



Cover Image credit: Amy Rose/Playing Out

# Streets for play, streets for freedom: How a “child lens” would transform transport policy.

Alice Ferguson & Tim Gill, 2026



## About Playing Out

Playing Out began in 2009 with the resident-led “temporary play street” model developed by parents in Bristol. Over 16 years, this model spread across the UK and internationally, enabling tens of thousands of children to play out on their doorstep and acting as a catalyst for change around children and streets.

Alongside supporting the grassroots play street movement, Playing Out has consistently campaigned for policy-change to address the environmental barriers to children’s doorstep play, independent mobility and everyday freedom, feeding into significant processes such as a Parliamentary Inquiry on Children and the Built Environment,<sup>1</sup> the national Play Commission,<sup>2</sup> the UK Government Covid Inquiry<sup>3</sup> and changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.

This paper came out of Playing Out seeing a need to make a clear case for more child-centred policy and thinking around streets and transport (even within progressive circles) and was funded by Sport England.

Playing Out CIC closed its doors on 31st March 2026 but play streets and the wider movement for children’s rights in the built environment continue.

## About the authors

Alice Ferguson<sup>4</sup> co-founded Playing Out and co-led the organisation (alongside Ingrid Skeels) until its planned closure in 2026. Her work includes research, writing, policy work, campaigning and international speaking around the topic of children’s rights in the built environment. She continues to speak out for children’s right to be “seen and heard” in streets, cities and society.

Tim Gill<sup>5</sup> is a researcher, writer and independent scholar based in London, and a global advocate for children’s outdoor play and mobility. He is the author of *Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities* (RIBA Publications’ bestseller for 2021) and *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society* (which the New York Times called “a handbook for the movement for freer, riskier play”).



A Hull play street, Credit: Emma Sarjo

1 <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/big-picture/children-and-the-built-environment/>  
2 <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/big-picture/play-commission/>  
3 <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/big-picture/covid-inquiry/>  
4 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alice-ferguson-65812844/>  
5 <https://rethinkingchildhood.com/about/>

## Readers

We asked a number of trusted allies and experts to read and give feedback on the paper, with an eye on inclusion, accuracy, readability, tone and impact. Their comments and suggestions were invaluable and we are very grateful to them all. This is what they say...

**Zoe Banks Gross,**<sup>6</sup> Expert in collaborative design, creating active people and healthy places.

*“Children as a Lens is an important paper synthesising information which highlights that children, for the most part, have been excluded from policy considerations despite the ramifications on their health and wellbeing. A much-needed provocation for policy makers and transport and urban planners.”*

**John Dales,**<sup>7</sup> Chair and Head of Transport Planning, Urban Movement. Chair of Living Streets.

*“The idea of making places child-friendly isn’t a novel one for transport practitioners and policy-makers, but we’ve failed to take it seriously or embed it in our work. This paper, by showing that child-friendliness in transport is both necessary in itself and an excellent measure of people-centredness, and by being surprisingly practical, will help us do both.”*

**Stephen Frost,**<sup>8</sup> former Head of Transport Policy at IPPR<sup>9</sup>

*“A child-centred approach fits well with the UK government’s commitment to a vision-led approach to transport planning.<sup>10</sup> Children’s needs should be at the heart of the ‘visions’ that governments adopt to inform both transport strategies and specific developments/projects.”*

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9 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/zero-road-deaths-by-2040-even-if-it-means-slower-journeys-say-majority-of-public>

10 <https://tps.org.uk/public/downloads/zOLm/Vision-Led%20Planning%20Report.pdf>

11 <https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2025-05-18/girl-9-killed-on-road-was-sacrificed-to-prove-need-for-speed-cameras>

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14 [https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction\\_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf](https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf)

15 <https://www.suv-alliance.org.uk/>

**Clare O’Neill,** Alice Williams’s mum<sup>11</sup>

*“Witnessing my child’s avoidable death by dangerous driving has made me question everything about our public spaces and car dominance. Alice Ferguson and Tim Gill are asking the same vital questions and make a powerful and moving case for change. Our children deserve a world that’s fit for them to live in.”*

**Dulce Pedrosa,**<sup>12</sup> PhD researcher and independent consultant on equity in active travel and mobility justice.

*“It’s refreshing to see the issue approached from a child lens, drawing together evidence and advocacy across disciplines, sectors and portfolios. It’s particularly encouraging to see active travel included: not only how independent active travel can benefit children, but what a child lens can do for active travel: streets that work better for everyone.”*

**Dr Sally Watson,**<sup>13</sup> Newcastle University

*“This important and timely paper is essential reading for all politicians. It shows just how far we are from creating the kinds of places that allow children to play an active part in civic life, but also that we can change things for the better if we put children first.”*

**James Ward,** Co-Director AdFree Cities<sup>14</sup> / SUV Alliance<sup>15</sup>

*“Our love for our children has always been exploited by the ad industry, and car advertising is no different. But the cars promoted in those family-friendly ads have increasingly made our world unsafe and inaccessible to children who can no longer walk or wheel independently as they once did. Tackling the interconnected issues raised in this paper necessitates stepping beyond the narrow horizons of the world created by advertising and thinking deeply about the world we really want for ourselves and our children.”*



Tibby's triangle, Southwold, Amy Burbidge

# Contents

- Summary
- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Children and cars
- Chapter 2: Ten good reasons  
for a child lens
- Chapter 3: A child lens on streets  
and neighbourhoods
- Chapter 4: What does 'good' look like?
- Chapter 5:  
What if...?  
FAQs  
A deeper dive...

# Summary

Our aim is to make the case for a radical, child-centric approach to transport policy and planning. These ‘10 good reasons’ summarise the rationale and are expanded on in Chapter 2.

## 10 good reasons for a child lens on streets and transport policy

1. **Children’s health is in crisis** and enabling their everyday mobility and spatial freedom is a significant part of the solution: **the foundation for a happy, healthy childhood.**
2. Children are the group **most impacted** by the way our streets and cities are planned.
3. Yet, due to equalities law and cultural norms, they are the group **least considered** by decision-makers.
4. For children, **independent mobility = active travel**= (walking and wheeling)
5. **Child friendly streets are also adult friendly streets** but the same is not true in reverse *because...*
6. Children have **specific needs and rights** that are often not considered or met by a universalist approach to streets.
7. A child lens **supports many other policy drivers** e.g. climate, clean air, public health, social equity, inclusion *and...*
8. A focus on children could help to **build consensus** and calm the “culture war” around streets, leading to more rapid and lasting change.
9. Children have been **asking for change** for decades
10. Children should be **seen and heard** in streets and communities.

## A child-lens checklist

This paper invites you to think differently, and to do things differently. It is not a technical manual or implementation guide. There is no easy pathway to change. However, the checklist below offers a starting point for anyone wanting to put a ‘child lens’ approach into practice.

Adopt a “child lens” on new and existing transport policy / strategies – are children considered and prioritised? Are their specific needs considered?

In all decision-making around streets and transport, ensure children as a whole (on the basis of age) are properly considered alongside all other equality groups

Make sure your plans also consider and work for children with intersectional protected characteristics

In communications, meetings and decision processes, talk about children and the importance of making streets work for them

Familiarise yourself with innovative case studies and authoritative practice for child-friendly design

Engage with children and parents, give due weight to what they tell you, and be transparent about how and why you have responded to their views.

Co-design meaningfully with children.

Ask yourself, “will this work for a 2yr old on a scooter (with a parent/carer walking nearby) *and* an 8/9yr old travelling independently?” Put yourself in their shoes. Look through their eyes.

Think beyond the school journey.

Remember that children are smaller, less visible, and less able to see and judge traffic danger

Remember that children use streets for play, as well as for active travel, and that these activities merge and overlap

Remember that children are more playful, unpredictable and ‘wobbly’ – and that these things are all a natural part of being a child

Prioritise children’s active travel, independent mobility and doorstep play over convenience for drivers

Focus efforts on reducing and removing road danger at source

Direct road safety messages and responsibility towards adult drivers, not children





A street free of cars during 2020 covid lockdown in Bristol, Andre Pattenden, Playing Out

*Authors' note: For the purpose of this paper, "children" generally means those under 17, unless otherwise specified (e.g. when quoting statistics). Considering older teenagers and young people as potential/actual young drivers is an important issue outside the scope of this paper. We also mainly focus on children of walking age, though the mobility of parents/carers with babies is a closely aligned topic, which is gaining attention in policy and academic contexts.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Louise Platt, Elsa Devienne, Ruthie Boycott-Garnett, Harrie Larrington-Spencer, Emily Lovett, Ruth Naughton-Doe, Anna Powell, Alison Stenning, Laura Tucker, Sally Watson, Catherine Wilkinson & Samantha Wilkinson (12 Feb 2026): The 'walking/wheeling with' framework: establishing walking/wheeling with children as a mobility justice issue, Mobilities, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2026.2628112; <https://vanleerfoundation.org/urban95/>

# Introduction

Children are rarely considered in decision-making around streets, transport policy and planning. However, they are arguably the group most impacted by these decisions, now and in the future. An adult-centric approach to designing our streets and neighbourhoods has, over decades, had the unintended effect of damaging children's health, taking children's lives, and limiting children's freedom, largely because of an excessive focus on the car. Those facing the most inequality have been impacted the most. By contrast, a child-centred approach to transport policy and planning could help transform streets and neighbourhoods into healthy, pleasant, safe, and equitable places for everyone.

This paper aims to challenge current thinking. To show how the dominant approach to streets and transport planning harms children and others (chapter 1), why a new approach is needed (chapter 2), where change should focus (chapter 3), what it could look like (chapter 4), and how it could come about (chapter 5). It invites policymakers, practitioners and campaigners - including those already working towards more sustainable and active travel - to embrace a child's point of view - to use a 'child lens' - when looking at streets and mobility.

The paper builds the case for a fairer, healthier, more sustainable future. It is not a comprehensive review of the evidence. Neither is it a guide to creating specially designed and designated "streets for kids" - others have done this. Whilst such initiatives (e.g. temporary and permanent school streets and play streets) are important both in themselves and as catalysts for change, the scale of the problem demands a more radical reframing of the issues.

*"I don't want a childhood city, I want a city where the children live in the same world I do... If the claim of children to share the city is admitted, the whole environment has to be designed and shaped with their needs in mind".*

*Colin Ward, The Child in the City, 1978.*

We also raise the hard fact of child road death. Worldwide, 75,000 child pedestrians and cyclists (0-19) are killed by motorists each year.<sup>16</sup> Statistics like this can be difficult to process or put into context; suffice it to say that road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death for children and adolescents<sup>17</sup>, exceeding deaths from cancer, drowning or malaria.<sup>18</sup> This in itself is enough reason to prioritise children.

No-one planned for huge numbers of children to be killed by cars. No-one set out to create places that lead children to live isolated, indoor, sedentary lives. Equally, no-one disputes that children's lives are precious. Nor that playing outdoors, socialising with friends, and getting around on foot, on wheels and by bike are part and parcel of a healthy and happy childhood. Despite this, streets and neighbourhoods continue to favour cars and drivers over children. The main reason this happens is because of car-centric mindsets and worldviews. These mindsets are so deeply embedded, widely accepted, and interconnected that they are hard to question or change. They will not be fixed by isolated schemes, tweaking design guidance or increased traffic enforcement. A more fundamental paradigm-shift is needed.

Equally, we cannot expect parents to bear the responsibility for their children's lack of outdoor freedom. In a world that is designed around the car, people should not be shamed for their transport choices.

Children's everyday freedoms link with many different policy/interest areas: active travel, road safety, public health, physical activity, children's rights, climate, clean air, equalities, child development, planning, housing, urban design, play, parenting, community activism... Yet, even when the topic is considered within each of these areas, it tends to be done in isolation. This paper is a call to join the dots, see the bigger picture, and build a powerful, collective focus on children and streets. A "child lens" has the power to both transform children's lives, and build the case for safe, welcoming, healthy neighbourhoods everywhere.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214\\_ProtectingYoungLives\\_FullReport-FINAL.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214_ProtectingYoungLives_FullReport-FINAL.pdf) (estimated 181,000 children killed on roads each year - 38% pedestrians 4% cyclists)  
<sup>17</sup> Global status report on road safety 2023. Geneva: World Health Organization;2023 referenced in [https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214\\_ProtectingYoungLives\\_FullReport-FINAL.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214_ProtectingYoungLives_FullReport-FINAL.pdf)  
<sup>18</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/causes-of-death-in-5-14-year-olds>

# Chapter 1: Children and cars

Between us (Alice and Tim), we have spent over half a century working to enable and restore children's everyday freedom to play outside and get around their neighbourhoods. We have led organisations, built coalitions, published papers, presented at international conferences, lobbied politicians, informed decision-makers, written reports, books and blogs, campaigned, gained media coverage and supported grassroots, parent-led action. Through all this, almost without exception, we have found that people of all backgrounds and political leanings, "get it". They remember their own childhoods and compare them to children's lives today. They instinctively know that a good childhood includes plenty of time outside, play, social contact, activity and independence. They understand that things are not right and that children have lost something vitally important; they support the overall aim of changing things. Yet there is an elephant in the room. Except the elephant is metal, four-wheeled, and getting ever bigger and more aggressive.<sup>19</sup> The status quo is strong and even those otherwise on the side of children can be reluctant to challenge it. So, let's talk about cars.

## A short history: How cars came to dominate streets (and children lost out)

It is tempting to think that urban streets have always been primarily for cars, and that this is somehow natural or inevitable. However, history tells a different story. In fact, as cities expanded during the industrial revolution, their streets were initially seen as social, multi-functional places where children habitually played. It was only through a concerted, coordinated effort by the motor industry and allied corporate interests that cars came to dominate urban streets.

To understand how cars came to take over urban streets everywhere, we need to go back to when they first started appearing in cities in the USA, in the early decades of the 20th century. Their emergence led to a toll of death and catastrophic injury that is almost impossible to imagine today. Children were at the forefront of the carnage caused by motor traffic. Across the US, in just five years between 1920 and 1925 nearly 29,000 children under 15 years of age were killed, the vast majority in urban streets.<sup>20</sup> In a single year (1927) 162 child pedestrians died in the New York Borough of Brooklyn alone (see Figure 2). In the UK, where car ownership grew later, hundreds of children died in streets each year for much of the 20th century.

The escalating scale of the horror led to near-universal outrage in these early years. Crowds gathered in the immediate aftermath of crashes to demand instant justice. Mass campaigns saw thousands take part in marches and memorial services. Newspaper editorials demonised drivers as "speed maniacs" and called for urgent action (see Figure 1). The US National Safety Council, in its 1920 Congress declared "the automobile as a death dealing instrument [was] the greatest present-day menace to public safety."<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1: New York Times, 23 November 1924

Yet within a few years the protests and outrage had ended, and streets in American cities became the domain of the car. How did this urban revolution happen? In a revealing example of corporate capture, the motor industry and allied businesses, realising the threat to their interests, completely reframed the topics of transport policy and traffic safety. Car industry leaders declared that pedestrians must be "educated to know that automobiles have rights." Those - frequently women - who spoke up for children and pedestrians were ridiculed, their voices trivialised; one leading industry spokesperson stated in 1925: "the day of the

emotional sob sister campaign has passed." Industry interests used underhand tactics to gain sympathetic media coverage, helping them to win key policy battles, gradually embedding the rights of drivers into laws, regulations and culture. Safety education (much of it aimed at telling children to stay off the streets) emerged as a major focus for official action and support. Another response was the emergence of urban public playgrounds. These fenced-off (and often supervised) spaces were a recognition that children needed somewhere to play, but also embedded the view that urban children should be contained<sup>22</sup> and supervised, rather than given the freedom to get around their neighbourhoods (see Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> Each of these transport, urban planning, legislative, regulatory, educational and cultural moves - with only minor variations - were taken up in the UK and other countries, with the geographical spread of the motor age.



Figure 2: 1920s map of Brooklyn showing sites of child road deaths and calling for new playgrounds. (credit: New York Times)

By around 1930 in the US (and a few years later in Europe) the 'terms of trade' were largely settled in favour of car drivers. In the UK, fierce and organised campaigning from the motor industry and allied groups resisted basic measures such as the driving test (eventually introduced in 1935) or 30mph speed limits (which were removed from many urban streets as a result of legislation passed in 1934).<sup>24</sup> If anyone asked the question 'what are streets for?'

the official answer was: for the free movement and storage of motor vehicles. (In truth other habitual uses - including children's play - persisted in many streets, despite this official position). Moreover, the individual burden of traffic safety in urban streets largely shifted to those outside cars. Crucially, street designs and road transport policies focused on maintaining traffic flows, with little attention to the needs of children or other groups. Similarly, car safety features that might reduce traffic danger to pedestrians remained largely unregulated for decades (and even today child pedestrians are barely considered in safety testing).<sup>25</sup>

## Child injury and death on the streets – an ongoing story

The historical 'settlement' on traffic safety in urban streets outlined above had one clear consequence: the deaths globally of thousands of children every year at the hands of drivers, more-or-less unchecked.

In the UK alone, over 400 child pedestrians and cyclists were killed on average every year from the 1950s until the early 1980s, before steadily falling to a level of around 30 annually.

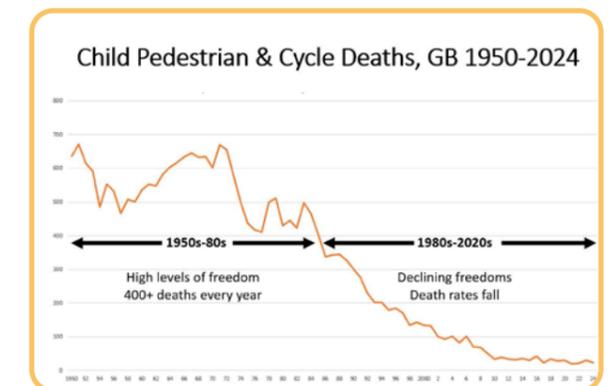


Figure 3: Pedestrian and cycle deaths, children (0-15), Great Britain, 1950 – 2024<sup>26</sup>

As Figure 3 makes clear, child pedestrian fatalities have fallen dramatically over more recent decades. This reduction has been celebrated by policy-makers.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/27/us-style-pickup-trucks-uk-roads-up-data-shows>  
<sup>20</sup> <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/historical-fatality-trends/deaths-by-age-group/>  
<sup>21</sup> Peter Norton (2008) *Fighting Traffic: The dawn of the motor age in the American City*

<sup>22</sup> Hart, R, 2002 *Containing children: some lessons on planning for play from New York City*. *Environment & Urbanization* 14, 2, 135-148.  
<sup>23</sup> Peter Norton (2008) *Fighting Traffic: The dawn of the motor age in the American City*  
<sup>24</sup> Dean (1947) *Murder Most Foul*; Pettifer J and Turner N (1984) *Automania*  
<sup>25</sup> <https://www.euroncap.com/en/car-safety/the-ratings-explained/vulnerable-road-user-vru-protection/>  
<sup>26</sup> Based on statistics provided to the authors in emails from officials at the Office of National Statistics and Department of Transport  
<sup>27</sup> Dept for Transport (2002) *Child Road Safety: Achieving the 2010 Target*



Figure 4: Pedestrian and cyclist deaths, children (0-16), Great Britain, 2015-2024.<sup>28</sup>

However, this decline in child casualties does not mean we have made streets safer for children. In fact, it correlates strongly with the steady decline in children playing, walking and cycling independently in their neighbourhoods.<sup>29</sup> It is hard to argue with the common-sense view that the main reason fewer children are being killed on the streets is that they have far less freedom to *be* on the streets.

We also must not be tempted to see current child mortality statistics as ‘negligible’. Even in the context of children’s much reduced time outside, an average of 1,995 child pedestrians<sup>30</sup> and cyclists (0-16) were killed or seriously injured every year from 2015-2024 in Great Britain.<sup>31</sup> 329 of these children died as a result of their injuries – an average of 33 every year, or more than a whole classroom. Every single child death, no matter the cause, is devastating, with untold impact for families, for whole communities. But these personal tragedies should be seen in the context of the societal norms and decision-making. In the case of child road deaths, norms and decisions

that have allowed our streets to remain unsafe for children. The fact that these deaths are, according to the WHO, “eminently preventable”<sup>32</sup> is of no comfort to bereaved families.

Given the continued, preventable loss and pain that lies behind these numbers, on top of the fact that falls in mortality rates have largely been achieved at the expense of children’s broader health and well-being, it is astonishing that the current situation has been hailed as a policy success.

Inequality is a huge additional factor in child pedestrian mortality. Children from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at least five times more likely to be killed on the roads as pedestrians than their peers from the wealthiest socio-economic groups.<sup>33</sup> In addition some research suggests that Black and Asian children, regardless of their level of deprivation, have higher pedestrian injury rates than white children.<sup>34</sup>

It goes without saying that such staggering and relentless casualty rates have never been officially mandated. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, from the dawn of the motor age, the loss of children’s lives was implicitly accepted as a side-effect of a car-centred world: a regrettable but tolerable (or at least tolerated) form of collateral

damage. In any case, road deaths and life-changing injuries in general (and those of children in particular) can fairly be described as a century-long pandemic that is hidden in plain sight.

Is it possible that some working in transport policy have become complacent, de-sensitised by the data, and satisfied that the numbers have gone in the right direction? The media and general public too seem relatively uninterested in exploring the system failures that lie behind the tragic headlines.

## Talking about child road deaths

When the worst happens and a child dies on the roads in the UK, the response from the police and authorities can be shockingly unfair, if not cruel. The police and judiciary system typically frame what happened as either a tragic “accident” (suggesting that nothing could have been done) or - even worse - use language that directly or indirectly blames the child and/or their parents.

This framing can be deep-seated, systemic and hard to shift. In a 2019 video documentary produced by the Environmental Transport Association, Nazan Fennell describes in agonizing detail how a truck driver killed her 13-year-old daughter Hope whilst she was crossing with her bike at a pedestrian crossing in Birmingham. She describes how in the initial investigation, police sympathised with the driver who was treated as blameless, whilst her daughter’s behaviour was closely scrutinised (even exploring the possibility she may have been drunk). It was only after Nazan refused to accept this account and pushed for many months for a more detailed investigation that the police found out the driver had been texting at the wheel leading up to the crash, and - in the immediate aftermath - had tried to hide this by deleting the texts.<sup>35</sup> His 6-month sentence for dangerous driving and perverting the course of justice was subsequently criticised for being too lenient<sup>36</sup> but reflects a norm of judges and juries sympathising with the “traumatised” driver.

Clare O’Neill - whose 9-year-old daughter Alice was killed in 2023 by a driver speeding through a red light- told us that, “a police investigation into a road death can currently take two years, during

which time the driver continues to drive, even when there is hard evidence of dangerous driving”. We urge you to watch the ITV video report on Clare’s story, which conveys the loss and pain caused by dangerous driving and systemic failures far more strongly than we possibly can.<sup>37</sup>

The road crash victims’ charity RoadPeace (which sadly closed in January 2026) argued that, because road deaths are not treated as homicides, the British criminal justice system treats victims and families as second-class citizens. Other countries including Italy and Belgium have strengthened the laws on vehicular homicide.<sup>38</sup>

Language matters. When it comes to reporting on or discussions about child road deaths, it is especially important to get it right, both for sensitivity towards victims and their families and because language impacts thinking, attitudes and behaviour.

Laura Laker, with the University of Westminster Active Travel Academy, led on writing new Road Collision Reporting Guidelines.<sup>39</sup> Consultation with journalists, police, experts and organisations found “a significant level of concern about the impact of language and reporting on the safety of those walking and cycling”. The final ten guidelines include avoiding the word “accident” (implying lack of blame or preventability), referencing the *driver* (“a driver hit...” not “a car hit...”) and considering the family of the victim.

All too often, police and news reports of a child being killed by a driver focus on the child themselves – what they were doing (e.g. crossing in front of a bus), where they were (e.g. on a busy main road), what they were wearing (e.g. dark clothing), who they were with (e.g. a group of friends). Sometimes news reports mention that a child was playing out, allowed to stay out late, or to walk to the park unaccompanied.

Mentioning these factors - unless very clearly framed within a narrative that firmly places responsibility on drivers, policymakers and an unsafe environment - risks bolstering the dominant narrative that it’s children who need to change their behaviour, parents who need to be more vigilant. The sub-text is, the child and/or their parents are at least partly to blame for their own death.

<sup>28</sup> Dept for Transport statistics Table RAS0202 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain>

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, I. (1993) “Why have child pedestrian death rates fallen?” *British medical journal*, 306(6894), 1737-1739.

<sup>30</sup> “Pedestrians” includes young children riding or scooting on pavements and babies in buggies <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-accidents-and-safety-statistics-notes-and-definitions/reported-road-casualties-in-great-britain-notes-definitions-symbols-and-conventions>

<sup>31</sup> Dept for Transport statistics Table RAS0202 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/ten-strategies-for-keeping-children-safe-on-the-road>

<sup>33</sup> O’Toole and Christie 2018. Deprivation and road traffic injury comparisons for 4–10 and 11–15 year-olds

<sup>34</sup> Steinbach R, Green J, Edwards P, Grundy C. ‘Race’ or place? Explaining ethnic variations in childhood pedestrian injury rates in London. *Health Place*. 2010 Jan;16(1):34-42. doi: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2009.08.002. Epub 2009 Aug 21. PMID: 19720554.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.eta.co.uk/trust/stop-killing-children/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-24106004>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2025-05-18/girl-9-killed-on-road-was-sacrificed-to-prove-need-for-speed-cameras>

<sup>38</sup> <https://etsc.eu/italian-senate-passes-road-homicide-law>; <https://www.thebulletin.be/new-crime-road-murder-be-added-belgian-law>

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.rc-rg.com/\\_files/ugd/c05c10\\_3f73627e43894c8496f379a2b9e84fd3.pdf](https://www.rc-rg.com/_files/ugd/c05c10_3f73627e43894c8496f379a2b9e84fd3.pdf)

Language can also be used to imply a false equivalence between a child victim and adult driver. In an academic context, we recently heard use of the term “collision partner” - suggesting equal responsibility and even collaboration between e.g. the child riding her scooter along the pavement and the van driver who mounted the pavement and killed her, or the boy who crossed the road in front of a bus and the driver who overtook the bus at speed and killed him.

Sympathy with drivers who kill people - perhaps especially with those who kill a child - is also widespread, and likely to be a major factor in the lenient sentencing - and subsequent high levels of re-offending - of speeding, dangerous or reckless drivers. Clare O’Neill says, *“Death by driving charges were introduced because juries were reluctant to convict on manslaughter. Some may still be reluctant to convict at all. ‘Mitigating factors’ can also be given undue weight. In our case the aggravating and mitigating basically cancelled each other out, even though the mitigation was dubious and guilt was not in question.”* The language used by police, journalists and the legal system can encourage this by focussing on the mental health of the driver, rather than the far more devastating impact for the family of the child.

Thanks in large part to Laker’s work, the term “accident” is becoming less common in relation to reporting of road deaths. However, child road deaths are still widely seen, recorded and reported as blameless, non-preventable “tragedies”. If the driver was very clearly breaking the law - on drugs, for example - this might be mentioned but the wider systemic and environmental circumstances are rarely acknowledged, absolving highway engineers and decision-makers of any responsibility and helping to maintain the status quo. Although almost all road deaths are preventable, only 3% entail a coroner’s Prevention of Future Deaths report.<sup>40</sup>

To the existing road collision reporting guidelines could be added:

1. **DO NOT** use language that implies or places blame on the child or their parents/carers.
2. **DO NOT** imply equality or equivalence between the child victim and the driver.
3. **DO NOT** use language that courts sympathy for the driver.
4. **DO** talk about the environmental conditions (e.g. 40mph limit outside school, no pedestrian crossing, pedestrian underpass out of use)

### The problem with traditional ‘road safety’

We need to tackle the misconception that roads have become objectively safer because casualty statistics have improved.

As already noted, the early and consistent policy response to child pedestrian deaths was to ‘educate’ children about the dangers of the roads rather than tackling the source of the danger and defending children’s right to be out and about.

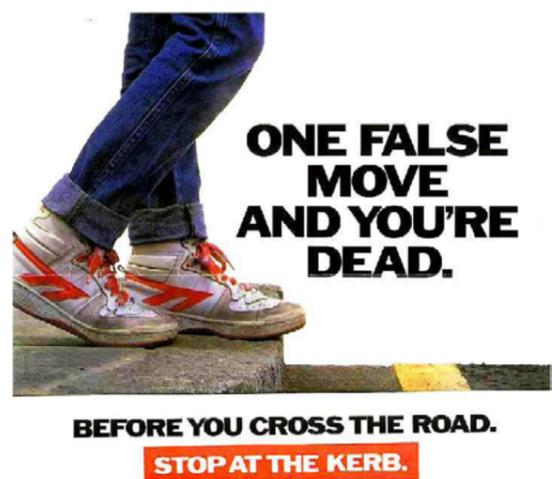


Figure 5: UK Government road safety poster, 1980s

In the UK, Government road safety campaigns over the decades have consistently put responsibility for safety onto children, rather than the cause of the danger – car drivers. The Tufty Club (1950s/60s), Green Cross Code (1970/80ss) and ‘Hedgehogs’

campaign (1990s/00s) have all sent a strong message to children that roads are for cars, the danger is inherent and they must learn to navigate them safely or stay off them altogether.

One of the less cuddly government campaigns of the 1980s depicted a child stepping off a pavement with the words, “One False Move and You’re Dead”. In 1991, Professor Mayer Hillman took this as the title for his seminal research<sup>41</sup> linking increased traffic danger and child-focused ‘road safety’ campaigns to the drastic reduction in children’s freedom over one generation.

In government and public policy, road safety is largely seen in terms of casualty statistics. Hence a very busy, fast, wide road with no safe crossing may prove such a risk to children that they avoid it completely and - because there are no pedestrian casualties - it is classified as ‘safe’. But, whilst there are examples of good practice, in general, streets and roads have not become safer for those outside cars over the past 50 years - if anything, the opposite is true. Increased traffic volume and vehicle size, increased speeding<sup>42</sup>, dangerous and illegal driving and an increase in dangerous driver behaviour<sup>43</sup> mean that the majority of streets feel - and are - more hostile than ever for children.<sup>44</sup>

Even spaces where children should be *completely* free from traffic danger are not always safe. Just in the past few years in the UK, children have been killed by drivers whilst scooting along the pavement<sup>45</sup>, on zebra crossings,<sup>46</sup> on pedestrian crossings,<sup>47</sup> having a picnic in their school grounds<sup>48</sup> and playing football on a sports pitch.<sup>49</sup> A 12 year old boy was killed crossing a main road as the pedestrian underpass he normally used to get to the park was flooded, with no alternative safe crossing in place.<sup>50</sup>



Figure 6: A 2026 example of business-as-usual “road safety” practice: a new child-unfriendly road junction is built across a previously safe walking to school route. Signs tell children it is their responsibility to “be aware”. (credit: Alice Ferguson)

To date, efforts to increase children’s walking and cycling have also been largely informed by this traditional road safety thinking and primarily focussed on encouragement and education (e.g. ‘walk to school week’, road safety and cycle training). But this approach, whilst arguably well intentioned, is highly problematic, for several interlinked reasons

1. It has shifted responsibility from those who have more agency and greater responsibility (drivers professionals and policy makers) to those who have less agency and capacity (children). The framing of “road safety” as primarily a matter of educating children lets drivers and policy-makers off the hook. This form of victim blaming also means that issues like street design, walkability, traffic management and enforcement are downplayed.
2. It has not made streets objectively safer for children. Even with the huge reduction in children’s outdoor freedom, drivers continue to kill and injure large numbers of children. The root cause of the problem - roads that

41 Hillman, M., Adams, J. and Whitelegg, J. 1990. *One False Move: A Study of Children’s Independent Mobility*. Policy Studies Institute, London.  
42 <https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/news/motoring-news/excessive-speeding-now-commonplace-on-uk-roads/>  
43 <https://www.driving.org/drug-driving-speeding-and-dangerous-driving-all-hit-record-levels-in-2021/>  
44 <https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/press-media/revolutionise-britains-roads-to-protect-road-users-charities-urge/>  
45 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/delivery-driver-who-ran-over-12776744>  
46 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-59310955>  
47 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12076961/Schoolgirl-killed-car-zebra-crossing-family-day-seaside-inquest-hears.html>  
48 <https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2025-05-18/girl-9-killed-on-road-was-sacrificed-to-prove-need-for-speed-cameras>  
49 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14382779/Father-schoolboy-eight-killed-hit-run-opens-tragedy-haunts-driver-jailed.html>  
50 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c154yznk14o>  
48 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/oct/24/met-police-reopen-investigation-wimbledon-school-crash>  
49 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgz472y4p3o>  
50 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-63778893>

are too dangerous - is excused and left untouched by conventional road safety.

- It has not increased children's independent mobility – in fact, it has had the opposite effect. Studies going back to the 1970s show that with each generation, fewer children walk or bike around their neighbourhoods on their own,<sup>51</sup> with “road safety” education sending a message that streets are not safe places for children.
- It is ineffective. Rigorous studies going back decades show that conventional road safety education has little or no real-world impact on children's injuries or fatalities.<sup>52</sup> While the right kind of schemes may help children to be more confident and capable in walking, cycling or scooting, coaching or training children will make not, on its own, make any significant difference to death or injury rates. Moreover, it is unlikely to lead to greater levels of walking or biking unless the fundamental problem - traffic danger - is tackled. One 2024 study based on the city of Montreal found that children's “walking accessibility” is reduced by at least 75% due to traffic danger.<sup>53</sup>

Research shows that road danger is the top reason parents give for limiting their children's outdoor freedom and has a massive impact on children's ability to walk to where they want and need to go.<sup>54</sup> Many parents want their children to have more freedom to be out and about, to be active, healthy and happy - but they also want them to be safe.<sup>55</sup>

## They Let Their Children Cross the Street, and Now They're Felons

Aug. 6, 2025

Figure 7: New York Times headline

We need a different policy approach – one that prioritises children's freedom to get out and about in their neighbourhoods, focussed on reducing road danger at source, firmly placing responsibility

for this on policymakers and transport planners, as well as on drivers.

### Car-spreading

In the US and Europe, cars have been getting bigger at an alarming rate over recent years, with particular implications for children. So-called SUVs are fast becoming the norm for family cars in the UK, representing 62% of new car sales in 2024. Strangely, a similar percentage of people think SUVs are not necessary in towns and cities, suggesting the high sales may be partly due to aggressive marketing (see below) and lack of consumer choice.<sup>57</sup>

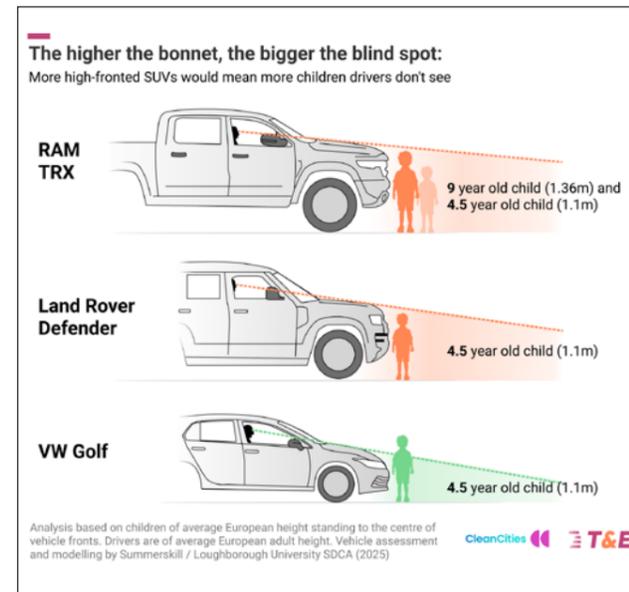


Fig 8 (credit: Clean Cities / T&E)

SUVs are often sold on the idea of safety. But whose safety? Certainly not that of children outside the vehicle – children walking, cycling or playing outside their homes.

Firstly, the high-fronted design of these vehicles is known to make children less visible to drivers. The higher the bonnet, the greater the risk to children (see fig 8). Despite this, average bonnet-height continues to rise and - due to brands such as Land Rover - the UK accounts for disproportionate sales of cars with bonnet heights exceeding 1m.<sup>58</sup>

Then, if hit by one of these vehicles, children are far more likely to die. Anna Goodman and colleagues at the London School of Hygiene (2025) published research showing that a child under 10 is more than twice as likely to die when hit by a larger, heavier, high-fronted SUV compared to a more traditional passenger car. “The greater fatality risk to children, especially young children, is in line with evidence that a taller front end is one key mechanism because children are shorter”, meaning they will be struck higher up their bodies.<sup>59</sup>

Parents instinctively know and feel this increased danger to their children. A recent survey of parents found that 61% are concerned that bigger cars make it more dangerous for children to walk and cycle in London, with only 16% disagreeing.<sup>60</sup>

*“Every day I worry about my children's safety just walking to school. The rise in massive SUVs on our streets has made a simple journey feel dangerous. Parents shouldn't have to feel this way. It's time councillors stepped up with bold, coordinated action to protect children and reclaim our neighbourhoods.”*

Nicola Pastore, Solve the School Run

Children feel it too. At a deputation to Lambeth council in August 2025, nine-year-old Oattie Palmer, from Rosendal School, said: “I want the council to know that SUVs make me feel scared. They tower over me when I'm cycling; they are so big, I get very worried that they will crash into me.”<sup>61</sup>



Figure 9: ‘Car-spreading’ creates more dangerous conditions for children (credit: Clean Cities)

Looking to the US, where oversized, high-fronted trucks are now the norm, shows us the future we are headed for unless we legislate against it now. There, unlike almost every other high-income country,<sup>62</sup> pedestrian road deaths have increased in the last decade<sup>63</sup> - and much of this increase is down to an increase in the proportion of larger vehicles. Shockingly, at least *four children a week* are killed in so-called ‘frontovers’ or ‘backovers’ - the folksy terminology betraying how normal this has become - usually by their own parent outside their homes. These figures are almost certainly an underestimate.<sup>64</sup> 93% of children killed in this way are aged 6 and under. The main organisation campaigning about this issue in the US is sponsored by some of the very companies who make these vehicles. Unsurprisingly therefore, none of their proposed “solutions” to this deadly phenomenon involve regulating the size or design of vehicles. To prevent “bye-bye syndrome” (the chilling terminology for a child being run over after coming out of the house to wave to their parent), the advice is essentially to keep your child locked in the house before getting into your car or truck and driving off to work.<sup>65</sup>

With SUVs now making up one third of all cars on the road and rising, without action the UK will very likely follow the US into a dystopia where child road deaths have become normalised and children's freedom is almost non-existent. In the UK and Europe, we have a window of opportunity to reduce the risk to children's lives from larger

51 Shaw, B., Fagan-Watson, B., Fraudendienst, B. et al. (2013) Children's independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971–2010). London: Policy Studies Institute  
 52 Duperrex O, Roberts I, Bunn F. Safety education of pedestrians for injury prevention. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2002, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD001531. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD001531.  
 53 Zahra Tavakoli, Shabnam Abdollahi, E. Owen D. Waygood, Antonio Páez, Geneviève Boisjoly, Traffic danger's potential impact on children's accessibility, Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment, Volume 135, 2024. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1361920924003274>  
 54 Redrow (2023) From Placemaking to Playmaking: Encouraging community play across the UK, (depending on the wording, fear of crime/abduction also comes up as a strong parental fear)  
 55 “Among parents whose children could not ride a bike, 88% said they would teach them if their local streets felt safer. The research highlights the negative impact that worries over traffic are having on children's freedom and ability to cycle and play outside with others”. (British Cycling survey 2019)  
 56 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/06/opinion/children-traffic-death-parents.html> - free version here <https://archive.is/jcxb>  
 57 <https://cleancitiescampaign.org/rise-of-carspreading-uk/>

58 <https://www.transportenvironment.org/articles/ever-higher-the-rise-of-bonnet-height-and-the-case-to-cap-it>  
 59 Robinson E, Edwards P, Laverty A, Goodman A. Do sports utility vehicles (SUVs) and light truck vehicles (LTVs) cause more severe injuries to pedestrians and cyclists than passenger cars in the case of a crash? A systematic review and meta-analysis. <https://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/early/2025/04/11/ip-2024-045613>  
 60 <https://cleancitiescampaign.org/children-demand-action-on-carspreading/>  
 61 <https://www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/news/25317920.lambeth-children-ask-council-higher-suv-parking-charges/?callback=in&code=NZBJMDM0YZTYTZHMY0ZZDUYU1WEHMMWMTODE2NZBMM TQWYZK&state=4364facb1e9d465a9b17f8c7f9b2e81b>  
 62 <https://www.ghsa.org/news/us-pedestrian-deaths-fall-second-straight-year>  
 63 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanyamoh/2024/02/19/carnage-on-worlds-roads-drops-slightly-but-us-is-an-outlier/>  
 64 <https://www.kidsandcars.org/frontovers/facts>  
 65 <https://www.kidsandcars.org/frontovers/facts>

vehicles, but this will need swift, firm action. Alongside measures to curb the sale and use of SUVs (e.g. tax reform,<sup>66</sup> weight-based parking charges and advertising restrictions<sup>67</sup>), vehicle safety and design standards must be revised to protect and prioritise the safety of children outside the vehicle.



Fig 10: A child's-eye view of their own street – SUVs parked nose-to-nose (credit: Alice Ferguson)

## Electric and autonomous vehicles

This brings us onto the hot topic of innovations in vehicle technology, particularly electric and autonomous/driver assist technologies.

Clearly, we need to shift away from fossil-fuelled transport but, from any number of perspectives, EVs are not the whole - or main - answer. From the point of view of children, aside from the possible clean-air benefits compared to fossil-fuelled cars (some of which may be cancelled out by increased tyre pollution due to the size/weight of EVs)<sup>68</sup>, switching to EVs is simply swapping 'like for like' in terms of road danger, use of street space and impact on independent mobility.

Perhaps things would be better if the "EV revolution" was bringing in a new type of car design – smaller, lighter, safer for people outside the car, less 'space-hungry' and better suited to the cities of the future. In fact, half of new EVs

entering the market in the UK are SUVs, with all the increased danger to children highlighted above.

There is also an added risk of people using EVs more due to reduced running-costs and lack of eco-guilt. In Norway, where EV use is over 90% (EVs have been promoted through government schemes), driving rates have gone up whilst active travel and public transport use has reduced.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, advocates of autonomous and driver-assistance technologies have made ambitious statements about their potential in terms of road safety and transport policy. These technologies are evolving rapidly, and look set to play an increasingly prominent role in mobility. Under some scenarios, they could lead to reductions in traffic danger (through improved vehicle control and better compliance with speed limits). There is also potential for reduced demand for parking spaces, especially if car-club style ownership models take hold. Yet so far there is no strong evidence of any of these safety, transport or land use benefits. A cautious if not sceptical position is reasonable, especially given the historical pattern within the motor and allied industries in tackling the harmful side-effects of car growth.<sup>70</sup>

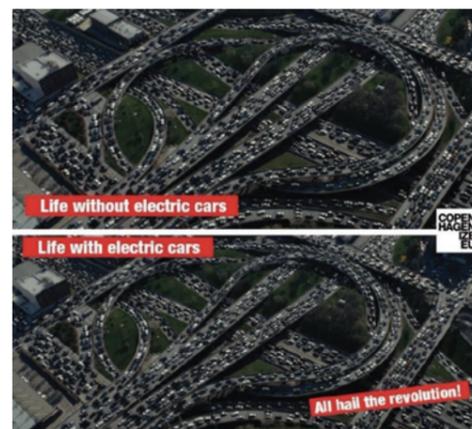


Figure 11: Switching to electric vehicles on its own does nothing to change traffic conditions (credit: Copenhagenize)

A child lens tells us that moving away from private car ownership and towards better, greener, more affordable public transport and active travel must be the way forward. Electric and autonomous vehicles will be part of this shift – especially as part of car clubs or other sharing schemes – but we must challenge the motor industry's desperate attempt to keep us car dependent, by investing in better solutions for children, communities and the planet.

## Car advertising

Cars - especially SUVs, both fossil-fuelled and electric - are aggressively marketed to adults on the idea and promise of 'freedom', yet not only do they *not* offer this freedom for children (who can't drive or make autonomous decisions about driving), they have played a huge part in taking away the freedom children of all social backgrounds did have – to get outside, to play, to meet friends, to walk, cycle, scoot, skate or wheel around their neighbourhood.

As James Ward from Adfree Cities says, "Car ads present glossy, aspirational visions of car ownership that appeal to our sense of adventure, our desire to be admired, and our love for our families...A common trope...is to show the car being driven in a city denuded of people....The driver and passengers are presented as occupying a world constructed solely for them and their driving convenience. The effect is to separate the driver from the world outside the car and therefore from their responsibilities to that world."<sup>71</sup>

This irony extends to the point of absurdity when advertisers and car manufacturers use the idea of free play in cities to sell the very product that is largely responsible for depriving children of this.



Figure 12: Car advertising at its most egregious (and a Twitter flashback)

The immense resource invested in car advertising has worked. The industry shows little sign of slowing down, with car ownership - and dominance of streets and space - increasing year on year.

**"From around 3.3 million cars on British roads in 1950, there were ten times that number in 2024 with over 100,000 being added each month."<sup>72</sup>**

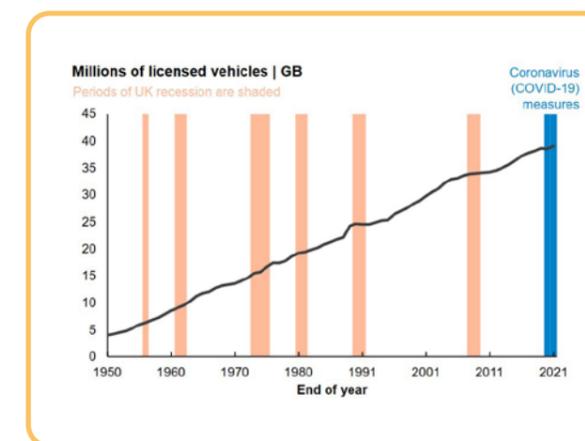


Figure 13: the relentless growth in car ownership over the last 70 years<sup>73</sup>

66 <https://www.transportenvironment.org/te-united-kingdom/articles/uk-still-a-tax-haven-for-big-polluting-suvs-new-study-finds>

67 SUV Alliance Manifesto [www.suv-alliance.org.uk](http://www.suv-alliance.org.uk)

68 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/feb/26/electric-cars-air-pollution-problem-brakes-tyres>

69 Colin Green, Vegard Østli, The effect of battery-electric vehicle ownership on transport demand and substitution between modes, Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice, Volume 199, 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0965856425002423>

70 Moore H and Kay A (2025) Roadkill: Unveiling the true cost of our toxic relationship with cars

71 [https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction\\_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf](https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf)

72 [https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction\\_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf](https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf)

73 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/vehicle-licensing-statistics-2021/vehicle-licensing-statistics-2021>

## Pushing back...

Tom Flood used to make his living advertising cars. Since realising the impact of traffic danger on his own children's safety and freedom, he has turned his skills towards highlighting this injustice, subverting the language and visual tricks used by advertisers to present these products in an unrealistically positive light.



Figure 14: Subverting the tactics of the car industry (image: Tom Flood)

A coalition of organisations is calling on the UK Government to follow the lead of Edinburgh City Council<sup>74</sup> and The Hague to introduce a national tobacco-style ban on SUV advertising, citing evidence that advertising is a powerful driver of demand for larger, more polluting and dangerous vehicles. The SUV Alliance manifesto<sup>75</sup> also calls for limits on vehicle size, weight and height, saying: “A vehicle’s size and design is very closely associated with the danger that vehicle poses to people walking, wheeling, cycling and scooting, and especially to children. Research has shown that children under 10-years-old are three times more likely to be killed if struck by an SUV compared to a small car. Vehicle weight and bonnet height, in particular, is a key determinant of road danger and yet is entirely unregulated in the UK, resulting in bonnet heights on new cars rising year-on-year from 76.9 cm in 2010 to 83.8 cm in 2024.”

## Motonormativity

It’s worth giving a nod here to Ian Walker and colleagues<sup>76</sup> who coined the term “motonormativity” to describe the phenomenon of “shared, largely unconscious assumptions about how travel is, and must continue to be, primarily a car-based activity.” This deeply ingrained bias goes some way to explaining the continued tendency to prioritise cars over children’s safety and health (as well as other important factors).

Interestingly, Walker and te Brömmelstroet propose that, “to avoid the current ‘stickiness’ of Motonormativity...people might be reminded of outcomes that they value (e.g., improving the mental or physical health of children) [which] might help unlock currently ‘hidden’ support for non-car mobility or car-reduction schemes.”<sup>77</sup>

So could a “child lens” be one way of countering the system that keeps children – and all of us – trapped in a car-centric, “car-brained” world?



Figure 15: Motonormativity (credit: Wheels for Wellbeing)



Tom Flood white line

<sup>74</sup> <https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=70730>

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.suv-alliance.org.uk/>

<sup>76</sup> Walker, Tapp and Davis, Motonormativity: how social norms hide a major public health hazard, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJENVH.2023.135446>

<sup>77</sup> Ian Walker, Marco te Brömmelstroet, Why do cars get a free ride? The social-ecological roots of motonormativity, Global Environmental Change, Volume 91, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2025.102980>

## A history of campaigning for child-friendly streets

The 'new normal' of urban streets as places for cars rather than children has not been universally welcomed. As car dominance has grown, groups and campaigns have emerged in different parts of the world to push for urban streets where children can play and socialise, or at least streets where the damaging impact of traffic danger is reduced.

Date	Location	What happened?
1930s	Manchester and other English cities	Mothers campaigning against the criminalisation of children playing in the street led to local authorities being given new powers to create permanent 'play streets' <sup>78</sup>
1950s	New York City	Campaigners led by leading urbanist Jane Jacobs saved Washington Square Park from being destroyed by A-road building scheme. The campaigners' tactic of mobilising local parents led the scheme's main backer, senior city official Robert Moses, to despair that the only people opposed to his plans were "a bunch of mothers."
1960s	Amsterdam	Protests against child road deaths in dense, working class neighbourhoods led to the founding of the 'Stop de Kinder moord' ('stop child murder') campaign, grass roots street reclaiming schemes and eventually government support for new child-friendly 'woonerf' street designs.
1970s	North London	Campaigning led by Nicky Gavron (former deputy mayor under Ken Livingstone) forced the government to abandon plans for an urban motorway. In its place, Parland Walk (a linear park) was created.
1970s	Newcastle	Mothers in Byker fought for 'sign only' play streets to be closed to traffic for children's safety. On one street, mothers and children formed a barricade to stop cars entering. The council eventually agreed to erect bollards and restrict through-traffic. <sup>79</sup>
1990s	UK	NGOs and grassroots community groups led by Transport2000 (now the Campaign for Better Transport) and the Children's Play Council (now Play England) called for the introduction to the UK of Dutch-style 'homezones', leading to Government-funded pilots.

2009 onwards	UK and global	Parents in Bristol, frustrated at the impact of cars on children's freedom, developed a resident-led play street model and start a movement to reclaim space for children. The Playing Out model is picked up by many hundreds of parents and groups across the UK and beyond, making children 'seen and heard' in their communities. <sup>80</sup>
2010s onwards	Global including UK, mainland Europe and N. America	Groups of children and adults come together in 'Kidical Mass' cycle rides through cities, calling for cities to support children's right to cycle independently in safe conditions.
2022-26	UK	Parents and children in Tower Hamlets, London, took direct action against a political attempt to remove a "school street" <sup>81</sup> . In January 2026 the Court of Appeal found in the children's favour, ruling that the elected Mayor had acted unlawfully in attempting to remove the scheme. <sup>82</sup>



Kidical Mass Bristol, 2024. Credit: Bristol 24/7

78 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071022.2017.1290366>  
79 Watson, 2025. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02665433.2025.2485367>

80 <https://playingout.net/about/playing-story/>  
81 "Children came out of nearby houses in their pyjamas, pulling on raincoats and wellies to protect the space. They climbed on top of plastic road barriers, shouting and singing as construction workers tried to move them." <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/nov/03/children-block-london-council-tower-hamlets-remove-play-space-school-street>  
82 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/22/tower-hamlets-mayor-acted-unlawfully-removal-ltn-schemes>

## Chapter 2:

# Ten good reasons for a child lens

Hopefully Chapter 1 has made it clear things need to change. Here, we set out the case for doing this through a “child-lens” on streets and transport.

## 1. Reversing the child health crisis

The UK is facing a longstanding, severe and worsening crisis in children’s mental and physical health. Depending what measure is used, 53-80% of children in this country are not getting the minimum 1hr/day of physical activity they need to be fit and well,<sup>85</sup> with 30% averaging less than 30 minutes per day, *including walking*.<sup>86</sup> Linked to this, more than one in three children are now leaving primary school overweight or obese.<sup>87</sup> While children’s physical activity levels and mental health and wellbeing are complex health issues, environmental factors including traffic, lack of green space and poor walking and biking infrastructure are a big part of the problem.<sup>88</sup>

Within this generally bleak picture, children facing inequalities suffer the most. According to Sport England, Black and Asian children and those from the least affluent families are significantly less physically active than the average.<sup>89</sup> Obesity among year 6 children is 29.2% in the most deprived areas, compared with 13.0% in the least deprived areas.<sup>90</sup> This in turn is strongly linked to spatial and geographical inequalities.

Children’s mental health is also in serious decline<sup>91</sup> and again, poorer children are doing worse.<sup>92</sup> UK children consistently come at or near the bottom of European rankings in terms of life satisfaction.<sup>93</sup>

On a purely economic level, this is a huge problem – obesity alone costs the NHS £6.5billion/yr and it has been estimated that the child mental health crisis will cost £1 trillion in lost earnings across a generation.<sup>94</sup> But, far more importantly, the cost for children themselves is incalculable.

These trends are all the more worrying because children are naturally disposed to be playful, active, and social. From an early age, they have an appetite for exploration and discovery; they want to gain a sense of their own agency and abilities. Movement is at the heart of this process - first through crawling, then toddling, then walking - often in a playful, experimental way. Provide children with the right conditions and this comes naturally.

Until recent decades, just being outside every day allowed children to be naturally active – playing, walking, cycling, wheeling – providing much of what they needed to be physically and mentally healthy, for free, regardless of family circumstances. Yet children’s time spent outdoors,<sup>95</sup> outdoor play,<sup>96</sup> ‘roaming range’<sup>97</sup> and independent mobility<sup>98</sup> have all drastically reduced over a few decades, depriving them of all this benefit.

The impact of this loss of access to free, everyday outdoor activity in the built environment is particularly severe for children facing economic and other inequalities, for several reasons.

1. **Inequality of access to private and public outdoor space.** Children from lower income households and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are significantly less likely to have access to gardens or any private outdoor space, and also have worse access to shared public

outdoor spaces including parks and play areas.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, access to shared doorstep space and the public realm (of which streets make a significant part and are also the conduits to other public spaces) is even more important

2. **Inequality of access to paid-for, organised activities.** Likewise, children from lower income families face more barriers to accessing “compensatory” activities such as sports and trips which often require money, parental time or access to a car.<sup>100</sup>
3. **Greater and more complex barriers to doorstep play and independent mobility.** These inequalities would perhaps be less of a problem if children facing disadvantage had equal or greater access to safe streets and communal doorstep space, but the opposite is true. Children facing inequalities *also* - with a few notable exceptions, as highlighted in architect Dinah Bornat’s work on child-friendly social housing estates<sup>101</sup> - tend to face greater and more complex barriers to doorstep play and independent mobility, including increased fear of crime and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), increased road danger (see Chapter 1) and a pervasive ‘No Ball Games’ culture<sup>102</sup> on housing estates.
4. **Intersectional inequalities.** Children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds,<sup>103</sup> children with physical disabilities, neurodivergent children, girls<sup>104</sup> and gender non-conforming children all potentially face additional barriers to being outdoors, independent and active, especially where these characteristics intersect with each other or household level income. (NB. Each of these groups merits examining much more deeply in its own right, with barriers and potential solutions identified, which is outside the scope/capacity of this paper).

All this adds up to a situation where the children who most need access to safe outdoor space and mobility, with all the benefit that brings, have the least. Restoring children’s outdoor freedom is therefore a social equity and justice issue, as well as a public health one. Creating safer streets and neighbourhoods where *all* children can play, walk, wheel, cycle and get around independently, would

be one of the most impactful, cost-effective and equitable public health interventions imaginable.

## 2. Children are the most impacted group

We would all, including drivers, benefit from a less car-dependent, traffic-dominated environment - the case for this from a public health, environmental and economic viewpoint has been made comprehensively elsewhere. However, children have the most to gain. Adults have a degree of choice about how they get around. Children have very little choice. They are highly dependent on the decisions made for them by adults – those they live with, those who make policy and those who plan, build and manage their local environments. While children in households with access to a car do enjoy some benefits (such as easier travel to some destinations), they have little say over when or where they get to travel. Their own freedom and autonomy are in fact only diminished by cars.

*“Children can only ever be passive participants in automobility.”*

– Stenning and Watson, 2024<sup>105</sup>

It is not pleasant or safe for anyone to deal with a traffic-dominated environment – there’s a reason that adult cycling mode-share sits stubbornly under 3%. However, adults can and do generally choose to manage this risk and are not completely deterred from getting around on foot or by bike.



Figure 16: Primary aged children trying to cross their own street (credit: Alice Ferguson)

85 Until 2019, the CMO’s recommendation was that “All children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day” (Start Active, Stay Active, 2019). By 2019, 80% of children were not getting this. The official guidelines then changed to “an average of at least 60 minutes per day across the week” (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report>), which reduced the percentage of children NOT getting this to 53% (Sport England ‘Active Lives’ survey 2023)

86 Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, Dec 2024 <https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-inspiration/childrens-activity-levels-remain-stable-significant-and-sustained-action>

87 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year/age>

88 UNICEF Office of Research (2022). *Places and Spaces: Environments and children’s well-being*, Innocenti Report Card 17, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence

89 Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, Dec 2024

90 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year/age>

91 LGA. (2022) *Children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health - facts and figures*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-camhs/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-and>

92 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/statistics/poverty-statistics#:~:text=Children%20and%20adults%20living%20in,than%20those%20in%20the%20highest>

93 <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/Good%20Childhood%20Report-Main-Report.pdf>

94 <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Future-Minds-Report-2025-WEB.pdf>

95 Natural England (2019) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey on people and the natural environment Children and Young People report

96 Play England. (2023) ‘Trends in Street Play’

97 Woolley, H.E. and Griffin, E. (2015) Decreasing experiences of home range, outdoor spaces, activities and companions: changes across three generations in Sheffield in north England.

Children’s Geographies, 13 (6), pp. 677-691. ISSN 1473-3285

98 Shaw, B., Fagan-Watson, B., Fraudendienst, B. et al. (2013) Children’s independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971–2010). London: Policy Studies Institute

99 Fields in Trust [complete ref]; Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (2010), Community green: using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health summary report

100 <https://playingout.net/blog/why-playing-out-is-a-social-justice-issue-for-children/>

101 <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/practice/culture/all-to-play-for-how-to-design-child-friendly-housing>

102 <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/as-a-housing-provider/>

103 [https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Dulce-Pedroso\\_Race-and-Playing-Out\\_March-2023.pdf](https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Dulce-Pedroso_Race-and-Playing-Out_March-2023.pdf)

104 Medeiros et al 2021. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266655812100035X?via%3Dihub>

105 Stenning and Watson, 2024 “Children see streets differently” <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/newe.12405>

The story with children is very different. Their mobility and choices are far more impacted by traffic dominance and danger. They are at greater risk than adults due to their smaller size (making them less visible to drivers, less able to see oncoming traffic and more physically vulnerable), because their brains are still developing, because they move and behave differently to adults *and* because they simply don't have the life experience to make judgements and manage risk. Not only are children disproportionately injured and killed as pedestrians<sup>106</sup> - surely enough reason to prioritise their safety - but also, because of very reasonable parental concern about road danger, their freedom to get around independently is hugely diminished *because* of this danger.

### 3. Children are the least considered group

Not only are children not *prioritised* in transport policy and planning, they are rarely *considered* equally alongside other groups, if at all. This blind spot is embedded in UK law. Under the Equality Act 2010, "age" is a protected characteristic. It would seem to follow that children - due to their age - should be treated as a statutory equality group within policy and decision-making. Yet the protected characteristic of age only applies to over-18s (except in limited circumstances). So, the specific needs of the elderly must be considered in decision-making, but not the needs of children.<sup>107</sup> On paper, it currently appears to be legal in the UK to discriminate against children and to ignore their needs.

Culturally too, children - despite being some 20% of the UK population - are little considered in UK policy outside of education and social care, perhaps partly because they don't get to vote.<sup>108</sup> Particularly within transport, planning and housing - all policy areas that hugely impact children's lives and wellbeing - children barely get a mention. This issue was the focus of a UK parliamentary select committee inquiry on Children, Young People and the Built Environment<sup>109</sup> that received written and oral evidence from over 130 organisations

and experts,<sup>110</sup> providing clear evidence that children need to be far better considered in these policy areas. While the inquiry was cut short by the announcement of a General Election in June 2024, the original group who called for the inquiry (including Playing Out and Tim Gill) worked with the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) to produce a report and recommendations based on the collective evidence, concluding that, "For decades, governments, policy makers and the planning system in England have failed to create places and spaces where children and young people develop well and thrive."<sup>111</sup>

When children are thought about in the context of streets and travel, the focus is almost always on school journeys. As the Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (formerly Sustrans) says in its 2025 Children's Walking and Cycling Index, "Children are often overlooked by decision-makers in transport except on journeys to and from school. This leaves out the role that travel plays in their day-to-day lives."<sup>112</sup> Even within active travel policy-making, utilitarian, "purposeful" journeys have tended to be the main focus. Children's use of streets to get around their neighbourhoods, to play, socialise, wander and just to be out and about is not well enough understood or valued.

### 4. For children, independent mobility = active travel

We will not set out the general case for active travel here, which is comprehensively made elsewhere.<sup>113</sup> For children however, walking, cycling or wheeling is not *just* a healthier, more sustainable, more cost-effective and equitable way to get around. It is also the *only* way they can get around under their own steam. And for those who do not have a family car (or whose everyday carer does not have access to one), it is an essential part of being able to access public transport and travel further afield. In other words, for children, independent travel almost always involves, or simply is, "active travel".

If children can get around their neighbourhood independently - if they have "mobility licence"<sup>114</sup> - as well as getting the daily physical activity they need, they have access to the outside world and all it has to offer: physical places such as parks, playgrounds, shops, friends' homes, sports facilities and cultural spaces, but also interactions, experiences, learning, opportunity and adventure.

sense as a simple way to ensure public space works for all users.

Where designing children out of public space has precipitated a vicious cycle (see above), applying a child-lens can be the start of a *virtuous* one. Creating more child-friendly environments

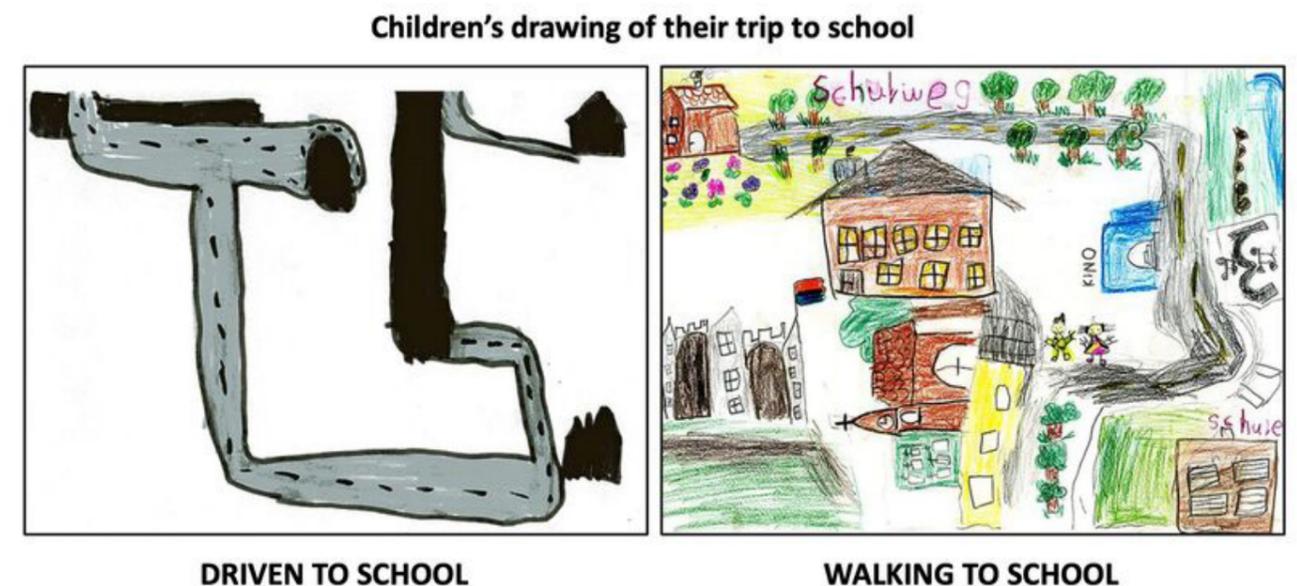


Figure 17: Contrasting 'mental maps'<sup>115</sup>

### 5. Good for children = good for all

Creating streets and a wider built environment that works for children *of all intersectional equality groups* is a sure-fire method of creating a better environment for everyone, young and old - one that is safe, healthy, equitable, welcoming, accessible and inclusive.

Enrique Penalosa, the former Mayor of Bogota, famously said, "Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for everyone". The same is true of roads and streets.

A tangible example of this is the "Piazzale Aperte" project in Milan (see Chapter 4), where low-cost, creative place-making around schools and nurseries has created public, all-age friendly spaces for the whole community. Using children as a 'lens' on urban planning and highway engineering makes

"increases the number of people of all ages out on the streets, making public spaces seem more welcoming and providing opportunities for social interaction and children's play".<sup>116</sup>

Involving children as active participants in local decision-making also benefits society as a whole. As well as the unique perspective and creative ideas children can bring, these are our future adult citizens, future users of transport - and future planners, politicians and highway engineers! Giving children a sense of agency will not only benefit them right now but result in better decision-making in the long-term.

Other equality groups - women, older people, disabled people and ethnic minorities - would particularly benefit from a child-centred approach that results in safer, more populated, more accessible, equitable, active-travel friendly streets.

Parents and carers (still most often women) stand

<sup>106</sup> Children 0-16 are roughly 19% of total UK population (see <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/>) yet child pedestrian KSI (0-16) make up 24% of total pedestrian KSI using adjusted figures (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain#road-user-type-ras02>). This is despite the strong likelihood that children are less exposed to traffic danger than adults, due to their limited independent mobility.

<sup>107</sup> Playing Out, 2024. Supplementary written evidence to the Inquiry on Children, Young People and the Built Environment. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/128903/pdf/>

<sup>108</sup> In Scotland, 16-year-olds can vote in Scottish parliamentary elections only. For all other UK elections the voting age is 18.

<sup>109</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7981/children-young-people-and-the-built-environment/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://playingout.net/what-can-i-do/big-picture/children-and-the-built-environment/>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Raising-the-healthiest-generation-in-history-Accessible-version.pdf>; NB. Since this report and other advocacy the UK Government has made more references to children in national planning policy.

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/the-walking-and-cycling-index/childrens-walking-and-cycling-index/>

<sup>113</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(24\)00201-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(24)00201-8/fulltext)

<sup>114</sup> [https://urbancyclinginstitute.substack.com/p/why-our-streets-are-failing-kids?source=queue&utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://urbancyclinginstitute.substack.com/p/why-our-streets-are-failing-kids?source=queue&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

<sup>115</sup> [https://www.kindundumwelt.ch/\\_files/VCLBalzers.pdf](https://www.kindundumwelt.ch/_files/VCLBalzers.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cb505e5274a2f304ef987/Briefing\\_Obesity\\_and\\_active\\_travel\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cb505e5274a2f304ef987/Briefing_Obesity_and_active_travel_final.pdf)

to benefit hugely too. If the burden of transporting and accompanying your children everywhere is lifted, the whole process of juggling competing priorities becomes less stressful and time-consuming. Many parents simply don't have the time, money, transport choices, headspace or ability to get children to where they need or want to go, so enabling independent mobility and active travel<sup>117</sup> especially benefits parents facing inequalities, lone parents and parents of multiple children.<sup>118</sup>

**“Freeing children frees the caregivers too.”**

Eva Kail, urban planner for City of Vienna and pioneer of gender mainstreaming<sup>119</sup>

## 6. Children have specific needs and rights (that are not always met by designing streets for adults)

Applying a child-lens would result in better streets and neighbourhoods for everyone. The same is not true in reverse. A traditional “universalist” approach often translates in practice as designing for the white, working-age, able-bodied, car-owning man, excluding many equality groups. But even forward-thinking travel strategies designed with all *adults* in mind can continue to exclude children and ignore their needs.

*Children have a right to play*

In many countries, including Wales, Scotland and Sweden, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) protects children's rights in law. The UK Government has not passed the charter into domestic law but as a signatory, has made a commitment to implement it. Article 31 asserts every child's right to “rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts”. Making streets and public space safe and suitable for children is essential to fulfilling this right equitably.

**“The child's right to play is of critical importance to every aspect of a child's life. Implementation of this right is crucial for the health, development, and wellbeing of the child, and the successful realization of a plethora of other children's rights”.**

Dr Naomi Lott, 2025

In a global review, the UN Committee commented that, “*Poor recognition of [the significance of the right to play] results in...the invisibility of children in national and local-level planning*”. It went on to spell out that one condition of these rights being met is, “*An environment sufficiently free from waste, pollution, traffic and other physical hazards to allow [children] to circulate freely and safely within their local neighbourhood*”.<sup>120</sup> Children's rights academic Dr Naomi Lott further argues that ensuring children can get around independently is an intrinsic element of member states fulfilling Article 31.<sup>121</sup>

*Children use streets differently...*

For children, there is little distinction between active travel and play - these activities blend, overlap and intersect. Streets are not just routes from A to B but can also be places to hang out, run around, ride a bike, make up games, get out of the house, let off steam, see the sky, experience life, connect with their friends and feel part of their community. Often, when getting to places, children ‘play on the way’, or they may simply want to be out and about with friends, riding bikes or walking around, with no particular destination. Active travel for children can include skateboarding, scooting, jumping and skipping. Doorstep play often involves bikes and other wheels and can be the perfect way to gain the skills, confidence and road sense needed to begin to travel further afield.

**“Children move on streets] in ways that adults rarely plan or hope for, in haphazard, stop-start, meandering ways”.**

Stenning and Watson, 2024<sup>122</sup>

The journeys children make (with and without parents) and the streets that matter most for them are also different from those of adults. Daily movement often involves parent/s and child/ren

making connected trips from one local destination to the next (see Fig 18). Trips they make may be shorter and less purposeful.

Family life happens in neighbourhoods – in the areas of towns and cities where we live, work, play, learn and get the products and services we need. Transport planners typically focus on the travel patterns of the solo commuter, or on the movement of those providing goods and services. These travel patterns are nothing like those of children and their parents and carers who look after them, whose spatial lives typically unfold within a mile or two of home and involve what is increasingly recognised as “trip-chaining”.<sup>123</sup>

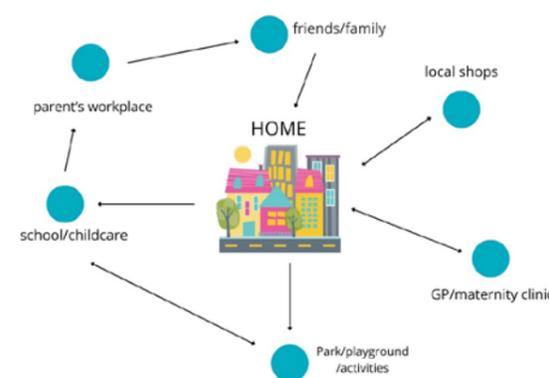


Figure 18: typical trip chains for a parent with young children (credit: Alice Ferguson, after Sam Williams)

In their 2022 book ‘Movement’, Marco te Brömmelstroet and Thalia Verkade argue that even in The Netherlands – widely seen as a beacon for better streets and active travel – perceived adult need for efficient, purposeful journeys, including by bike, has been prioritised over children's need for safe, liveable neighbourhood streets and doorstep space where they can walk, play and be. [insert photo of Movement – no fig number?]

Large-scale, high-profile engineering projects aimed at encouraging active travel and reducing car dependence will help to make streets and neighbourhoods less car-dominated. But children also need smaller, more specific, localised changes that make it easier for them to play outside their homes, cross the road to call on a friend or safely walk around the corner to a local greenspace.<sup>124</sup> Hence for children and their carers, as well as for older people and other groups, it may have more

impact to focus on hyper-local, residential streets and routes to playable spaces and community-based facilities, as well as schools and childcare centres. Great Kneighton in Cambridge (see Chapter 4) shows how transport policy and practice at different levels can come together to transform neighbourhoods for children.

*Children are not little adults...*

To state the obvious, children are small. They are less visible to car-drivers (especially those driving high-fronted trucks or SUVs – see Chapter 1), and less able to see over obstacles such as parked cars. This in itself puts them at far greater risk than adults.

However, children are not simply small adults. They are still developing, physically and mentally. It is well known that children - especially those under the age of about 7 - perform worse at the kind of judgements involved in dealing with cars and traffic.<sup>125</sup> They are simply not equipped to cope with high-volume, high-speed traffic, nor should we expect them to. Children are also less linear than adults, more wobbly on bikes and scooters, more erratic and playful in their movements. Rather than attempting to control and limit such natural, healthy childhood ways of being, we should be creating environments that allow for this. Designing streets and infrastructure with only adults in mind can literally be lethal for children.

Whilst there are other dangers and risks on the street, especially where crime rates are higher and for children facing inequalities, the biggest threat of all comes from cars. And, unlike some other risks, this is a relatively simple one to solve. It is in the gift of decision-makers and practitioners. We know what is needed and have a responsibility to act on this knowledge.

**“We know that kids have difficulties assessing things like the speed and distance to a moving car which in turn leads to difficulties in figuring out when a gap in traffic is enough. Kids also have limited peripheral vision and trouble locating sounds. Yet traffic engineers don't design to help kids out.” -**

Wes Marshall, Traffic engineer and author of “Killed by a Traffic Engineer”

<sup>117</sup> Louise Platt, Elsa Devienne, Ruthie Boycott-Garnett, Harrie Larrington-Spencer, Emily Lovett, Ruth Naughton-Doe, Anna Powell, Alison Stenning, Laura Tucker, Sally Watson, Catherine Wilkinson & Samantha Wilkinson (12 Feb 2026): The ‘walking/wheeling with’ framework: establishing walking/wheeling with children as a mobility justice issue, *Mobilities*, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2026.2628112; <https://vanleerfoundation.org/urban95/>

<sup>118</sup> [https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2022/10/benefits\\_and\\_barriers\\_to\\_children\\_cycling\\_for\\_parents\\_cycling\\_uk\\_2022.pdf](https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2022/10/benefits_and_barriers_to_children_cycling_for_parents_cycling_uk_2022.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> Speaking at ‘Start with Children’ conference, Bratislava, 2025

<sup>120</sup> [https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/UNCRC-General-Comment-17-on-Article-31.pdf?plscmtl\\_id=20587](https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/UNCRC-General-Comment-17-on-Article-31.pdf?plscmtl_id=20587)

<sup>121</sup> Naomi Lott, A framework for implementing the right of the child to play: space, time, acceptance, rights-informed, *Human Rights Law Review*, Volume 25, Issue 2, June 2025, ngaf003, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngaf003>

<sup>122</sup> Stenning and Watson, 2024 “Children see streets differently” <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/newe.12405>

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/nts-factsheets/trip-chaining-2024>

<sup>124</sup> ‘Movement: How to Take Back Our Streets and Transform Our Lives’ by Thalia Verkade and Marco te Brömmelstroet

<sup>125</sup> Deluka-Tibljaš, A., Šurdonja, S., Ištoka Otković, I., & Campisi, T. (2022). Child-Pedestrian Traffic Safety at Crosswalks—Literature Review. *Sustainability*, 14(3), 1142. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14031142>

## 7. A child-lens supports other policy aims

Child-friendly streets, designed with the needs of *all* children in mind, are also pedestrian-friendly, cycle-friendly, female-friendly, all-age and disability friendly, equitable and inclusive. They are Healthy Streets, Resilient Streets, Active Streets, Community Streets, Green Streets, Living Streets, Vision-Zero Streets. In other words, they are the streets we all need now and for the future.

*“[Creating more child-friendly environments] increases the number of people of all ages out on the streets, making public spaces seem more welcoming and providing opportunities for social interaction and children’s play”*

Public Health England, 2013<sup>126</sup>

These are just some of the policy agendas that would be supported by a “child lens” and a move away from car-centric planning:

**Active travel.** A child lens could be the key to increasing public support for prioritising active travel and building a deeper, longer-term consensus (see below). Additionally, enabling children to walk and cycle is the best way to shift the norm and ensure a future generation of adults who choose to walk and cycle.

**Public health.** Enabling children to get outside, move around, play, walk and cycle as part of everyday life, would help all children get the minimum 1hr/day moderate-to-vigorous physical activity they need, as well as improving their mental and emotional wellbeing. Through enabling everyone to travel more actively, the health of the wider population would also be improved.

**Community cohesion.** Play streets<sup>127</sup> have demonstrated that even temporarily creating streets where children can feel safe and play out near home builds stronger, more connected communities where neighbours of all ages and backgrounds can come together and build relationships.<sup>128</sup>

**Safety and crime reduction.** Safer streets for children mean safer streets for everyone, especially women and other more vulnerable groups. The more children can be out and about, independently or with an adult, the more ‘eyes on the street’.<sup>129</sup> Less car-dominated, more lively, welcoming streets used by people of all ages, ethnicities, abilities and genders will feel safer for everyone.

**Climate and clean air.** Transport is the only sector of the UK economy in which greenhouse gas emissions are increasing rather than decreasing over time.<sup>130</sup> EVs at best only a partial answer to this (see Chapter 1) - there needs to be a radical and systemic shift away from car-dependency towards active travel and cleaner public transport.<sup>131</sup>

**Reducing inequalities.** Car-dependency exacerbates inequalities. The top 10% wealthiest households are 40% more likely to own at least one car than households in the least wealthy 10%. Black people are twice as likely to live in a household without access to a vehicle.<sup>132</sup> Disabled people face greater barriers to car travel.<sup>133</sup> Children from households without a car suffer all the negative impacts of car-dominant environments with none of the benefits.<sup>134</sup> A child-centred, equality-based approach to transport would help to redress this injustice.

**Economic stability:** Neighbourhoods with child- and family-friendly features including accessible green space and safe, walkable streets tend to be popular and are part of what makes some towns and cities more attractive to families. What is more, towns and cities need families if they are to have a population mix that ensures long-term prosperity - crucially including people of child-rearing age who work in many of the jobs that are critical to social and economic success.

*Vibrant communities need people of all ages for long-term economic stability.”*

Mildred Warner and Rebecca Baran-Rees,  
Cornell University.<sup>135</sup>

## 8. A focus on children could win public support and calm the ‘culture war’ around streets

*“Children are the emotional link for all of us. If they’re part of the messaging, it starts to connect with people.”*

Chris Boardman, Head of Active Travel England.<sup>136</sup>

The debate around streets has become increasingly toxic in recent years, both in itself - “cyclists” vs “drivers” - and as a disproportionate focus of the culture wars, creeping into policy-making as exemplified by former prime minister Rishi Sunak’s rhetoric around “ending the war on motorists”.<sup>137</sup> This, perhaps more than anything else, has hampered both political support for progressive transport policy and actual change on the ground.

Shifting the conversation to focus on children’s safety, health and opportunity could help break the gridlock and lower the temperature, giving policymakers a different way in to make the case for active travel and clean air measures. A focus on children cannot help but focus on the longer term, as well as building a strong consensus for collective action that is resistant to narrow, short-term vested interests.

*“In hindsight, a greater focus on children’s needs would have not only delivered an even better active travel environment for youngsters and adults alike, but also reduced the level of opposition to the programme from some quarters”.*

Paul Gasson, Waltham Forest “Mini Holland” campaigner



Waltham Forest ‘mini-holland’ scheme. Credit: Alice Ferguson

## 9. It’s time to listen to children – and act!

For decades, children themselves have been aware of the injustices around streets and transport - and they have demanded change. In surveys and consultations, children have repeatedly spoken out about the need for safer streets where they can walk, cycle and play. In schools across the country, they have participated in mapping exercises, showing where they feel in danger on their route to school and envisioning safer routes.

In 2003, Sustrans (now Walk Wheel Cycle Trust) organised a national child-led conference in Leicester: “Championing Safe Routes to School: Citizenship in Action.” 200 children from schools across the UK congregated to speak about their desire to walk and cycle and the need for safer streets. A Government minister promised to make it a priority. Yet nothing changed.

In 2004, the children’s charity Barnardo’s joined forces with the pressure group Transport 2000 (now Campaign for Better Transport) to produce a report: “Stop, look and listen: children talk about traffic”. This contained powerful first-hand testimony from children on the way traffic has limited their freedoms. In a hard-hitting conclusion, the authors called on the government to make our streets safer, so that children could play outdoors again. An Early Day Motion was put forward to parliament but there is no record of any further action.<sup>138</sup>

126 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cb505e5274a2f304ef987/Briefing\\_Obesity\\_and\\_active\\_travel\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cb505e5274a2f304ef987/Briefing_Obesity_and_active_travel_final.pdf)

127 <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>

128 <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tackling-Loneliness-with-Resident-Led-Play-Streets-Final-Report.pdf>

129 Goodman, Anna, and Rachel Aldred (2021). “The Impact of Introducing a Low Traffic Neighbourhood on Street Crime, in Waltham Forest, London.” TfL Findings.

130 [https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction\\_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf](https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf)

131 Graeme Hill, Oliver Heidrich, Felix Creutzig, Phil Blythe (2019) The role of electric vehicles in near-term mitigation pathways and achieving the UK’s carbon budget, Applied Energy, vol.

251 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2019.04.107>.

132 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/transport/car-or-van-ownership/latest/>

133 <https://www.transportforall.org.uk/the-issues/private-transport/car/>

134 [https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction\\_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf](https://adfreecities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Driven-to-distraction_-Adfree-Cities-guide-to-car-advertising-V1-November-2024.pdf)

135 Mildred Warner and Rebecca Baran-Rees, ‘The Economic Importance of Families with Children’, [https://labs.aap.cornell.edu/sites/aap-labs/files/2022-09/Warner%26Baran-Rees\\_2013\\_EconomicImportance.pdf](https://labs.aap.cornell.edu/sites/aap-labs/files/2022-09/Warner%26Baran-Rees_2013_EconomicImportance.pdf)

136 Playing Out Webinar 23rd February 2022 <https://playingout.net/blog/highlights-from-our-active-travel-webinar-with-chris-boardman/>

137 <https://playingout.net/blog/we-need-a-plan-for-children-not-motorists/>

138 Original report not available - referenced in: [https://www.playday.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/street\\_play\\_literature\\_review.pdf](https://www.playday.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/street_play_literature_review.pdf) and <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/content/other/traffic-all-housing-developments-should-have-room-for-play>

In 2010 in Swindon, school friends of a 7yr-old-boy who was killed by a speeding motorist two years earlier campaigned for a widespread 20mph speed limit.<sup>139</sup> One girl said, “I just want the drivers to slow down, it’s just sad because people die. Please just slow down.” Over 15 years later, these children are adults and the council is only just implementing a partial 20mph scheme in the city.<sup>140</sup>

In 2015, children from Room 13 Hareclive - an independent child-led artist studio based in a primary school in Hartcliffe, a South Bristol housing estate with high levels of disadvantage and inequality, conducted research into children’s freedom to play out. They found that traffic danger - along with adults’ fear - was by far the biggest barrier<sup>141</sup>. They created a film - “The Sad Reality”<sup>142</sup> - to highlight the impact of unsafe streets on their lives. They organised a protest march and screened the film in a local church. Local council representatives came to the film premiere - a huge event for the children and parents in this community - and promised to make a difference. Nothing changed.



Figure 19: Children from Hartcliffe process to Bristol City Hall to demand safer streets, 2017 (Photo credit: Shani Ali / Room Thirteen Hareclive)

In 2018/19 Room 13 children were part of another collaborative research project, this time with academics. The Bus Project<sup>143</sup> looked at how cost of bus travel is a major barrier to children’s ability to access anything beyond their estate on the outskirts of Bristol. The children co-produced another short film, “Now’s the Time”, lobbied Bristol City Council for change and fed into national government consultations. Despite the council ‘listening’, for eight years there was no action. However, the then council cabinet member for women, children and families, Helen Godwin, was elected as West of England Regional Mayor in 2025. As a result of her anti-poverty work and remembering Room 13 voices, she piloted free bus travel for under-15s in school holidays,<sup>144</sup> with the possibility of extending the policy if funding allows. Though too late for the year 6 children - now adults - who originally petitioned, their efforts may yet help other Hartcliffe children in the future.

In 2025, Sustrans held another “Children’s Summit” in Birmingham, to launch their Children’s Walking and Cycling Index.<sup>145</sup> A whole new generation of children from diverse backgrounds once again spoke powerfully about the impact of traffic and other dangers on their everyday freedoms, saying they felt “trapped indoors” because the streets didn’t feel safe enough to play out, walk or cycle. Once again, they pleaded with the adults in the room to do something.

These are just a few of many examples of children calling for change around streets and transport. Despite some small local wins, children learn that in general, their needs are unimportant, their voices unheard, and politicians’ promises unreliable. This must now be the time for change.

## 10. Children should be ‘seen and heard’ in streets and communities

The less visible children become in streets and public space, the less their needs are considered by drivers, decision-makers and society - and the more their absence is normalised. In a vicious circle, as children’s outdoor play and independent mobility has declined, so has consideration of it. In the UK, it is now commonly assumed that primary-aged children will be accompanied by an adult, so highway engineers are typically not imagining an 8-year-old trying to cross a road independently to get to the park. Similarly, the idea that streets and doorstep space should be safe and playable for children given little attention. In recent years, even campaigns for primary school children to walk and cycle to school have focussed on encouraging parents to walk and cycle *with* their children (which is of course valuable in itself), skirting the question of children’s independent mobility.

Conversely, enabling children to be ‘seen and heard’ outside, in streets and communities, is an important part of establishing their rights both specifically as street-users and more fundamentally as citizens - reminding us that they are active, valuable, equal members of society *in their own right*. We must reverse the vicious circle and, through making children visible, ensure their needs and rights are respected and met.

**In short, when all these arguments for a “child lens” are taken into account, it is clear that children should not only be considered alongside all other equality groups in decision-making around streets; they should be prioritised.**



Doorstep Play. Credit: Playing Out

139 <https://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/8707316.children-campaign-for-20mph-zone/>

140 <https://www.thisiswiltshire.co.uk/news/25359812.swindon-neighborhood-set-20mph-speed-limit/>

141 <https://playingout.net/inspiration/creative-projects/hartcliffe-safer-streets-films-event/>

142 <https://vimeo.com/208477850>

143 <https://www.room13hareclive.org.uk/our-work/projects/the-bus-project>

144 Dulce Pedroso comments: “Some of the asylum seeker interviewees in my research complained that because this wasn’t during term time, it was of no benefit to them - it was the term time when they needed the support”

145 <https://www.walkwheecycletrust.org.uk/the-walking-and-cycling-index/childrens-walking-and-cycling-index/>

## Chapter 3: A child lens on streets and neighbourhoods

Almost all residential streets in the UK are designed first and foremost around the needs and concerns of car drivers and owners. In urban areas in Britain, streets make up around 80% of public space. Most of this street space is allocated to cars (moving and parked) while street and junction designs mainly aim to make driving easy and smooth. These ‘car-first’ features of streets are so common, and their logic so deeply ingrained, that it can be hard to imagine anything different. Streets that favour cars are just ‘the way things are.’

To bring this out, consider one ingredient of the road network of almost all residential areas: a side road T-junction. In a typical junction, the detailed design is entirely oriented towards easing life for the driver, with the inevitable side-effect of making life harder for all pedestrians – and often a complete barrier to children travelling independently.



Figure 20: A typical side road junction with crossing distances (image: Google Street view)

The top image below shows a street view of a junction that is typical of tens of thousands up and down the country. The side street (at the top of the photo) has just 12 houses. Yet the ‘splay’ (the wide curves where the side street meets the main street) is designed to allow vehicles to drive at speed into it, while pedestrians walking along

the main street must cross about 15 metres of roadway. If these curves were tighter or removed altogether, the crossing would be much shorter, and cars turning into the side road would be forced to take the turn more slowly and carefully. In other words, a tighter junction would reduce the danger from moving cars, and make life easier for pedestrians: not only children, but also parents with small children or infants, and people with mobility problems including many older and disabled people.



Figure 21: A ‘continuous footway’

It is not hard to envisage a more pedestrian and child-friendly approach. Simply tightening the junction would make for a more pedestrian and child-friendly environment, reducing the distance for a child to cross, increasing visibility and slowing down drivers. More forward-thinking urban design promotes the “continuous footway”, which reverses the current norm, prioritising pedestrians over cars (Figure 21).

Whilst certainly an improvement, this is a good example of where a child lens could reveal other issues. The continuous footway gives all the visual signals of a pavement, which children have been trained to understand as safe, car-free, space. Yet in this instance, cars can and do drive across it. Imagine a young child on a scooter or balance bike, shooting ahead of their parent on foot. Would they know to stop and watch for a car turning across the “continuous footway”? Or, would drivers necessarily be aware and careful enough to allow for a small child scooting across the junction? If engineers applied a child lens to the problem, would the solution be different – perhaps more like figure 23 below?

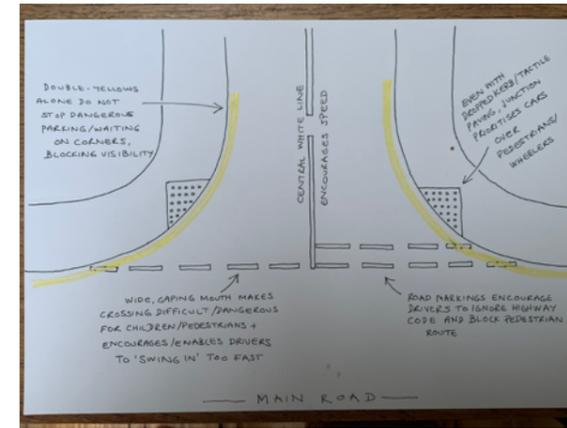


Figure 22: a typical residential side street junction (credit: Alice Ferguson)

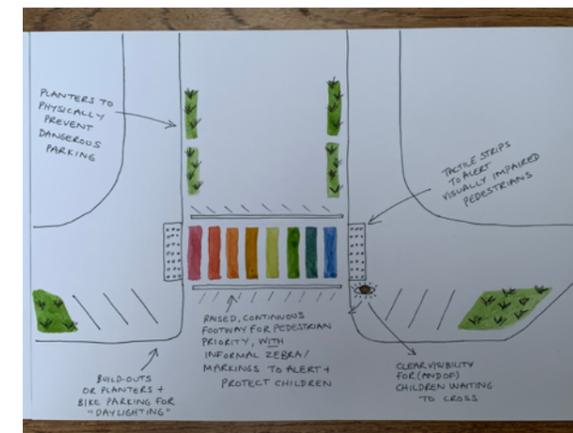


Figure 23: Speculative proposal for a more child-centred side-junction (credit: Alice Ferguson).<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, for many decades, the wider road layout of most housing areas and estates has been designed to make life easy and convenient for car owners and drivers. Street networks, the location and patterns of parking, and the size and distribution of parks and green spaces are shaped around the need to store, get to, and drive around in vehicles. Street network patterns and road designs aim to keep traffic flowing (rather than say, to create safe routes for pedestrians). The overall layout of standard housing estates is designed around everyone being able to drive to their front door and park in the prime doorstep space, precluding doorstep play and necessitating a neighbourhood that is dominated by its road network. Green spaces and play areas are an afterthought, fitted in around the road network rather than being a central feature or focus;

<sup>146</sup> Disclaimer – this quick sketch is not intended as a technical design and it is important to note that non-standard designs/colouring need to also be considered from a disability perspective.

<sup>147</sup> Biddulph M (2011) ‘The impact of innovative designs on activity in residential streets’

<sup>148</sup> <https://themustangsource.com/forums/t726/look-what-i-brought-home-today-538431/index2> via Lior Steinberg

hence it is no surprise when they end up being in marginal, inaccessible or unattractive parts of a neighbourhood. The overall mindset is as if, when designing a house, the primary focus is to have a convenient central car garage rather than a pleasant home to live in (see Figure 24).

People who walk are given minimal attention, typically through the provision of pavements and occasional crossing points. People who cycle must usually share the roadway with cars, since cycling on pavements is prohibited. Protected cycle lanes are rare, and well-connected networks of safe cycle routes even rarer. The mobility of children is almost entirely ignored in design terms, except for some special measures such as barriers and surface signage at the entrances to parks, play areas and schools. It is true that many neighbourhoods include traffic calming measures like speed bumps and chicanes to tackle the problems caused by excessive speed. While these are fairly effective in slowing drivers down, and can play a role as part of a more comprehensive highway design approach, in isolation they rarely change the basic feel or function of a street.<sup>147</sup>

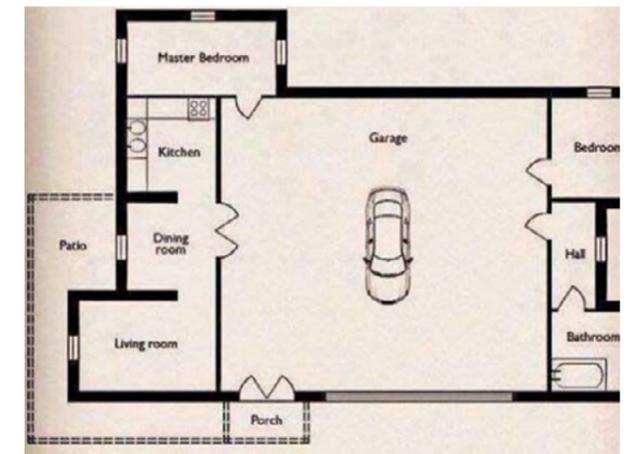


Figure 24: Houses are not (generally) designed around cars, so why are neighbourhoods?<sup>148</sup>

## A word or two about parking

Given that “the average car is stationary 96% of the time”<sup>149</sup> parking is a singularly hot topic and car-owners can be fiercely protective of what they see as their right to park. Seen in a historical and cultural light, the emotions prompted by moves to restrict parking - even pavement parking, increasingly recognised as a serious problem<sup>150</sup> - are amongst the strongest signs of how deeply embedded car-centric thinking is in everyday life. There is nothing ‘normal’ or given about this. A survey of old photos of British residential urban streets will show that parked cars were uncommon right up until the 1970s



Figure 25: 1970s London residential street (credit: Homer Sykes/Playing Out)

The gradual appropriation of residential street space by parked cars is a form of privatisation of public space. What is more, it was never explicitly planned for or set out in public policy. No politician proposed it in a manifesto or referendum. Yet trying to reverse this process by restricting, charging for, or removing parking is likely to lead to instant, sustained fury, as any local politician will confirm.

*“It’s not my duty as mayor to make sure you have a parking spot. For me it’s the same as if you bought a cow, or a refrigerator, and then asked me where you’re going to put them.”*

Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores, mayor of Pontevedra.



Figure 26: 2010s Bristol residential street (credit: Playing Out)

Japan offers a different, less car-oriented approach. In many Japanese cities, prospective car owners must prove that they have an off-road parking place before they can buy a vehicle. The policy, which dates back to the 1960s, has effectively kept most urban residential streets free from on-street parking, and as a result they feel much more pedestrian-friendly. This could at least in part explain why even young children enjoy levels of everyday freedom and independent mobility that are startling to Western eyes (as shown by the popularity of the reality TV show ‘Old Enough’ which depicts children as young as 3 or 4 taking on tasks and challenges like shopping in a local supermarket).



Figure 27: Typical side street in a Kyoto residential neighbourhood (credit: Tim Gill)

A neighbourhood that takes proper account of the needs of children and those who look after them makes local trips convenient and safe to get to, without the need for a car. This is partly a matter of good paths and networks for walking, cycling and wheeling, and partly about having key services and spaces close to hand.

Access to a variety of spaces and opportunities for children of different ages to play and hang out is important. Indeed, talk to many people about the spaces children need for play, and playgrounds are likely to be at the top of the list, if not the only item on the list. However, simply focusing on segregated play areas is not enough. For one thing, children and families need to be able to get to these spaces easily; even a well-designed playground is of little value if it is cut off by busy traffic, or in a far-flung, isolated part of a park or housing estate.

Robust studies from around the world show that neighbourhoods where children play outside the most typically have streets with low traffic speeds, lower traffic volumes, fewer intersections and good networks of physically and socially safe routes and spaces. This is a more critical factor than the presence of parks or play spaces.<sup>151</sup>

Slowing traffic speeds both reduces serious child road casualties<sup>152</sup> and helps to create the conditions for children to be outside independently - walking, cycling and playing out.<sup>153</sup> In Wales, where a national 20mph default limit was introduced in 2023, road casualties on 20/30mph roads fell by 26%.<sup>154</sup> Such a significant fall in the first phase is highly encouraging. Further research on the impact on children walking and cycling (both in terms of reduced injury and increased active travel) will help give more detail on the impact of the scheme and to build the case for a UK-wide roll-out.

Dinah Bornat’s 2016 study of ten new English estates found that those outdoor spaces with the highest usage levels (by both adults and children) had design features including direct, car-free access from front doors to public open space, and good walking networks that connected one space

to another.<sup>155</sup> What is more, children can and do play and hang out in all sorts of places - including parks, squares, woodlands, shopping areas, and streets - not just playgrounds.

Even today, some children still play out near home, where the conditions are right; indeed one 2022 survey found that around a quarter of children said that they regularly played in the street<sup>156</sup> - though this is a far lower proportion than for their grandparents and even their parents’ generations. A narrow focus on formal play areas not only ignores all these other possibilities, it also feeds that idea that playgrounds are the \*only\* legitimate places where children can play, and that if they are playing anywhere else, they need to be stopped or moved on.

Pulling these elements together, the neighbourhoods whose physical features meet the needs and wishes of children and families, succeed on two dimensions. First, they include a variety of free-to-access places, spaces and facilities. Second, they are easy and safe to get around on foot or by bike. These two dimensions of a child-friendly neighbourhood, town or city are illustrated in Figure 28.<sup>157</sup>

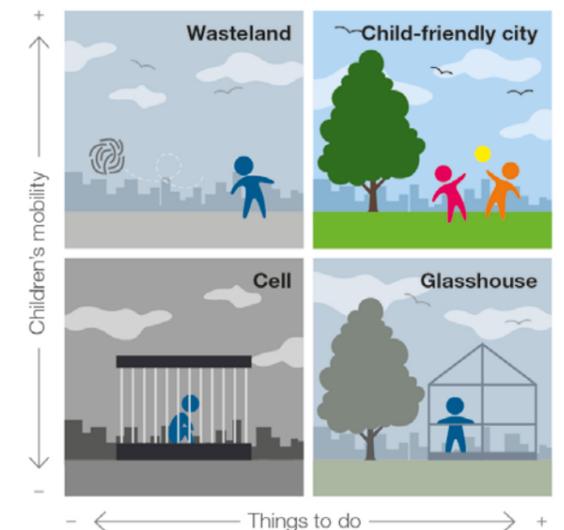


Figure 28: The two dimensions of a child-friendly place (credit: Arup/Sam Williams)

As this framework shows, improving neighbourhoods for families can involve creating

149 <https://theconversation.com/end-of-the-road-why-it-might-be-time-to-ditch-your-car-72097>  
150 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp80ll3kk9jo>

151 Refs: Gemmell E, Ramsden R, Brussoni M and Brauer M (2023) ‘Influence of neighborhood built environments on the outdoor free play of young children: a systematic, mixed-studies review and thematic synthesis’, *Journal of urban health*, 100(1), pp.118-150.  
Visser K and van Aalst I (2022) ‘Neighbourhood Factors in Children’s Outdoor Play: A Systematic Literature Review’, *Tijds. voor econ. en Soc. Geog.*, 113: 80-95.  
Lambert A, Vlaar J, Herrington S, and Brussoni M (2019) ‘What Is the Relationship between the Neighbourhood Built Environment and Time Spent in Outdoor Play? A Systematic Review’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 20: 3840.  
152 <https://www.bmj.com/content/339/bmj.b4469>  
153 [https://reasonstobecheerful.world/cars-slowing-down-european-cities/?utm\\_so](https://reasonstobecheerful.world/cars-slowing-down-european-cities/?utm_so)  
154 <https://stats.gov.wales/en-GB/4367f600-6af9-43d1-8114-76d92ad47887>  
155 Dinah Bornat (2016) *Housing Design for Community Life*, ZCD Architects  
156 Play England report *Trends in Children’s Street Play*  
157 Gill T (2021) *Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities* (based on the work of Marketta Kytta)

more ‘things to do’ – open spaces, free facilities and the like. (At least) equally, it can involve making it easier for children to walk, cycle or play outside. The ideal child-friendly neighbourhood has both elements. The framework also shows how neighbourhoods can fail to be child-friendly in two distinct ways. They can be ‘wastelands’, lacking the variety of accessible spaces and places that support family life. Or they can have plenty of things to do, but only if you can get there by car. Living in neighbourhoods like these is like being inside a glasshouse (seeing the world only out of the window or through a windscreen).

It is important to emphasise that the “glasshouse” situation is far worse for children facing inequalities, for whom facilities may be more, or completely, out of reach, requiring transport, parental time or money. In cities with high levels of inequality, the inability to access facilities (that peers might be able to) as a child may be the beginning of embedding social and health inequalities in life.

Equally, a “wasteland” neighbourhood (perhaps too derogatory a term?), even if lacking other important factors/assets, can still be a rich and relatively equitable environment in terms of children’s freedom and ability to play out, if streets and the wider environment feel safe and welcoming to children.

### The street as ‘doorstep space’

A child’s own street in particular is - or at least should be - far more than just a road. It is their doorstep: an extension of home, a transitional space. It’s where they first encounter the wider world, where ‘real life’ happens. It is where they begin to develop a sense of place, of neighbourhood and neighbourliness, of belonging in a community. It is where they can get the everyday outdoor social play they need, within easy reach of home. It is the literal and figurative first step of every journey.

For this precious doorstep space to fulfil its potential, first and foremost it needs to feel safe, and *be* safe. Safe enough for most parents to feel comfortable about letting their child go out the front door unsupervised, or semi-supervised, from a reasonable age. Safe enough for a child to play on the pavement or call for a friend. Safe enough to kick a ball about and get out of the way if a car comes. Safe enough that the risk of death is not

ever-present.

As the play street model [add cross ref to play street box] has shown, making streets safe enough for children to play freely does not necessarily mean removing cars completely. The key changes that make streets more child-friendly are: reducing the volume of through-traffic; slowing vehicle speed to walking pace; keeping parked cars away from the immediate doorstep space; and increasing driver awareness of children (through design, signage and other “signals” like play equipment and chalk). These factors could be designed into both new and existing streets as a matter of course, if we understood and prioritised the value of doorstep space for children.

According to Jess Read in her 2022 report for the Scottish Government on creating more child-friendly streets, *“The concept of a “child mph” speed limit originates in the legal speed limit applied in play streets in Germany of “Schrittempo”, which translates literally as “walking pace” – however fast a child or anyone else is walking is the speed limit”*. In these 24/7 play streets, *“Cyclists, car drivers and lorries have a legal duty of care to give way to children and pedestrians in the carriageway. This child-friendly speed limit is expected to be self-enforcing through traffic calming and clear threshold treatment such as continuous footways and signage. This is fair for drivers who can feel and see from the road layout that they have entered a play street.”*<sup>158</sup>

These design ideas have been taken up to a degree in the UK, in the form of home zones. Legislation, new signage, and government funding for pilots and evaluation led to some 60-70 schemes by the mid-2000s. The cost of the pilot schemes - which often involved extensive retrofitting such replacing tarmac and pavement with continuous cobble surfacing - meant home zones were not widely taken up, despite positive evidence of their impact on children’s play and mobility.<sup>159</sup> However, designs influenced by the idea have been implemented in some new housing developments and some elements have been used in the far less costly “DIY Streets” model<sup>160</sup> and in the more recent Low Traffic or Liveable Neighbourhood model. More generally, there is great potential for developing and refining models for more child-friendly streets, drawing on relevant experience from the UK and mainland Europe.

## Chapter 4:

# What does “good” look like?

Hundreds of schemes, policies and programmes in the UK and around the world have improved children’s lives through tackling the harm caused by car-centric approaches. While some have children as an explicit focus, others have wider goals but with children as clear beneficiaries. This chapter introduces a small selection of noteworthy initiatives. The ‘find out more’ section signposts more resources and agencies.

### UK case studies

#### Great Kneighton, Cambridge

Great Kneighton is a residential area in Cambridge that, when finished, will total around 2500 homes. Development began in the 2000s and is still underway. Great Kneighton shows that when new housing is less car-dominated from the outset, this creates the conditions for a more attractive, playful, convivial place. Streets are narrow and green, and a significant proportion are traffic-free. The design of vehicular streets encourages low driving speeds (driving above about 15 mph is difficult or impossible). Around 1.5 parking spaces are provided per home on average (lower than a typical suburban development) and parking is cleverly designed (typically in small car parks or semi-covered car ports) meaning that streetscapes are not dominated by cars. The area is close to a guided busway offering regular, fast public transport into the city centre, and this route is also a strategic, traffic-free cycleway. A new mainline train station within walking distance is due to open in 2026, further reducing the need for access to a car.



Figure 29: Car-free paths with chalk drawings showing evidence of children’s play, Great Kneighton (credit: Tim Gill)

The public realm is high-quality, with well-overlooked small squares and courtyards including seating, green space and play features, while a larger playground/skatepark and country park is within easy walking distance. The development also includes a community hub including supermarket, cafe, library and community centre next to a central square. The housing is a higher density than is typical for new housing outside major cities, and includes low-rise apartment blocks as well as single family homes. Many homes have stacked gardens including terraces and extended balconies, and direct access onto public open spaces.



Figure 30: Homes surrounding small park with seating and play features, Great Kneighton (credit: Tim Gill)

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.2030.co.uk/Child%20mph.pdf>  
<sup>159</sup> Bidulph, M. (2010). Evaluating the English Home Zone Initiatives. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 76(2), 199–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944361003622688>  
<sup>160</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/green-living-blog/2009/nov/25/diy-streets-clapton-sutrans>

### Marmalade Lane, Cambridge

Marmalade Lane is a cohousing community, located in the outskirts of Cambridge, made up of 42 homes (a mix of terraced houses and apartments) where around 100 residents live (including 30 children). The homes are arranged around three sides of a shared garden, with an additional terrace across a play street. Each home has a small private garden. There is a small car parking area at the edge of the site; the initial parking requirement agreed with the local authority was far lower than would be usual for this part of Cambridge (see Figure 31). Once residents moved in, they were able to argue that there was still more parking than they needed. As a result, further communal outdoor space has been made available.

An evaluation report<sup>161</sup> commissioned by the developers five years after residents moved into Marmalade Lane found that the design “contributes to neighbourliness and belonging by providing residents with more space to safely meet, socialise and for children to play, developing the community feel of the site. Furthermore, by moving cars down the transport hierarchy on site, residents are encouraged to consider other modes of more active travel over the car.” The report also states that “For children, the Lane offers a safe environment, without cars and overlooked by nearby properties, for a variety of play, including imaginary games, chalk drawing and ball games, supporting childhood activity and development and promoting a degree of independence from a young age. It also provides a safe space for scooting and cycling, allowing children to learn these skills in a car-free environment.”

*“Imagine a world where homes were built according to the needs of residents rather than the profits of house builders, a place where land was allocated with the best long-term value in mind, rather than flogged off to the highest bidder, and where politicians’ claims of “creating communities” actually rang true. It might be something like Marmalade Lane.”*

Oliver Wainwright, The Guardian, 8 May 2019

### Waltham Forest Mini-Holland

The Mini-Holland scheme in the London Borough of Waltham Forest is an ambitious initiative to cut traffic flows, improve facilities for walking and

cycling, and create more attractive streets (see Figures 32/33). The scheme, which received around £30 million funding from the Mayor of London and covered several neighbourhoods, was implemented between 2013 and 2021, with the most significant changes taking place in 2015-2016. Studies funded by Transport for London<sup>162</sup> have found clear evidence of improvements, including:



Figure 31: This aerial image of Marmalade Lane shows more green space, and less space for car circulation and parking, compared to the neighbouring block (credit: TOWN)

- 75% reduction in road traffic injuries;
- 10-18% reduction in rates of street crime;
- 6% reduction in vehicle ownership;
- 56% reduction in car trips;
- 29% increase in time spent walking;
- 51% increase in time spent cycling;
- improved perception of the local environment.

These statistics are based on the whole population; the impact on children’s play and mobility has not yet been systematically studied. However, the underlying changes to the built environment that caused these improvements are certain to benefit children too.

Given that such schemes have both ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ elements (in other words, they both encourage walking/cycling, and discourage motor vehicle use because some car journeys become longer and less convenient) it is not surprising that they have met with opposition. The main policy objection was and is that such schemes allegedly shift traffic from quieter residential areas onto main roads, and that this both weakens or eliminates their benefits in terms of targeted streets, and is also unfair to those using (or living on) main roads.

Other concerns include the potential for unwanted

who are dependent on vehicles. However, an independent, government-funded review found

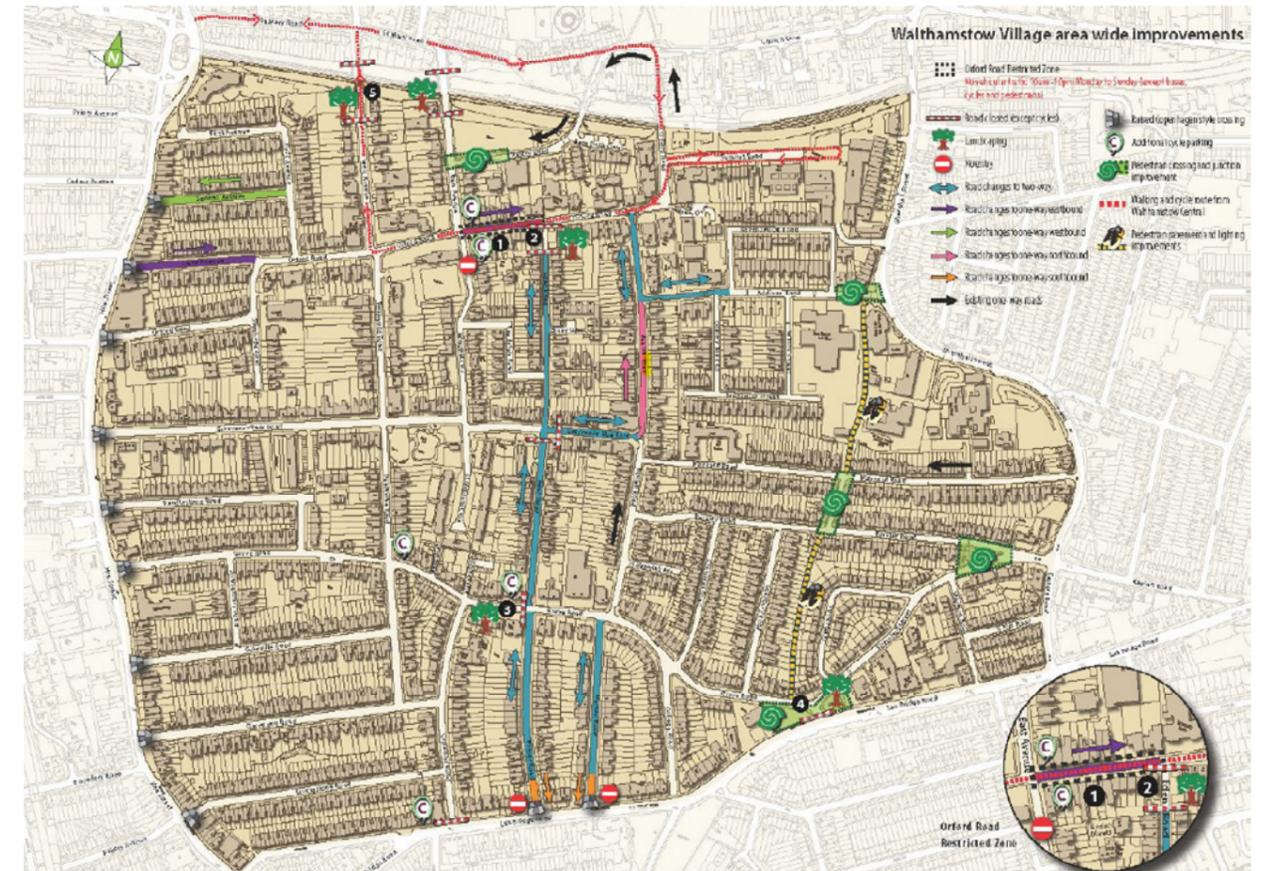


Figure 32: Map of traffic management interventions, Waltham Forest Mini-Holland



Figure 33: Permeable filter in Waltham Forest creates the conditions for children’s play (credit: Tim Gill)

gentrification due to increasing housing costs, and the impact on emergency service vehicle response times, and on disabled people and local businesses

that these objections and concerns were largely unsupported by evidence. On traffic displacement, for example, the report concluded that “LTNs are effective in achieving outcomes of reducing traffic volumes within their zones while impacts (positive or negative) on boundary roads appear to be minimal.” The same report found that LTNs did not adversely impact emergency vehicles, and that overall, more people within the affected areas supported LTNs than opposed them.<sup>163</sup>

Other inspiring UK schemes and initiatives include<sup>164</sup>

- » Kings Crescent estate regeneration, London Borough of Hackney
- » EC1 New Deal for Communities Public Space programme, London Borough of Islington
- » Sidney Close affordable family housing scheme, High Wycombe
- » Port Loop, Birmingham
- » Hazelmead cohousing, Dorset<sup>165</sup>

<sup>161</sup> TOWN (2024) Insights From Marmalade Lane

<sup>162</sup> Aldred, Rachel, and Anna Goodman. 2020. “Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, Car Use, and Active Travel: Evidence from the People and Places Survey of Outer London Active Travel Interventions.”; Goodman, Anna, Scott Urban, and Rachel Aldred. 2020. “The Impact of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and Other Active Travel Interventions on Vehicle Ownership: Findings from the Outer London Mini-Holland Programme.”

<sup>163</sup> IPSOS (2024) Low Traffic Neighbourhoods Research Report

<sup>164</sup> Bornat D (2025) All To Play For: How to design child-friendly housing

<sup>165</sup> Gill T (2021) Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.ribaj.com/buildings/hazelmead-barefoot-architects-bridport-dorset-cohousing/>

## Play streets: a model for change

The resident-led 'Playing Out' model started in Bristol and has spread nationally and internationally. By 2024, over 100 UK local authorities had a play street policy, enabling tens of thousands of children to 'play out' regularly on their own streets.<sup>167</sup>

Play streets temporarily divert through-traffic from quiet streets, giving residents car access at walking speed. This hugely successful low-cost model provides immediate benefit for children and communities *and* supports a culture-shift towards children's increased active travel, independent mobility and free outdoor play. Play streets also *show* some very important truths:

- » The barriers to children's outdoor play and mobility are largely environmental
- » Children *want* to play out together. Parents want this too.
- » Doorstep space – for most children, their own street – is important and valuable
- » When this doorstep space is safe and welcoming, children play out
- » When children play out, they are *naturally* active
- » Free of traffic danger, streets become community spaces
- » Play and "active travel" are intertwined for children
- » Resident-led action increases community cohesion and active citizenship
- » Temporary interventions build support for more permanent changes
- » Showing the benefit for children also builds support for safer streets

Playing Out CIC closed in March 2026 but an updated legacy website is a rich resource for parents, organisations and councils who want to take up or support the play street model: [www.playingout.net](http://www.playingout.net)



Bristol play street. Credit Playing Out



A Bristol play street. Credit: Alice Ferguson

<sup>167</sup> <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>

## International case studies

In Milan the “Piazzale Aperte” (“open square”) project has used tactical urbanist interventions to create public, all-age friendly squares in the streets and public spaces around schools and nurseries for the whole community.



Figure 34: Piazza Spoleto, Milan, 2024 (photo credit: Alice Ferguson)



Figure 35: Piazza Spoleto before the transformation

### Vauban, Germany

Vauban is a compact, mixed-use neighbourhood with a population of around 5,500 that was built on a former military site in the 1990s and 2000s. It has a strong emphasis on well-designed, accessible green public space, good walking and cycling networks, and a direct tram service to the city centre. Car ownership is very low; most roads have no on-street parking and limited car access, and almost all cars are required to be parked in one of three peripheral multi-storey car parks. Vauban is medium-high density, with almost all housing in the form of 4–5-storey apartments. All dwellings offer direct, car-free access to public space (either

green space or restricted access roads). Not surprisingly, Vauban is very light in traffic. The absence of surface parking means that the neighbourhood has easily accessible, green, public open spaces for play, recreation and contact with nature (see Figure 36). Services, shops and facilities that families need every day are close at hand, and easy to get to on foot or by bicycle, with good public transport connections to those destinations that are further away and less essential.



Figure 36: Typical Vauban street (credit: Tim Gill)

Vauban is well-known in city planning as a flagship sustainable urban development (it influenced the Great Kneighton development described above). The thousands of international visitors over the years often comment on the number of children they see, contrasting this with what they are used to seeing in their own countries.



Figure 37: Vauban neighbourhood park (credit: Tim Gill)

### Odense, Denmark

Odense (the third largest city in Denmark, with 185,000 inhabitants) was designated as Denmark’s official ‘National Bicycling City’ in 1999. It has the highest cycle mode share of any Danish city, with cycling accounting for about a quarter of all trips (average in Denmark: 18 percent share) and over 40% of children going to school by bike. Between 1984 and 2002, cycle trips grew by about 80 percent.<sup>168</sup>



Figure 38: Road junction and cycle path, Odense (credit: Tim Gill)

Odense’s cycling facilities and improvements include 500km of bike lanes and paths and a range of design interventions, including extensive bike parking near main destinations (stations and shopping areas). Municipal policies discourage car use in general and provide an additional incentive to cycle or walk: no direct routes for cars to pass through Odense’s city centre from one side to the other car-free pedestrian streets include two-way cycle paths parking in the city centre is limited and expensive, which discourages car use.

The municipality has run many promotional and support initiatives, including some aimed at very young children and their parents as well as older school children. From 1999 to 2004, cycle levels rose, while total cyclist injuries fell. This correlation between rising cycling levels and falling injury rates is consistent with the theory of ‘safety in numbers’, which suggests that more cycling can lead to greater cycling safety.<sup>169</sup>

Odense is not the only Danish city with strong policies and programmes to promote walking and cycling for children. In fact, children’s active travel

has long been supported by national legislation, funding and other initiatives. Up to the 1970s Denmark had some of the highest rates of child road deaths in Western Europe. So in 1976 a law was passed that forced local authorities to “protect children from the dangers of motorised traffic on their way to and from school”. Implementation focused on reducing road danger at source, through highway design and investment in walking and cycling infrastructure. These changes resulted in much higher levels of walking and cycling than the UK, but lower casualty rates.<sup>170</sup>

Other inspiring international examples of child-centred neighbourhood planning<sup>171 172</sup> include...

- » Ghent’s ‘Living Streets’ project
- » Tirana school streets, Albania
- » Seestadt Aspern, Vienna
- » Barcelona’s ‘superblocks’
- » Paris’s permanent school streets (300 and counting)
- » Berlin’s community-led Kiezblocks



Kiezblock, Berlin (photo: Alice Ferguson)

168 New Zealand Transport Agency (2014) BCA Strategic Options toolkit

169 New Zealand Transport Agency (2014) BCA Strategic Options toolkit

170 T. Andersen (1997) ‘Safe routes to school in Odense, Denmark’ in R. Tolley, ed., The Greening of Urban Transport: Planning for walking and cycling in Western cities, 2nd edition

171 Bornat D (2025) All To Play For: How to design child-friendly housing

172 Gill T (2021) Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities

## Chapter 5: What if...?

This paper has set out - on the one hand - evidence of the huge harm caused to children by a car-oriented, adult-centred world and - on the other - a vision for a more child-centred, child-sensitive approach to streets, neighbourhoods and transport policy. It is obvious that making this vision a reality will need a fundamental shift in values, policy and practice. While pilot schemes and incremental reforms may help to flesh out ways forward, they will never be enough.

Given the status quo, it is also unsurprising that challenges to car-centric thinking face great resistance. Political controversy over the past 20 years - around petrol price-rises, LTNs, congestion charging and 20mph limits - have clearly made decision-makers nervous. Their anxieties are no doubt heightened by a tone of public debate that can be vicious and personal: the very opposite of healthy democratic processes. In this context, our arguments for more radical moves to rein in car dominance may sound politically naive.

The accusation of naivete is a mistake, for two reasons. First, key measures such as the original London congestion charge, the Welsh 20mph policy, play streets and school streets have, once implemented, been widely accepted and supported. Indeed, even LTNs – perhaps the measure most affected by ‘culture war’ online activity – are largely supported by the public.<sup>173</sup> Second, and more fundamentally, a strategic focus on children will build consensus and increase support (see Chapter 2).

The canvas we set out here is vast, the challenges daunting, issues complex, and the need for debate urgent and important. We are not transport policy experts. Hence it would be inappropriate to simply offer a set of implementation or action points plucked from the air, as it were. As an alternative, we invite readers to think about some big-picture moves towards a more child-sensitive transport climate. These moves are set out in question form,

framed for the key audiences we want to reach. Some also signpost one or more real-life initiatives that capture something of the fundamental rethink we are calling for.

### Road safety moves

What if local authorities were required to develop road safety strategies aimed at enabling children’s independent mobility - with targets to match? Real-life examples: Denmark (see Chapter 4)

What if road safety education was primarily aimed at ensuring drivers prioritise children’s safety? This could include: campaigns timed for the new school year; revisions to driving tests and speed awareness courses.

**Real-life examples:** Switzerland driver awareness campaigns<sup>174</sup>

### Traffic law moves

What if there was a UK-wide maximum speed limit of 20mph wherever children live, learn and play (as the 20 is Plenty campaign has been calling for over decades)?

**Real-life examples:** In Wales, a country-wide 20mph was introduced in 2023 and road deaths have significantly reduced<sup>175</sup> Hoboken, New Jersey has implemented a 15mph limit (with enforcement) around every state school as part of its Vision Zero policy<sup>176</sup>. The municipality has not recorded a road death since 2017.<sup>177</sup>

What if the burden of proof shifted to drivers whenever a child pedestrian or cyclist is injured or killed? This could involve: strict liability offences (as used for other public safety issues such as knife crime)

**Real-life examples:** In the Netherlands drivers are held responsible for crashes with child pedestrians/cyclists in almost all circumstances, under Article 185 of the Road Traffic Act 1994.<sup>178</sup>

What if every child pedestrian/cyclist death led to a ‘prevention of future deaths’ review, focussed firmly on danger reduction and not child-blaming?

**Real-life examples:** The killing of 3-year-old Xander Ivie by a 91-year-old driver with dementia led to the coroner recommending cognitive testing for drivers over 80.<sup>179</sup>

### Vehicle design moves

What if car designs were regulated to prioritise safety of children outside the vehicle? This could involve: maximum bonnet heights; minimum drivers-view standards for visibility of small children; maximum top speeds and acceleration capabilities.

**Real life examples:** We don’t know of any – let us know if you do!

### Street design moves

What if all residential streets were designed for slow speeds to enable children’s independent mobility and free play? This could involve: a child-lens on existing guidance such as the Manual for Streets to tackle streetscapes, junctions and crossings, along with clear compliance tools; guidance on child-sensitive walking and bike infrastructure; initial training and CPD for relevant professionals.

**Real life examples:** Global Designing Cities Initiative ‘Streets for Kids’ funding programme, which is active in over 60 global cities including Fortaleza, Brazil; Cuenca, Ecuador; Istanbul, Turkey; Lima, Peru; Milan, Italy; and Tirana, Albania<sup>180</sup>

What if car parking in residential neighbourhoods were reconfigured to free-up doorstep space for play and socialising? This could involve: changes to national planning frameworks and guidance, increased support for innovative parking solutions; child-sensitive masterplan design guidance for new large-scale housing developments

**Real-life examples:** “Growing up in Hackney: Child-friendly places supplementary planning document (SPD)<sup>181</sup> Child-friendly UK and international developments - see Chapter 4.<sup>182</sup>

## Transport planning and strategy moves

What if promoting children’s independent mobility were a strategic focus for local, regional and national transport policy? This could include: legislation and guidance for local transport authorities and Highways England; high-quality evaluation of schemes and initiatives; revisions to the Highway Code and subsequent public awareness campaigns.

**Real-life examples:** England Regional Mayors’ statement of support for children’s active travel; Oslo City strategic support for a phone app and other resources to improve routes to school, backed by responsive maintenance and funding for implementing schemes<sup>183</sup>

What if school street schemes were implemented outside every school in the UK? This could involve: revising regulations to streamline the process; support for sharing existing good practice from the UK and beyond.

**Real-life examples:** Paris (has implemented 300 school streets, many including permanent closures to traffic); Hackney (sessions running at the beginning and end of every school day in every primary school)

What if government required local transport authorities to allocate 10% of their budgets to walking, biking and public transport, with targets for mode shift by children and young people? **Real-life examples:** Rotterdam gradually shifted its transport budget away from roadbuilding and towards active travel; by 2019 the latter represented over 50% of total expenditure.<sup>184</sup>

## Engagement moves

What if government held a citizen’s panel – including the views and perspectives of children - to reform the way strategic transport budgets were allocated?

What if every local transport authority had a duty to review their plans with children in mind?

173 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f400adfa18510011011787/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf>

174 <https://www.autosprint.ch/en/ratgeber/tcs-lanciert-kampagne-gegen-schulweg-unfaelle/>

175 [https://www.20splenty.org/2nd\\_anniversary](https://www.20splenty.org/2nd_anniversary)

176 : <https://www.hobokennj.gov/news/city-of-hoboken-to-implement-reduced-school-zone-speed-limit>

177 <https://reasonstobecheerful.world/the-city-where-traffic-fatalities-vanished>

178 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artikel\\_185\\_Wegenverkeerswet](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artikel_185_Wegenverkeerswet)

179 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx252v6i60lo>

180 <https://globaldesigningcities.org/streets-for-kids>

181 <https://hackney.gov.uk/child-friendly-spd>

182 <https://www.mobillab.wien/storymaps/en/part2.html>

183 Gill T (2021) Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities

184 ‘Stedelijk Verkeersplan Rotterdam 2016–2030+’ <https://www.rotterdam.nl/wonen-leven/stedelijkverkeersplan/Stedelijk-Verkeersplan-Rotterdam-20170123.pdf>

**Real-life examples:** Norway, Germany and Sweden all have legislation imposing a duty to engage with children on planning and transport.<sup>185</sup> Wales and Scotland have legislation requiring local authorities to assess ‘play sufficiency’ in their area and come up with plans for improvement.<sup>186</sup> The Welsh government additionally passed a Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015). This represents the systemic shift in thinking needed in how decisions are made and has had a direct impact on transport policy.<sup>187</sup>

## Signs of change

There are some hopeful signs of change. A new ‘hierarchy of road users’ in the revised Highway Code 2022<sup>188</sup> placed children walking and cycling at the very top, accompanied by some innovative awareness-raising communications.<sup>189</sup> A Westminster Hall debate in April 2025<sup>190</sup> saw one MP after another stand up to talk about the urgency of making roads safer for children to walk and cycle, with many referring to children killed by drivers in their own constituencies.

A new UK Road Safety Strategy was subsequently published in January 2026, following a decade without one. It opens with a strong statement from the Minister: *“Over the past decade twenty-two European countries have made more progress in reducing road fatalities than the UK...We must take action and reject the flawed idea that drivers alone bear responsibility. Human error is inevitable, but deaths and serious injury are not. Addressing road safety needs a systemic solution... We need to address how we design our roads and vehicles, how we educate road users including testing drivers and riders, and the laws we make and enforce.”* However, the changes proposed are largely incremental and uncontroversial, with little sign of the kind of measures that will have a dramatic impact on road danger reduction.

Whilst children are specifically mentioned throughout the strategy, a seemingly arbitrary target - *“70% reduction in the number of children (under 16) killed or seriously injured on roads in Great Britain by 2035”* - continues to accept the

inevitability of hundreds of serious child road casualties a year. The targets also make no distinction between children as car passengers or pedestrians/cyclists, which is crucial for targeted and effective action. Why not follow Norway’s lead<sup>191</sup> and aim for zero road deaths by 2040, as supported by the majority of the public?<sup>192</sup>

Two clear areas that should be far stronger in relation to children are speed reduction and vehicle size regulation. Extraordinarily, especially considering the robust evidence to show the importance of lower speeds for children’s safety,<sup>193</sup> there is no mention of a national 20mph policy.<sup>194</sup> The strategy mentions *“concerns”* that *“larger vehicles, particularly the emerging trend for increased bonnet height in SUVs, may have a detrimental safety impact on vulnerable road users, particularly pedestrians, cyclists and children”* but fails to mention these concerns are based on evidence. Rather than committing to address this through revising safety standards, the government proposes only to *“collaborate with stakeholders and vehicle manufacturers to further understand safety concerns regarding increasing vehicle size.”*

In short, a road safety strategy that proposes consultation, guidance, exploration and collaboration – rather than committing to clear and radical policy change to address road danger and implement known solutions – continues to let children down. We need a genuinely radical, integrated and fully funded Government plan to eliminate child road deaths whilst increasing independent mobility and active travel. The current strategy is far from this but hopefully it is a starting point.

Change is afoot in national planning policy too, undoubtedly influenced by the 2024 Inquiry on Children and the Built Environment (see Chapter 2) and subsequent lobbying and advocacy. In January 2026, the UK Government published their draft updated Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance, which for the first time specifically mentions children’s need for safe streets and doorstep space for play.<sup>195</sup>

More immediate change for children may come at the local policy level. In summer 2025, 12 of England’s Regional Mayors committed to “transform the school run,” working together to enable more children to walk, wheel and cycle, supported by the Department for Transport and Active Travel England. The focus on creating safer infrastructure such as crossings and school streets – as opposed to educating children to deal with danger – is particularly welcome. The fact that children are at the forefront of this wider active travel plan suggests that politicians are beginning to understand that putting children first helps to win support for changes to streets.

We very much hope these small but significant steps are the start of much greater, systemic change towards putting children’s needs at the heart of built environment policymaking. The streets, neighbourhoods and cities that children need are those we all need – and a child lens could truly be the way to get there.



“Safe streets now” protest. credit: Bristol 24/7

## FAQs

This section addresses some of the questions and reactions that may have arisen so far.

***Doesn’t the fact that casualty rates have fallen show that traffic danger is exaggerated and parents should not be so worried about it?***

The casualty rates for children walking, biking or wheeling would lead to an outcry in any other context. So why are they acceptable in the context of transport? This question is even more forceful given that the main reason the rates are now historically low is because children’s freedoms are so constrained. Every parent knows that their children will need to learn how to deal with everyday challenges as they grow up. Parents want their children to become confident, capable people who have meaningful connections with the people and places around them, and a sense of community and belonging. However, parents and children also have a right to expect that the world around them is reasonably safe, and that society takes some responsibility for child safety. It is no surprise that some parents are at the forefront of change, in their own streets and neighbourhoods and in public debates. They are right to be worried - and angry - about traffic danger.

***“Telling parents that they are being overprotective and that the roads are becoming safer for their children is...like telling them that they can let their children play with matches again because deaths from fire have been falling.”***

Unicef<sup>196</sup>

***Is traffic dominance and road danger really the reason children are not out and about as much?***

It’s common to hear people say it’s not traffic that is stopping children from playing and getting around independently. *“Back in the day, there were cars on the street but we still played out”* and *“kids today just want to be inside on their phones”* are common refrains on social media.

Cars were already pushing children off the streets - and killing them in large numbers - in the 1950s, but the embedded culture and assumption of children’s outdoor freedom held out for a few

<sup>185</sup> Gill T (2021) Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities; <https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/opening-up-swedish-spatial-planning-to-children-and-youth-participation>

<sup>186</sup> <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/a4eg0bhd/childfriendlyplanningintheukareview2019.pdf>

<sup>187</sup> <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/14269738>

<sup>188</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-highway-code-8-changes-you-need-to-know-from-29-january-2022>

<sup>189</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1624521748708233>

<sup>190</sup> <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/a11faccc-d3f8-453c-b423-78e4262be5b1>

<sup>191</sup> <https://etsc.eu/norway-sets-formal-target-of-zero-road-deaths-by-2050/>

<sup>192</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/zero-road-deaths-by-2040-even-if-it-means-slower-journeys-say-majority-of-public>

<sup>193</sup> [https://www.20splenty.org/duty\\_of\\_care\\_mandates\\_20mph](https://www.20splenty.org/duty_of_care_mandates_20mph)

<sup>194</sup> <https://transportactionnetwork.org.uk/road-safety-strategy-leaves-vulnerable-road-users-exposed>

<sup>195</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/696a5c77e13af2b11d3b04a6/Design\\_and\\_placemaking\\_planning\\_practice\\_guidance\\_-\\_draft\\_for\\_consultation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/696a5c77e13af2b11d3b04a6/Design_and_placemaking_planning_practice_guidance_-_draft_for_consultation.pdf)

<sup>196</sup> UNICEF, A league table of child deaths by injury in rich nations, Innocenti Report Card 2 (Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001); available from: <http://www.unicef-icdc.org>.

decades. However, sometime in the 1980s there was a tipping point, with cars dominating almost all streets and children disappearing from them. Other factors - changed work and parenting cultures, media scare-mongering, reduced community, the growth of consumerism, the draw of screens - will have also played their part but undoubtedly local streets and neighbourhoods becoming places for cars, not people, has been the primary factor.

### Isn't it too difficult/expensive to change streets?

It is striking that the statement 'if it saves one child's life, it will be worth it' – often made by politicians in response to high-profile child safety issues – is rarely, if ever, heard when it comes to road danger. Many cities have shown that risk from traffic can and should be hugely reduced, if not eliminated. Helsinki and Oslo have recently celebrated a whole year with no road deaths.<sup>197</sup> Paris, Copenhagen and Vienna (amongst other cities) have made long-term, strategic moves to be less car-dominated, and more child-friendly, yet are economically successful. The same can be said of London's experience with congestion pricing and low emission zones.

Many measures that support less car-dominated neighbourhoods are low-cost and a more strategic national approach to delivery would reduce the burden on local authorities.

Bigger picture, major roadbuilding schemes use vast sums of public spending that could be re-directed towards creating safer streets for all. The Government's roadbuilding budget for England is around £24 Billion for 2026-2030<sup>198</sup>. Sums like these are so huge that they can be hard to understand. Comparisons can help; for example, the last Labour Government's 2008 National Play Strategy for England had a total budget of £235 million over 3 years (around £400 million at 2025 prices): less than 2% of the roadbuilding budget. Nearly three times this amount - £1 billion – will be spent on a single scheme to upgrade just 12 miles of A-road in Cambridgeshire<sup>199</sup>. There is no shortage of funding that could be spent on more local, neighbourhood transport schemes.

Shifting away from car-centric policies and design is more challenging in more suburban or rural areas. Public transport is often more patchy, and

walking and cycling less practical for some trips. However, even in these areas, straightforward measures such as street redesign, lower speed limits and reconfiguring parking would rapidly make a huge difference and could be delivered at little or no cost.

**It is true that some issues, including car design reform, highway design guidance, legislative reform and changes to qualifications, training and professional development, will take longer to tackle. However, the case for change is clear and there is no reason why it cannot start now. Isn't this about middle-class parents making unreasonable demands on others?**

The basic case for action has already been made above. Turning to class, poverty and inequality, it is also clear that those hardest hit by car-centric thinking are the most disadvantaged families. What is more, working-class families and those living in disadvantaged areas are often active in campaigns for change, and have been at the forefront of some key movements such as the 1930s UK Play Streets campaign, early US road safety campaigns and the Dutch Stop de Kindermoord movement.

It is not surprising that some campaigns are led by groups of people who have time and resources to devote to making a difference. Far from focusing on their own individual needs, these groups uniformly work collectively to improve local peoples' lives. Indeed there is evidence that small-scale collective action in a street - for example organising Playing Out sessions - often leads groups to take on more ambitious neighbourhood community action, such as open space improvements.

### Won't in-car technology like sensors or assisted driving fix things?

Car manufacturers have for decades claimed that technological changes will improve safety. But while there is good evidence that devices like seat belts improve safety for car occupants, there is no good evidence of improvements for pedestrians or cyclists. Indeed there is some evidence that some technological developments lead to increased risk for those outside the vehicles. For example, electric vehicles are typically quieter than non-electric ones, and studies suggest that they are more likely to be involved in pedestrian crashes<sup>200</sup>

The big picture is that larger, heavier cars with more dangerous designs, together with growing traffic levels, mean that traffic danger is on the increase. If these changes are not reversed, things will only get worse.

### Don't children and families benefit from cars?

It's true that, in a car-centric society, car ownership has expanded work, education, leisure and other choices for households who have access to one. Questions about whether this has been good for society overall, and whether such advantages continue if car dependence continues to grow, are beyond the scope of this paper. What this paper does highlight is that the resulting 'terms of trade' in transport policy are unfairly weighted against children. What is more, the benefits of car ownership and use are not equal across society. For households and families that do not have access to a car, things are very different. A system that prioritises and encourages private car use (rather than investing in affordable public transport and active travel) heavily disadvantages children and families who cannot afford to own one. Even the children of well-off, car-owning families are being harmed by the side-effects of a car-centric world. Their lungs are being damaged by polluted air inside and outside of cars. Their spatial freedoms are curtailed by traffic danger. Their social networks are restricted because of their dependence on their parents to take them places and organise their social lives.

In a car-oriented world, it is not surprising that many families choose to travel by car. Equally, if the systems change, families adapt, as shown by the growing popularity of E-bikes and cargo bikes in many towns and cities.

It is also true that as children approach adulthood, many want to own or drive a car. This is hardly surprising given their appetite for independence (which has been suppressed for much of their earlier lives), the car-oriented world they live in, and the depth of car culture - all amplified by the barriers they face getting around any other way. Even so, statistics on the rates of drivers' licence ownership amongst young adults show static or falling rates, suggesting that young people today may be less keen on car ownership and use than previous generations.<sup>201</sup>

### Aren't children today happy to spend their time online – doesn't the digital world meet their needs?

Putting aside all the very strong arguments for restricting children's access to screens and social media, it is simply not true that children are happy spending their free time solely in the digital world. Given the opportunity, they strongly prefer to play and connect with their friends and peers IRL (in real life). This finding has been proved by robust surveys in the UK and USA. What is more, teens are even more keen to see friends and peers face-to-face than young children, suggesting growing frustration with the constraints they face.<sup>202</sup>

Figure 16: Which one of these activities would you like to do more often? (Base: 1033 6 to 17-year-olds)

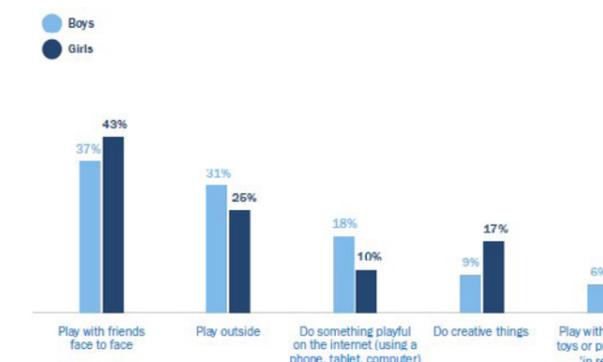


Figure 39: When asked their free time preferences, most children and teenagers want to play IRL, not online<sup>203</sup>

There is growing recognition that part of the reason why children and young people are spending so much time online is that they have few if any alternatives.

While children's preferences are clear, there is clearly a risk that some may become habituated

197 <https://www.politico.eu/article/helsinki-no-traffic-death-roads-eu-accident-finland-driving-transport/>  
 198 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025.html>  
 199 <https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/a428-black-cat-to-caxton-gibbet/>

200 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-025-66463-8>  
 201 Dept for Transport NTS0201: Full car driving licence holders by age and sex, aged 17 and over: England, 1975 onwards  
 202 Livingstone S et al (2021). *Playful by Design: A Vision of Free Play in a Digital World*; Let Grow survey 2025  
 203 Livingstone S et al (2021). *Playful by Design: A Vision of Free Play in a Digital World*.

over time to screen-based social lives and potentially less confident or capable in navigating the real world. It is equally clear that it is in everyone's interest that this future be avoided.

### ***Aren't politicians too nervous of losing votes to tackle these problems?***

Measures to tackle the dominance of cars have faced some political opposition in recent years. At the same time, children's views and voices have rarely been a part of public and political debates. A stronger focus on children, as the population group most harmed by car dominance, and as the demographic who will shoulder the biggest burden of its consequences in the future, will help build support for effective change. Leaders including Anne Hidalgo (mayor of Paris from 2012 to 2026)) and Chris Boardman (head of both Active Travel England and Sport England) are articulate and compelling in placing children at the centre of the cases they make for walking and biking.

What is more, the overall level of support for measures like low traffic neighbourhoods and cycle lanes may well be greater than decision-makers believe. Robust studies of public attitudes suggest that people who support non-car travel incorrectly assume that they are unpopular.<sup>204</sup>

Politicians can also be swayed by the huge and largely unchallenged influence of the roads/car lobby. This can change if the depth of the problem is laid bare, and political pressure for change is mobilised.

What is clear is that policy makers need to be more honest that when it comes to transport and planning, there are rarely easy or universally popular solutions to complex problems, and policies almost always have trade-offs that leave some groups at least temporarily worse-off. It is also clear that, when it comes to children, the existing, largely unquestioned pattern of trade-offs has for decades cast a long shadow over their health and well-being.



***“People are particularly amenable to messages about walking and cycling when it is about children being able to travel safely and independently...if you start with asking people, do you want [safer streets] for your kids, you’ll have a very, very strong, powerful and politically popular – yes.”,***

*Chris Boardman*<sup>205</sup>

## A deeper dive...

We are by no means the first to raise issues related to children, streets, traffic and transport. If you are inspired or motivated to explore this topic further, here is a non-exhaustive additional reading/watching list to get started on...

### **Books...**

Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961

Colin Ward, *The Child in the City*, 1978

Beunderman et al (Demos) *Seen and Heard:*

*Reclaiming the public realm with children and young people*, 2007

Tim Gill, *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society*, 2007

Peter Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The dawn of the motor age in the American city*, 2008

Adrian Voce, *Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right*, 2015

Chris Bruntlett and Melissa Bruntlett, *Curbing Traffic*, 2021

Tim Gill, *Urban Playground*, 2021

Marco te Brömmelstroet and Thalia Verkade. *Movement*, 2022

Dinah Bornat, *All to Play For*, 2025

Andrew Kelly (ed): *Mutual Aid, Everyday Anarchy: Essays on Colin Ward*, 2025.



“A shelf in Playing Out’s library”

### **Research...**

Adams, J, 1993. *Risk compensation and the problem of measuring children's independent mobility and safety on the roads*, in *Children, Transport and the Quality of Life*, Ch. 7 PSI

Appleyard, D, 1981. *Livable Streets*. Berkeley, Cal: University of California Press.

Blinkert, B and Ellen Weaver, 2015. *Residential Environment and Types of Childhood*. Humanities and Social Sciences. Vol. 3, No. 4, 2015, pp. 258-267. doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20150304.16

Cowman, K, 2017. *Play streets: women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930-1970*. *Social History*, 42:2, 233-256, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2017.1290366

Ferguson, A. (2019). Playing out: a grassroots street play revolution. *Cities & Health*, 3(1-2), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2018.1550850>

Foreman, H, 2017. *Residential Street Design and Play: A literature review of policy, guidance and research on residential street design and its influence on children's independent outdoor activity*. Commissioned and published by Playing Out.

Hart, R, 2002 *Containing children: some lessons on planning for play from New York City*. *Environment & Urbanization* 14, 2, 135-148.

Hillman, M, 2006. *Children's Rights and Adults' Wrongs*. *Children's Geographies*, Vol 4, No 1, 61-67, April 2006.

Hillman, M., Adams, J. and Whitelegg, J, 1990. *One False Move: A Study of Children's Independent Mobility*. Policy Studies Institute, London.

Shaw, B. et al, 2013. *Children's independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971-2010)*. London: Policy Studies Institute.

Tranter, P and John W. Doyle, 1996 *Reclaiming The Residential Street As Play Space*. Published in *International Play Journal* 1996, 4, 91-97

Whitzman, C. et al, 2010. Links between children's independent mobility, active transport, physical activity and obesity. In E. Waters, B. Swinburn, J. Seidell, & R. Uauy (Eds.), *Preventing childhood obesity: Evidence policy and practice*. Sydney: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>204</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378025000172>

<sup>205</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jul/02/england-regional-mayors-back-plan-national-active-travel-network>

## Reports...

Jess Read, “Child MPH”

<https://www.2030.co.uk/Child%20mph.pdf>

Sustrans and A Place in Childhood, “Enabling independent travel for young people”, 2022

[https://aplaceinchildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Enabling-Independent-Travel-for-Young-Scots\\_Final.pdf](https://aplaceinchildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Enabling-Independent-Travel-for-Young-Scots_Final.pdf)

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (formerly Sustrans), Children’s Walking and Cycling Index, 2024

[https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk/media/y2jatfzm/250224-waci24-childrensindexuk-v43\\_digital\\_v1a.pdf](https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk/media/y2jatfzm/250224-waci24-childrensindexuk-v43_digital_v1a.pdf)

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (formerly Sustrans), Scotland Children’s Walking and Cycling Index, 2024

[https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk/media/ctwjqi3v/250310-waci24-childrensindexscotland-v21\\_digital\\_v1a.pdf](https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk/media/ctwjqi3v/250310-waci24-childrensindexscotland-v21_digital_v1a.pdf)

Bikeability Trust and Living Streets, Road Safety Report, 2024

<https://www.bikeability.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/The-Bikeability-Trust-x-Living-Streets-Road-Safety-Report-2025-.pdf>

Global Designing Cities Initiative, “How do kids experience streets?”

<https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/how-do-kids-experience-streets-the-reverse-periscope-companion-guide/>

UNICEF. “Protecting Young Lives”, 2025

[https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214\\_ProtectingYoungLives\\_FullReport-FINAL.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214_ProtectingYoungLives_FullReport-FINAL.pdf)

WHO. “Guide to creating urban public SPACES for children” 2026

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240116313>

Arup. “Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods”, 2017

<https://www.arup.com/insights/cities-alive-designing-for-urban-childhoods/> child-friendly cities report

NACTO. “Designing Streets for Kids”

<https://nacto.org/publication/designing-streets-for-kids/>

## Campaigns and initiatives...

ETA Trust, “Stop killing Children” film:

<https://www.eta.co.uk/trust/stop-killing-children/>

Play streets / Playing Out:

<https://playingout.net/>

Wider international play street movement:

<https://playingout.net/nearby-you/an-international-movement/>

Kidical Mass:

<https://kinderaufsrad.org/>

Cities4Children:

<https://cities4children.org/>

Mums for Lungs:

<https://www.mumsforlungs.org/>

Solve the School Run:

<https://www.solvetheschoolrun.org/>

8:80 cities:

<https://www.880cities.org/>

Urban 95 Academy:

<https://urban95academy.org/>

International Children’s Cycling Manifesto:

<https://bycs.org/childrensmanifesto/>

