

WHY GIRLS AND BOYS STAY IN TO PLAY

This started life as an article in the Guardian (12 August 1992). It was then expanded and appeared in the January/February 1993 issue of Hard Times, the magazine of the Greater Manchester Play Resources Unit. It is printed below with a couple of minor textural amendments. What it demonstrates is that in virtually 20 years Government thinking has barely moved even though the situation for children has got steadily worse.

Children are not couch potatoes, as is commonly supposed, but couch prisoners. They are constantly imprisoned in reservations because our adult society values the motor car more than it does children.

I use the word “reservations” to describe these restrictions, deliberately. It reminds us of the games of Cowboys and Indians we played as children. When we watched films of the Wild West an occasional one would be supportive of the Indians. Typically it would end with the “goody” saying “the Indians only want a place of their own”, the “baddy” saying “well as long as they’re out of my way” and the Red Indian Chief promising not to be a nuisance any more. The film would end with everyone living happily ever after.

But we know that they did not live happily ever after. Wherever “reservations” or “homelands” have been seen as a solution, they have been used to limit the freedom and opportunities of those whose lives they were supposed to protect and enhance. What is more, because their creation was as a result of an alliance between the “goodies and the baddies”, the policy of having reservations remained widely unchallenged.

The parallels with our children’s lives are clear. Parents, because they want to protect their children from the dangers of the car, are increasingly keeping their children in the house or asking for play facilities where their children will be safe. The motorists don’t care where the children are, as long as they are out of the way. And local authorities and play organisations provide “reservations” to keep both sets of adults happy.

The result is that children lose their freedom and their lives are diminished rather than enhanced. One result of this has been that, all too often our campaigns for children’s play have centred on the need for particular type(s) of facility (or reservation?) rather than the child’s right to play. Not only is this limiting the concept of play but also ultimately self-defeating for if the roads are too dangerous they will not be allowed to use them to attend the play facility. The resultant low use of the facility will make it appear unpopular and therefore not cost effective.

A report (1990)¹ by the independent Policy Studies Institute clearly demonstrated this when it concluded: “The personal freedom and choice permitted a typical seven-year-old in 1971 are now not permitted until children reach the age of about nine and a half” and the main reason is the increase in motorised traffic.

So in the last 20 years children have been punished by a 2½ year loss of liberty. For the period of that sentence (which at 10 is a quarter of your life) they have been restricted in their ability to visit grandparents, meet friends, go to the conker tree, fish for tiddlers in the stream, make houses in the bushes and play games on the field.

I am not suggesting that we should not have play facilities – I shall continue to promote them as important contributions to children’s play and therefore development. I am, however, asking what is the point of such provision if children cannot, of their own free will, travel the small distances to them?

I am, therefore, urging all concerned to give children’s right to play their highest and constant priority. The child’s right to play must come first. We must move away from constantly requesting more play facilities as the main focus of our movement. Failing to make this change will merely reinforce the view that reservations are the answer and therefore children’s play opportunities will be diminished.

There is increasing evidence of the decline in the health of our nation. The Sports Council and others suggest that from an early age we should all take up some sporting activity. Their advice is pathetically inadequate. The car is preventing children from taking the regular activity of walking or cycling to and from school, ten minutes physical activity twice per day. They are also prevented from walking or cycling to the library, the swimming pool, the youth organisation or the very sports centre where sports activities are organised. If children are prevented from walking and cycling as part of a healthy lifestyle, they certainly will not start these activities as adults.

They will have lost that opportunity for physical education. They are being condemned to obesity, heart attacks, strokes in their early middle age. We have locked ourselves into a ludicrous vicious circle where parents taking children to school by car to keep them “safe” are making the roads round schools more dangerous.

The social dangers are even greater. Research has shown that there is an inverse correlation between the amount of traffic on a road and the number of friends and neighbours people feel they have, the more traffic there is, the less people feel they have friends around them. Additionally the research shows that they will tend to feel less responsibility for that community.

This lack of community affects us all but particularly the young and the elderly. They both suffer from the restrictions traffic imposes and tend to engage in a higher percentage of local activities. These two groups are crucial in cementing communities together, yet rather than both contributing to, and benefiting from, a vibrant community they both end up trapped by the traffic.

This lack may also help to explain the dramatically increasing fear of stranger danger. (It is the fear rather than the danger which has dramatically increased.) If our road is full of strangers, rather than friends and neighbours, no wonder our fear increases.

I believe we must change our whole outlook. What we call road safety has an implicit and threatening agenda. It does not assume that children should be protected from the car (if it was then we would be restricting the car in residential areas). No, the reality is

that the road safety lobby accepts that it would be a nuisance for motorists to have to scrape children off their bumpers at regular intervals; therefore it is the children who are restricted. They are taught how to restrict themselves, how to keep out of the way of the traffic. They are even given prizes for encouraging each other to accept those restrictions – a good “keep away from the traffic” poster will win a prize, a poster to restrict the car in residential roads will not. The law is, of course, on the side of the car.

Road safety workers are complicit in this and, unless they change their attitudes dramatically, are enemies of children’s healthy development. We must change our whole attitude to transport.

Birmingham’s transport policy (and they are nowhere near the worst) as justification for walking as a mode of transport states: “Almost all trips to the city centre start or end with a walk.” Yet children’s journeys, when they are allowed, are very local. A typical period between end of school and evening meal may include five or six journeys, to friends, to the sweet shop, to aunty/uncle, an errand, to the back of the garages for a game of football, back home for toilet/for an elastoplast.

All research on children’s play demonstrates that the majority happens close to children’s own homes. They must therefore be given priority over the car in residential roads. Children are 20 per cent of the population but they are not alone, a large percentage of the rest of the population use walking as their usual form of transport for local journeys – the elderly, parents with children in pushchairs, those who cannot afford a car, together with those who choose to walk for health or ecological reasons.

Play Streets are not the answer. They give children an unfair priority over other pedestrians. They also give an impression of a facility provided and might be used to deny the need for existing or developing play provision. I believe we must have a new designation for residential roads. They must no longer be highways with permission for motorists to travel at 30 mph – about 8 mph (twice fast walking speed) might be appropriate.

On the “home-roads” or “safe-streets”, pedestrians must have priority. They should not be imposed, but residents should be able to petition for the re-designation and, with appropriate safeguards, approval should be granted unless the local authority can show it to be a necessary distributory road.

Local authorities should have a duty to ensure that the vast majority of pupils at a school are able to walk/cycle to school along safe routes. And we must all accept that it is in our own interest, and particularly that of our children, to drive that last 100 yards to our door slowly, rather than at 30 mph.

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Re-issued 23 November 2010

¹ “One False Move ... A study of children’s independent mobility” (1990) by Mayer Hillman, John Adams, John Whitelegg, Pub. Policy Studies Institute