



Because it's freedom: Children's views on their time to play

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August 2009



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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the children who shared their thoughts and feelings with us so openly and trustingly. You were a joy to talk to. Thank you also to all those who worked so hard at organising the focus groups – without you this project would not have been possible.

1. Introduction

The theme for Playday 2009 is *Make time*, highlighting the need for children to have time to play and enjoy themselves. This study was commissioned as part of a wider body of research to inform the 2009 Playday campaign. It describes the experiences of a small number of children from differing demographic groups. Many of the children's accounts support previous research into this area. A national opinion poll, also carried out to inform the Playday campaign, reinforced some of the issues highlighted in this report. The views of the children taking part in these focus groups offer a valuable insight into their experiences as individuals. The opinion poll and literature review allow us to get a broader picture of children's ideas on their time for play.

Play England commissioned Inspire Consultancy Limited to conduct eight focus groups with children to inform the campaign. A Play England member of staff assisted the running of the focus groups.

The areas of investigation for the focus group were:

- the amount of time children spend playing
- competing demands on time and what impact this has on children's time to play
- how children spend their time playing
- play in the school day
- who children spend their playing time with

The eight focus groups, with children aged between 7 and 14 years old, were carried out in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to establish children's play patterns and specifically their time for play. Children from different demographics and areas of the UK were consulted. Focus groups were held in a number of settings, including schools, community centres and play provision, and lasted approximately an hour. In each group there were between six and ten children, with a total of 71 children: 33 girls, 38 boys. These included 22 children from Black and other minority communities, 12 young carers and 15 children with severe learning difficulties (most of whom were disabled children). A group of children who were originally from Sudan were interviewed. Children with learning difficulties, children of different ethnicities and young carers generally gave similar responses to the other children, although there were some differences that have been highlighted throughout the report.

Each of the focus groups had a similar structure, combining a mixture of questions and games to elicit information. Children were asked to express themselves verbally and through writing and pictures. Children were also asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements and to expand on this.

1.1 Findings

Children valued their weekends as they enjoyed the freedom this provided. School was also valued as a place to play for the opportunity to socialise with different children and meet up with friends on a regular basis. Although there was no agreement amongst the children as to whether playtime in school was long enough, many children spoke about the 'rush' of lunchtime. Many of them resorted to eating quickly or throwing away their lunches so as to have enough time to play outside. Homework shortened the time to play for most of the children in the groups.

There was a mixture of responses as to whether children felt they had enough time to play, around half the children stated that they had adequate time, and the rest stated that they did not have enough time to play. One group of older children (of secondary school age) felt they had 'too much' free time – for this group, their lack of safe, exciting outdoor spaces and age-appropriate clubs and activities meant that they had enough free time but little to do during this time.

In some groups, younger children seemed to spend much of their time for play in clubs and also attend many extra-curricular activities in their free time. Although these activities were enjoyed and appreciated by all the children in the groups, those who attended more than a few per week often felt this left them with little time for free, self-directed play.

Three characteristics emerged from the focus groups for children to have the most enjoyable play experience:

- friends to play with
- time to play
- freedom to play without structure.

2. Amount of time children spend playing

The nature of childhood and play means that children will spend time playing wherever they can and whenever they can, although it was clear that the playing time of the children in this study was curtailed by other activities and responsibilities (see section 7).

To help establish when children played and how much time they played, questions were asked in relation to different times of the day. In general, children did not have much time to play before school. Those who did play before school played for various lengths of time, ranging from 5 minutes to an hour, depending on the time they chose to get up and often depending on their parents' schedules, particularly if they were driven to school. A few children from each group walked their dogs or took care of their pets in the mornings. In the evenings, a few older children, particularly from one group, reported that they played until about 9.30pm or later (playing roughly four or more hours after school). However, this was usually interrupted by other activities, such as eating dinner or doing homework.

Children played during the school day, particularly during morning break but had little time for play during lunchtime. (For more information on children's playtime in school, see sections 5 and 7.2.)

Children's time to play after school varied according to their age and family expectations. Although some children in all groups attended clubs, children in two of the focus groups attended a significant number of after-school clubs and extra-curricular activities which impacted on their free playtime (see section 3.1). By the time these children got home there was little time to play. Homework shortened the amount of time most children played.

Younger children had most time for play at weekends when, apart from any family obligations, they spent the majority of their time playing. Where parents were separated and children shared their weekends between them, the children tended to say this did not affect their time to play.

There was a difference of opinion amongst the children about whether they had adequate time to play. There was a fairly equal balance between children who wanted more time and others who felt they had enough time. Some younger children felt learning was as important as playing. Older children in one group said that by the time they came home from school, got changed and left for the city centre (where they liked to go), only half an hour was left for them to spend with their friends, so they wished the day was longer. Other older children said they felt they had too much free time because a lack of places to go and things to do meant they had nothing to do during this time (see section 2.2 below).

2.2 Time to play – making it count

Whilst younger children reported having a range of different types of play opportunities, older children were less content with the range of opportunities available to them regarding their play and leisure. For these children, it was not a question of having enough time, which they did, but the quality of their experience. Older children complained of boredom and this stretched out their free time so that it felt too long. One young person said:

‘We have too much free time cos you don’t have anything to do so you are sitting around being bored.’

Other older children said:

‘All we say when we are with our friends is that [our city] is really boring and there is no different varieties of things to do – done cinema, done bowling, been to the restaurant lots of times and it just gets boring.’

‘I would go out and play but there is just nothing to do.’

‘If we hang out everyday then we do everything. And we get bored. You can’t just keep doing the same thing over and over again, just get bored.’

‘Go home, watch TV, sometimes I play, not often but sometimes I play on my games. There is not enough stuff on my computer or on games consoles.’

‘In this city there are only a few things you can do – town, cinema, bowling (really boring), that’s it, or go to park, do stuff like that, but if you do it all the time then you get bored of it’

The older group of Sudanese children explained that they felt there was little for older children to do in the UK compared with their homeland.

‘I find in Sudan, the difference is here I keep doing the same thing every day so I get bored of it.’

These older children felt that the UK was more restricting for them.

‘The thing about here – it’s not open.’

For these older children, it seems that the problem was a lack of nearby facilities appropriate to their age group rather than insufficient time to play. It was the quality of their free time that was important. Some stated that they used strategies to cope with the boredom and often turned to indoor technology, mostly computer games, as a way of filling in their free time.

3. Competing demands on time and the impact on play

For some children, particularly for younger children, play was restricted by a number of external factors that impinged upon their free time. A combination of school, homework, family visits, housework and after-school clubs meant that a number of children led busy lifestyles and so finding the time to play, as much as they would like to, was often difficult. Children enjoyed many of these activities and were willing to take responsibility for schoolwork and household tasks but often found balancing the numerous demands on their free time rather challenging.

‘I have six clubs a week, four in one day. And then I have to go out and help my mum or go to a childminder’s and do my homework.’

In the groups, children’s accounts of their busy lifestyles suggest that some children’s free time could be over-scheduled and many of them stated that they sometimes felt too ‘busy’ to find the time to play. The majority of the younger children’s lives seem to have a strong sense of structure or routine and often children felt they had little control over the use of their own free time. This busy organisation of children’s time meant that self-directed play outside of the home was particularly difficult. Children frequently stated that they wished the days were longer and some favoured the summer months, as this meant that they had more time after school to play.

‘I would love it if the day was much longer (all year round).’

School and after-school provision took up the greater part of children’s time during the week. Older children, who were less likely to attend as many out-of-school clubs and activities, found it particularly difficult to find places to spend time with their friends after school because places were closed by the time children got there.

The majority of children were assigned homework and completed this on a regular basis. Although only a few children said they enjoyed doing homework, most thought a small amount was fair. However, some of the younger children did not like having homework at such a young age.

‘I’m only seven; we shouldn’t be getting any homework.’

Some children thought they had too much homework and felt that school education should be left in the classroom. Children told of their difficulties in finding time to complete their homework along with other commitments.

‘You’ve got your own stuff to do; it’s not all about school.’

Children from most of the groups stated that playtime was often taken away from them as a result of not completing a piece of homework.

Children were often made to finish any incomplete homework during school playtimes.

‘If you don’t do your homework you get less golden time [free time awarded to children for good behaviour] or you have to miss a playtime.’

This tendency to reduce playtime as a punishment could reinforce the idea that time for play is a reward rather than a right to which children are entitled.

The consequences of juggling competing demands on children’s play opportunities is noted in one child’s account, where she describes her immersion in her play and the difficulty of returning to this state of deeply involved play once it had been broken.

‘I stop playing mostly ... because of homework. My parents say “stop doing that for now, do your homework and come back to it later” but I would forget what I was doing and where I was up to.’

Nearly all of the children said that they spent some of their free time helping out with housework, such as washing up, hoovering, tidying the house or polishing shoes. The majority of them stated that they thought this was ‘fair’ and willingly took on the responsibilities of helping out around the house as long as it did not take up all of their time to play. Children also understood the adults’ burden of housework and wished to relieve some of the stress.

‘I don’t mind housework because there is time to play afterwards.’

‘If I help my mum then she is less stressed, and happy.’

Even though children’s time to play could be restricted by obligations of housework, there was evidence that they incorporated play into these tasks. Children frequently talked about their imaginary play when helping with housework.

‘When I am hoovering I imagine it’s my pet dog eating all the crumbs.’

As well as homework and housework responsibilities, children spent a proportion of their free time fulfilling family obligations, such as visiting family members or caring for younger siblings. Again, there was a general consensus that caring for younger siblings was acceptable, especially if it meant helping out their parents while they were doing household chores or working.

‘Sometimes I have to look after my sister when my mum is busy around the house, but I don’t mind.’

There was some evidence to suggest that parents' busy schedules also impacted upon children's time to play. Many of the children were dependent on their parents to take them to friends' houses or places to play, possibly due to distance or concerns about safety. Children discussed how living far away from their friends meant they had difficulties playing near their home.

[Do you have friends in the neighbourhood?] 'I can't really walk that far.'

'On Fridays I will play my [computer games]. I would like to live next to my friends so I could go out and hang around with them, mess about, like all day.'

Because of these issues, some of the children seemed to have limited independent mobility and many of the children, particularly the younger ones, were reliant on their parents to take them out to play. Other pressures on parents' time meant that they sometimes struggled to accommodate their children's play needs.

'When my mum comes to pick me up, I don't want to leave yet, but she has to [pick me up] then.'

However, children seem to acquire greater independent mobility in the summer months as the lighter evenings mean they are given more freedom in the local area.

'It's lighter in the evenings so we can stay out later.'

There appears to be a number of demands of children's free time, limiting children's play. Most children accepted taking on certain responsibilities but in general children often reported feeling over-scheduled, with little control over how they chose to spend their time. In contrast, some older children, particularly from one group, felt they had too much free time, but a lack of recreational facilities close to where they lived meant that their play in their free time was of limited quality.

3.1 Extra-curricular activities and structured clubs

One of the most common discussion points around children's time to play, was structured clubs and activities. Most of children in the focus groups took part in some form of extra-curricular activity or organised club outside of school hours. Children's accounts often seemed to suggest that their free time was associated with a strong sense of structure and routine.

'Tuesdays I have piano, Wednesdays choir, Fridays I go to guides, Saturday and Sunday I'll go out with my friends to Meer Green or something and other weekends I will go to my dad's.'

Overall, children enjoyed attending clubs and appreciated the social aspect that they could provide.

‘I like clubs, they are fun!’

‘Clubs help us to learn skills and stop us from being bored.’

‘Clubs are a good way of meeting people; there are always people there at clubs.’

The older children from Sudan enjoyed attending a Wednesday club set up for ethnic minority children because they could take part in a range of activities such as cooking, arts and crafts, and various games.

In fact, there was a high demand for clubs amongst the small number of children who did not have access to any.

‘I like singing, I like cooking. I try to find singing lessons and guitar lessons, but in [my city] they are just not available.’

‘It would be good if they can have clubs if they like something, like ballet club.’

It appears that the out-of-school clubs were an important aspect of children’s lives and appreciated by the children. There was also a sense that attending clubs prevented children from ‘getting bored’ by helping them to take part in activities and meet people that they would otherwise not be able to. However, although there was overwhelming support for clubs and extra-curricular activities from all the children, those who attended many clubs on a regular basis felt that the clubs consumed a lot of their lives, often limiting the amount of time they have for free play.

‘[Going to clubs] gets away from the playtime.’

‘I go to lots of clubs and do too much, so I don’t have much time to play and I would like to quit a few.’

It seems that for some children, attending clubs was the norm and something that was widely accepted as an integral part of their lives. Around half the children claimed that they had little choice as to which clubs they attended, again suggesting a degree of a lack of control over how children’s free time is organised. The children’s narratives imply that any external social life must be planned around these structured events rather than attending them when they feel like going. However, the presence of clubs was deeply set into children’s lives and this seemed to go relatively unquestioned by the children.

Despite this, attending at least some out-of-school activities left a positive impression on the children – it was only when children were attending

'too many' clubs that they spoke more negatively. Some of the children's accounts show that the pressure of attending too many clubs led them to feel that their free time had become over-scheduled.

'I have swimming and dancing and I am starting jazz, now I only have Wednesdays and the weekends off.'

'I'm too busy, I have to practise music and it's too much.'

'First I go to my friend's house, then I have piano, then I have swimming, by the time I get back I'm really tired.'

'My violin teacher tells me I need to do more practise but I can't because of Stagecoach – it's hard to do two things at once.'

For these children, extra-curricular activities and clubs seemed to threaten their free time, which they would otherwise spend in less structured forms of play. The national opinion poll also reflected a significant proportion of children would rather be play than spend time in extra-curricular activities.

All of the children agreed that they wanted a balance between attending the clubs and extra-curricular activities and having time to spend in unstructured play.

'I would like a mixture of both clubs and playing.'

Children sometimes said that they attended clubs, even when they did not want to go. Some of the children went in the hope that they might enjoy it when they got there, while others felt that they had to attend because of the expense it cost their parents.

'Sometimes it gets annoying having to go [to clubs], I don't tell [my parents] I don't want to go, but sometimes they realise, but I go anyway because it costs money, it's a waste of about eight pounds.'

'Mum pays for it and it's wasted money. Sometimes I really don't want to go, but I want to go as well because it's a waste.'

A large proportion of the children who attended clubs emphasised that they did so to acquire skills or improve their learning, rather than simply to have fun.

'I go to recorder club, but I'm good at it now so I want to stop now.'

[Why do you go if you don't like swimming?] 'I have to pass the level.'

It seemed that some of these children perceived clubs as something they 'ought to do', regardless of what they felt like doing with their spare time. Informal play alone or with peers was viewed as having less of a purpose than these organised activities, other than for their own enjoyment. Although this opinion did not surface in the quantitative research, similar findings were mirrored in the literature review.

Children also stated that they attended clubs after school to avoid boredom while their friends were in their own clubs and activities.

'If other people are at clubs, you can't ask your friends to come round and it's really boring.'

It seems that attending clubs not only impacts on the time to play of the children involved, but the playtime of their friends.

Some children seemed to be encouraged by adults to attend structured activities, as the adults believed it to be a safer alternative to playing outside locally.

'My mum says it's better to be in clubs than to be hanging round on street corners.'

'[If I didn't go to clubs] I would be stuck inside because people pick on me in the street.'

Public outdoor spaces tended to be viewed with some caution by many of the children in the focus groups. Many expressed their worries over gangs, bullies, paedophiles and traffic, and believed that clubs offered an alternative to this.

Children clearly valued attending clubs and they were much missed by children who do not have the chance to attend. However, a significant number of children in the study lacked any control over which activities they attended and when they went to them, sometimes eliminating the sense of fun. All of the children favoured a mixture of informal play and organised activities, but for many children there seemed to be an imbalance and children's time for play was often taken over with structured events.

4. Favourite time to play

A considerable number of children in the focus groups stated that their favourite time to play was during school because they could play with their friends. School break times meant that the children were able to meet regularly with many of their friends and had the freedom to decide who they played with and the games they played. Having time to play freely with friends was less of an issue for children in one group, who said they regularly played on the streets and with other children – although it is unclear why this was.

Playing with others at school meant children could be inventive about their play and try out new games. They could be spontaneous when playing and it was clear that being with friends was an essential component of play.

‘My favourite time to play is at school because we can make up new games and let other people join in who are alone.’

‘[My favourite time to play is at] school because you have friends to play with and you get other people’s opinion on your game and it’s nice to know I have made other people happy.’

‘School time – make new friends and play with different people.’

The children with learning difficulties also seemed to enjoy school. The special school they attended also had a swimming pool that they enjoyed. They said of the school:

‘[School is] handsome.’

‘School is peaceful.’

It appears that children of various abilities enjoyed the play opportunities they were presented within school. The socialising aspect made the school day an enjoyable experience for the children as it offered more opportunities to play with friends than out of school hours.

For others, after school was their preferred time to play because this presented them with more choice, freedom and a longer timeframe. Some children led fairly structured lives and they, in particular, valued their free time when not doing homework, attending clubs or taking part in organised or goal-orientated activities. Weekends were also popular times for play because this was the least structured part of their week.

Two primary characteristics that children favoured about their play outside of school were the lack of structure in their play and the extended time for play. When asked when their favourite time to play was, those who did not say school, said:

‘After school, because there is more of a rush in the morning.’

‘After school, because there is more time to play.’

‘Both during and after school. I get to see friends at school but after school there are more options and more time.’

‘Friday and Saturday because there isn’t any school.’

‘My favourite time is Wednesdays and the weekends because I don’t have dancing and I can just chill out.’

‘After school because you can invite friends, play with cats that have had kittens – they are still small and a bit blind.’

Children’s favourite playing time is characterised by three dominant features:

- the availability of friends
- the availability of time
- the ability and freedom to play without structure – to continually invent and re-invent games.

In relation to this last point, many children favoured unstructured play, that is, play that is self-directed where children can choose to do as they wish. However, of the older children who felt they had enough time to play, many wanted more structured activities to take part in within the local area alongside more opportunities for informal recreation. Their independence meant they had the option to choose who they spent their free time with, so their problem was boredom rather than a lack of freedom.

5. Play during the school day

Children discussed their experiences of play during the school day and whether they felt they had enough time to play. Children talked about their time playing in school, usually during break and lunchtimes. Most of the children received at least 45 minutes for lunch and an additional two short breaks during the day. Some children received only one short break.

Playing in school was many of the children's favourite time to play. Whilst children enjoyed the freedom, choice and variety available to them after school, play in school was highly valued because it offered opportunities for socialising. Playtime in particular offered children the experience of meeting up with a range of friends on a regular basis and inviting others to join in their games. It also allowed children to be more inventive about their play and to try out new games for others' approval.

Some children had limited access to friends to play with outside of school for a number of reasons. These included living a fair distance away from their friends or having other commitments (such as attending after school clubs).

'I play more with friends who are in school than out of school as other kids are at clubs a lot. If you knock on the door and they are not there I get a bit bored.'

One girl describes how school was the only opportunity she had to meet up with friends.

'At school you can play with friends, I don't have friends after school.'

Children felt strongly about the importance of playtime during the school day, and could identify a range of ways that play benefited them. Not only was it credited with the opportunity to socialise, but children also highlighted a number of ways in which play assisted effective learning in the classroom. Most commonly, children spoke of how play boosts their concentration in class and how the chance to let off steam in the playground could lead to improved behaviour in the classroom.

'It stops more fights if you get more play.'

'Some children learn how to socialise when they play with other kids.'

'It helps you concentrate in school.'

'We need fresh oxygen from the playground.'

‘Children get tired after doing work, and being out in the yard playing helps them get back into learning.’

These positive implications of playtime in schools are supported in the opinion poll findings. Some children in the groups claimed that they would like more time to play at school, either longer break times or an extra break in the day. Children frequently spoke about lunchtimes being ‘rushed’ and there was usually not enough time to eat lunch and play outside. Children used strategies, such as eating their lunch quickly or throwing it away, in order to have a longer time to play.

‘If you don't eat fast you miss your playtime.’

‘I have a big lunch so I don't have enough time to play afterwards.’

‘People will chuck their lunch away so they have more time to play and other people sneak out of the canteen.’

‘My school closes at 2:55, it used to close 3:30 and we used to have 1 hour 20 minutes. Now lunch is only 45 minutes, break is 10 minutes... if you come in last, you have to eat so fast and by the time you go out the 4th lesson is starting.’

‘You have to rush or leave and you waste your lunch. If you don't eat it fast then you get a detention.’

‘We have two separate half hours but they are not enough, especially if you are in the hall. Then you want to get lunch and if you are the last person you have five minutes to sit down and eat it.’

Around half of the children felt that the length of playtime in school was balanced fairly with lesson time. In fact, some children believed that education and formal learning should be prioritised over play. This was despite their view that they would enjoy having more playtime.

‘If you play all the time, you don't learn.’

‘Children should only play a little or they don't learn anything and they will just be dumb.’

‘Play is important to keep fit, but you also need to get a good education.’

‘Yes, because everything fits in, I think it's fair because we need more education.’

One or two children also felt that having more time to play at school would be too tiring and so were happy with the current length of playtime in school.

‘We wouldn't want longer at playtime because we get tired.’

Although the children who were satisfied with the length of their playtime in school received around the same amount of designated playtime as children in the other groups, children from one school were ‘awarded golden time’ (free time during lessons to play) in addition to their school breaks. This extended time to play may have led them to feel that their school break times are long enough.

Despite the mixed response as to whether children felt break time was long enough, the ‘rush’ at lunchtimes – also reflected in the opinion poll findings – suggests that the lunch break in some schools is too short. It seems that in this case the lack of time to play in school has led to unhealthy eating patterns for some of the children, whether it is eating very quickly or eating very little to make more time for play. Children valued eating lunch with their friends. Most of them stated that they would like to eat with their friends or wait for them so they could leave the canteen together. Many schools did not permit this; and children were often asked to leave the canteen immediately after eating.

‘When you eat near your friends it makes you happier.’

‘If you wait for your friends to finish their food, you get told off.’

It is clear from these accounts that children felt that they benefit from playtimes, in terms of their personal development and classroom learning. There is also evidence that children's time to play in school is rushed, which seems to impact upon their lunchtime eating habits. However, the children often valued their education and accepted there had to be limited times to play in school.

6. How children feel about playing

Playing is clearly important to children. Children in the groups saw play as a means to have fun, be with their friends, be creative, use their bodies, enjoy themselves and feel free. Play was also seen as a functional tool that helps their development (concentration, social development, socialising, intellectual development). Children said that making time for play was important because:

‘You need it to concentrate – get fresh oxygen.’

‘You need to play so you don’t turn into a hermit.’

‘Play is important because children need to go for a walk and get some fresh air.’

Children also valued play for its contribution to their inner spirit and emotional expression, they said:

‘If [children don’t play] it makes them yuk and boring.’

‘There might as well be no colour if you can’t play!’

‘It means being able to shout without getting told off!’

‘Cos you need fresh air – if you don’t have fresh air you might die – well I would anyways – it’s important to get air.’

‘If you learn too much and stuff and it’s all in your head, you won’t have time to be free and stuff.’

‘When you play you can let your imagination unfold.’

‘Play does help your imagination run away.’

When asked, ‘Why would you be sad to lose playing time?’ one child said:

‘Because it’s freedom.’

Another said, of being in the focus group:

‘I’m glad to be able to be free out here [in the focus group].’

Disabled children gave similar responses to other children.

‘Children should play because they are very very good. If children couldn’t play they would feel very very sad.’

‘Play makes me feel happy.’

For older children, free time was important because they could reclaim time for themselves and, in turn, take control over some aspects of their lives. For these children it seemed that other time, particularly school time, was given over to adults who imposed control over how it was used and there was a sense of alienation about that time. When asked why free time was important, the older children said:

‘You do what you want to do.’

‘You need time for yourself.’

‘To have a laugh and get your own life.’

‘To be with your friends.’

‘Cos you need to socialise.’

‘Cos it’s my time.’

6.1 Naughty behaviour and play

The majority of children agreed that children who are naughty should still be allowed to play. This suggests that children perceive play as an aspect of every child’s life. One child, reflecting prejudices against young people hanging out on streets, said:

‘People who are nasty shouldn’t be allowed out and should be at home, not hanging around street corners.’

Other children, who felt play was important for all children, said:

‘Everyone deserves to play, otherwise you get bored stiff.’

‘If they are playing, then they are happy, but if they are not allowed, then they become more naughty because they are not able to go out and play off their naughtiness.’

It appears that many of the children felt that dedicating time for play was important for every child and had a positive impact on their overall well-being.

7. How children play

Children played inside and outside and their play activities were numerous and varied. Children in general liked to play outdoors, although one group of children spent a lot of time indoors on their computer games. Children played on the streets, in parks, in their homes, on the school playground, in nearby woods and other natural environments, and in clubs. They took part in passive play, like watching TV, and active boisterous play, like playing 'Bulldog' and on their bicycles.

Gender differences in play were evident, with boys engaging in more rough-and-tumble play and girls' play focusing on friendships and social play.

Children with learning difficulties played similar games to non-disabled children but perhaps included more boisterous play. These disabled children enjoyed playing in the park particularly playing 'Tig', football, cricket, jumping and running. Like some of the non-disabled children, they also played with Lego which was popular with two boys in particular. One child said he played Indiana Jones, another said he liked to look through catalogues and another that he played with his dialect tools and keypad.

Many of the Sudanese children visited Sudan regularly and they talked more animatedly about their play experiences in Sudan than in the UK.

'The best thing that happened was the holiday to homeland to see my family – Sudan. My best friends are there – I go out from the morning until the night – sometimes I don't even get back to the house – playing football, running around, visiting the houses. All my cousins are there.'

A few children in two of the groups happened to spend their weekends in caravan parks, which offered different environments for play. Older children could visit different clubs offered at the caravan parks.

When on journeys in cars, children played games such as 'Wink, wink murder', I-spy and the 'Why?' game (asking 'Why?' to a number of statements and using the answers to help them guess the main question). Those who walked to school seemed to play more imaginative games than those who travelled by bus or car. Imaginative games were often played with siblings or friends, particularly friends that they met on the way to school. They played games such as shadows on the road and avoiding cracks in the pavement.

'I play shadows on the road, where you don't let the cars' shadows touch our shadows... it's fun!'

'I pretend the cracks are goo.'

'I play 'Wink wink murder' in the car on the way to school with my brother. [But how do you play Wink wink murder with one person?] If we see people walking on the way to school we wink at them and see if they fall over.'

Older children who normally travelled to school by bus used the time to and from school to socialise with their friends. Computer games were a particular feature with older boys, who played their computer games on the bus to and from school, sometimes engaging their friends in their games.

'I chat with my friends on the bus.'

'I play with my [computer games] on the bus to and from school... if I get a new game – I play more.'

'I play on my [computer games] on the bus on the way to school and sometimes you can link them up with others too.'

It appears that the journey to and from school offers children an important opportunity for play. Children travelled to school by various modes of transport, such as buses, cars or by foot. This seemed to influence the type of play they engaged in, with more imaginative play for those who walk and more verbal play in the car and on buses. Gaming technology was also more commonly used on bus journeys.

Some children who walked to school said they played more on their journey to school than on their way home from school. These children hurried home to have more free time and be away from the school grounds.

'I want to go home quickly – I just hurry to get home so I have more free time.'

Younger children played a range of physical and imaginative games in their daily routines. Pets were an important feature for younger children, particularly girls:

'I play kittens game.'

Younger children also played computer games.

'I play car racing or Hannah Montana game on [my computer]. The big gorilla one, little Mario ones.'

A significant proportion of the younger children in the groups enjoyed playing outdoors and exploring nature, as one child stated:

'I take bikes by the road and play on the pavement or if mum doesn't let us I search for insects [Do you like insects?] Yes I do, I

catch them and normally put them on my hand if they have no wings or I will put them on the paper and let them walk around.'

7.1 Play for boys and girls

Older boys tended to play football, ride their bikes and play computer games. If they lived in areas with natural surroundings they played out more – climbing trees, going fishing and 'free running on the sand hills' for example. Football was particularly popular with older boys. Older girls spent time talking to friends and on social networking sites. Both boys and girls regularly went to the cinema and bowling.

'On Saturday I usually go to cinema or town or just go over someone's house.'

'Fridays I either go to cinema or something with them two [pointing at two girl friends] and my sisters or something else.'

There were differences in play between younger girls and boys (although in one group the girls said they also played football). Boys engaged in boisterous play, whereas girls focused on social play. Girls' physical play contained acrobatics and less competitive team games.

'Boys play football and sometimes join in with girls' chat. Girls play with dolls, sit down and talk, they never play football.'

'Boys play batman, car games and transformers. Girls play 'It', handstands and cartwheels.'

There were even two versions of a game called 'Washing machine'.

'The girls go around in a circle and the boys go around in a circle and turn around like you are in a washing machine.'

Younger girls played with their pets, particularly imaginative games.

'After school I get to play with kittens. They are black and white. My cat looks like she has a mask and her nickname is Batman but her name is Tickle.'

'I play with my hamster. [What do you play?] I put him in a bowl and make him go wee, wee, wee.'

One girl said she preferred to play with boys because:

'... girls just scream and play with their hair.'

Sometimes girls and boys reported playing together, including games considered 'boys games' such as football. It seemed that playing

together, particularly at school where children had more choice about who they played with, was not usually the norm and the children tended to mix mostly with others of the same sex. There sometimes appeared to be peer pressure for children to play with others of the same sex. About boys and girls playing together, children said:

‘Sometimes we play bulldog together.’

‘Most times the boys let us play but sometimes the girl friends are playing better games.’

‘Boys who play bulldog cheat’ [unanimous].

‘If you want to go and play bulldog with the boys your girl friends will say, “You don’t like me anymore” or “You’re being mean” and then they won’t speak to you.’

7.2 Play in schools

In schools, children played a variety of ‘running around’ games and on play equipment such as ‘trim trails’ (assault courses for running and fitness). Two school based groups were visited by playworkers who brought with them play equipment. Children said of playworkers:

‘The playleaders can help children to play when they are lonely.’

‘Playleaders come at lunchtimes and play games. They ask us what we want to do or play and come equipped with things to play with.’

The school attended by one of the groups was next to a play area (known as the ‘rec’ – the recreation ground) and they were acutely aware of the different rules for playing here during school and after school. They could not understand, for example, how the same play equipment could be deemed unsafe during school time and safe after school.

‘We play at the recreation ground in school time. When we go over there, we are not allowed to play on the play equipment and it’s unfair, but we are allowed after school, and it’s ‘perfectly safe’ then!’

‘After school we are allowed to go to the rec playground, and we never fall off and no one ever gets hurt – it’s so silly.’

‘The dinner ladies watch us – if there are dogs on the rec then we cannot play with them, we cannot talk to people on the rec. We get a red card if we are playing ‘wrong’.’

‘When we are at the recreation ground with the school, we are not allowed to play with the dogs or to talk to any people – even if we know them!’

It seems that the same play space could be fluid in terms of the play experience for these children. As the rules seemed only to be applied at particular times, the grounds offered more restricted play during the school day and more freedom in out-of-school hours.

7.3 Outdoor play

Those who lived near natural environments spent a proportion of their time playing there. They played on sand dunes, in forests and woods, usually at weekends. Children played in local parks, particularly older children. About outdoor play, one child said:

‘I have swimming lessons in the morning and then go on adventure cycling trips near home which are really fun.’

For older children, parks provided a place to meet up with others and socialise, as well as a place to play games like football. When asked about playing in parks the children said:

‘Parks are fun when you’re with your friends and people of your own age.’

‘Yes you can play football and basketball and chat in the park. Sometimes it’s OK with my brother because we play football, talk or sit down.’

‘... When my friends come over to my house, before dinner, my mum lets us go to the waterfalls near my house and there is a big park there and there is a rock island that you can go on the stepping stones and play skipping stones and also there is a cut down tree on the ground and me and my friends pick up twigs and start fighting and stuff like that.’

‘Sometimes we go over to her house, cos they live [nearby]. There are loads of big parks there. We play on the playgrounds, walk by the waterfalls and just go on bike and scooter.’

One group of older boys said that they usually played football in a nearby field, except on Sundays when official football games were played there. They also climbed over a fence surrounding astro-turf to play football there. These older children felt as though they had no choice but to play in forbidden areas as there was nowhere else available for them to play.

7.4 Street play

Children also played out on the streets with friends and siblings. One group reported playing in the streets frequently. They played a range of games, usually physically active play such as playing on bicycles, hula hoops, football and other ball games. Playing on the streets meant children could meet with, talk to and play with their friends.

'I play on my bike.'

'I do play on the streets – football, maybe talk with my friends, play things people play, sometimes on my bike.'

'I play "Kerby" after school – you throw the ball and if you hit the curb you win – I play it in the streets with friends.'

'I play on my road – no cars really pass by.'

Children who did not play on the streets could not do so because of fears about traffic and personal safety from strangers.

'We used to live somewhere else, it wasn't a main street. It was a big place and everyone played, we used to go out and play with my friends everyday but now we moved to a main road and there are always cars driving by so can't really do anything – just stay in or go on computer.'

Children reported that their parents were reluctant to let them out of sight and this restricted how far they could go to play.

'I can't play on the road as I live on a hill and can't see around the corner.'

'You can't go as far away as you want on your bike because of strangers in cars, you might get lost.'

'I'm allowed to play in the house next door – mum and dad don't want to lose me, the cars will follow me.'

Older children, including 12 and 13-year-olds, talked of their parents' and carers' concerns about playing out.

'[Our parents are worried about] gangs – some have samurai swords and bats.'

One group talked about a recent fatal stabbing of a young man known by them in the local community, and this was clearly present in their minds as they talked about their parents' fears for them.

‘Our parents worry if you get hurt, or if anyone takes you or something, worried about kidnappers, pervs, my mate’s uncle got stabbed, a wee boy got run over, and you can get mugged.’

Children gave examples of playing in their gardens with some children having access to a range of play equipment there.

‘I have a scooter and bike in my garden – I only play in the garden with it. We’ve got a swing, see-saw, slide, rocking horse.’

‘I play trampoline and swimming pool in garden.’

7.5 Play and the weather

Playing outdoors was not always an attractive prospect to all children. One group of older children expressed their view that the weather sometimes made playing outside unpleasant, while another felt there was little to do.

‘It’s always raining.’

‘Why would you want to sit outside under a tree?’

When it rained, children usually played indoors with their pets or on their computer games. Some children said they did not like the rain, while others said that they enjoyed getting wet and playing in the rain. One child said she skateboarded with an umbrella.

Children enjoyed playing outside equally in the summer and winter. In the winter they enjoyed playing with the snow (reflecting their memories of the winter snowfall in 2009) and they enjoyed the long evenings in the summer.

‘There isn’t much difference between summer and winter, snow is good for snowball fights and making snowmen. In the summer, we have longer holidays so can play more and go swimming.’

‘I tried to make an igloo but it didn’t work.’

The different seasons clearly had an impact on how children play and while some children favoured the colder, rainy months, this led other children to avoid playing outdoors. The long summer evenings seemed to allow some children more time to spend outdoors.

7.6 Play and older children

Despite their age, older children were willing to talk about their ‘free time’ and ‘play’ interchangeably. They did not feel they were too old for ‘play’

but usually defined it as 'leisure' or 'free time'. Older children in one group, when asked about considering football or basketball as 'play', said:

'But you PLAY football and you PLAY basketball, so it is 'play'.'

Older children complained of having very little to do and few places to go and so they spent most of their time hanging around outdoors with their friends. They said they were bored of doing the same things again and again – usually bowling, going to the cinema, playing football or on computer games. Some went swimming and a few attended local youth clubs where they could 'go and hang out'. Places designed for older children to use or those that were acceptable for older children to spend time at incurred costs and so their choices were often limited.

'All the stuff is really expensive as well, so we can't do a lot because we can't afford it because it's too much to go out all the time.'

Meeting together, for example on the streets, near shops or in parks, often led to complaints and harassment from adults, including neighbours and local community members. Amongst all of the older children interviewed, those from Sudan were the only group to discuss their experiences of being reported to the police when they met with their friends on the streets and in the parks. Most of the older children thought this was because of their age rather than their ethnicity, although one child reported encountering racism.

'If me, her and her [pointing to two other young people] were going around with other girls and boys, if we are going on the street, going to the park, sitting there, a lot of people, they will ring the police for no reason and the police would come up to us and say, "Go away" when we haven't done anything. That happens all the time.'

'Say, we were out and they seen us, they will just assume we [teenagers] were doing something – then they tell our parents something we didn't do and then that stops us from going out.'

'There isn't very much to do in [my city] – we just try and socialise in parks and stuff. If we do then we get done for it when we haven't done anything.'

'If there is a kid going into a shop and there is a lady or a man – they will just go 'oh move, move' with their stick. That's what happened to me and my cousin when we were in a shop – a man said you're too young to come here on your own.'

'People just, a little where I live, if you're just standing out the front of someone's house they come out and start shouting at you because you're making too much noise.'

These accounts suggest that older children are treated with hostility in public space, which may in turn limit or affect their time spent playing outdoors.

Although some younger children reported that they would have liked to attend fewer clubs and have more free time, a lot of older children wanted the reverse. They wanted to attend more clubs that offered a variety of activities, including different sports, but not just sports because not all of the older children liked participating in sports.

'[It would be better] If clubs were on more than once a week – basketball once a week is not really enough.'

'Say there was a clubhouse, say people like ballet, they can go to a ballet club every day. Or a football club or anything. Or a creativity club. I like singing, I like cooking. I try to find singing lessons, guitar lessons but in [my city] they are just not available.'

In general, the older children in the groups reported that they had very little to do, costs for doing something different were prohibitive and they experienced harassment by adults when they did find something to do.

8. Who children play with

Children played with their brothers, sisters, cousins and friends and with other children in their neighbourhood. The majority of children in the group with learning difficulties stated that they played with their parents or siblings. Only a small number of these children claimed that they played with friends or neighbours. This may suggest that children with learning difficulties encounter some social barriers in their play experiences, as the group we spoke to seemed to spend less of their time playing with peers, although this theory hasn't been tested. The older Sudanese children said they most frequently played with other peers also from Sudan because they shared the same culture and none of these children spoke of friends outside of their community.

Finding playmates was very important to the children, as many of them did not enjoy playing on their own.

'I don't have a brother or sister but there are lots of kids so I can play with them.'

'Sometimes, playing with friends in the park is interesting because you can just mess about. But when you are on your own ... you don't enjoy it more.'

One girl, when asked what would improve playing time, said:

'Sometimes – for example – high schools aren't close to your house so you wouldn't have friends there – it would be good if you have loads of friends next to your house and your street wasn't busy at all and you can just play.'

Some children played on their own as there were no children living nearby for them to play with.

'I play on my own because I don't know people on my street. They are mostly elderly people who have lived there for a long time and so that's why there are no children.'

Weekends were usually spent with family members, particularly for younger children. Children whose parents were separated or divorced shared their weekends between their parents. Visiting families offered children different environments for play.

'I visit family [in another city] once a week and there I go to the fountain park to play pool, bowling and stuff like that.'

Grandparents were important facilitators of children's play and important parts of children's lives.

'I go for a walk with granny and grandad in the woods.'

'I go to the park with an adult (not on my own), when I go to my nan's house, the park by her... but not at night because people get stoned.'

'My nan and grandad play board games and Scrabble with me.'

Although many children felt that visiting family members offered them new and exciting opportunities to play, to some children visiting family members sometimes seemed like an obligation that they had to fulfil.

'I go to my grandma's once a week for the whole day and it just gets boring because we always do the same thing – sit there and watch rubbish on telly.'

Older children liked to be with friends and spoke repeatedly about 'hanging out' with their friends. One boy said he liked to:

'Hang out with friends [Why do you like that?] I can spend time with them, talk to them.'

One older child (a 13-year-old) said because he lived further away from the school, it affected how much time he played.

'I live far away from the school so I don't play as much as everyone else does.'

Children played with a variety of people, including with peers, family members or on their own. Who the children played with was partly based on their own preference, but also dependent on the community they lived in and their family structure. Distance away from school was particularly influential, as those who travelled a long way to school tended to have fewer available playmates in the area that they lived in.

9. Conclusion

The findings from the focus groups suggest that children's time to play can be affected by a number of factors including family structure, geography and age.

In general, children played most at weekends when they had no school and fewer extra-curricular activities and therefore more time to play. There was a range of views about whether children in the groups felt they had adequate time to play, with some children saying they had enough and others feeling they had very little time to play.

Some of the older children (of secondary school age) felt they had adequate free time but the lack of good quality play and leisure provision for them to play freely meant that, for some, free time was endless and boring and led some of them to feel that they had too much free time. There is clearly a need to address the lack of facilities available to older children in their free time.

Many children's favourite time to play was during the school day because a choice of friends was readily available, enabling them to be more inventive in their play and games. Children also enjoyed playing during the weekends and after school, when they had no clubs and had more time to play.

Visiting family, particularly grandparents or another parent (if parents were divorced or separated), affected how the children spent their weekends. It seems, however, that younger children played with their grandparents or parents wherever they were. Younger children in the groups seemed to adapt to their family dynamics and incorporated any changing circumstances into their lives and in their play time.

Children enjoyed a range of types of play from quiet imaginary games to outdoor boisterous games, with boys engaging in more rough-and-tumble play and girls in more social play. Amongst the older children, boys played on computer games and girls reported using social networking sites. Children played both outdoors and in, although playing out was only available if parents and carers felt it was safe for them to do so.

Street play and playing with friends was restricted for most children, with the exception of one group where children seemed to have more outdoor playtime (although it was not clear why).

Concerns for personal safety and a lack of friends available to play with – either because of distance or because friends were attending clubs – meant the children reported playing indoors, in parks accompanied by adults, in gardens and on their own or with siblings. These findings suggest that there continues to be a need to promote street and outdoor play and to work with service providers to increase safety and

the perceptions of safety. Designing safer streets for play would enhance children's ability to play outdoors. Some children seemed to have internalised the idea that it is good to be engaged in productive activity, such as attending clubs, and bad to hang around on the streets with 'nothing to do'.

Time to play for some of the younger children who participated in many extra-curricular activities, was more restricted. Their free time was dominated by structured activities and, whilst many enjoyed attending clubs and seeing their friends there, some children felt over burdened by their lack of free time to play. The need to continue promoting the value of and need for free play for children is still evident. The findings suggests that children's play may often be institutionalised, in the sense that children are spending more time playing in designated play areas, such as clubs, rather than an integrated part of the wider community.

Children helped with household chores and looking after younger siblings, which most did not mind and some turned these into games and play. Homework and education was particularly valued by those in some groups because it was perceived to lead to good jobs and a better life. However, adults need to ensure that children have time to play freely and avoid structuring their lives to mirror their own rushed experiences.

The sense of rushing was evident for some children from when they wake up, during school and after school. Even school lunchtime was a hurried affair, and children spoke of throwing food away in order to make it to their classes and thus avoid detention. This seems contrary to messages about enjoying food and the social aspect of eating. Creating spaces for children to 'chill out' will become increasingly important if their lives continue to be regulated and rushed by adults.

Many children said that playtime in school was reduced if they did not complete work or for 'bad behaviour'. Whilst the aim of reducing or depriving children of playtime is to teach children about the consequences of their behaviour, the social and academic benefits of play in school recognised by the children suggests that cutting playtime may not be an effective approach to improving discipline and learning.

The children from Sudan were very connected to their culture and to Sudan. They had good memories about playing there and spoke about their much expanded social life over there. The children said it took a while to understand the norms and the culture in the UK but now they understood how everything worked and felt able to communicate with others.

Children with learning difficulties played similar games to non-disabled children, although they were more likely to play with family members than friends.

Children from some areas were more likely to participate in after school clubs which many had little choice over, whilst others had fewer opportunities to do so and wanted more opportunities.

Three characteristics that emerged from the focus groups for optimum play experiences were:

- playing with friends
- having time to play
- having freedom to play without structure or outcome and to be able to continually invent and re-invent in play.

For children, play was as important as breathing – they saw being out and getting fresh air and oxygen as essential to their survival – and, as importantly, play was their freedom.

Because it's freedom: Children's views on their time to play

This publication can be downloaded at www.playday.org.uk
Published for Play England by NCB
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Play England is part of NCB and is supported by the Big Lottery Fund.

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Play England is part of NCB and is supported by the Big Lottery Fund.
Published for Play England by NCB.



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Big Lottery Fund

