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Where do the children play? How policy can influence practice

Helen Woolley, Senior Lecturer, Department of Landscape,

E: h.woolley@sheffield.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Children's play is important for individual children and for society as a whole and this paper discusses some of the issues concerning the spaces that children might play in, in the external urban environment. First the paper seeks to briefly remind the reader about the importance of play, both for individual children and society as a whole. Second it discusses the types of spaces - playgrounds – which society currently usually provides for children to play in, in the outdoor environment in England. The paper then addresses some of the places that children like to play in, drawing upon evidence from research. This is followed by a discussion of some policies which can provide opportunities for children to experience different spaces for playing and experiencing the external environment. Finally there is a short reflection as to whether society will be able to use the opportunities these policies currently provide and thus provide spaces for play with a different character than we have been providing for the last 50 years.

Keywords: Social impact, Town and country planning, Recreational facilities

Where do the children play? Relationships between policies, places and practice.

*'Well you roll on roads, over fresh green grass, for your lorry loads, pumping petrol gas,
and you make them long and you make them tough,
but they just go on and on, and it seems that you can't get off.*

Oh, I know we've come a long way, we're changing day to day, but tell me

Where do the children play?'¹

INTRODUCTION

During the latter half of the twentieth century there was an increasing debate in England about children's play: what it is; what benefits derive from it; what happens if children do not experience play; why it is important for society as well as individuals; and where it takes place^{2, 3, 4, 5}. This dialogue has drawn upon a variety of research and influenced government policy and, through this, resulted in the allocation of a ring fenced sum of £155 million by the managers of the Big Lottery Fund. How this money should be spent was the focus of government deliberation⁶. One mechanism for supporting the distribution of this money is the organisation Play England whose play initiative has several aims. One of these is to: 'create, improve and develop children and young people's free local play spaces and opportunities throughout England, according to need.'⁷. So children's play, and provision for it, is very much on the agenda – politically, financially and in practice, in England at the current time.

It has been suggested that four elements are required to create a child's play environment: a place to play; a time to play, friends to play with and what the child actually does⁸. The aim of this paper is fourfold. First it seeks to briefly remind the reader about the importance of, 'what the child actually does', - play. Second it will discuss the types of spaces - playgrounds – which English society currently usually provides for children to play in, in the outdoor environment. The paper will then address some of the places that children like to play in, drawing upon evidence from research. This is followed by a discussion of some policies which can provide opportunities for children to experience more opportunities for playing and experiencing the external environment. Finally there is a short reflection as to whether society will be able to use the opportunities these policies currently provide us with

to provide spaces for play with a different character than we have been providing for the last 50 years.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY FOR CHILDREN AND SOCIETY

There have been many definitions of what play is ⁴ but for the purposes of this paper the definition accepted by Play England will be used, that is: 'play is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons' ⁷.

Throughout the paper the term child or children will be used and taken to mean children and young people up to the age of 18, as defined by the United Nations ⁹. Fifteen types of play have been identified and are commonly being accepted and increasingly used by professionals. These types are: symbolic play; rough and tumble play; socio-dramatic play; social play; creative play; communication play; dramatic play; deep play; exploratory play; fantasy play; imaginative play; locomotor play; mastery play; object play and role play ⁴.

There is an increasing evidence base of the role that play has in the lives of children and the many benefits that it provides to both individuals and society as a whole. During recent years a raft of research has been brought together which confirms this importance ^{2, 4, 5}.

These benefits can be summed up in the following statement from the *Charter for Children's Play* ¹⁰:

'Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to processes of human development. It provides the mechanism for children to explore the world around them and the medium through which skills are developed and practised. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, intellectual and educational development and acquiring social and behavioural skills.'

Indeed the benefits of play are such that lack of play may result in children with, 'poorer ability in motor tasks, lower levels of physical activity, poorer ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events, poorer ability to assess and manage risk and poorer social skills leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural difference' ⁴. So play is not just about fun, although this is a very important attribute of it, it really is good for children.

DEVELOPMENT OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH PLAYGROUNDS

There was a time when children in western countries were allowed to play anywhere and those of us who have, or have watched, children will know from observation and anecdotes that children will play anywhere – even at the breakfast table. The seminal work of the Opies affirmed what people, in the main, really knew – and I would suggest still know but do not always articulate within society that - '*where children are is where they play*' ¹¹.

However during the last forty or so years outdoor play provision for children in England has increasingly moved towards allocating very specific spaces for children to play in – playgrounds. Associated with this physical provision appears to be an expectation that they will play in playgrounds and nowhere else in the external environment. This trend of expecting children to play only in allocated spaces, can be considered to have derived from two aspects of culture. One of these is a sociological one of how we perceive children in society ^{12, 13}. The second has derived from the professional approach to the zoning of land. It is not clear how these two attitudes might be related to each other and this is not a focus for discussion here. However, the latter of these two issues is of direct significance to this paper, not only because I am a Chartered Landscape Architect with an interest in this area but also because of the anticipated readership.

Various authors have discussed the move towards spaces being specifically allocated for children, which began towards the end of the 19th century, and which, in the main, still exists in western urban areas. This has been described as the, 'initiation of the era of specialisation' ¹⁴. In England a range of legislation, commencing with the Recreation Grounds Act of 1859, allowed for the provision of 'playgrounds' and 'play streets' ¹². Following World War II spaces for children to play in became fewer in England as the bombed sites they played on were redeveloped and as vehicular traffic increased ^{15, 16}. The development of 'Adventure Playgrounds' was inspired by Emdrup in Denmark, where the first Adventure Playground was opened in 1943. 'Play Parks' were also developed during this time ¹⁷.

In the initial reconstruction period following World War II, concrete was used in the design and construction of many playgrounds. Then in the latter half of the 20th century most playgrounds across England became similar in character. This has meant that wherever one is in England the playground is likely to be similar to anywhere else in the country. Such playgrounds usually consist of metal play equipment, surfacing and fencing. Often the play equipment is all bought from one company, and not chosen for the play value it might provide. Increasingly the surfacing has changed from being tarmac to 'safer surfacing' which consists of wet pour – or sometimes tiles of – rubber. Huge amounts of money are now spent on such surfacing despite research which indicates that it is questionable with respect to absolute risk, cost-benefit and qualitative factors ¹⁸. These types of playgrounds are often put together by a play equipment company and not designed by landscape architects.

Over forty years ago playgrounds such as these, were described as, 'consisting of bleak, tarmac or asphalt with no shade or shelter with no where to get a drink or go to the toilet and surrounded by a tall forbidding fence' ¹⁴. It was perceived that these spaces were 'apparently built so that the child will be protected from the dangers of the city' ¹⁴. My own increasing concern with the design of these playgrounds has led me to coin the phrase 'KFC' playgrounds. The term KFC refers to the Kit of equipment, the Fence to keep the dogs out – or the children in - and the Carpet of expensive rubber surfacing, as can be seen in Figure 1. But are such playgrounds the only spaces that children want to and do play in, in the external urban environment?



Figure 1: A traditional playground using the Kit, Fence and Carpet approach

WHERE DO CHILDREN PLAY IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT?

There is evidence that children do, and want to, play in spaces in the external environment, other than those designated as playgrounds. The evidence covers a period of about forty years. Pioneering researchers of the 1960's and 1970's undertook groundbreaking

research into the experiences of children's play and exploration in different aspects of the external environment in urban areas ^{11, 19, 20, 21}. These academics set the basis for subsequent research in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Some of these earlier investigations were specific to one type of space while others studied a range of spaces used by the children and the 'home range' children had for using these spaces.

One way to understand where children play in the external environment is to examine the different types of spaces that they play in. In order to do this it is helpful to have some sort of typology of spaces to structure the discussion around and for this purpose domestic, neighbourhood and civic urban open spaces ²² will be considered. It is suggested that domestic open spaces include private gardens, community gardens, housing areas and allotments. Neighbourhood open spaces include parks, playgrounds, playing fields and sports grounds, school playgrounds, streets, city farms and incidental or 'natural' green spaces. Civic spaces are considered to include those open spaces relating to commercial, health, education, transport and recreational uses.

Individual gardens

Gardens can provide very important experiences for children, including opportunities for developing special meanings and memories ²³. In addition, gardens also provide opportunities for children to learn about the natural world around them and for play.

Research undertaken in California and Norway revealed that adults held many remembrances of playing in gardens relating to interaction with the natural environment where they reported as having played, 'under the berry bush,' 'under the big trees', 'on the swing' and 'in the tree house'. Others remembered more unstructured fantasy and physical play such as the use of flowers for people, and the building of piles of leaves to jump in ²³.

Communal gardens and courtyards

For some children home is associated with a communal garden or courtyard, rather than an individual garden. Such courtyards may include a tree, clotheslines a sand box and a slide²⁴. Often these spaces are not only played in by the children but also used by the adults.

Spaces associated with housing areas

An early study of play in housing areas was undertaken on 12 housing estates. This revealed that play in public space took place in roads and car parks, paved areas, public grass and gardens, as well as in playgrounds²⁵. Further research including 50,000 observations on 15 housing estates confirmed that children were playing in spaces in public areas which were not designated as playgrounds. These locations included roads and pavements, paved areas, grassed areas, wild areas, planted areas, access areas and unorthodox areas such as walls, fences and flat roofs of garages²⁶.

The fact that play in housing areas does not only happen in designated playgrounds, where they do exist, but also in other spaces has been confirmed by more recent research²⁷. In this work play was identified as taking place on roads, pavements, pedestrian and cycle paths and sometimes on route between different locations. Some of these locations were chosen because children could spontaneously meet up with friends. Other spaces were chosen because, 'a significant amount of play involves moving around the estate (either on foot or by bike) for its own sake, or to call on friends²⁷. This research also revealed that the estates which appeared to be most successful for play had, 'traffic calming, street closure, walls and driveways; grassy areas set back from the roads, a footpath network (for pedestrians and cycles) around and through the estate linking into the public open spaces

and; cul-de-sac layout with a spinal footpath network and informal play areas'. The conclusion was that the provision of a variety of spaces with different opportunities, such as equipped play areas and sports pitches in local parks, was important for children of different ages.

Parks

Parks may be the most frequently visited urban open space for children's play. The importance of parks for this purpose was confirmed by research which revealed that taking children to play was the main social reason for adults to visit urban parks, play areas and green spaces ²⁸. This is despite the fact that in some locations adults were not satisfied with the play areas provided and in other locations some adults were concerned that playgrounds had been removed. This research also revealed that children would like, 'better things to play on', and a focus group comment that, 'a more natural style of play is missing' ²⁸. More recently it has been identified that external spaces within neighbourhood areas, such as designated play areas and developed parks, provide spatial, physical and social opportunities for children while providing opportunities for play ²⁹.

School playgrounds

Some people are of the opinion that 'children don't play their own games any more' ³⁰ and research has revealed that such opinions are held extensively by staff in primary schools ³¹. However even recent research, let alone that from forty years ago, reveals that a wealth of play does take place in school playgrounds. From an adult's point of view such play may seem to be chaotic but some have tried to understand the play by categorising it. A recent categorisation is of, 'play with high verbal content, high imaginative content, high physical content and less structured play', ³².



Figure 2: School playgrounds can be creative and fun

This is not the place to have a full discussion about the play which does take place in school playgrounds but to remind ourselves that school playgrounds are a daily experience for children at school in term time. Thus these spaces should be designed and managed to facilitate play. Many primary school playgrounds are still only composed of tarmac and little else and yet children still find opportunities to invent all types of play with sticks, stones, grass cuttings, manhole covers, holes in walls and fences, to name a few^{32, 33}. Even more play opportunities – not to mention educational opportunities – are available where school playgrounds have been designed and managed in a manner which reflects the fact that some of this play is passive and that contact with nature is important for children.

Playgrounds with the provision of seating areas and vegetation or designed in a more creative and imaginative manner can provide opportunities for increased social contact and

'less structured play' which is as important as the structured play. Figure 2 shows a school playground in Germany which is creative and fun. Over the years Learning through Landscapes has proposed this approach to playgrounds.

Commercial spaces – in city centres

Many civic spaces, especially in the centre of towns and cities, were developed or initiated for community activities such as markets, festivals and celebrations. However as the 20th century progressed many such spaces were dominated by the business sector and became Central Business Districts (CBD). Within these, usually predominantly hard landscape areas, one of the social activities which has taken place towards the end of the 20th century is that of skateboarding. This activity, mainly – though not exclusively - undertaken by male teenagers is one expression of how this group of young people likes to play. They use the urban fabric of these spaces in a way which is unique and sometimes controversial, although research has revealed that often such controversy is based on hearsay and not fact³⁴. Skateboarders like these spaces for their play because it provides 'accessibility, trickability, sociability and compatability'³⁴. For some skateboarders there seems to be a constant battle to be accepted as people who have a legitimate right to be using these 'claimed' spaces – which are often not well used by other people. Sometimes the approach of decision makers in cities has been to exclude skateboarders by the use of a series of legal, social and physical controls in different locations³⁵. This is despite the fact that young people are increasingly acknowledged as being under provided for in urban open spaces²⁸.

Linear green spaces including transport corridors

Transportation corridors are generally places which are not considered to be safe for children to play in but there are other linear civic spaces which can provide opportunities for play. River and canal corridors are such spaces yet little research has been undertaken to investigate how children use canal and river corridors. One piece of research into this area has revealed that some local children were barely aware of the existence of a river, let alone of the opportunities for playing in or around it. When children were taken on a visit from school to a local river they enjoyed not only opportunities for educational experiences but also those for play including getting wet, games and throwing stones ³⁶. Other research has revealed that the use of 'greenways' by people, including children, is dependent not only on their existence but also on their design and management. Principles which were identified as affecting use include visibility of others, visibility by others, choice and control, solitude without isolation, environmental awareness and legibility ³⁷.

POLICIES AND HOW THEY CAN FACILITATE CHILDREN'S PLAY IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Having acknowledged that much of the current provision for children's play in the external environment in England has been in the form of playgrounds but that children like to play in a variety of spaces, not just playgrounds, how can policy help to facilitate this? There is a range of current policies which could be used as channels for allowing and facilitating children's play in different spaces. These include planning policy guidance, home zones, travelling to and from school, the Sure Start programme, health, housing ³⁵ together with the extended schools programme, and these will now be discussed briefly.

Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) 17 about Open Space, Sport and Recreation was revised in 2002, at a similar time to the publication of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce final report. The purpose of such guidance is to provide planners, and other professionals, across the country with a framework within which to work. In this revised version of PPG 17³⁸ a typology of spaces was defined as including: parks and gardens; natural and semi-natural green space, including woodland: green corridors (including rivers and highways); outdoor sports facilities (including football and other pitches); amenity green space; provision for children and young people; allotments; community gardens and urban farms; cemeteries, disused church yards and other burial ground and civic spaces. Although only one of these typologies mentions children and young people most of the other types of spaces can accommodate children's play in some form or another. In practice it is anticipated that the use of different spaces by children and young people will be identified as local authorities develop their green and open space strategies. Such strategies are suggested as an important way forward for local authorities by both research and policy^{38, 39, 40, 41, 42}. In such strategies the quantity, quality and accessibility of existing green and open spaces is being identified and this information is linked to the current and predicted demography of a local authority. This enables assessments of user needs to be made and standards to be set. Thus children and young people, as one group of society, should be identified, consulted and provided for. This is one significant opportunity to move the boundaries of provision for children and young people beyond the traditional playground.

Home Zones

The policy of 'Home Zones' has developed in recent years, following a campaign, of some years, led by the Children's Play Council and Transport 2000. The home zone concept can be seen as a development of two previous approaches to streets. First 'play streets'

existed in England and America in the early part of the 20th century and could be closed at certain times to allow children to play. A more direct influence has been the 'woonerf', a form of street development pioneered in the Netherlands in the 1960's. The main approaches to this type of street are the slowing of traffic by the use of design elements and shared surfaces resulting in a greater priority for people. In 2001 the Prime Minister announced a £30 million challenge fund for home zones in England. This has resulted in 61 schemes aiming 'to provide quality of life in residential roads by making them places for people', by acknowledging the, 'benefits of slow traffic speeds,' giving 'greater priority to non-motorised user' and the 'use (of) design to limit vehicles to very slow speeds'.⁴³. Evaluation of the schemes has revealed an increase in 'play and other activities' as one of the main benefits of these schemes. Many of these home zones do not appear to have specifically designed in elements for play but if an increase in play has been identified then this is a positive outcome. Perhaps future home zone schemes might provide more creative design elements and vegetation which can be used for play as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Home zones can allow for play (source Tim Gill)

Travel to school

Travelling to and from school is something that children do every day of the school term and because this is such a regular event it is an important opportunity for them to experience and play in the external environment. Sadly this opportunity is one which many children in contemporary English society are not allowed to experience. In 1971 80% of children aged 7 and 8 years old were allowed to go to school by themselves but by 1990 this figure had reduced to only 9%⁴⁴. The government's Transport White paper of 1998⁴⁵ sought to, 'reduce the need for children to be driven to school by encouraging safer routes for walking and cycling, giving greater priority to public transport'. School travel plans, safer routes to school and walking buses have all been identified, and in some situations, implemented. So the interesting question is why is it that between 1989/1991 and 2002/2003 the numbers of children, aged 5-10 and 11-16, both walking and cycling have decreased and those going by car increased?⁴⁶ This policy seems to be struggling to have the impact it could have on children's play and experiences of the external environment. In addition this approach is having a 'double whammy' with respect to children's health; the lack of exercise adding to the concern about children's health while the exhaust from the cars adds to the pollution of the atmosphere. How this trend can be reversed in urban areas is difficult to see without a multiple approach to policies, actions and practice relating to the use of cars, provision of public transport and the enhancement of streets and spaces on the routes to schools.

Educational policies

Increasingly much of children's time is spent in educational institutions. Not only do they go to school between the ages of 5 and 16 or 18 but the government is encouraging all

preschool children to attend Sure Start and Children's Centres. During the last 20 years or so after school clubs have been established in many locations around the country. From April 2007 the Extended Schools programme comes on line where schools are to provide opportunities for children for breakfast clubs and after school clubs. There is evidence that outdoor play and playtimes is very important for children in several ways. It can help their concentration and educational attainment³¹ while contact with nature has been shown to help those with Attention Deficit Disorder⁴⁷. So in light of this increasingly institutionalised childhood it seems more important than ever that these educational establishments have outdoor spaces which are designed and managed to allow for as many types of play as possible. It is also important that they are used as much as possible, whether that be for play times or for class times. In the way that many playgrounds in public spaces can be seen as limited in their design, and therefore probably their play value, so too many of the spaces associated with nurseries, Sure Start and Children's Centres, primary and secondary schools have much to be desired. These policies, along with the Building Schools for the Future programme, currently addressing secondary schools but in future years expanding to primary schools, give a unique opportunity to provide playful spaces for children's daily lives.

Housing policy

There is currently an extensive house building and house renovation project underway within England, with 4 million houses being built before 2021. Most of these new houses are being constructed in the south of the country in what are called the Housing Growth Areas. In the north nine Housing Renewal Areas are pledged with regenerating existing housing stock or replacing them with new properties in order to improve the standard of the living accommodation. It is clear that both of these programmes provide a significant

opportunity with respect to the design of the open spaces associated with them. As has been shown by the literature, children like to have a variety of spaces to play in associated with housing and this massive programme is an opportunity to move away from the provision of traditional playgrounds to a variety of spaces children can enjoy.

Health policies

Underpinning all of these different physical spaces in the urban environment which children may or may not have access to and which may or may not be suitably designed and managed for them to experience is a concern about the health of children in our nation. This has recently been highlighted by media reports of children as young as 8 years old being 14 stone in weight. Different age ranges are being affected by both physical and mental health issues. On the Wirral in the north west of England it has been identified that there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of obese and overweight 4 year olds in the 10 years to 1998 ⁴⁸. A 50% increase in obesity in children across the country has been identified in the last 10 years with 16% of children aged 2-15 coming into this category ⁴⁹. Such obesity in early life can lead to diabetes and heart problems in later life. In addition it has been identified that one in ten children suffers with depression and mental illness ⁵⁰. Poor diet and lack of exercise have been identified as two of the main causes of poor physical health, while poverty and social context is often seen to impact on mental health. However both physical and mental health can benefit from use of the outdoor environment, whether it be for physical exercise, relaxation or restoration of attention deficit ⁴⁷. Thus children's physical and mental health could benefit from a range of experiences, throughout their daily, weekly and seasonal activities by use of a well designed and managed outdoor environment.

CONCLUSION

It is somewhat daunting that statements made over forty years ago appear to still have much truth in them with respect to children, the context in which they are growing up in the western world and their play opportunities in the external environment. Lady Allen of Hurtwood's ¹⁷ assertion that:

'Children and young people living in the so-called civilised countries probably enjoy better living conditions than ever before: good hygiene, good food, better schools and better housing. But there still remains immense emotional poverty and privation. There may be less direct hardship, but we are aware of more depression, more mental illness, more violence, more delinquency and more drug taking'

is one which has many aspects which ring true today. However for some children in 'so-called civilised countries', some aspects of life have become worse because although there are opportunities for good food the current levels of childhood obesity indicate that these are not fully taken up, and as previously mentioned the occurrence of children with depression and mental illness is ten percent ⁵⁰.

Perhaps we would do well as a society to listen to the words of Aaron ¹⁴:

'It is thus important as a first step in the right direction honestly to admit to ourselves just how adversely modern urban society and suburban conditions do affect the lives of our children, so that we may find new answers to the problems. We cannot turn our backs on the economic advantages of specialization in the large city, just as we cannot escape the necessity for playgrounds in such an environment. But we can improve our playgrounds so

that children may derive more benefit from their play experiences within them; so that what they learn while playing in playgrounds will be of some use when they become adults'.

Again much of this statement rings true but it would be helpful in society today for us to replace the word playgrounds with 'opportunities for play' 'playable space' or 'playful landscapes'. In taking this approach we may be able to acknowledge:

'the spatial claims of children, not only to improve the everyday lives of children, but also to enrich the city and city life'.⁵¹

So an aim of the increasingly urbanising western and emerging Asian societies might be that,

'Play environments must be created wherever cities and towns are planned, wherever clubs or schools or hotels are built, wherever housing projects are developed'¹⁴

Reflecting on these statements of forty or so years ago might leave us feeling that nothing has changed with respect to the way in which we provide opportunities for children to play in the external environment. In some instances this is the case. However we have seen that there are a range of policies which, if implemented appropriately in practice might improve the current situation. I believe that through these policies, and the expression of them in practice, there is an opportunity to provide what might be called, 'opportunities for play'²⁸, 'playable space'⁵² or what I have started to call 'playful landscapes', possibly of the character seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Playable space/playful landscapes can use a variety of landscape elements.

There seems to be a general, though not yet proven in England, assumption, that the KFC approach to playgrounds does not provide for as many of the fifteen play types as playable space or playful landscapes might. Thus some consideration could also be given to the design, management, quality and character of such spaces in the future. Research elsewhere has shown that to encourage different types of play a range of design concepts is required: accessibility; safe challenges; diversity and clarity; graduated challenges; flexibility of physical elements; sensory experiences; different social experiences and different spatial settings⁵³. Also a variety of design elements have been identified as important and these include opportunities for risk taking, moveable parts, sand, water and mud, vegetation and the use of landform^{53, 54, 55}. My hope is that the planning policy guidance, home zones, educational policies, housing development and health concerns for

our children and young people will provide a framework for these design elements to be included in practice and provide healthier external urban environments for our children and young people in the future.

Photographs 1, 2 and 4 by Helen Woolley. Photograph 3 by Tim Gill

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