



Submission to the Play Commission, October 2024

Introduction

Playing Out / expertise

Playing Out started with a parent-led action on one street in Bristol in 2009. Frustrated by the lack of free outdoor play for their children and inspired by the play and freedom that they themselves enjoyed growing up, parents reclaimed doorstep space by temporarily closing the street to through traffic and opening it up for children, play and community. The results were amazing: neighbours of all ages and backgrounds came out to meet and chat, children of all ages and schools came out to play, and from that moment, the street community and children's lives began to change. The idea began to spread, first around Bristol and then [around the UK](#) and [internationally](#).

Fifteen years on, around 25,000 parents and residents across the UK have been part of making [play streets](#) happen in communities across the UK, directly benefitting 50,000 children. Playing Out has communicated and exchanged with **this large grassroots network** through our regular mailings, social media and bi-annual surveys, gathering ongoing live feedback on both the challenges for parents and barriers to play as well as on the many benefits of taking positive action and creating safe outdoor space for children.

The temporary play street model has clearly demonstrated both the deep value and importance of “doorstep play” (for children and communities) and the conditions needed to enable it. Our evidence on the policy changes needed for all children to be able to play out near home, every day, are informed by this direct learning.

We have also heard from many more parents over the years, looking for advice and support in the face of barriers to outside play, often in contexts where challenges are greater or more complex. This might be where councils are more closed to community action or less understanding of the importance of play and community, or where neighbours are particularly against children playing outside or space being reclaimed. However, mainly, these barriers are where communities are already facing greater disadvantage and challenges, for example in social housing situations where families are subject to ‘management’ and where space is off limits to children (eg No Ball Games signs or ‘play bans’).

On top of this responsive and reactive work, Playing Out has actively sought out responses and views on experiences, barriers and benefits of outside play from parents in diverse communities around the UK, through our project and research work, to ensure that our expertise is as inclusive and equitable as possible. For example:

Estates project 2015: working with diverse communities in high rise blocks in inner Bristol: <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Estates-Project-2015-16-Final-report-1-1.pdf> and <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/on-your-doorstep/playing-out-on-estates/>

Playing out in Hartcliffe 2016: child led research (including parents) into the barriers to outdoor play in an area with high levels of poverty and disadvantage in Bristol : <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Room-13-Playing-Out-in-Hartcliffe-commission-Report-June-2016.pdf>

Safer Streets in Hartcliffe 2017: child led project (including film and parent engagement) around the impact of traffic danger on children's freedom: <https://playingout.net/inspiration/creative-projects/hartcliffe-safer-streets-films-event/>

Barton Hill parent engagement 2021: research (co-produced with University of Bristol) with Somali parents living in a tower block community on the barriers to doorstep play (findings available).

Playing Out Close to Home, The African Pot Project 2023: filmed action-research/ discussion on the benefits of and barriers to outdoor play with multi-generational West Indian diaspora in central Manchester (Hume, Old Trafford.): <https://playingout.net/inspiration/creative-projects/playing-out-close-to-home/>

'How does race affect children's access to outdoor play?' Dulce Pedrosa, 2023: a Playing Out commissioned review of existing literature and practice related to race, ethnicity and children's access to outdoor space and play: <https://playingout.net/blog/playing-fair-how-does-race-affect-childrens-access-to-outdoor-play/> and <https://kumu.io/DulceP/playing-out-review-of-the-role-and-impact-of-race-and-ethnicity-on-outdoor-play#untitled-map>

As part of this work, we support diverse parent and other voices to be heard on the importance of outdoor play and the barriers experienced, as this is key to inclusive change e.g:

<https://playingout.net/blog/growing-up-playing-out-and-freedom-for-my-son/>

<https://playingout.net/blog/its-changed-our-lives-how-playing-out-helped-my-children-my-neighbours-and-me/>

<https://playingout.net/blog/find-your-village-growing-play-and-community-on-a-tower-block-estate/> (also Samira Musse's chapter in Raising the Nation by Paul Lindley, which we supported Samira to write).

In parallel to our grassroots work, we have also worked closely with many other bodies, organisations and individuals who impact the context for children and outdoor play, thereby engaging with 'top down' decision making and change as well as collaboration with partners and allies to actively help to bring this about.

Since 2009 we have worked with countless community organisations across the UK, representing general community needs, or specific to children's health / physical activity, community wellbeing or sustainable travel/ environment. Many are located in areas of greater disadvantage or challenge.

We have supported hundreds of local government representatives, giving advice, problem solving, training and encouragement towards policy change and support for community action around children and play. As a result, over 100 local authorities have put a supportive play streets policy in place, with many more interested and engaged. Some have stepped up as Beacon Councils to help advise others around play streets. Some, such as Leeds City Council, are also leading on wider child-friendly policies and approaches.

We have collaborated with many other organisations from areas and concerns overlapping with ours: children's rights and equalities (CRAE, Save the Children), physical activity (British Cycling, Sport England, Cricket Board, Intelligent Health), community action (Eden), streets (Sustrans, Living Streets, 20 is Plenty, Brake).

We have taken a lead role in encouraging campaigning around children's need and right to play out. For example, lobbying and campaigning [during the pandemic](#), leading to formal inclusion in the [Covid Inquiry](#). We've also worked on many joint national campaigns, e.g. [Summer of Play](#) with Save the Children, cycling and playing out with British Cycling, playing out and sport with ECB. Our work in this area has also included policy submissions and lobbying such as our joint proposal to bring about the

recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment and to produce a follow up report and parliamentary event (with TCPA, Fields in Trust, Tim Gill) and our submission (with Tim Gill) to the NPPF consultation, and related guidance to other organisations supporting children's needs and rights in planning.

We've also worked with many academics and universities over the years on joint evaluation and research, conferences and other projects. All of the above work also includes collaborations with international partners, particularly around advising on and spreading the idea and impact of play streets. All of this has contributed to our experience of top down/ policy contexts and our more formal knowledge and expertise around the areas of children/childhood, play, community, built environment, equalities and activism/ change-making.

Our submission to the Play Commission draws on all this expertise over 15 years.

Why 'playing out' matters

Until a few decades ago, playing out with friends - on or around your own street or estate - was a normal part of life for most children across the UK. This everyday outdoor play gave children a huge amount: physical activity and skills; social contact and friendship (often across different ages, cultures or backgrounds); learning, independence, resilience and community belonging - as well as the deep intrinsic value and pure enjoyment of free, child-led play.

It didn't matter where you lived, what your family situation was, how much money you had, or whether your parents had the time and means to take you to places. If you could play out, you had all this – and the related health and developmental benefits - available to you for free.

But children's time spent outdoors, outdoor play, 'roaming range' and independent mobility have all massively reduced over a few decades. For many children, organised clubs, classes and activities have taken the place of free outdoor play. However, these only very partially compensate for the loss of everyday freedom to play with others. They also often require money, transport and/or an adult to organise or accompany, thereby excluding many children without these things.

This loss of outdoor freedom has contributed hugely to the current state of children's physical and mental health. Even pre-pandemic, [80 per cent of children were not getting the basic hour per day of physical activity they need to be healthy and well](#) and one in four children now leaves primary school clinically obese. Not surprisingly given the above (and other factors) children from the poorest backgrounds are far more impacted. Children's mental health is also at crisis point and again, poorer children are [far more likely to be impacted](#).

This loss of everyday freedom and outdoor play from children's lives should be a cause of huge concern. It is also clearly a matter of [spatial and social justice](#).

Policy to address the child health crisis and related inequalities has focussed on food, organised sport, education and provision of services. But the problems are getting worse, not better - the policy is not working.

Conversely, tackling the root of the problem, including restoring children's everyday freedom, could go a long way to ensuring all children, regardless of background or circumstance, get what they need to be happy and healthy.

And playing out is not only important for children - it can also act as a 'glue' in communities helping adults to connect and making shared outdoor spaces feel safer and more lived in. This can in turn create a 'virtuous circle' - parents feel happier to let their children play out when they know and trust their neighbours.

It is in all our interests as a society to restore children's freedom to play out near home. And this is more about policy change and vision than it is about big spending. In short, it could be a game changer, with the right understanding and political will.

A note on our submission

As the subject of the Play Commission overlaps with all Playing Out's work over the past 15 years, we have tried to give key evidence in summary only, whilst also not missing out anything important.

We are aware that other organisations and experts will provide comprehensive submissions on the value and importance of play itself, and on specific play spaces (parks, green spaces, public playgrounds, Adventure Playgrounds and schools). For this reason, we are focussing our submission on the heart of our work: children's everyday freedom and informal outdoor play in streets, estates and the wider built environment.

In giving evidence on each of the headings below, and re-submitting our evidence from the recent parliamentary Inquiry on Children, Young People and the Built Environment, there is inevitably some repetition or signposting between sections.

In each section we include links for further reading and can provide more information or discuss anything on request.

In each section, we also point to the broad changes needed. In 'Recommendations', we then set out our full recommendations for specific policy changes and other action, as well as linking to our own [Manifesto](#).

Evidence

I/ Places to Play

Even more than specific or 'destination' places to play (which, however good, may not be easy or possible for children to get to), children need free access to the whole public realm - from their front door, into their own street or estate and around their neighbourhood. This is even more important for children who have the least (lower income, no garden, no access to a car or transport) where organised clubs, classes and activities are also not so accessible.

Since other submissions will talk more about designated play and green spaces, we want to focus on two key ways in which all children's lives could be dramatically improved, enabling them to play out as part of everyday life.

Doorstep play

Doorstep play means children having immediate, easy access to safe, shared space right outside their home. Space where they can play freely and semi-independently from an appropriate age, together with other children in their community.

Play streets have clearly demonstrated the [huge value of doorstep play](#) for children and communities. They also show that, given the opportunity to play out on their doorstep, children seize it enthusiastically. And the wide take-up of this parent-led model shows how much parents want this for their children.

However, play streets (temporary, dependent on adults taking action) are not the long-term answer. All children need to play out as part of everyday life, wherever they live. This means creating streets and housing estates where doorstep play is prioritised and 'built in'. The key enabling features for this are:

1. Safe space

The main barrier to children accessing the space on their doorstep is car dominance and traffic danger (see parent section). Low or no-traffic streets or shared doorstep spaces are ideal, and in new-build housing should be the norm, with car access and parking kept to the boundaries and speeds kept to walking pace outside children's homes.

See more here: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/blueprints-for-change-how-homes-designed-for-children-could-revitalise-uk-housing>

In existing residential streets, implementing and enforcing lower speed limits (20mph or lower), together with design that prioritises people – especially children – over vehicles, should become the national norm, backed by Government funding for such measures.

Other safety issues (crime, ASB) are perhaps more difficult to address but there is evidence to show that, alongside investing in communities, increasing positive community use of space can help parents to feel more confident about allowing children to play out (see below).

2. Permission to play

Even if doorstep space is physically safe, children and parents need to know they have the right to play in that space. The explicit right to play outside your own home should be written into national and local policy. 'No Ball Games' signs (effectively telling children they are not welcome and empowering adults to complain about children playing) should be banned and children's right to play outside written into tenancy agreements. The distinction between play and ASB should be clarified and communicated widely, including to police, councils and housing providers. The law around playing in the street should also be clarified and police guidelines updated to reflect this. (See also section on right to play)

3. Other children

Children want and need to play with other children, not in isolation. This means creating safe shared/communal spaces that children can access easily and independently from their homes. Many existing residential streets and housing estates have the potential to provide this, through removing physical or 'permission' barriers to children accessing existing doorstep space. New housing should build this in and such spaces should never be segregated by tenure.

4. Community

To play out, children need to feel safe and welcome in their doorstep space. Enabling and encouraging wider community use of outdoor space for residents of all ages is an important factor in this and can also be 'built in' and encouraged through design (overlooking, seating, planting, low-traffic streets etc). Community connection, belonging and 'ownership' of doorstep space is also important and, towards this, all local authorities could implement policies to support and enable 'DIY' or community-led physical changes to streets and estates, as well as temporary community-led action such as play streets and street parties.

These measures to reclaim space and bring communities together are especially important in areas of higher crime and anti-social behaviour, alongside essential measures to actually tackle the issues. Coming together in shared space - as happens with play streets - creates a stronger community, more 'eyes on the street', more trusted adult relationships and a greater sense of belonging and agency for children and families. <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/building-stronger-communities/>

Independent mobility and active travel

Enabling children's independent mobility and active travel (walking, cycling, wheeling) is vital for their everyday physical activity and health, as well as for the environmental benefits. It is also the best way to 'open up' the neighbourhood to children, giving them much greater access to local green/playable spaces and places, as well as other amenities. And, for children, there is little distinction between mobility and play – often, when getting to places, children 'play on the way', or they may simply want to be out and about with friends, exploring the area with no particular destination.

Until now, efforts to increase children's walking and cycling have primarily focussed on encouragement and education (e.g. 'walk to school week', road safety and cycle training). This has also focussed primarily on the journey to school which, although a good place to start, is not the only journey children need to make.

But this approach, whilst perhaps well intentioned, is highly problematic, for two main reasons.

1. It has not made streets safer for children
2. It has not increased children's independent mobility

We need a different policy approach – one that prioritises children's freedom, actually reduces road danger at source and firmly places the responsibility for this on policy-makers, planners and drivers.

We firstly need to tackle the misconception that roads have become safer because casualty statistics have improved. As cars began to dominate UK streets, children who were outside – playing, walking and cycling, as they always had done – began to be killed in huge numbers, reaching [a horrific peak](#) of 396 child pedestrian deaths in 1983.

Tragically for children, the policy response to this was to 'educate' children about the dangers of the roads - and to keep them off the streets altogether - rather than tackling the source of the danger and protecting children's right to be out on the streets where they lived. Understandably, parents began to curtail their children's freedom to be out and about and whilst child casualty statistics have reduced, it seems likely that this is largely due to the corresponding huge decline in children being outside. Streets themselves have not become safer – if anything, the opposite is true. Increased traffic volume and vehicle size, together with a change in driver culture/behaviour mean that streets feel - and are - more hostile than ever for children.

And the numbers are still far, far too high. In 2023 (the latest published statistics), [1,832 child pedestrians and cyclists](#) (0-16) were killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions – including on pavements and pedestrian crossings. Each child death has untold impact for families and communities. Children are at a greater risk of pedestrian injury than any other age group, with [road traffic injuries being the second leading cause of death in 5–14 year-olds](#).

And children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are [at least five times](#) more likely to be killed on the roads as pedestrians than their peers from the highest socio-economic groups. The evidence is clear that [slower speeds and safer streets](#) would save lives and give children more freedom.

Children as a group have undoubtably been the most badly impacted by what our roads and streets have inadvertently become: congested, unwelcoming, unhealthy and unsafe. Conversely, taking a child-centred approach to transport planning could transform streets into the healthy, pleasant, safe, equitable and effective public spaces they should be for everyone.

2/ Parents and Play

Drawing on our 15 years of working responsively, supportively and proactively with parents across the UK (see submission intro for details), we can share the following summary information around outside play and parents – the barriers and benefits (more info in links or on request).

Traffic

Research shows that parental concern about traffic danger¹ is the main reason children are not given 'licence' to play out near home or to walk/cycle to school².

National Playday surveys (e.g. 2013) and own research also reflect this. For example our [Safer Streets in Hartcliffe](#) project that came out of our 'playing out' research with children and parents on the Hartcliffe estate, Bristol: (see p31 on traffic <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Room-13-Playing-Out-in-Hartcliffe-commission-Report-June-2016.pdf>).

Parents' fear is justified. Children are at a greater risk of pedestrian injury than any other age group, with road traffic injuries being the second leading cause of death in 5–14 year-olds. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214140518300756?via%3Dihub>

In 2023 (the latest published statistics), 1,832 child pedestrians and cyclists (0-16) were killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions – including on pavements and pedestrian crossings. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain#road-user-type-ras02>

Children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are at least five times more likely to be killed on the roads as pedestrians than their peers from the highest socio-economic groups. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214140518300756?via%3Dihub> The evidence is clear that slower speeds and safer streets where children live would save lives and give children more freedom.³

Children and parents want this: our [Safer Streets in Hartcliffe](#) project reflected this concern, and it is also the key motivation for parents throughout the UK wanting to organise a play street to enable outside play. However, the percentage of parents able to take this action is tiny. The rest are living with the reality of unsafe streets, keeping children inside, accompanying them to places or – if an option – driving their children around, thereby exacerbating the problem.

As well as demonstrating parents' wishes for safer, less car dominated streets and the need for measures to bring this about, play streets uptake – and evaluation and feedback - also demonstrate the huge benefits of safer doorstep space for children and play: physical activity, mental well-being, developing skills (such as learning to ride a bike), socialisation and friendships, sense of community connection and trusting neighbours, growing independence, feeling safe and belonging – as well as enjoyment and the intrinsic value of play for children in the moment.

In our [2023 survey of parents and residents participating in play streets](#):

- 72% of parents felt their children are more active as a result of play streets
- 78% of parents felt their children are healthier
- Parents said their child/children either learnt or improved: ability to ride a bike (78%); ball games (66%); scooting/skating (82%); running (59%)
- 80% felt their children's mental health positively impacted

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/07/man-arrested-after-boy-seven-dies-in-folkestone-crash>

² Shaw, B. et al (2015) [Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action](#) University of Westminster

³ https://www.20splenty.org/duty_of_care_mandates_20mph

- 88% had more social confidence and freedom
- 68% learnt about road safety

(for stats on community safety see Strangers section below).

Links:

- University of Bristol play streets evaluation: https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Play-England_Why-temporary-street-closures-make-sense-for-public-health.pdf
- Impact overview page: <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>
- Parent blog: <https://playingout.net/blog/its-changed-our-lives-how-playing-out-helped-my-children-my-neighbours-and-me/>
- 20mph research: https://www.20splenty.org/duty_of_care_mandates_20mph

Temporary play streets (a few hours a month or fortnight) for just some communities and children is obviously not the answer. However the model and evidence of benefits clearly demonstrate what needs to change in terms of road safety and safer doorstep space in residential areas for all children, and what the vast impact on children's health and lives would be if this were to become reality – as, in fact, it already is more so in eg The Netherlands.

Strangers/ unknown adults

'Stranger danger' (fear of your child being abducted by a complete stranger) has always been a parental concern but this has grown disproportionately over the decades, largely due to huge media / increased coverage of random incidents. Many parents are aware of this, but still feel the same fear/concern. Professional bodies are starting to address this. A parent focussed - and council/police backed - campaign calling for a change of approach ([Clever Never Goes](#)) recognises the negative impact and the need for children to have more freedom:

"For 50 years we've been warning our children about 'stranger danger'. Yet most strangers won't harm children, and many people that do pose a risk to children are not strangers. Today's children live in an increasingly shielded world. They spend less time playing outdoors and moving about independently (for example walking to school) fuelling a rise in childhood obesity and mental health problems. Safety which simply curtails children's independence becomes toxic, depriving them of the emotional intelligence, creativity and problem-solving skills that are vital to their development and, ironically, will actually keep them safe."

More proportionate is parents' fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, which we have found is usually far higher in communities facing greater disadvantage, inequality and other related challenges. Parents report a fear of other adults, or even young people that they do not know, in relation to knife crime, drugs, mental illness and erratic behaviour, violence and other threats. These fears are based on real dangers and parents are understandably fearful of letting their children out without an adult. See p31 of our research report with children and parents in Hartcliffe: <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Room-13-Playing-Out-in-Hartcliffe-commission-Report-June-2016.pdf>) and parent blog by Samira Musse from the Barton Hill estate, Bristol: <https://playingout.net/blog/find-your-village-growing-play-and-community-on-a-tower-block-estate/>

In many communities, play streets and other interventions that bring people together in a shared space around children and play can massively help to break down barriers between people of different backgrounds, ages and interests and help to strengthen connections and a sense of community and belonging, thereby also increasing a feeling of safety and 'eyes on the street'.

In our [2023 survey of parents and residents participating in play streets](#):

- 94% felt they now know more people on their street
- 91% felt their street feels a safer and friendlier place
- 91% feel they belong more on their street
- 95% feel more involved in their community

- 64% reported their children playing out at other times
- 88% reported children interacting with other adults on the street
- 78% said that neighbours have more contact outside of play street

Links:

- Impact overview: <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>
- Parent blog: <https://playingout.net/blog/its-changed-our-lives-how-playing-out-helped-my-children-my-neighbours-and-me/>

Temporary play streets (a few hours a month or fortnight) for just some communities and children is obviously not the answer. However, the model and evidence of benefits clearly demonstrate how lives can change when communities come together in safe space. Again, it is shared, safe doorstep space (free to use by parents and children) that is key – so how can this be created, unlocked and encouraged as widely as possible in all communities, estates and new developments?

In communities where crime and anti-social behaviour make parents afraid for their children to be out alone, due to very real dangers, play streets or other interventions do bring benefits (e.g. parent blog: Samira's activism and work in Bristol to create 'the village': <https://playingout.net/play-streets/parent-and-resident-stories/samira-in-bristol/> and <https://playingout.net/blog/find-your-village-growing-play-and-community-on-a-tower-block-estate/>).

However, the imperative and only real solution to the barrier is to address the issues themselves, and the underlying causes that are very often linked to poverty and inequality. See parent blog and call for change by Otis in central Manchester <https://playingout.net/blog/growing-up-playing-out-and-freedom-for-my-son/>).

Permission to play

We have gone from a society where up until the 70s and into the 80s the majority of children played wherever they were - doorstep, estates, on the way to school, any public space that looked inviting (any of which might have come with some adult annoyance or need to comment or request to move on) with parks as the special destination green and fun spaces to one where parks - sometimes even only the fenced off play areas within parks - and private gardens are now considered almost the only acceptable spaces for play, , and any adult annoyance can be the basis to stop play.

It is partly directly through parent feedback that we have become aware of the extent of this growing lack of understanding and tolerance around children's outdoor play over the years – sometimes amounting to hostility. It has significantly worsened during and following Covid-19 (for complex reasons, including the huge social shift to many more people now working from home). And to many parents, it completely contradicts the other 'messages' and huge pressures on them – and their own great need and wish - for children to be active and healthy.

This lack of tolerance or understanding includes complaints from the following (seen by Playing Out):

- People living near schools about the noise of children playing at breaks and lunch times
- Tenants without children or older tenants complaining about the noise or presence of children playing in outdoor public spaces or private spaces meant to be for all residents
- Tenants complaining around even small play eg one small child being out on a bike with a parent in the car park
- Parents reported to police or social services for allowing their children freedom to roam but it is seen as 'neglect'

And from agencies/bodies:

- Play labelled 'anti social behaviour' alongside eg drug selling in letters to tenants

- Tenants threatened with eviction or penalties as a result
- Proliferation of No Ball Games signs across housing estates
- Increase in signs within estate playgrounds saying 'children under 12 must be accompanied'
- Increase in housing developments that include playable space at plan/approval stage and then forbid this once occupied
- Current playable public space being lost to new housing developments because it is not valued or recognised as such
- Involvement of police in complaints around play and noise
- Secondary schools telling children not to run around at breaks or on their way home

Parents who contact us about these things know that their child wants to play and that it is good for them. But they do not know where they stand or what their rights are. If in social housing, they are often afraid of the consequences if they push back. (See Rights section for more info on all of this).

All of these barriers have a far greater impact on children already living in poverty or facing disadvantage because their access to space can be less (no gardens, more dangerous traffic, more restrictions such as No Ball Games...) and their access to compensatory alternatives for physical activity and friendships (clubs, classes and activities often requiring money, an adult to take you or a car to get there) are also much less. Our work in this area over the years has increasingly led us to understand children's access to outside public space as [a spatial justice issue and a social justice issue](#) that urgently needs addressing.

Parent led play streets or playing out sessions and other interventions can temporarily reinstate permission to play in a street, car park or other communal space, thereby giving back spaces to children / play and reminding the public and other bodies that children need to play. They are also important as signs of 'push back' and parent power:

In our [2023 survey of parents and residents participating in play streets](#):

- 59% of residents said that play street sessions have led to neighbours getting involved in other community activities, groups or campaigns
- <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/encouraging-active-citizenship/>

However, there can be a danger that authorities see street play as only possible/allowed on a play street (something we have seen in police correspondence), based on a misconception that roads are primarily or only for cars. Far ranging and significant national changes are needed to reclaim permission to play – many of them not costing large amounts, but rather relating to public and professional education, or to policy and to rights.

Social judgement / pressure

Parents often report wanting to let their child walk to their primary school independently or to play out – but that fear of social judgement prevents them, because these things are no longer the norm. Would they be seen as a bad parent? Are they allowed? The fewer parents giving their children some freedom, the harder it becomes for others to do so: children do not want to play out alone, and there is also safety in numbers. Parents losing confidence about allowing children freedom to play out is therefore a vicious circle.

It is clear there is a huge need for education around play and children's rights (for parents, public, professionals in e.g. education, police, councils, government) that would give parents confidence in individual actions to allow and support their children to play and get around independently, and to encourage a virtuous circle rather than a negative one.

Play streets enable parents to come together around this shared wish for children to play out more and to take action together – and tens of thousands have done so. This puts into action the 'virtuous circle'

of change outlined above and in [our culture change diagram](#). It also shows what parents can and will do if they don't feel alone with an issue. Just as the more recent grassroots parent campaign around phone use ([Smart phone free childhood](#)) has brought over 100,000 parents together to take collective action where alone they felt 'an outlier' and peer pressure to conform. All of this demonstrates the potential of harnessing parent power and collective voices and action around play in order to change the status quo, alongside – or to help bring about – local and national policy change.

Screens and digital use

The media, government and other bodies often blame screens for why children are not outside and active anymore. Or rather, they blame 'lazy parenting' or even 'lazy children' for being on screens all the time. The reality – as expressed through almost all of our parent interactions over 15 years – is that:

- the loss of freedom to play out predates the widespread use of smart phones and hand held devices (ie when we originally started our work);
- children do not have the choice to play out and be active due to all the reasons given in this and other sections
- parents feel dependent on screens for interest, entertainment, connection, learning and adventure as well just dealing with children who are stuck indoors and isolated for long periods
- when given the opportunity – such as a play street session – children consistently choose to be outside, playing with other children in real life

In short, whilst getting children off screens can be a big challenge, the environment (as described in the barriers above) is a huge block to children playing outside and getting around independently, and the greatest factor in children's lives becoming increasingly indoors, inactive and isolated. This in turn fuels children being increasingly on-line and finding the digital parallels (but not real life equivalence/benefit) to connection, adventure, learning and so on.

Most parents we speak to, from every social, ethnic and geographic background, are very unhappy about their children's reliance or amount of time on screens. But they do not feel they have easy alternatives. For more on screens and digital see 'Digital Play' section.

Overall...

Our work with parents around the UK shows that parents are constantly told about the dangers and barriers to children having more freedom to play outside with friends – traffic, strangers, crime, prohibitions, social judgement. At the same time, they are made very aware of the need for children to be active and physically and mentally healthy and well, and the dangers of too much time and freedom on-line. What they don't have are easy, accessible solutions (eg p32 of our research report with children and parents in Hartcliffe <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Room-13-Playing-Out-in-Hartcliffe-commission-Report-June-2016.pdf>).

Parents and parenting have changed hugely over the past few decades. Parents are far more likely to be both working, are largely time poor, and are put under huge pressures around their children's physical and mental health, education, entertainment, happiness – often with accompanying financial, time and transport costs – whilst at the same time, the original free and accessible solutions to some of these things – such as outside play with other children and freedom to get around - have been eroded and are no longer possible or the social norm.

Where children and parents already face greater disadvantage and inequality, these pressures are largely higher, and the available options for children are largely fewer, thereby increasing health and other inequalities for children. On top of this, younger parents may themselves have grown up without much play or playing out. Understanding of the value – and good parenting value – of play and free outside play for children has been lost.

An education campaign for parents and professionals that promotes this fundamental value and official UN right (see Rights section) would give more choice and power to parents and would also shift the responsibility more fairly onto the environment, education and local and national decision makers, as well as on parents, to fulfil.

3/ Digital Play

In addition to the above feedback on screens and outside play under Parents and Play:

In countless consultations, the most recent and biggest being that of the Children's Commissioner in 2021, children themselves regularly express the wish to play outside with friends more – in real life – as a top priority. In this [on-line survey with over half a million responses](#), wanting places to play and fun things to do, with an emphasis on spending time with friends, wanting to be outside and valuing outside spaces for play, were all mentioned as important, with 'play' being one of the most frequently used words in children's responses.

The play streets movement too demonstrates this wish for outdoor play with friends. Consistently, children choose to be outside and playing rather than indoors alone on screens, demonstrating that where children have an actual choice due to safe space to play, they choose this (see also play street survey parent responses above).

There is an alarming tendency in some research and discourse to equate digital play and its activities and benefits with free outdoor play, and we believe it is important to challenge this. Yes, digital play is play: it is not adult led, it is a space for freedom and creativity and imagination - often a way bigger one than children get in real life spaces! And yes, it will have some of the same benefits of real-life play (e.g. developing imagination). It will also have some others that are unique to digital play (such as digital skills, digital connection, creativity and adventure). And of course it has its own risks and dangers, some of which are significant and alarming, not least because it IS such a free and unregulated space (ie children can come across and access the most extreme content there is).

All of this is best fully explored by people who are experts in digital play. However, what we believe is dangerous (to advocating, decision making and so to outcomes for children) is to imply that there is an equivalence between digital and outdoor play, and that children can get the same benefits from either.

No matter what benefits there are in digital play, the fact is that children are ultimately mainly sedentary, indoors, inactive and physically alone when they participate. When they lift a block on Minecraft, they are not physically lifting anything. When they move through landscapes, they are not physically moving (unless using VR), using physical energy or developing any physical skills. When they make friends digitally, they are not learning how to socialise in real life. When they have adventures and challenges and take risks and problem solve, they are not learning how to do any of these things – so crucial to becoming a functional and thriving young adult - in real life settings.

This distinction may not matter quite so much for the child who is getting some of this from the rest of their life, largely facilitated by their parents. Maybe they go on cycling holidays or are part of clubs and outdoor activities, and have a good, organised social life. For these children, digital time will add new layers - though none of these organised activities can replace the benefits of outside free play for any child, not led by an adult, and freedom to get around.

However for the poorest children who are not getting those 'compensatory' activities, and do not have freedom to play out either, they can be spending most of their non-school time, including weekends and holidays, only indoors, alone, and on-line. This is contributing to the terrible physical activity levels and health outcomes of many of the poorest children and needs addressing.

In short, it is very concerning to hear the benefits of digital and outdoor play equated, conflated or confused. They are very different. Children – and especially children who have the least in our society - need real life play with other children for all the physical, mental health and developmental benefits we know for children as they grow into adults, as well as for the joy in the moment.

4/ Learning Through Play

Arguments and evidence around the value of outdoor play to formal / curriculum and wider education in schools will be well made by others. We want to focus on the value of outside free play to other childhood learning crucial to children becoming young adults able to function and thrive in the world:

Physical skills - Play is how human young develop physical skills and literacy (running, moving around, balancing, jumping) and informal games and sport (ball skills, cycling) and enjoyment of being physically active. All of which helps children to grow into adults who are more physically active, healthy and well.

Links:

Clip of [parent Daniel, central Manchester](#), and [the whole filmed discussion on the benefits and barriers of playing out](#).

Playing out as the foundation level to sport and physical activity: <https://playingout.net/blog/summer-of-sport-summer-of-play/>

Social skills – outside play with other children is how and where children experience making friends, falling out, making up again, without an adult directing them or sorting things out for them. They may also interact with neighbours / other parents.

Confidence / resilience/ independence – the imagination, ideas, adventures, problem solving and solutions that children develop as they respond to the opportunities and (appropriate) challenges/risks of free play outside close to home, and covering more distance and space as they get older.

Links:

Clip of [teenager Malachi, central Manchester](#), and [the whole filmed discussion on the benefits and barriers of playing out](#).

Parent Kate in Bristol: <https://playingout.net/blog/how-playing-out-helps-to-build-childrens-independence/>

Parent/ co-founder Ingrid: <https://playingout.net/blog/playing-growing-benefits-freedom/>

Community – the connections children make with other children, parents and neighbours on their doorstep and in their patch, and the resulting sense of embodied belonging and community that comes with this for them. Through the play streets movement, we have also seen how outside play also increases the connections and sense of community between adults themselves (see play streets survey results above in Parents and play).

Links

Parent Emma in Hull blog: <https://playingout.net/blog/its-changed-our-lives-how-playing-out-helped-my-children-my-neighbours-and-me/>

Equality, diversity and inclusion – children playing out together can help to reduce racism and break down barriers between different groups.

Links:

Watch this clip of [parents/ grandparent/ teenager in central Manchester discussing this](#) and [the whole filmed discussion on the benefits and barriers of playing out](#).

Read about the action research project this is from: <https://playingout.net/inspiration/creative-projects/playing-out-close-to-home/> and <https://playingout.net/blog/playing-out-helps-children-to-make-friends-across-race-culture-and-backgrounds/>

5/ Time to Play

Given the gradual erosion of children's freedom to play out independently, their time to play outdoors (outside of school) has increasingly become dependent on the time and ability their parents/carers have to take them outside. And, as we know, parents are frequently 'time poor' given the pressures of full-time work and other demands.

Children themselves often do have time for play – they just can't go out alone, and the main factor limiting this is lack of easy access to playable space (ie doorstep play and independent mobility). If children had this, and were less reliant on parents to organise activities and take them to places, they would also have far more – and far more equitable – time to play.

6/ The right to play

Over the past 15 years, we have regularly been contacted by parents living in social or managed housing who have come up against barriers to children being able to play out freely near home. At the most extreme end, they have even been threatened with eviction if they continue to allow children to play out in the shared spaces on their estate.

Through these contacts and other case studies, we have identified a number of **distinct issues and barriers to children's right to play outside where they live**. These are *additional to* (and exacerbated by) all the known barriers to children playing out more generally such as traffic danger, lack of safe/accessible space, parental fear and a general culture-shift away from playing out being normal and acceptable.

- Lack of distinction between play and ASB. Ambiguity in legal definition of ASB.
- HA/landlord response to complaints about children playing out, usually from a minority of neighbours or a single household (based around noise, perceived 'nuisance' or 'ASB', safety concerns or negative perceptions of children playing unsupervised) aimed at stopping children playing rather than resolving the issue. Usually in form of letter to all tenants (or just to families) saying children must not play out, sometimes threatening eviction.
- Ambiguity in tenancy agreements around rights to use of shared spaces or use of space for play explicitly banned within tenancies.
- 'No Ball Games' or 'No Playing' signs discouraging children from using outdoor space and allowing other residents to complain about them doing so.
- HAs considering a designated play space (playground or park) within walking distance to be sufficient play provision, precluding the need for children to play in the street or very near home.
- 'Segregated play' - play provision for private tenants/owners separate from social tenants. Clash of priority/needs between private/social tenants/owners and q over whether some HAs are being even-handed in way they treat these two sectors.
- Housing officers not equipped to defend children's right/need to play out.
- Tenants not fully equipped to defend their own rights (even where they have the will) and unclear about the action and steps they could take.

- Building on space that is currently/historically used informally or explicitly for play
- Developers not fulfilling “promise” to provide play space/child friendly development (using images/idea of family/child friendly to sell development but not following through)
- Management/rules deterring children using potential play space (e.g. rules banning noise, school-hours only, no unaccompanied children). Hostile environment.

The right to play is not protected in UK law or reflected in policy. Even more fundamentally, children as a group are not protected from discrimination by equality law.

During the recent Inquiry on children and the built environment, both government and local authority representatives testified to the fact that within policy areas such as planning, housing and transport, children are rarely, if ever, given consideration as an equality group in their own right.

The impact of this is the creation of environments that exclude and discriminate against children, or that don’t meet their needs (e.g. roads they can’t navigate safely, housing estates that ban them from using outside space for play, have unsuitable, inaccessible or insufficient play space, or where space for cars takes priority over safe, playable doorstep space).

As well as helping to meet children’s rights more widely, addressing this underlying problem could go some way to ensuring children’s need for informal outdoor play, physical activity, access to green space, community connection and independent mobility are better met through policy and decision-making related to the built environment.

We believe there should be a statutory responsibility for policy-makers to consider children and their specific needs alongside those of adults and all equality groups.

We have researched UK equality law in relation to children, speaking to legal, child rights and equalities experts and found that whilst the Equality Act *does* protect children and young people from discrimination on the basis of other protected characteristics (e.g. race, sex), it *does not* protect them as a group on the basis of age (except within employment).

Legal experts are not in agreement about whether or not the PSED applies to children in a meaningful way that would place a duty on e.g. planning committees to have due regard to their needs.

Because the EA explicitly excludes children from being considered an equality group in most areas, and because the PSED at least partially rests on the legal requirements of the EA, and children are not explicitly mentioned in the PSED/guidance, it seems likely that local authorities *do not think or are not aware* that they have a duty to have due regard to the needs of children under the protected characteristic of “age”.

The fact that there is no explicit/clear public sector duty to consider children as an equality group in their own right on the basis of age underpins routine discrimination of children and failure to consider/meet their needs within the planning system and wider policy and services.

In summary, either there is no legal duty to specifically consider children in decision-making related to the built environment OR most public servants are unaware of this duty.

Ideally, the Equality Act should be amended to include children under the “age” characteristic across all areas. There is no obvious reason not to do this given that, were this amendment to be made, direct age discrimination would still not be unlawful where it is “a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim” (section 13).

Whether or not the PSED currently applies to children (and it is possible this would only be clarified through a test case), it seems evident that it should – or that there should be a stand-alone duty on decision-makers to consider children as a group in their own right, along similar lines to the PSED.

The most recent [concluding recommendations to the UK Government](#) from the UNCRC included this recommendation: “*To take legislative and other measures to ensure the protection of all children below 18 years of age from discrimination on the grounds of their age, particularly in England and Northern Ireland...*”

(See Playing Out supplementary evidence to Inquiry: “Are children an equality group?”)

Recommendations

Drawing on our work, expertise, experience and feedback above, here are our recommendations for policy changes, as also set out in our top level [Playing Out Manifesto](#).

The current Government has “a bold new ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history” (Labour Manifesto, 2024). Achieving this requires commitment at the highest level to restoring children’s freedom and access to outdoor play. Specific policy could include:

A child ‘lens’ applied to policy and decision-making across departments, informed by children’s need to play outside and get around safely/independently for their health and wellbeing.

National education campaign on the importance of children’s free outdoor play and independent mobility, for statutory bodies and the general public.

National play street framework ensuring residents anywhere can regularly open their street for play.

National planning policy requiring developers to build in safe doorstep play.

Safe Streets for Children strategy including 20mph national default, child-friendly street design standards and a revised road safety approach that places responsibility on drivers, not children.

Children’s right to play and status as an equality group enshrined in law, preventing discriminatory “No Ball Games” policies and ensuring children’s needs are considered and protected.

Local Authorities obligated and resourced to ensure all children have sufficient access to outdoor play (e.g implementing a play sufficiency duty in England)

Conclusion

The problem of child health and wellbeing is deep-seated, serious, and getting worse. Tackling it needs a clear vision and bold steps. Implementing these recommendations would start to address these huge problems at little or no extra cost, ensuring future generations of children from all social backgrounds have access to the “free preventative healthcare” and multitude of other developmental, wellbeing and intrinsic benefits that come from everyday access to outdoor space, play, mobility and community.

Playing Out, October 2024