

# Where do children play?

## Introduction

Children play wherever they are. This might be indoors or out. Children play in their homes, at school, in childcare and play provision and in the public and private places they visit with their friends or with adults. For many children the primary outside play spaces are the streets and other open spaces near their homes. This fact sheet is about the types of places children use for outdoor play.

Where children play depends on a whole range of factors. Whether and how they play out-doors is influenced by their own age, interests, experiences and influences; the equipment and resources available to them; their parents' feelings about their safety and security; the area and surroundings in which they live; the accessibility of the open spaces they might want to use; the variety and attractiveness of potential play places and current play fads and fashions.

Most younger children tend to play around their homes where they are most likely to feel secure and comfortable. As they grow older the distances children go away from home to play begin to vary more widely. Whilst some children continue to choose to play indoors or near their homes, others spend

much of their time playing out, exploring and moving about. They tend to seek out their friends, finding places where they and their friends can be together. As they grow up and begin to feel more independent, playing further away from their homes and using the wider neighbourhood as their outdoor play space is a vital part of their developing independence and self-confidence.

If children are not provided with the sorts of play spaces and opportunities they want they will either miss out on these important developmental opportunities or will seek them elsewhere, often in places felt by adults to be inappropriate.

Although many children enjoy playing outside they do have some reservations. One of their biggest concerns is their fear of being bullied by older children. They are also concerned about traffic and are constrained by their parents' fears for their safety. (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995 and Children's Play Council and the Children's Society, 2001).

One study found that the parents of children in rural England were so concerned for their children's safety that they heavily supervised their

children's use of space. Children's free play and independent environment exploration were constrained as their parents acted as chauffeurs for them and their friends, taking them to organised activities. Free play in the countryside is also restricted by changes in farming practice (Valentine, 1997).

### **Play in the garden**

Where they have them children do use their gardens to play in. However, if they are keen to play with or meet their friends the garden is not always the best location. Children frequently play in their front garden, rather than at the back, so they can see their friends passing and make contact with them. (Whewey and Millward, 1997).

### **Play in the streets near home**

Children have always played in the streets and roads outside or near their homes. This quote from a recent study of play in a village in the 1950s and today is typical: 'During the daylight hours children played cricket, football, five stones, marbles and conkers. When it was dark and children got together to chase each other around playing hide and seek and other games'. (Tovell, 2000). Research shows that this continues to be the case. In the early 1980s Parkinson found that, during school holidays, children played most often in the streets close to their homes but went further from home as they got older. (Parkinson, 1985).

Similarly, research on housing estates in the mid 1990s found that children playing out tended to do so on the streets partly because they could more easily meet their friends there but also because much of the

time they are moving about in search of others. (Whewey and Millward, 1997). Another study in Northamptonshire found that young people frequently used the streets as a 'place to be' because there was nothing else for them to do in the locality. (Matthews, 1998).

Two surveys, carried out in 2001, found that children played out on the streets more often than anywhere else, even if this was not always their preferred play space. (Child Accident Prevention Trust, 2001, and Children's Play Council and The Children's Society, 2001).

### **Play in other parts of the neighbourhood**

Although the area near their homes is one of the main play places for many children, in both urban and rural areas, these spaces have frequently been impoverished by the encroachment of traffic and development.

Today, children's use of the local neighbourhood as play space depends on who and where they are. For example, one survey found that children in inner London were most likely to play out in local green spaces but also used the street or pavement, their own or other people's gardens and the local neighbourhood. Those in outer London chose similar play space but those in Hatfield (a commuter belt New Town north of London) were more likely to play out on the street or pavement than in local green spaces. The children from Hatfield also used their own and other people's private gardens more. (O'Brien, 2000).

Many children go out on their bicycles to play and to get to their play spaces. Much cycling takes place near children's homes, but children with road worthy bikes use them as part of their everyday routines for moving quickly around between different places where they play.

The recent introduction of Home Zones in England is one attempt to make local neighbourhoods safer places for children to play. A Home Zone is a residential street where landscaping, the road layout and traffic calming measures give priority to people over cars. (Biddulph, 2001).

Children also play on areas of land that they find interesting and exciting but which are not really there as play places. Cemeteries, waste-land, quarries, allotments, building sites and reservoirs all offer children exciting and challenging outdoor play opportunities. If there is no-where else as interesting for them to go, they will play in these places.

Other neighbourhood places where children play, and which help meet their developmental needs, include natural features such as rivers, fields, hedges and woodlands, school grounds that are open to the public, road side edges and the edges of common ground, sports fields, small parks and areas which are being made ready for reclamation and redevelopment.

However, evidence suggests that children are more restricted in their outdoor behaviour by their parents than they were even 10 years ago. O'Brien found that the number of primary school children who walked to school had decreased since 1990 and that there had also been a

reduction in the number of children who said they travelled to school without an adult. (O'Brien, 2000).

## **Play in parks**

Young people are one of the most common user groups of parks. They use parks as places to 'hang out'. They know about them because they used them as children and some young people spend most of their free time in parks, especially during the summer. They see parks as relatively safe environments, compared with the streets where they often feel they are not welcome. (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995).

Good parks also offer younger children, especially in urban areas, freedom and a play space away from traffic. The green spaces, trees, plants and small animals found in parks may be the only regular access city children have to the natural environment. Parks frequently have other features attractive to children for play. These include trees and bushes, wide-open flat green spaces, informal sports facilities, ponds and paddling pools, fountains, hills and slopes and smooth paths and surfaces.

One study found that in inner London 89 percent of the children and young people in their sample were within walking distance of a park, compared with 95 per cent of those in outer London and 91 per cent of those in the New Town. Thirty per cent of the children living in inner London had no private garden, whilst only 3 per cent of those in outer London and 1 per cent of those in the New Town had no garden. Almost half of the children in the study had visited a park in the last week. (O'Brien, 2000).

Although many adults consider that parks are essentially places for children they do express concern that the parks they use may not be safe or properly maintained. Many parents are unhappy about their children going to parks on their own. Children are aware of their parents' fears and frequently stay indoors unless accompanied out by an adult or an older child. Older children of around 10 and 11 are more likely to be allowed to use parks without adults but are usually with their friends. (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995).

Children are also very conscious of the poor quality of the parks near their homes. They are frequently seen as dirty, dangerous and unattractive places. (Cole-Hamilton, 2002).

## **Play in dedicated play space**

### *Unsupervised play areas*

Children's playgrounds are a common feature of both urban and rural landscapes and, when imaginatively equipped and well maintained, are popular with both children and their parents. Playgrounds are often located in parks but also frequently located in residential areas near children's homes. Children are more likely to use playgrounds in parks when they are with adults but tend to use those nearer their homes when they are out on their own or with their friends. Well-used playgrounds are an important meeting place for parents as well as children.

Cycling, skateboarding, roller-blading and scootering are all popular play activities and dedicated courses and ramps offer challenging and exciting play places where children and young people can develop and hone their skills. Where there are no

attractive facilities for 'play on wheels' children and young people will use the streets, curbs, walls, and steps, frequently to the disapproval of adults.

### *Supervised play provision*

A small proportion of children have regular access to open access, supervised play opportunities in adventure playgrounds, play-centres and holiday play-schemes. Where these exist they tend to be popular with both children and parents as they offer parents the confidence that their children are both safe and enjoying themselves, and children a wide range of play opportunities. Other open access facilities offering children play opportunities include city farms and wildlife and nature reserves.

### *Childcare provision*

Increasingly children whose parents are at work or in training spend much of their time, when not at school, in childcare provision. During term time this might be at breakfast and after-school clubs and during the holidays at play-schemes. People involved in providing this type of childcare have an important role in ensuring that the children they look after get good play opportunities.

### *Play in commercial play settings*

As opportunities for children to play out freely and on their own diminish so the development of privately owned and commercial play spaces increases. Many private businesses with public access, for example pubs, shopping centres, and private parks now offered dedicated play spaces for children. There is also an increase in pay-for-use playgrounds and sports facilities.

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The Children's Play Information Service produces factsheets and student reading lists on a variety of play topics, and can also provide customised reading lists in response to individual requests.

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