

Most Play Strategies are Wrong

IPA Conference, Cardiff

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The Decline in Children's Freedom to Play

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Children's freedom to play is falling dramatically because there has been failure to give primacy to the "Child's right to play" and instead those responsible have concentrated on a relatively small number of facilities and the quality of an even smaller number. The domination of the car is the main causal factor. Fears of "stranger danger" and "risk aversion" are misunderstood.

I must state that I think Cardiff City should be congratulated for having the foresight to consider the issues I will discuss. There is no implication that the criticisms of play strategies are specific criticism of Cardiff City, they are more go-ahead than most.

Secondly, although the research in Cardiff is fairly small sample sizes the conclusions are consistent with non-interactive observational research that I have carried out at over 60 areas of housing in other areas of the UK to find out where and why children are or are not playing out (see Appendix). These observations were all followed up with significant interview research.

They all build on my publication with Alison Millward ¹ which researched children's freedom to play at 12 housing estates. Similar methodology was used and conclusions reached.

<p>The International Play Association "promoting the child's right to play" or face painting a few passengers on the deck of the Titanic?</p>

We've had our "Right to Play" declaration from 1977 with this right being include in the UN Convention on the Rights of Child since 1989 and what has happened? Children's freedom to play has just gone down and down. I cannot give any figures – there aren't any. There are pieces of research about play that tend to show this is happening but little definitive. It is an indication of in what low esteem play is held that there is little definitive research.

Where there is research it tends to have been about transport rather than play. An important study found

In 1971, 80 per cent of seven and eight year old children were allowed to go to school without adult supervision. By 1990, this figure fell to 9 per cent. ²

Whilst the transport research very strongly confirms the loss of freedom to play, because it is not about "play" it has tended to lead to transport solutions such as "walking buses" and "Safe routes to school" and ignored the much more significant play needs of children. School only accounts for two journeys per day for half the days in the year. The other half of the year are play days and even on school days there is significant time for free play.

We need to ask ourselves – are we going to be the Association that “promotes the child’s right to play” or are we just face painting a few passengers on the deck of the Titanic?

The graph suggests that we, and UN member governments, have been doing the latter – happily involving a few children in interesting activities whilst children’s freedom to play is sinking fast.

Fewer and fewer children can get out and play freely. They are losing the right to play.

I often hear talk of a marvellous new play area. It’s probably got lots of fantastic things and has “natural” elements as recommended by Play England. But when I visit these play areas, children are not playing freely. What I see is lots of parents taking their children so children aren’t coming and going of their own free will. It is not free play. It is great family entertainment and great family experience (I used to take my children) but it isn’t children playing freely.

The ratio of adults to children is interesting. On 3 visits to one area in Cardiff there were 104 adults to 134 children, that’s nearly as many adults as children. I have even been on playgrounds where there have been more adults than children. You get 2 grandparents, a parent and a child – that’s 3:1 in that group alone.

Although these playgrounds are important as a family facility they do little for children’s play as such. The actual location of this particular playground has very busy roads both sides and parents have to take their children (as can be seen from the parked cars).

I don’t think we should be the

International Association for the right of the child to go to the park

- if the parent is free
- if it isn’t raining and
- if they’d rather not drop them off at scouts, dance classes etc. and then come away again

That isn’t play and it isn’t what we should be about. Play is “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated”³. There is a qualitative difference between play where children make their own agreements, their own scenarios, settles disputes through negotiation and adult directed activities – however good those are.

What we know from Cardiff and from lots of other research is that children want to play in sight and sound of their home and their parents want them to. That has been the same for generations. Whilst children used to range further years ago their general every-day play has always been close to home, usually within sight and sound of home or perhaps in a street where their friend lives and “Mary or Johnny’s mummy” can keep an eye on them as well.

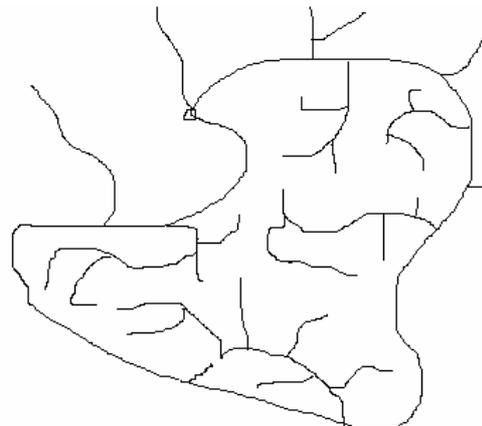
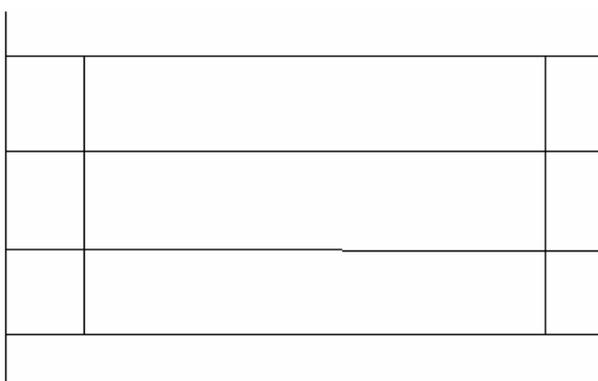
Our research in Cardiff resulted in exactly the same thing – parents and children saying they were only allowed to play close to home, certainly up to the age of 11. Even teenagers tend to play quite close to home.

Our research considered 2 areas of Cardiff. The first was standard terraced houses with straight roads in a grid pattern. There was a big primary school (400 children plus 60 in the nursery) in the area. We knew, therefore, that there were children there however we hardly saw any children. It was school half term holiday and in February. There were older children playing football on the large green area across a busy road but not young children, except a few who were taken there by older children.

The second area was of cul de sac design, with no through traffic and the distributory roads had bends to slow the traffic. In this area we saw many more children.

In the first area with the straight roads cars go through at 30 mph (approx 48 kph) or so even though it is a residential area. From when they were built (around 1900) up until well into the 1960s children would have been out on those streets playing freely.

In the second area we found that children were playing out because there was no through traffic in the cul de sacs and the road layout deliberately has bends to slow traffic.



**A crude representation of the 2 different types of road layouts
(Not intended to indicate scale)**

The difference was that junior females/junior males (from about 6 to 11 years old) were out playing much more freely in Area 2. This is even though more dwellings were in the area of observation in Area 1. (Infants approx 4-6 years old)

	Infant Girl	Infant Boy	Junior Girl	Junior Boy
Area 1 Terraced			1	3
Area 2 Cul de Sac	2	2	24	34

This is a massive difference. It is the same city, the same time of the year, the same sort of weather, but a different road layout restricting the car makes the difference.

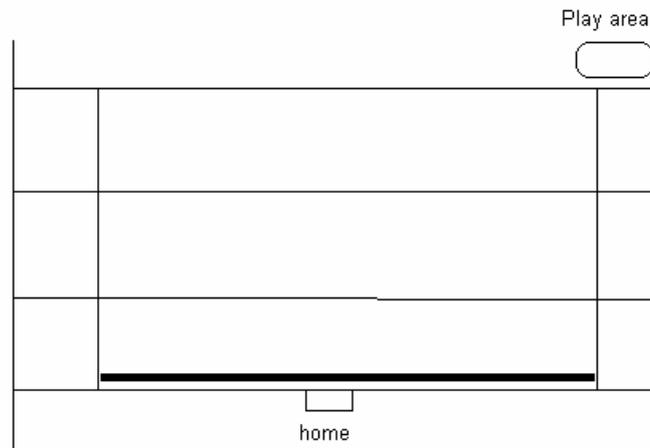
It also shows that girls still don't have as much freedom to play out as boys.

February wasn't the best time of the year to do the research, but it was when the resources were available.

Walking between the 2 areas the difference was obvious. Walking around the cul de sac area you just saw lots of children out and about. We didn't know what they were doing precisely as the research was non-interactive. Some might have been walking an errand or going to a friend's rather than actually playing but the difference in their freedom to play was really very fundamental.

If you then look at UK strategies for obesity, for keeping fit, for well-being they all promote the idea of children going to play areas and have a healthy lifestyle. This is a complete and utter nonsense. The reality for large areas of most cities that the nearest play area is too far away to be used for free play. Children want to play in sight and sound of their own home as they always have done and as their parents also want. (See figure below)

No local authority is going to start knocking down houses on each street corner so the children can get there. What we found from the terraced area was that even if there were spaces, the children wouldn't be out there as the cars were going through too fast.



— = area in front of home where children want to play

Play area too far from where children can play freely

It is the car that makes the difference. It isn't fear of "stranger danger".

What I have found looking at different parts of housing areas is that you get different rates of children playing out or staying indoors. Because they are in the same housing area you can discount social class, the effect of the media, warnings from police, warnings from schools, local rumours, etc. It is the areas where the cars cannot go through fast where the children are playing out.

Interestingly where children play out parents talk much more about feelings of neighbourliness, they talk of keeping an eye on each other's children.

The areas where cars go straight through have fewer children playing out.

We found the same in Cardiff as in my previous research studies. I don't really think the children in the cul de sac area would have fewer computer games than those in the terraced area, certainly not sufficient to explain the difference. The problem is not computer games. Children want to get out, they want to be active, they want to play and it is us as adults who are not letting them because of the fear of the car.

We found that up to 11 years old children want to be within sight and sound of their own home, which approximates to a maximum of 100m. If you then plot 100m from most play areas you see they simply don't work for children.

In the first example from Cardiff (shown to delegates) – a typical town park play area – 100m travelling distance was plotted in each direction. The only houses within this distance are a few across a busy through-road. The area has no effective catchment for children's play. It is a great visit facility but doesn't serve children's play needs.

The second example shown (a typical neighbourhood play area) looks good but with a through road against one side and a good distance from the houses on the other sides, the 100m travel distance hardly only takes in a small number of houses. It has a limited effective catchment for children's play.

The third example shown (a small play area) is right in the heart of the housing area with traffic-calmed roads adjacent and consequently the 100m travelling distance catchment takes in lots of houses. It has a good effective catchment for children's play.

The problem is that most planners just draw a circle around the play area on the plan and assume that is the catchment. However this is often meaningless because for children it is safe and short travelling distance that matters. This radial distance significantly underestimates the travel distances in most situations. Most planners also significantly overestimate the distances children will travel for free play.

Most local authorities are not asking whether or not children use the areas for free play and the reasons why they do, or do not. Most do not even seriously consider whether a busy road will act as a barrier.

Some playgrounds are hidden away and so not only would a child feel vulnerable, but even an adult with a child would feel vulnerable. They are therefore hardly used.

Rather than consider the child's right to play and their freedom to play, the usual practice is just to count the number of play areas and play centres regardless of whether they are used or not.

Risk Averse?

On another issue, you may hear people with alleged knowledge of children's play talk about us living in "a risk averse society". It is not true. We asked children and parents at previous consultations what they think of playgrounds. We repeated this and the figures from Cardiff (below) are similar to other surveys.

Playgrounds are

- about right (not too dangerous/not too safe) 75
- too safe 22
- too dangerous 7

The vast majority of both children and parents think playgrounds are either safe or too safe and even of the ones that said playgrounds were too dangerous some added phrases like "because there is glass there" or similar, so actually they weren't talking about the risk of the playground they were talking about specific problems.

Whenever I do consultations many children and parents ask for equipment that is "bigger", "faster", "higher" etc. Neither the majority of children nor parents are risk averse. They even ask for skateboard areas which are riskier than anything I played on as a child.

It is some local authority officers who have tended to be risk averse. There is an important issue there in how we support them in providing challenging and exciting opportunities.

Where parents restrict their children from playing out it is not because the parents have become risk averse but because the roads have become more dangerous. This is contrary to what UK politicians tell us. They say that because there are fewer deaths the roads must be safer. The roads are, of course, more dangerous so parents quite reasonably keep their children in and their play is restricted.

So we have to ask ourselves – Are we promoting the child's right to play or are we face painting a few passengers on the deck of the Titanic?

What we need to do

What we have got to start doing is measuring the outcome "Can children play out?" That is far more important than counting how many playgrounds or play centres there are and then drawing circles around them to give a false impression of catchment.

We need to know what percentage children play out. If it's only 5 or 10%, that's disastrous – no wonder our children are getting obese. They are not getting out and running around. Children are instinctively active, we know that they do want to get out and play.

We've got to look at our hierarchies:

- Environment
- Public Space
- Designated Play Places
- Playwork Places

Environment – Every child, if they are going to play, needs to play in their local environment. That is 100% of children.

Public Space – There isn't a precise figure but perhaps 20% of children are able to play in some sort of public space. That is only a fifth of those that play in the environment and it might be even smaller.

Designated Play Places – 10% possibly, less than 10% probably, of children are able to play freely in designated play places.

Playwork Places – Perhaps about 5% - so quite a small proportion.

Yet why does every playground strategy start with the playwork opportunities at the top and the environment as almost an after-thought? However good the quality of play experience the playworkers are providing at the playcentre or adventure playground, it will be meaningless for the majority of children.

What strategies do we need?

We have to make the environment fit for children to be able to play in and start there

We should be saying that residential roads should be suitable for children. There is no reason to assume that the car should be able to go at 30mph (48kph). Why shouldn't we say that in all residential roads there should be the assumption that pedestrians (old and young alike) should have the priority to run and walk about? There obviously needs to be an exception for important distributory roads.

20mph (approx 32kph) zones reduce deaths and injuries but are not slow enough to make the roads safe for children to play out.

We know from the observations that children want to be out there playing, want to be out getting healthy exercise. It can be seen from the observed differences in levels of playing out that it is the car that does the damage.

How can we measure it? We could start by going to the schools. A proxy measure would be to ask - how many walk to school unaccompanied by an adult? It won't be exact but would be a good starting point. Up until the 1960's virtually all 5 and 6 year olds went to school on their own. The first week or two the parents took them, after that they went unaccompanied.

If they went to school on their own you can reasonably assume that they went to their friends on their own, to the park on their own, they did little errands on their own. Certainly people of my age and their parents clearly recall doing this. That was what happened for generations. That was what was usual.

Nowadays I have observed that most children at primary school (5-11 years old) are taken to school by an adult. It is very rare to see children walking to or from school on their own. We can be 99% certain therefore that their play is also restricted.

This also means we need to change the consultations we carry out for children's play. Too often the location of the play place is assumed and the consultation is merely on the design and facilities.

"Where can you play?" is the crucial question. There's no point providing a play facility 500m away, however good it is, if you can't get out and play there every day.

Children's participation is important but it has got to be continuing, not one bit of participation when the playground is built and then forget about it.

Playgrounds/equipment will last, a long time, I am regularly inspecting equipment that's 20, 30 or 40 years old. Children change generations about every 5 years (a 6 year old is significantly different from an 11 year old) so we need participation and consultation as a continuing process.

Mediation – we should be having equal respect with children and adults. Getting them together and talking to each other. That's what works. All too often children are regarded as a "problem" and play facilities are used to keep them out of the way, thereby unintentionally restricting the "right to play".

We have got to believe in play, believe in the benefits of play. We know that if the children can get out, even if it is not a great exciting playground or playcentre, even if it is just their local road, they will play in exciting and interesting ways.

My research has found that children will have interesting play even in places which are not particularly what would be regarded as a good play environment. But they will play if you let them get out and play.

Questions

There was time for questions at the end of the presentation

Q: The impact of home zones – we've seen streets initiatives, particularly in London and Bristol, are these perhaps ways forward? You seem to be asking us to go back and re-look at issues of range behaviour in a much more significant way. (Home Zones are roads which are re-engineered and have trees and street furniture to give restrict road traffic and encourage community interaction. Like the Wohnorf.)

A: Home Zones? if you look at the A-Z map of London there are 63,000 roads in it of which you could say that probably 50,000 of these are side residential roads.

At the moment we are making about 10 a year into Home Zones so it will take 5,000 years before we have streets in London suitable for play. Stonehenge is less distance going back than this is going forward.

We have got to have a completely different designation. I lost that debate to people who said we must go for quality rather than for inexpensive solutions which could easily be repeated in thousands of roads.

Yes children's ranges - we really must look at them. But the first problem is that, children's transport in the UK is not counted as transport. So their short journeys to their friends, to the shops, round to the play area are ignored. We calculated when we did Joseph Rowntree Foundation study, (which you can download free off the website), that if you had got an area with 100 children and only 50 could play out and they did play out, they would make 281,000 journeys in a year. That's massive amount of transport. It's non-polluting, healthy exercise yet the Government and local authorities don't consider it transport. A lot of it is play but even if you want to be a purist about it and say it is not play the fact is that play is dependant on that transport - to play a child has to walk to their friend's, or walk to the corner where they gather, or walk to the patch of grass or concrete which is their usual play place.

I don't think the large amount of Lottery money poured into play has had the effect it should have had. What happened was there was a lot of money for play spaces but the "right to play" was not the central strategy. There are lots of new interesting play areas and I've been heavily involved in inspecting them and checking them for good design and safety. But the problem for many is that the location has been wrong and they've asked the wrong questions. They haven't asked children - (where) can you play freely near your home? They've said this is where the play area is going to be. So that has diverted them from thinking about the "right to play" and they have concentrated on the quality of play with little regard for whether children will be free to play there or not.

Q: Are there are any local authority play strategies that you know of that put the car in its place?

A: Not really - there are little bits here and there. I speak as an ex-playworker, I am passionate about adventure playgrounds, but the problem is that if you are really involved playwork and believe in it you tend to concentrate on that rather than the wider issues of the child's right to play. So the influence on local authorities is more about playwork than "play".

It is more the social landlords who are getting it right. Certainly they are much better than the commercial sector who, when they build a commercial housing estate, put the children's playground out of sight and out of mind because they want to get the highest price for the houses. The social landlords tend to consider community interaction and the design of their estates are generally better for children and are more likely to restrict the car.

Q: Where I come from (believed to be Indian sub-continent) there are poorer area without any playgrounds, without any special areas where people are too poor to have cars I see children playing outside.

A: Absolutely in line with what I am saying. Yes they will play out there. We are finding that in some inner city areas there are more accidents happening because the children are allowed to play out a little bit more freely. I wonder if there are some

areas where the children, of ordinary people who are not affluent, may well get better play opportunities and more exercise than the middle class children. You are absolutely right.

Visits

A visit by 15 members of the conference on the afternoon of the talk to the 2 housing estates found similar differences in the amount and ages of children playing out and moving freely round their neighbourhood. On the following day very heavy rain prevented observations

References

- 1 Wheway R, Millward A (1997) "Child's Play – facilitating play on housing estates" pub. Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation - freely downloadable from the CPAS website:
www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk
- 2 Hillman M., Adams J, Whitelegg N (1990) "One false Move: A study of children's independent mobility" London, Policy Studies Institute
- 3 Hughes Bob, England – Various publications and papers

Appendix

Over the last 20 years Rob Wheway has regularly carried out annual inspections (EN 1176 and BS 5696) for all tiers of local authority, housing trusts and commercial organisations. He has also carried out inspections of skateboard areas and indoor play areas.

In addition he has undertaken contracts (including risk assessments) leading to strategic and operational recommendations for:

- Belfast City Council
- Malvern Town Council
- Mole Valley District Council
- London Borough of Newham
- Nottingham City Council
- Rugby Borough Council
- Warwick District Council
- Wychavon District Council

He has carried out **observational and interview research** and consultations leading to strategic recommendations for:

- Basingstoke & Deane B. C. (Playschemes, Disabled Children, Play in Environment)
- Birmingham City Council (Play in environment and in play areas)
- Cardiff City Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
- Elmbridge Borough Council (Play Areas)
- Knightstone Housing Assoc. (Play on Housing Estates)
- Lewes District Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
- London Borough of Lambeth (Adventure Playgrounds)
- Medway Council (Play Areas)
- Oxford City Council (Playspace, Play in the Environment and Playschemes)
- Waltham Forest Housing Action Trust (Play/Youth Work and Playspace)
- Waverley Borough Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
- William Sutton Housing Trust (Play Areas and Where Children Play)

He regularly carries out “Inspecting Children’s Playgrounds” training courses for a wide variety of organisations and repeatedly for:

- Belfast City Council
- Bristol City Council
- Crawley Borough Council
- Forestry Commission
- Uckfield Town Council

He regularly advises on design and undertakes inspections of non-standard and “natural” play areas. He has carried out inspections for many Councils including 12 “Play Pathfinder” playgrounds (renewed for a further 12 the following year) for:

- London Borough of Camden

Following a successful audit of their playgrounds has been awarded a second three-year contract to assess their playgrounds and improve their operational management by:

- North Warwickshire Borough Council

He has run seminars for local authority managers to instruct them in how to have more robust playground inspection procedures yet save money at the same time for:

- LondonPlay