children.

1. Can/will your child be able to walk to school on their own, or with another child of the same age from at least 7 years old upwards?	
2. Can/will your school age infant child be able to play out in front of the house in safety?	
3. Can/will your toddler be able to sit on the front step or be in the front garden in safety and be seen by you?	
4. Is the house designed so that the children can be seen at the front from the main area of the house (perhaps by leaving the front door open), or from the kitchen window?	
5. From age 8 will your child be able to walk or cycle unaccompanied to the nearest community centre or church hall, or other buildings where there are such organisations as cub scouts/brownies, football team, clubs etc?	
6. Can/will your child be able to cycle/run around the block in safety from the age of 7?	
7. Is there a play area or green space, close to the house, where your children will be able to go (unaccompanied) to play with other children?	
8. Can/will your child be able to walk or cycle safely to the swimming pool, town park or adventure playground from at least age 10?	
9. Is there a bus/train route nearby from which your child will be able to travel to other facilities that are further afield from the age of 10?	
10. Is your child able to walk/cycle safely to the library, shops, parks, woodland areas, playing fields or other places of interest within your neighbourhood from the age of 8?	

The checklist is not in any priority order. You can work out your own scoring system and weight it according to the age(s) of your child(ren). If you can't give a positive score to most of the questions then either the location or the design is wrong or motor traffic has been given too much of a priority over children's needs.

Relatively few people live in isolated areas, ie farms, where the above may not be possible. However most people, even in villages, live in housing areas where the checklist can be used.

The checklist is based on what was the normal experience of childhood for many generations.

More sports and clubs are not the answer. These always involve only a small proportion of the population and there is a very high drop out rate. The environment, within which people live, is much more crucial. This checklist has been designed to enable community organisations and parents to judge whether their neighbourhood is suitable for children's healthy development.

When buying a home parents, or prospective parents, usually consider whether the new house will be suitable for their children. They tend to consider the rooms inside, the garden, and the quality of the local school, but usually fail to realise the importance of the environment. The checklist will assist parents to judge if a house is in a suitable location, or whether sufficient priority has been given to pedestrians, for it to be suitable for children's health and happiness.

Where the roads are safe, children play out a lot and move around their estate going from friends' houses to the play area, to the shop, back home, making many short journeys. They rarely play in their back gardens because that means they are shut away from everything else that is going on.

Research has shown that when children can't play out from a young age they have less advanced social and motor development and are less autonomous. In other words they are not as good at making friends, using their muscles and making decisions for themselves.

This applies even if their parents race around from place to place ferrying the children by car to friends, clubs and facilities.

If the roads in an area are so unsafe that children can't walk or cycle to friends, school, church hall/community centre, play area, etc, then the children miss out on considerable amounts of healthy exercise and developing self-confidence. Parents ferrying the children increase the traffic and make the situation even worse.

Interestingly enough, where the roads are safe enough for children (and pensioners and other pedestrians) to travel around, then parents also have more friends and more people they feel they can trust for baby-sitting. It is people who are walking and talking within a community that help bind that community together.

Most important of all (as virtually all grandparents will recall from their own childhood) playing out near their homes is fun. Designs of estates that deny children happy, healthy childhoods, cannot be good for their long-term development into adulthood.

The policy of encouraging Home Zones may help a few people to improve their neighbourhoods but its application is very limited. Home Zones are very costly and at the current rate of progress it will be hundreds if not thousands of years before most neighbourhoods are made suitable for children if Home Zones are the only approach.

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January 2014