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STREET LIFE

Every child used to play in the street. Then the car drove them all indoors. Samantha Laurie hopes the Jubilee will get them outside for good



Images courtesy London Play

If you were among the one million people who marked last year's Royal Wedding with a street party, chances are that you will be hanging out the bunting for the Diamond Jubilee in June. In fact, so successful was last year's streetfesting that forecasters expect the number of requests for road closures to double this time around.

But for some communities the sight of kids playing together on the street has inspired more than just a blast of nostalgia. Around the country, residents are finding ways of closing their road to traffic on a regular basis, releasing children from TV bondage and getting them back outside.

In Bristol – a city now something of a champion of community street events – a number of residential roads have run street play events, and some now close regularly to traffic for a couple of hours to allow children to play freely after school.

One of these is Greville Road where, every Monday at 3.30pm, neighbours put

out the road closed signs, while two volunteer stewards stand at the closure points redirecting all traffic other than residents needing access. For two hours, kids of all ages, from toddlers to teenagers, play out semi-supervised while adults pop in and out of their homes.

"We are trying to get people to think of the residential road as a place where people live, not simply as a conduit for traffic," says Alice Ferguson, Director of *Playing Out* and instigator of Bristol's first 'play street'. "Closing to traffic isn't ideal, but it does make people think about the dominance of the car – both parked and

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moving – in residential roads. Streets should be places where people can sit, talk, read, play and walk. This is a step towards normalizing something that was once an important part of children's lives."

Sympathetic councils like Bristol, however, are still few and far between. But with mounting pressure to improve communities, address child obesity and calm traffic, government ministers are beginning to nudge local authorities towards such schemes. One project attracting interest is *Sunday Play Streets*, which will trial in Croydon this Easter with the closure of a busy cut-through, South Vale, every Sunday afternoon for three hours during the summer months.

"Children pollinate communities," says Paul Hocker of *London Play*, a group that helps communities like South Vale marshal their efforts. "By flitting from house to house they bring adults together and create safer neighbourhoods. Playing outside is good for everyone, not just kids."

Only 21% of children play out now, as compared to 71% in the 70s. Traffic is the single biggest reason for the mass retreat indoors. And yet, when asked, children would rather play on their own doorstep than anywhere else. Unlike parks and playgrounds, which for younger children usually require a special outing under adult supervision, the street is the first taste of independence; the first playspace in which they are not artificially segregated from adults.

"The street is the starting point for all journeys," writes author Tim Gill. It is a key step towards self-reliance and a place to learn boundaries from older children. And, crucially, it makes for fitter kids: one hour of street play, says *Play England*, burns off more calories than an hour of football.

In fact, play streets are nothing new. In the 1930s, Minister of Transport Leslie Hore-Belisha (of beacon fame) imported the concept from America. By the 1950s over 700 streets closed often on Sundays to allow children to play safely. But as car ownership increased, attitudes shifted heavily in favour of four wheels and street play went into freefall.

Some have taken matters into their own hands. In Peckham, neighbours in one street have organized a rota of volunteers who stand at the end of the street and warn kids of approaching cars. And in Hounslow, the council has turned to transport charity *Sustrans* to design psychological traffic calming devices, such as rugs, planters and street paintings, to help return communities to the streets.

Changing entrenched attitudes is hard – but not impossible. In Greville Road, many worried that they would not be able to gain access to their homes (they can, by driving more slowly); that kids would damage their property (parental responsibility applies, road closure or not); that children would play dangerously on the road at other times (they didn't). Yet encouragement and perseverance have prevailed.

Street parties have helped dispel the notion that it is negligent to let kids play outside. They have woken people up to the idea that the visibility and freedom of children is a sign of a healthy neighbourhood. Traffic speed on local roads, it has been noted, is largely governed by how much residents have

psychologically retreated from their street. A Jubilee street party offers a real chance to return from behind closed doors.

■ playingout.net;
londonplay.org.uk

