



Making it *Our Place*: Community views on children's play

Josie Gleave
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1. Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research conducted to inform and support the 2010 Playday campaign.

Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play, a day where events take place across the UK to highlight the importance of play in children's lives. This year Playday takes place on Wednesday, 4 August. The campaign is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Scotland, Play Wales and PlayBoard Northern Ireland.

Each year, Playday campaigns on issues affecting children's play. This year's campaign entitled *Our place* aims to tackle the restrictions faced by children wanting to play outside where they live, and highlight the role that communities have in shaping childhood.

Methodology

Seven focus groups were carried out in different locations across England. These groups comprised four groups of children aged 7 to 14 years, two of parents and one of adults without young children (non-parents). A diverse mix of participants made up the focus groups, coming from various geographies (inner-city, suburb, town and rural), ethnicities and age groups. Additional consultation was carried out with a playworker who operated within an inclusive adventure playground. Data collected from the groups was thematically analysed relating to the topics specified and other issues that arose throughout the sessions.

Findings

Children have less freedom to play in their communities than previous generations

Adults in the study spent a lot of their childhood playing freely in the streets and surrounding areas near to their home. However, today's children do not enjoy this freedom.

Adults gave three explanations for the decline in children's freedom; there are more concerns about children's safety; there is nothing for children to do in the neighbourhood anymore; and that there has been a general breakdown in community.

It is not seen as safe for children to play in the local neighbourhoods without adult supervision

The reoccurring concerns were:

- an increase in road traffic
- an increase in crime
- children carrying knives
- gangs
- drugs
- paedophiles.

There was little, if any evidence of children experiencing any of these concerns, questioning whether these fears are justified.

There aren't enough places for children to play in their community

Although almost all children preferred outdoor play to indoor play, for many children the only opportunity they have to play outside is limited to private gardens. This was due to parental restrictions and a lack of space. Parents often had to drive to find play opportunities for their children as nothing is available for them locally.

Children appreciated any formal and informal play facilities. However, poor maintenance of open spaces prevented children from playing.

There has been a breakdown of community

It was felt that there has been a decline in community spirit and that people no longer interact with each other at a local level. This, in turn, affects children playing out where they live. This was seen as a result of busy lifestyles, an increase of car usage and advances in modern technology.

Parents are uncomfortable allowing their children to play outdoors

Parents often felt a dilemma between the need to protect their children and the need to allow them some independence so they are equipped to deal with real life encounters in the future.

There is evidence that they are more inclined to let their children play out if there are other children playing out too. However, parents' report that they rarely see children playing out outside, and so are reluctant to allow their own children to do so.

Parents thought their neighbours would think they were bad parents if they allowed their children to play outside.

This perceived judgement from others contributed to parents' reluctance to allow their children to play outside.

Children have a role in bringing neighbours together

Adults in the study valued any social ties within their communities and acknowledges children's role in helping to foster these.

Children do not have many friends close to where they live

Only a few children spent a lot of time playing with other children in their street or were friends with neighbouring children. Many others felt that they knew no other children close to where they live and there was little neighbourly interaction. This was often because children attended schools that were far away from their home. A small number of children were actively discouraged from speaking to neighbours because of bad relations their parents had with each other.

Unfamiliarity leads to mistrust

Participants felt that neighbours no longer know each other and that this unfamiliarity leads to mistrust. This, in turn, led to feelings that the neighbourhood is unsafe. Such evidence suggests the importance of building community relationships. There was evidence that parents mistrust of others filtering down into children's perspectives.

Despite a distinct fear of 'strangers', children gave little evidence of adults' having posed any real threat. Most accounts of 'stranger danger' relied on hear-say and anecdotal stories, rather than any situations that may alert concern. However, older children are capable of negotiating own risks; they are aware of possible dangers and are confident in their abilities to manage them.

Adults fear accusations of abducting or harming children

Adults in the study stated that they would be hesitant in approaching a child who needed assistance in their neighbourhood because their actions might be misinterpreted as trying to abduct or harm the child. There was consensus that this was particularly difficult for men, with the perception they were most likely to have their motives questioned by others. Some participants recalled stories of accusations, particularly from parents, which deterred them from helping children.

The media's role in reinforcing a culture of mistrust

Parents blamed the media for projecting an image that children are likely to be 'snatched' by strangers. Although many parents felt it was

irrational they still found this fear difficult to overcome. People are more suspicious now, and this has a big impact on their own community involvement in terms of looking out for other people's children.

Children experience hostility from the police

Older children felt that they were unfairly targeted by the police when they were playing or spending time in their neighbourhood. They were 'moved on' for simply spending time in a public space. Adults sympathised with children's concerns to some extent but some adults argued that power has been taken away from adults, or police, and given to children, and this has led to children lacking any respect for the police, or wider society.

Other community members can also be unwelcoming of children playing outside

Parents received complaints from other residents when their children play out in the streets near their home. Children reported that neighbours disapprove when they play games in the local streets or even in their own gardens.

One parent described a situation in which a resident reported their child to Neighbourhood Watch for playing hopscotch in the street.

Acceptable or unacceptable of children was seen as situational

Adults' opinions of what was deemed acceptable or unacceptable behaviour depended on numerous factors such as the time of day, location and the age of the children.

Some specific behaviour that most adults deemed undesirable

These included:

- disrupting others or the environment
- damaging public property
- impinging on privacy or utilising private property (even using a trampoline in the garden was not acceptable as children can see over the neighbour's fence)
- risk taking (it seems then, that children are not engaging in activities anymore risky than previous generations, but society's norms of acceptable behaviour have changed).

Children would socialise in groups because it made them feel safe, but this was frowned upon

Children often felt there was nothing else for them to do except hang around the local area. Adults often acknowledged this, but the presence of groups of children still made them feel uneasy.

Getting to know the local children helped adults make better judgements about them

Adults, who were not cautious of older children, usually had some form of relationship with them. This illustrates the importance of building relationships with local families and getting to know the neighbours.

The media was seen as a source of heightening hostility towards children

Participants recalled media stories rather than experiences when referring to their concerns over Often children's behaviour.

Disabled children and their parents can be particularly vulnerable to hostile behaviour from others in public space

Disabled children and their parents may have even less opportunities for community play due to the negative reaction they received from other parents and children. This was perceived to be a lack of understanding about impairment, a result of poor opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to mix with one another.

Parents recognised their own responsibility to make changes in the community and were keen to get involved

They gave support to a lot of the solutions these included:

- fun day in a public space
- closing the street to traffic so children can play
- shared supervision of children
- volunteering
- community meetings to discuss play
- educating children to be streetwise
- staffed play provision.

A shift in attitudes towards children and young people is needed for them to become valued and active citizens in our communities

- While there is clearly a need for improving public space for children, they cannot be fully integrated into community life without support from other community members.

2. Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research conducted to inform and support the 2010 Playday campaign. Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play, a national day highlighting the importance of play in children's lives, which this year takes place on Wednesday, 4 August. The campaign is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Scotland, Play Wales and PlayBoard Northern Ireland.

Each year, Playday is an important occasion to campaign on issues affecting children's play. This year's campaign, entitled *Our place*, aims to tackle the restrictions faced by children wanting to play outside where they live, and to highlight the role that communities have in shaping childhood.

Focus groups were structured around the findings from *Community play: a literature review* produced by Play England. This qualitative research project and the findings from the above mentioned literature review were used to inform a national opinion poll, developed by Play England and conducted by ICM.

3. Methodology

Seven focus groups were carried out in different locations across England. These groups comprised four of children aged 7–14; two of parents; and one of adults without young children (non-parents). Each group consisted of between five and twelve participants. A diverse mix of participants made up the focus groups, coming from various geographies (inner city, suburb, town and rural), ethnicities and age groups. Schools provided the venue for the children's and the parents' focus groups; and the non-parents focus group met in a hired consultation room. Additional consultation was carried out with a playworker who operated within an inclusive adventure playground. An informal interview was carried out in order to raise some specific issues relating to community play and disabled children. Further research into community play for disabled children and their families is needed in order to explore these issues in more depth.

The adults' sessions consisted of semi-structured group discussions; and the children's sessions combined asking questions with playful activities. Picture cards were used, along with other materials, to engage children's attention and encourage them to reflect on their own experiences of playing. Children and parents were selected by staff from each of the schools. Two researchers were present for each of the group sessions: one to lead the discussion, while the other takes notes and tape-records the discussion. Data collected from the groups was thematically analysed in relation to the topics specified and other issues that arose throughout the sessions.

4. Findings

The findings of this report have been themed under issues that arose from the group sessions. The views of parents, non-parents and children have been referred to throughout the report and, where necessary, any differences highlighted.

4.1 Memories of childhood

The adult groups of parents and non-parents were asked to reflect on their experiences of playing as children. All participants recollected happy memories of playing outside, and exchanged stories of games they used to play and places they visited. Although it was clear that adults grew up in a diverse range of communities, they shared common experiences of playing during childhood: playing freely indoors; feeling safe while playing; experiencing independence; having places to go; and participating in the community.

- **Playing freely outdoors** All adults associated their childhood with a sense of freedom. They recalled spending most their time playing outside in the local streets and the wider community. Adults seemed to spend a considerable amount of their childhood exploring the local environment, utilising the natural environment as play sites.

'We used to just go up the woods, go down the quarry and just play all over'

(Non-parent, inner-city secondary school)

- **Feeling safe** Adults referred to their childhood communities as safe places for children to play outside. Most believed that the world was a safer place then than it is for children now.
- **Independence** Childhood memories seemed to comprise mostly of playing outside alone or with peers rather than under adult supervision. Adults frequently talked about the lack of restrictions put on them by their parents about where they were allowed to play. Indeed, many spoke about their parents encouraging them to spend the day playing outside.

'When I was a kid my mum would just like throw us out to play ... at 10 o'clock on the morning and expect us back for teatime, whereas I don't know whether parents would do that now. They used to say, "yeah, just get out" ... and we would just be out all day.'

(Non-parent, inner city)

- **Places to go** It was felt that there used to be lots for children to do when they were growing up. Adults found opportunities to play in their communities, in public spaces as much as in

designated play spaces. Adults believed that they had access to lots of green space to play in, and made the most of what their community had to offer.

'When we lived in a flat we had lots of green space, we could ride out. And then when we moved and we weren't in a council place we used to play out in the cul-de-sac, so it was always fun.'

'We used to have great fun in graveyards, playing hide and seek, that's the best place.'
(Parent, suburb)

- **Community participation** Many adults also recalled a sense of community 'togetherness' when reflecting on their own childhood. Some gave accounts of play having a social role, in which neighbours would come together and play games with the children.

'Summer's night, you could come out, we'd have rounders in the back street, your mam, everybody.'
(Parent, rural)

For some, this was a regular occurrence; for others, it seemed to happen only occasionally. However, the fact that the adults spoke about this suggests it was a happy childhood memory for many.

4.2 Safety concerns

There was a general belief amongst the adult groups that children have less freedom now than they had during their own childhood and that children no longer play outside as much. Participants gave three explanations for this trend: that there are more concerns about children's safety; there is nothing for children to do in the neighbourhood anymore; and there has been a general breakdown in community. Similarly, during the focus groups with children, participants frequently spoke about their restricted freedom. These concerns are discussed in more detail below.

There was an overall feeling amongst adults that the world is more dangerous now than it used to be. Adults and children alike expressed concerns over children playing unaccompanied outside in the community. The reoccurring concerns were:

- **An increase in road traffic** Traffic was perceived to be a major danger by all of the groups. It was of particular concern to many children, who stated that busy roads prevented them from playing outside.

'You can't play in [my street] because there's too many cars – and when you play the cars just fly past and nearly hit you.'
(Girl, rural primary school)

- **An increase in crime** Adults believed that communities suffered higher crime rates than in previous times. Because of this, it was felt that many public areas were no longer suitable for children's independent play. This is despite statistics from the British Crime survey, which showed a substantial fall in crime rates over the last year.
- **Children carrying knives** Some participants felt that children were more likely to carry weapons these days and that this resulted in children's freedom being restricted. This view was held strongly by one group of parents, but was less prominent in other adult groups.
- **Gangs** There was some concern amongst parents that too much freedom would result in their children 'falling in' with the wrong crowd. Other adults discussed feeling threatened by groups of children. This was also an issue for many children – and particularly prominent amongst two of the children's groups. Children acknowledged that the gangs were not causing any harm but that this still prevented them from wanting to play out. Children adopted strategies to avoid gangs

'If there's no gangs there, we shout for her little brother. And if there's gangs there, we just carry on walking right through.'
(Girl, town secondary school)

- **Drugs** Drug users and drug dealers or 'druggies' were perceived as a big problem for children living in the inner-city community. It was claimed that, while this doesn't prevent them from playing in their community, it does mean that they don't feel safe when they are playing outside.

[Asked what they don't like about their community]

Child: 'The drug distributors and that sort of stuff.'

Researcher: 'Does it stop you doing what you want to do?'

Child 'Not really but you just don't have that sense of security when you go out'

(Boy, inner-city secondary school)

- **Paedophiles** Most of the adults' and children's groups identified paedophiles and child abductors as a significant threat. Although only a minority of adults suggested that the risk had increased since their own childhood, many adults – particularly from the parents groups – felt that there was now more awareness of this danger. This perceived heightened awareness meant children's freedom to play out should be restricted more now. However,

some non-parents argued that, rather than there being a better understanding of dangers, the risks have simply been exaggerated. Children's lack of freedom, they suggested, was partly due to over-protective attitudes. Non-parents felt that laws have reinforced this hysteria through excessive CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks and rules around taking photos of children, for example.

It may be the case that parents of disabled children have further concerns about their children playing out. Consultation with an inclusive playworker suggested that disabled children rarely play outside unsupervised as they are perceived as more vulnerable than non-disabled children. Parents can have concerns about their children being bullied because of their impairment. The playworker argued that parents can be less willing to allow disabled children to take risks or independently explore the world. She argued:

The parents [of disabled children] are really nervous. If a non-disabled child starts banging a stick, it's accepted – just something they will do. But then if a disabled child does it, then [others] presume it's part of their disability. But it's normal for all children'.
(Inclusive playworker)

It became clear throughout the research that children tend to associate safety with the private realm. All children felt safe in places such as their homes, gardens, friends' houses and private institutions such as schools. They claimed they felt least safe in the public realm, such as the streets, parks or woods. Children also tended to report feeling unsafe when they were close to busy traffic and around people that they did not know. When probed, children had not personally experienced real dangers in such scenarios. It is therefore likely that adult representation of public space has caused children to feel frightened of the outside world. The effects of this on children's well-being should be examined.

'I don't feel safe when I'm outside my house where the road is ... there's loads of people that walk past my house, and also the cars.'
(Girl, suburb primary school)

Despite a general perception that outdoor locations were less safe than indoor settings, children were reluctant to directly deem public places as either 'safe' or 'unsafe'. Rather, they felt this was situational, depending on the time of day and whether there were gangs hanging round or other people there to help. Children seemed to feel safe if they were close to home and if they had peers with them.

'We feel safe outside our houses because we know that if we're in trouble we can go to our mates' houses and tell their mum or something. And we're with our mates anyway.'
(Girl, town secondary school)

Children in one group claimed that they felt safer in 'nicer' areas, rather than the council estates where they lived, despite not knowing the people there.

4.3 Nowhere to go

Almost all children preferred outdoor play to indoor play. This was generally because it gave them more:

- space to run
- freedom to direct their play as they wish
- access to friends
- excitement.

However, most children only played in their front garden and felt that their opportunities for outdoor play were limited by their parents. A significant number of children claimed that they rarely play outside. For many children, a lack of play space also prevented them from playing in the local streets.

'I don't play on the street because there's no pavement on the other [side], so you can't really play, and there are a lot of people walking round.'

(Boy, suburb primary school)

There was a general agreement amongst children, parents and non-parents that there is nowhere for children to go. While adults recalled that they would make use of the natural landscape to play during their own childhood, and felt they had plenty of places to go out and play, it was generally felt that parents now have to drive to find similar play opportunities for their children as nothing is available for them locally. It was not uncommon amongst the groups for children to have to rely on parents to take them to a park to play football, due to the distances involved. Children spoke of their area feeling 'squashed', saying that there was nowhere with enough space to play games or ride a bike.

Children who did have access to nearby play facilities appreciated them. This referred to more formal play space for children, and also somewhere for older children to go alone or with friends.

'The good thing about my community is we just recently got a new park, so that's all right. I might just go out there, practice football on my own, just have some time to myself alone ... It's really nice when you've got all your friends just chilling and you've got something else to do.'

(Boy, inner-city secondary school)

Children from two of the groups felt that, if there were open spaces close to where they lived, they were unsuitable for playing in because of poor maintenance and neglect.

'There's dogs' muck all over the field, so I have to try and dodge out for it, I'm like, there's one there.'

(Girl, rural primary school)

Child 1: The playing fields at the back [are] full of all the dog poos and ... it's horrible because like you're meant to be picking the poo up aren't you? And no one does in that field because they don't know kids play [there]. Sometimes when we walk in and we've got dog poo.'

Child 2: 'You were covered in it'

(Girls, town secondary school)

Vandalism was also seen as a problem by most of the groups and this often prevented children from utilising facilities nearby. This reinforces not only the importance of having play facilities within close proximity of children's homes, but also of maintaining play spaces so that they are safe and welcoming for children to use.

4.4 Breakdown of community

Although some participants felt that there was a good sense of community in their neighbourhood, it seemed to be a minority view. This contrasted with adults' memories of their own childhoods. There was an overall feeling that there has been a breakdown of community spirit and that people have become more wary of others. This, in turn, affects children playing out where they live. The groups believed that several factors have contributed to this, namely an increase in car use, busy lifestyles, and advances in modern technology. It is believed that these social changes have meant that neighbours no longer know each other or interact at the same level as they once did.

The adult groups discussed how an increase in car use has meant that people do not rely on local people and facilities. Children are often driven to designated spaces to play and no longer attend schools close to their homes. As a consequence, children are losing the opportunity to get to know their local environment and to have friends nearby.

Adults also argued that busy lifestyles and working long hours have meant there is less time for neighbours to interact with each other.

'I think more people have to work [so] there's less chance of meeting your neighbours. So the communities have dissolved a little bit in that sense.'

(Male, non-parent, inner city)

One or two children also highlighted that their parents' commitments impinge on the opportunities to play, as many of the children were reliant on supervised play. Adults argued that people tend to move about more, which meant that local networks are difficult to establish.

An increase in modern technology means that social relations are increasingly virtual. Adults argued that this keeps children indoors, as they tend to do their networking online rather than at a local level. This led some adults to question whether children actually want to play outside anymore; though this is not corroborated by children in the study.

Female: 'People rely so much now on internet, social networking, all those kind of things ... I just think as a society ... we don't take the opportunities to interact like probably we did even ten years ago.'

Male: 'You're right there, because I was saying about my nephews, I saw them recently, I said, "Why aren't you out? It's a lovely day today, you want to be out socialising," and he said to me "I am socialising," but they were doing it on the computer, like on Facebook and things like that. And that was their idea of socialising, whereas my idea of socialising is doing it face to face with people you know.'

(Non-parents, inner city)

The idea of technological advances replacing outdoor play seemed to be mirrored in some of the children's accounts. They claimed that they spent a lot of their time playing computer games or watching television. However, rather than it being something they wanted to do, many children used modern technology as an inferior substitute for outdoor play (which was limited).

4.5 Parental restrictions on freedom

Parents reported that while their own parents were happy to allow them to play out all day without adult supervision, many would be uncomfortable letting their own children out of their sight. Parents seemed apprehensive in their decision to allow children out but based their decision on numerous factors, including the:

- age of the child
- perceived maturity of the child
- type of neighbourhood (whether people look out for each other; the extent of the traffic; and other safety concerns).

Although parents seemed to agree that older children should be given more freedom, there was evidence that parental fears did not decrease as children got older; rather, their fears would simply shift to new concerns. While child abductors and traffic were major concerns for parents of younger children, gang involvement and teen pregnancies were concerns for parents of older children.

However, there was some awareness that children must be given a level of freedom; and parents were often in a dilemma over whether to be protective of their children or to allow them some independence.

Most parents did not want their children to be ill-equipped to deal with real-life encounters and acknowledged the importance of outdoor play to developing this awareness. However, a few parents were less willing to 'let go' in the face of perceived dangers; and felt that the risks of allowing their children independence could not be justified. Parents discussed whether they imposed rules on their children's independent mobility within the community in order to mitigate safety concerns, such as giving their children instructions on where they are allowed to play outside.

'Ours play out a lot, and in the summer they will go out all day, but if they go to somebody else's house they have to say where they're going, and they're not allowed out of where the grass is in the cul-de-sac behind us, but they're all the same and they all know that, and none of them are allowed anywhere.'

(Parent, rural)

Allowing children out of their sight was difficult for most parents in the study, regardless of their children's ages. The freedom that parents allow their children seems to be influenced by the behaviour of others. Parents seemed more inclined to allow their children to play out if they knew that there were other children playing out too. Parents' report that they rarely see children playing outside and, because of this, they adopted the same restrictions on their own children:

'I may let [my eight year old] out if I knew there were going to be five other children that were going to be playing together, and they were going somewhere that I knew that was quite safe for them to get to. But because I know there's no children [playing outside], he would be on his own and then I think he's more vulnerable so I wouldn't.'

(Parent, suburbs)

However, there also seemed to be an element of disapproval towards parents who did allow their children to play outside. Some made further judgements: that too many children stayed out too late and at too young an age. Some even felt that there were too many children outside. Although this view was partially a result of safety concerns, it also seemed to be partially based on a prejudice that children should not be present in public spaces. This disapproval of children playing in the neighbourhood seemed to prevent parents from allowing their own children to play outside, that is, they feared being judged by others.

4.6 Community togetherness

Participants offered a range of characteristics that they believed were important qualities of a good community. Both adults and children highlighted the following as important:

- knowing the neighbours/having friends close
- a tendency to support and look out for each other
- safe residential roads.

Adults additionally highlighted the need for: tolerance in communities and shared information on potential local dangers. Children also sought a physical environment with open space and parks. for example, and what they described as 'nice people' and a vibrant atmosphere in local streets.

Adults valued any social ties that they had with their neighbours and the wider community, and sought these connections through numerous sources. Schools were highlighted as offering important opportunities for building relationships with other parents. Many said that they have widened their social network by chatting to others outside the school gates or involving themselves in school clubs and activities. Parents also made friends through structured activities that they sent their children to, and believed that this helps to foster a better sense of community. Few parents and non-parents were involved in any other community groups; and, for a significant proportion, it seemed that the presence of children in the community played a vital role in creating and maintaining social bonds.

Interaction with neighbours seemed to vary largely, depending on the particular communities and individuals. While some participants claimed they knew no one in their street, others felt they had good relations with most people in their local area. Most commonly, adults had good relationships with one or two neighbours, but knew most of their others only by sight or by name. Many children felt that their neighbours get on reasonably well, but also believed that they knew the people who they should avoid, usually 'groups of older children' and certain adults. Both adults and children who had good relations with their neighbours enjoyed the sense of community togetherness, and spoke positively about their neighbours.

'If you go up to the front where there's, like, loads of old people who live there and they're really nice. And I know one of them. Her name is Dina.'

(Girl, rural primary school)

Many children knew neighbours to say hello to. Those who didn't know many people where they lived felt that they would like to get to know others better. A minority of children spent a lot of time playing with other children in their street or were friends with neighbouring children;

while many others felt that they knew no other children close to where they live. Children felt that they would like there to be more children close to where they live, with a substantial proportion claiming that it was mostly adults who lived in their street.

'We just don't speak, our neighbours just don't come out much and we don't come out much.'

(Boy, suburbs primary school)

A small number of children were actively discouraged from speaking to neighbours because of bad relations their parents had with each other:

'My neighbours don't come out much and I'm not allowed to speak to most of my neighbours because either they're really mean people or they've done something mean to my family.'

(Girl, suburbs primary school)

Some children highlighted that other children in their local area attended different schools so they didn't tend to mix with them very much. This lack of contact was compounded as their school friends lived too far away for them to play with.

Parents felt aware that children did not experience the same neighbourliness that they had experienced during their own childhood. Some parents made attempts to preserve community togetherness and to recreate the type of freedom that they had enjoyed when they were growing up. These attempts were described in terms of fairly regulated activities within certain boundaries, such as building a gate between two neighbours' gardens or allowing children to roam free within closed-off areas, such as a neighbouring field.

'We've got a little girl next door. Her and my daughter get on really well and we actually get on really well with the next-door neighbours, we've built a little gate in between the garden and this, to me, it's a little bit of what we had as a kid ... In the summer they're in and out of each other's houses and to me that would be the ideal but it's just not, it only works for her. My son hasn't got that because there's no boys next door that are his age, but for me for my kids that's what I would love, that's how I would love it to be for all kids. They're in and out of the garden, I would love them to be able to go in the field behind but I wouldn't let them.'

(Parents, suburb)

Those parents who knew a lot of their neighbours seemed to be the people who made an effort to get to know others by holding events and inviting nearby residents to their houses.

'We live in a row of terraced houses and everyone knows everyone, and every couple of months we'll have a dinner and they'll be 18–20 of us pile into one person's house and you just all get together and it's

lovely, it's really lovely. I know it's so unusual you don't hear anyone else doing it but everyone knows everyone.'
(Parent, suburb)

'When we moved into our house, we all went and knocked on everybody's door and invited them in for a party ... Yeah, that's what (my husband will) do. He'll just go and talk to anyone. He's like; we're not going to get to know anyone here, otherwise.'
(Parent, rural)

While some parents argued that they did not have the time to make an effort with other local people, others insisted that it was a case of making time and valuing neighbourhood connections. According to these participants it was about creating a culture of neighbourliness that everyone must take responsibility for. They hoped that others would copy their example and would create a better sense of community.

'I think about improving community. I think the only people that are going to change it are the community themselves, there's nothing that anyone can do. It's people's attitudes; it's like where we are, when you have someone new move in you do, you make a cake, you knock on the door and say hello.... I think that if you want to make the time you can make the time whether you've got two jobs, three jobs or no jobs. It's just wanting to do something and a lot of people don't want to.'
(Parent, suburb)

4.7 Trust

Participants seemed to be most trusting of people they knew. Neighbours were usually viewed by participants as trustworthy if they were people who they saw regularly and knew well. People who they met through their children's school were also trusted. Knowing neighbours was an important factor in determining whether parents look out for other children in their local area.

Across all groups there was strong evidence to indicate that people unknown to participants were often viewed with caution. Participants felt that, as neighbours in general no longer know each other, this unfamiliarity leads to mistrust. This, in turn, leads to feelings that the neighbourhood is unsafe. Such evidence suggests the importance of building community relationships. In one rural setting, parents discussed how there was a general feel of hostility amongst neighbours, and simply 'looking at somebody in the wrong way' caused aggressive behaviour from other local people. While most parents believed that trust must be built up and established through making an effort with others, there was also an opinion that there were specific people in the community that could not be trusted and a general feeling of unease that 'untrustworthy people' could be in the local area. When

probed about this, adults were unable to identify why they felt such unease or who exactly these people were.

Although most parents were trusting of neighbours who they knew, there was more apprehension over whether they would trust them with their children. This kind of shared supervision was perceived as a last resort that should be done only in emergencies, rather than something that they would like to see happen as the norm. Although many parents claimed to trust their neighbours, some children reported that this was not the case and there was evidence of this distrust filtering down into children's perspectives. Some children reported that they were not allowed to play outside due to their parent's mistrust of others.

Child: *'My dad, he doesn't let me go outside ... If I wanted to play outside, he wouldn't let me, I was just only allowed in the teeny weenie bit of the front garden, and when my friends, well they weren't friends, they were like people that I knew played with on bikes ... my dad wouldn't let me go.'*

Researcher: *'Why do you think he doesn't let you?'*

Child: *'I just think he doesn't trust anybody in our neighbourhood. Nobody in my house trusts anyone in our neighbourhood because they've just, they're just really crazy people.'*

(Girl, suburb primary school)

Backing findings from *Community Play: A literature review*, which accompanies this report, many children claimed that they could identify trustworthy people based on physical characteristics and behavioural traits. Trustworthy people were usually people who smiled at them or were generally friendly.

While discussing the topic of trust, parents seemed to be mostly concerned with abduction and sexual assault of their children, while non-parents highlighted a more general breakdown in community spirit. Similar to findings from the adult groups, children seemed to be more trusting of people that they knew or recognised and they were cautious of strangers, often referring to their abduction fears when discussing people who were unfamiliar to them. Older children from one group expressed their concerns about cars slowing down next to them, believing that these people were 'perverts'. Children exchanged stories about local people who they thought were 'kidnappers'.

Child: *'There's always perverts in my area.'*

Researcher: *'How do you know they're perverts?'*

Child: *'Because I remember... there was this one before who kept following these two girls and asking them... to go home and stuff.'*

(Boy, inner-city secondary school)

Girl: *'Because there's this man going around. He kidnaps kids and all that, and he chased after me and my friend'*

Researcher: *Who is the man?*

Girl: *'I don't know but he's bald. He's bald ... He chased her, [NAME] and me, and my friend.'*

Researcher: *So why are you scared of him?*

Boy: *'Because he just goes round chasing kids and getting them and all that. We had to run to my friend's house because he was running to us and I had to shout, [NAME], "run", because we had to run.'*

(Children, rural primary school)

Due to such concerns, children expressed a reluctance to ask someone that they did not know for help in situations where they find themselves in trouble. They suggested that people unknown to them should only be approached in extreme situations.

'If it was really urgent and no one was around ... I would ask a stranger ... because I don't really trust strangers. Because once my sister nearly got taken away by a stranger.'

(Girl, rural primary school)

When drawing on their personal experiences, some children gave examples of how they had relied on strangers to assist them when they had needed help, such as falling over and needing a tissue or first aid kit. It seems that children have the capacity to assess each situation as it arises. Despite awareness of the potential dangers that some adults can pose to children, and a distinct fear of 'strangers', accounts from children in the study seem to give little evidence of adults posing any real threat. Most accounts of 'stranger danger' relied on hearsay and anecdotal stories, rather than any situations that may alert concern.

One group of older children talked about an incident where their parents called the police because of a suspected paedophile where they lived, who, they claimed had been previously convicted and jailed for such a crime. The children seemed dismissive of this potential threat, claiming that the person 'did not bother them'. This group seemed to rationalise that they do not see him in the area very often and so they do not feel unsafe. Such accounts suggest that children feel capable of negotiating their own risks and mitigated them by knowing who to avoid. They are aware of possible dangers and are confident in their abilities to manage them.

Feelings of mistrust negatively affect community interaction. Adults in the study were asked whether they would intervene if they saw a child who was in trouble or needed assistance in their local area. Parents seemed to be more willing to help a child that was not their own, particularly if the child was alone, known to the adult or very young. However, both parents and non-parents claimed that they would be somewhat hesitant in this situation. Their primary concern was that their actions may be misinterpreted by others, and they feared accusations of trying to abduct or harm the child. There was consensus that this was particularly difficult for men, with the perception that they

were mostly likely to have their motives questioned by others. Indeed, one or two participants recalled stories of accusations, particularly from parents, which deterred them from helping children.

‘One of my mum’s friends intervened with a child that was in the road on her own. She was about two or three and he went across into the middle of the road and held her hand and tried to walk her to the side of the road and was saying to her, “Where’s your mum?” And then the mum came out and screamed and shouted and just went mad because it looked like he was going to walk off with her. And he was saying, “But she was in the middle of the road by herself” and he said “Never again, I would never do it again because of the way she reacted”.’
(Parent, suburb)

Adults set boundaries, such as approaching children at a distance, to avoid such accusations.

Parents blamed the media for projecting an image that children who are left alone will be ‘snatched’ by strangers. Although many parents felt it was irrational, they still found this fear difficult to shake. One or two parents reported that their children were picking up on their fears and this concerned them. Non-parents mainly believed that children are not in any more danger of abuse and abduction than they were when growing up, but that publicity of high profile cases has led to an outbreak of hysteria. They argued that people are more suspicious now, and this has a big impact on their own community involvement in terms of looking out for other people’s children.

4.8 Acceptance

Hostility, coming from community members or from children and young people, was commonly reported by both children and adults in the study. Neighbours and police were given as examples of those exhibiting unfriendly behaviour towards children and young people.

Police intervention

While there was little mention of police by younger children, older children – particularly those from the inner-city group – felt that they were targeted by the police when they were playing or spending time in their neighbourhood. While a minority of older children deliberately got into trouble with the police to cure their boredom or to get a ‘buzz’, the overwhelming majority of children felt that they were unfairly targeted and were ‘moved on’ for simply being in a public space. There was a general feeling that police are more suspicious of young people; and there was a strong sense of injustice amongst children in the study. Adults corroborated children’s concerns to some extent, with a large proportion objecting to children’s apparent victimisation by the police. Adults identified that more often than not, children were ‘not causing

any harm' and were unfairly targeted for being in a public space, in circumstances where there was nowhere else for them to go.

Despite such empathy, non-parents in particular seemed to contradict these views. They argued that police now lack the powers that they used to have. Power, they argued, has been taken away from adults, or police, and given to children, and this has led to children lacking any respect for the police or wider society.

'Before you had to have respect for the police and the older generation, you couldn't backchat because you knew you'd be in bother. Nowadays they just mouth off.'

(Non-parent, inner city)

It was not evident from the study whether either scenario was more prominent, or to what extent they were interrelated.

Hostility from neighbours

There was agreement amongst adults and children that residents could often be intolerant of neighbouring children in situations where they are not doing anything obviously wrong. Parents exchanged stories of received complaints from other residents when their children play out in the streets near their home. Usually children were simply playing ball games. Children, too, frequently talked about neighbourly disapproval when they play games in the local streets or even in their own gardens.

Children often described their neighbours as 'grumpy', because they frequently complained when children socialised or played in the local streets.

Child 1: *'They see me with my friends, we're there standing outside my house, they're like "move on, move on".'*

Child 2: *'Next-door-but-one to me, the woman gives dirty looks.'*

(Boys, inner-city secondary school)

Although there was some recognition by adults that children should be out playing, many of them spoke of an ethical dilemma. While adults acknowledged that 'kids will be kids' and that they both need and want chances to play outside in their community, they were also preoccupied with the idea of children being the source of nuisance to other residents. There was evidence of a so-called 'not in my backyard (nimby)' attitude. It could be speculated that more engagement is needed to stoke the culture of 'acceptance' rather than 'nuisance', and that messages emphasising the human need for children to play should be louder. Parents frequently stated that they prevented their children from playing outside due to their fears about disturbing others. This fear was not always unfounded; however, it was surprising what constituted a disturbance. One parent described a situation in which a

resident reported their child to the Neighbourhood Watch for playing hopscotch in the street.

Adults discussed their opinions on how children should behave when they are playing or spending time outside in the community. In general, what was acceptable or unacceptable depended on the situation and context. Acceptable behaviour depended on a number of factors.

Time of day

There was little tolerance towards children playing outside after a certain time in the evening. Some expressed a worry over children's safety, but the majority of concerns related to older children 'hanging round' late at night, which participants claimed to find intimidating.

'If it's still light and the kids are young or old, that would be fine. But I used to find, and I still do find, it quite intimidating to go to a shop if there's loads of, even if they're still kids, but like young teenagers and there's a big group.'

(Non-parent, inner city)

Location

Adults only accepted ball games if they were played in parks and other open spaces. There was less support for children playing ball games in the streets through fear of them damaging cars, windows or gardens and the belief that they would annoy other residents. Streets were generally viewed as too dangerous for children to be playing due to traffic concerns.

Number of children

Children spending time in groups of more than three or four was not viewed as acceptable. This contrasts with children's preference, as they enjoyed the social aspect of play and felt safer with other children.

Age of the child or children

Stereotypes that older children were causing trouble prevailed throughout adult's accounts. Older children themselves spoke of their experiences of being labelled as troublemakers without any just cause.

Noise made

Children making noise while they were playing was a much debated issue, with varying levels of acceptance. It was generally believed that this behaviour was not acceptable outside people's houses. Making noise was seen as acceptable in a park or playground, but only if there were no residential streets close by. Again, tolerance of children making noise seemed to be situational. Adults said that they enjoyed

hearing kids play, but argued that swearing was not acceptable. While some adults felt that making noise in the daytime was okay, others pointed out that some people work night shifts and were less accepting of this. It was not uncommon for children themselves to view shouting and making noise when they play as unacceptable. It seemed that children were acutely aware of how playing may disrupt others and usually adjusted their behaviours accordingly.

Although it was noted that adults' perceptions of what is acceptable was situational, there was specific behaviour that most adults deemed undesirable:

Disrupting others or the environment

Adults were hesitant about children using public features, such as bollards or railings, as a source of play. Generally this was accepted so long as it caused minimal disturbance to others and did not cause damage to the environment. Non-parents expressed some unhappiness about children using public space to play, but also exhibited a level of empathy towards them. Parents felt very conscientious that their children were most often not 'doing any harm' when they played, but some children's accounts suggest that adults are wary of children playing, even if they did not feel they are causing any harm.

'There's a man, because when we go on the green it's just plants there, at the sides, and we go down the middle and things, and he say, "get off the plants". And we're just in the middle, and the plants are at the side.'

(Girl, rural primary school)

Non-parents, in general, argued that instead of children's play being integrated into public space, there should be designated play facilities for play, such as skateboarding and BMX riding, so as not to cause a nuisance to others. While it is clear that designated play facilities for children are beneficial to communities, it could be argued that the idea of segregating children from public space and wider society is discriminatory and could be damaging to children's well-being. Indeed, children offered many stories of neighbours disapproving of them using the local environment for play, such as leapfrogging over poles or riding a bike on their street. However, some of the non-parents felt saddened when they considered their own viewpoint and remembered that their own experience of childhood very much encompassed utilising public space for play.

'I think the most depressing sign in the world is that sign that you sometimes see outside lots of flats, where it says "No ball games".'

(Non-parent, inner city)

Damaging public property

Children frequently reported being told off for playing due to adults' fears that they will damage public property. They were often stopped from playing too close to parked cars, as neighbours were worried that they would cause damage, accidentally or on purpose.

Child: 'There's also people, if you just stand near a car, they just shout at you ... And you don't touch the car, you're far away from them, they just come out and shout at you ... They think you're doing stuff bad to the car and all that. So they say, "leave me car alone or I'll call the police".'

(Girl, rural primary school)

Impinging on privacy or utilising private property

Adults felt that playing on private property without permission was disrespectful, even if children were not causing any harm. It was evident that sitting and chatting on a neighbour's wall was deemed unacceptable, while perhaps in years gone by there was more acceptance towards this behaviour, particularly because it was an activity than many adults remembered doing when they were young.

'Down my road there's an old lady and we all sit on the wall and she comes out and tells us not to sit on the wall, or sometimes she watches us out the window and then me mum tells me not to sit on the wall.'

(Girl, town secondary school)

Children's accounts implied that neighbours felt that children's play impinged on their privacy. One girl reported that her neighbours disapproved of her garden trampoline because of the noise the springs made and the idea that children can see over the garden fence. However, this was not true for everyone. Some parents claimed that neighbours play an important role in looking out for each other's children.

'Where I live, nobody's bothered about the kids, and they'd all keep an eye on them.'

(Parent, rural)

Putting themselves at risk.

Parents seemed to be least tolerant of playing when it puts children at risk. Even minor risk-taking was not acceptable to many adults. Children seemed very concerned with safety issues in their play, with most children regarding most play types as too risky. Most children admitted that they engaged in these types of play and found them 'fun', but there was a preoccupation with the idea that they should not be doing this, as adults would find it too dangerous. Although parents recalled engaging in play deemed risky, such as making rope swings in

trees or jumping off bridges into the River Wandle, they regarded this same behaviour as unacceptable for today's children as it was perceived to be too risky. It seems then, that children are not engaging in more challenging activities than previous generations, but society's norms of acceptable behaviour have changed.

Hanging around

Obviously, playing was generally received more warmly than just spending time in the neighbourhood, which adults were wary about. As 'hanging out' is an activity predominantly carried out by older children, this suggests less tolerance is shown towards children of older age groups.

'If you see a group of kids doing something like this, playing a game, they're playing rounders or basketball or whatever, then you'd feel less intimidated. It's when they're just standing and you don't know what they're doing, and you think "what are they doing?" That's when it gets really intimidating.'

(Non-parent, inner city)

Adults acknowledged that children hanging out and socialising were not doing anything wrong most of the time and felt that their fears were generally unjustified. In fact, there was a degree of empathy towards young people hanging round, as it was felt that there was nowhere for them to go and it was safer for them to hang out in groups. Adults acknowledged that children felt safer when they hang out with peers than they do alone. This contrasts with their overall belief that children in large groups are intimidating.

Parent 1: 'You always think, oh, you don't want a load of teenagers hanging about in big groups or that, but they've got to hang somewhere, haven't they?'

Parent 2: There's not much for them to do, is there?'

(Parents, rural)

The lack of things to do was mirrored in children's accounts, with many claiming that they walked around the area because there was nothing else to do. Children also felt safer if they spent time outside in larger numbers.

'You can't really like get hurt when you're in a big massive group.'

(Boy, town secondary school)

Adults claimed that they would be more accepting of children hanging out in their neighbourhood if they knew them. Those adults, who felt unthreatened by older children, usually had some form of relationship with them. This illustrates the importance of building relationships with local families and getting to know the neighbours. Some parents identified that stereotypes and discrimination was unfair on young

people, but were still unable to shake this stereotype from their own perception of teens.

Parent 1: 'That's bad that we assuming the worst'

Parent 2: 'You do though don't you? It's just terrible really.'

(Parents, suburb)

Parents often recalled hanging round in large groups when they were younger, but dismissed this as harmless playing. They were concerned that allowing their own children outside unsupervised would mean they would be hanging around with nothing to do and would succumb to peer pressure and cause trouble. Children also took a disapproving attitude towards older children hanging out, with many children stating that they felt 'scared' of large groups of young people and labelled them as 'bad'. Children's attitudes were influenced by the behaviour that the children displayed when they were out. To children, making loud noise and smoking was perceived as threatening, while a group of friends chatting was seen as acceptable.

Some older children were more accepting towards children spending time in groups, highlighting the socialising aspect of this, and how it helps them to make friends. However, these children still treated other groups of children with caution when they were outside. For one group of children from an inner-city area, racism seemed to be an issue. The children believed that adults thought it was less acceptable for black children to be socialising in the public spaces than white people. These children argued that minority groups of children were treated with more suspicion than other children and this meant that they were moved on or treated with more hostility if they were spending time with friends outside.

Children felt very aware of how their behaviour affects others in the area and said they tried to be considerate when they played. They noted how 'No ball games' signs restricted their play.

'Round my friend's house we will play a ball game, but then I saw a sign that said, "No ball games".'

(Boy, suburban primary school)

Children reasoned that the signs were put up to stop them damaging the natural setting or parked cars, but felt that there was little chance of them causing any damage. Most children obeyed the signs, but some rebelled against them if they felt there was no valid reason for ball games to be restricted. This retaliation was apparent not only in relation to 'no ball games' signs but any play that children felt was not causing harm.

'He just told us [off] for playing water fights but we stilled carried on ... Because you're meant to have fun there aren't you? You're not just meant to just sit and do nothing.'

(Girl, town secondary school)

'They need to understand that kids will be kids.'
(Boy, inner-city secondary school)

Older children seemed to resent being moved on from streets and only followed their instructions if they asked them in a nice way.

'If they say "please could you move" then we move. And if they just go "move" then we stay there.'
(Boy, inner-city secondary school)

Shockingly, there was even some hostility towards children playing on play equipment. While adults claimed that they supported children playing on equipment designed for play, one or two children expressed accounts of when adults have disapproved of this.

'I've forgot her name but every time you go up the park, if you go on a swing she says, "get off that", as soon as she goes in the park to sit on the swing and watch the ducks, she goes, "get off that swing now", and pushes you off.'
(Girl, rural primary school)

Adults seemed to acknowledge children's right to play, but were overwhelmingly sidetracked by issues relating to safety and private property. Even climbing trees was cast under doubt because of these concerns. Similarly, children frequently reported being told off for climbing trees, with the reasons given including neighbours being concerned that they were looking through their windows or that they may hurt themselves.

There was an overall feeling amongst parents that most play activity within the community should take place under adult supervision as they felt children are not able to deal with potential dangers on their own. Children playing outside alone or with peers lead to some level of discomfort. Such protection of children in public space was perceived to be not ideal, but necessary in most parents' view. It could be argued that there was little trust, from adults, that children can behave appropriately; and little acknowledgment of their ability to respect others. A few parents emphasised the importance of engaging with children to teach them boundaries. Some parents also acknowledged that adults should be more accepting towards children and reflected on how their negative perceptions of children should be overcome.

'It's trying to get into the mindset that not all children are bad because, you know, we're very lucky we've got good children – they all play and mix well.'
(Parent, rural)

Interestingly, adults claimed that they would be unlikely to intervene if they saw a child causing trouble or was in need to trouble in their

community. This is despite children stating that they are frequently told off when they are playing or spending time outside. Three factors seemed to influence whether adults would intervene:

- *Low intervention for older children:* This mirrors findings from the accompanying literature review. Adults were unlikely to intervene as they were worried that older children might be aggressive.
- *High intervention for children they know:* Adults felt a greater sense of moral obligation to look out for children and correct them if the child was known to them.
- *High intervention to protect others:* Parents would be most likely to intervene if they saw bullying incidents, or where another child was at risk. Non-parents were also most likely to intervene if children's behaviour was causing harm, but they spoke of animal cruelty rather than harm to other children.

In discussing why they would be hesitant to intervene, non-parents spoke of accounts where intervention with children had led to retaliation from them.

'I've intervened in incidents with kids at my old flat that they were vandalising ... I'd gone out and told them off and ended up with the parent of that child coming round to my house threatening me.'
(Non-parent, inner city)

Most adults pointed to the media as a source of heightening hostility towards children and this factored in their decision to intervene. In other words, adults drew on media stories to legitimise why they would not approach children in a public space. Some non-parents concentrated on media stories of retaliation.

'There's been stories on the news hasn't there? Where people have gone outside to ask kids to move on or whatever and they've ended up in a fight or dead or worse.'
(Non-parent, inner city)

Despite apparent awareness that prominent media coverage of single cases can exacerbate negative attitudes, it was not enough to dispel such perceptions, at least for the non-parent group. Some non-parents expressed a view that children get away with more now. They argued that if a child misbehaves, it is the adult rather than the child who would get into trouble these days. In general, however, there was an overall awareness that a tolerant attitude towards children must be adopted. Adults gave examples of when they have felt that neighbours were being intolerant of children and have intervened by asking others to empathise with the children's position. Many non-parents also agreed that children can be intimidated more often than they intimidate others.

However, many also confessed that they feel less tolerant towards children as they do not have children or their children are grown up. These non-parents seemed to adopt a romanticised approach towards

their own childhood, claiming that children these days lack respect for others, which was not the case in the past.

'Now mine have grown up I'm thinking, I don't want to be with all these lot running around, and yet I would have done when they were young.'
(Non-parent, inner city)

Alternatively, parents reported that they felt more tolerant of children since having their own.

Consultation with an inclusive adventure playground suggests that disabled children and their parents can be particularly vulnerable to hostile behaviour from others in a public space. A playworker recalled parents' distress over the difficulties they had in allowing their disabled child to play outside. They claimed that if their child behaved in a way that was not characterised as 'normal', parents of non-disabled children were seen pushing their child away through fear that the disabled child might act aggressively or become violent. The playworker believed that many parents of disabled children avoid taking their children to play outside, or only visit play spaces when there are no other children around, because of the negative reaction they received from other parents and children. This was perceived to be a lack of understanding about impairments, a result of poor opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to mix with one another.

4.9 Solutions

Primary aims of the focus groups were to understand the barriers that prevent neighbours from interacting with one another and to find out what would help children to play outside more in their communities. Adults and children offered many ideas as to how to address the barriers and were enthusiastic about making positive changes. Despite the emphasis on busy lifestyles and time constraints, parents recognised their own responsibility for making changes in the community and were keen to get involved. They gave support to a lot of the solutions.

Fun day in a public space

Amongst the ideas suggested, holding a fun day in a public place was met with the greatest amount of support amongst both adults and children. Many recalled fond memories of this type of event taking place and believed past experiences were a great success. One or two parents said that they themselves organise these types of events by a 'round robin' email and it was an effective means of fostering community relationships and a good opportunity for children to play in the neighbourhood.

'We already do it actually ... we go to [the park] and there's about 40 or 50 of us and it's just a round robin on an email – you send it through to

your mates and say “come along, bring the kids, bring a picnic and if you’ve got any mates that want to come, bring them along too” ... It’s absolutely brilliant.’

(Parent, suburb)

An event, similar to the Playday campaign, was also suggested by some adults as a solution.

Non-parent 1: ‘If it was like a national play out day or something, national play in your street day or something like that.’

Non parent 2: ‘That’s a good idea that, national play out day.’

(Non-parents, inner city)

However, some concerns were raised by adults over the logistics of such events. They suggested that it would take a lot of organising, some people may end up doing the bulk of the work and publicity could be difficult to achieve.

‘It’s the same community-spirited people that do all the other community things.’

(Non-parent, inner city)

In the context of the hundreds of communities that carry out *Playday* events every year, it seems these concerns can be overcome.

Closing the street to traffic so children can play

The vast majority of participants also supported the idea of closing their street every so often to allow children to play outside safely near their homes. This was a suggestion made by both adults and children across the groups. Many drew on their own experiences of similar events and agreed that it was a positive experience that they would like to happen regularly.

‘My daughter and her partner did it last year. ... They decided to have a barbecue in the street for the whole street, and told them a week before. It’s only a small road, but they parked [the cars] further in, so no cars could get up and down it. And they had music out there and all the kids were playing, they thought it was absolutely brilliant.’

(Non-parent, inner city)

‘We have street fun days where all of you, like, say you have our street, then the street over the road come, and then the other street – and the street’s packed and we have face painting and everything there ...

[everyone was] happy’

(Girl, rural primary school)

Others who had not experienced this before were keen for it to happen in their area.

However, many participants were hung up on the practicalities of street closure. The complexity of closing streets and coordinating traffic diversion was seen as problematic. However, this was challenged by one non-parent, who pointed out that Oxford Street is shut to traffic for Christmas shopping, so it is possible. Children, although enthusiastic about the idea, were also aware of the traffic diversion problems.

'If they shut off our road, they'd be shutting off one of the ways to the dual carriageway, like a motorway, because we live on the [name of junction], so if they shut our road down they'd shut down a lot of roads.'
(Boy, suburban primary school)

While it seems to be the case that some roads would be difficult to shut, smaller roads close by could be used as an alternative.

Similarly to community fun days, participants highlighted their belief that there could be a lack of people who would have time to organise and carry out the event. This suggests some support is helpful from either a local or national level.

There were also inhibitions that neighbours might not receive the activity positively and there could be complaints from other residents.

Shared supervision of children

Shared supervision of children amongst neighbours was also discussed as a means of encouraging neighbourhood play and community togetherness. This idea was met with a mixed response: while some were enthusiastic others were against the idea. The issue of trust was important here. Many parents felt that they would only trust a registered group with their children if shared supervision was introduced. Practical problems also arose during the discussion. A few parents felt they were unable to relax, even knowing that their children were supervised by others. Many claimed that they only felt comfortable doing this with friends. This lends weight to strengthening community ties and relationships. There was some reluctance from parents to take on the responsibility of supervising other people's children. Some adults described concerns about other children being 'dumped' on them. It was argued by some, particularly the non-parent group, that laws make it difficult for shared supervision to take place. Participants highlighted the extensive CRB checks, and health and safety regulations. It was unclear whether any of these participants had experienced these processes and regulations first hand or whether the perceived complexity had deterred participants from activities where CRB checks would be required.

Many participants also felt that time or work commitments would prevent them from taking part in a shared supervision. There was some

sense of guilt about asking others to supervise their kids, and parents did not want to be a burden to others.

Volunteering

Initiatives in which members of the community volunteer to make the area nicer for children to play had some support, but others felt it would be ineffective. It was argued that similar barriers to other initiatives would occur, such as the same people getting involved rather than the whole community participating in it; and time and work commitments made this seem like an unrealistic activity for most.

Some adults also assigned blame for local degradation to 'yobs', and therefore asserted that it should be their responsibly to clear up their own mess.

Children were highly supportive of the idea of regular clear-ups and felt this would help them to play out in the community. Some also said they were willing to help get involved in such an activity.

Child 1: '[In] my street, everybody chucks litter all over the floor and so whenever you want to walk somewhere, every time you stand on stuff, and there might be glass and stuff and you might cut yourself.'

Researcher: So you'd like adults to spend some time clearing that stuff up?

Child 1: Yeah.

*Child 2: Yeah, like a day when we clean up altogether.
(Boy and girl, rural primary school)*

However, a small minority of children also felt that adults should not have to clear up other people's mess. One group talked about a day in which children got their bikes fixed free of charge and had a local football tournament where everyone got involved. This group, who had previously expressed bad relations with the police, talked about police officers' participation in the tournament and the fun of everyone coming together. This suggests that community bonds can help to dissolve poor relations between children and other community members.

Community meetings to discuss play

Participants were less willing to back the idea of a meeting to discuss how to get children to play out in the community and improve community spirit. Once again it was felt that the same 'community-spirited' people would get involved rather than the wider community; and some participants questioned what benefit community meetings would have and were concerned that it would not make any difference. One child reported that meetings are held in their local area; the residents get together to campaign over community issues. However,

he was unsure of the outcomes of this. The group of non-parents pointed out that children must be involved in community consultation to have a say in decisions that affect them. All adults felt that schools do a lot for the community, but as many parents and children travelled long distances to get to their school, they had limited involvement. Again, it was argued that 'red tape' issues make it difficult to have close involvement in local schools.

Educating children to be streetwise

Parents also suggested that educating their children to be more 'streetwise' could be an important solution. By providing children with the necessary skills to look after themselves parents stated that they would feel comfortable in allowing their children to play outside:

'I probably am a bit overprotective ... I probably haven't taught them enough about how to take care of themselves. So perhaps that's ... something that could be done in school as well as at home. But I certainly think I probably could have done more from an earlier age of teaching them a bit more so that they are maybe more ready to cross the roads by themselves now and because I've always known I was going to be there I haven't maybe bothered so much about it. And now [CHILD'S NAME] is going to high school next year he won't have me to do it, but I think really I need to take more responsibility as a parent probably.'

(Parent, suburb)

One group of parents noted that their school takes an active role in teaching children life skills, including teaching children how to use travel cards and get around the local area independently. This gave parents a sense of reassurance which they highly valued.

Staffed play provision

While parents were supportive of preparing children to play outside, it was felt that other measures were probably also needed, such as the provision of supervised play opportunities. Staffed play provision gave adults the most security in allowing their children to play outside.

Play rangers were also a welcome solution. Play rangers are professional playworkers who provide play opportunities for children in open outdoor spaces in local communities. Children are free to come and go as they wish. A few of the child focus groups had experienced a play ranger service in their local area. Children valued this, claiming that it stopped them from being 'stuck indoors'. However, in one group, children admitted that few children attended the sessions because they were held in areas known as 'gang hangouts', while others said that the sessions took place at inconvenient times. One or two children said that by the time they had travelled back from school, the sessions had finished or that the service was held too far away from home. Children

suggested having the service at weekends instead; and holding the sessions in areas of the neighbourhood where they felt safe. This highlights the importance of considering the time and locations of play services in order for them to be successful. It also demonstrates the demand for the expansion of play ranger services. One group of children noted that their local play ranger service moved from parks and open spaces to inside a community hall. This was less favourable to the children, who argued that this was less fun and that there was not enough space.

Some children suggested having more community centres for children to play and interact with each other, while others felt a need for a dedicated play space in their street that would overcome their problems relating to traffic and other dangers. Other suggestions included a park that was easy to get to and available for them to play; and more friends playing out in the streets where they lived.

Consultation with the inclusive play setting suggests the importance of communities offering opportunities for disabled children and non-disabled children to mix with one another. The playworker noted how one autistic child was non-verbal because he attended a specialist school with other non-verbal children. Only when the child attended an inclusive adventure playground did the child begin communicating verbally as he mixed with other verbal children. Likewise, by mixing with disabled children, non-disabled children also learned new skills and forms of communication, such as sign language and brail. It seems that inclusive play settings can offer children of different abilities and requirements opportunities to play alongside each other within the community. They also can help community members to have a better understanding of different impairments. Educating the rest of the community about impairments can promote an accepting attitude towards difference. The playworker argued that, through play, children can recognise that their peers are different and unique but can still share the same interests and enjoy the same things.

5. Conclusion

The findings from this research indicate that children have less freedom to play in their communities than previous generations. A contributing factor is the belief that it is no longer safe for children to be out playing without an adult. Adults and children had a range of safety concerns, including risks of traffic accidents, worries over gangs, drug users, paedophiles and crime. Due to these concerns, children associate feeling safe with indoor private spaces such as their homes. This is despite children's reports that they enjoy playing outdoors more than indoors. The perception that outdoors is not safe not only seems to provide an exaggerated and inaccurate representation of public space, but also makes the assumption that private space is a safer option. This is despite a wealth of evidence suggesting that children are at more risk of harm within the private realm (see *Community Play: A literature review*).

It is important to try to rationalise the fears that prevent children from enjoying outdoor play and to consider the harm of disallowing children from playing outside in their communities. Parents in the study often found themselves in a difficult position: whilst being aware of the benefits of children playing outside in the local streets and open spaces, their safety concerns prevented them from allowing their children to play outside. Efforts must be made to reassure parents and to promote an awareness that, with support, children are capable of managing their own risks and addressing safety issues specific to their area. Parents were concerned that others in their neighbourhood would disapprove if they allowed their children to play outside unsupervised, and this influenced the decisions they made. It seems then that children's access to play in their communities will continue to be restricted unless there is a change of attitude in the adult community.

Concurrently, physical changes and additional resources are needed to improve neighbourhoods for play. We should be careful not to lay blame for the decline of children's play opportunities in our communities solely on community members or parents. Where the environment exhibits a real danger for children, such as busy roads, it is entirely understandable that parents' concerns impact upon their children's play. In such circumstances, provision such as play space and staffed play provision can offer a solution.

Adults felt that there has been a breakdown in community spirit, as people no longer know others in their neighbourhood or participate in community events as much as in the past. It was believed that this was because of busy modern lifestyles and car usage meaning, in turn, that people are less dependent on their local facilities and community members. It was also argued that advances in modern technology have meant that networking and social relationships are often established online. However, social ties were still valued by participants. Parents believed that having a family has helped them to

build community ties, highlighting the role of schools in fostering relationships with other local people. Interaction amongst neighbours seemed to vary enormously, across communities and even individuals. There was also a big variation in terms of whether children play outside in their local streets.

Where there was little interaction amongst residents in communities, this seemed to lead to distrust. In turn, this distrust prevented parents from allowing their children to play outside and stopped children from feeling safe in their community. This highlights the importance of fostering opportunities to build local relationships in order for children to have freedom in their neighbourhoods. Adults in the study clearly felt hesitant in helping a child who was in trouble due to their concerns that others would not trust their intentions. It seems that this culture of mistrust not only reflects, but reinforces poor community spirit and prevents people from looking out for one another.

There seemed to be a hostile attitude towards children in public space, whether they are playing, socialising or simply being there. Children from an older age group felt they were penalised by the police, while children of all ages seemed to experience hostility from neighbours and other local people. It was not uncommon for children or their parents to receive complaints for simply playing outside their homes from local residents; ball games and even hopscotch was not tolerated by many neighbours. Complaints were even received by some participants for allowing their children to play in their own gardens due to noise considerations and neighbours' fears that they may interrupt their privacy. Children reported being very aware of the negative attitude local people had towards them playing outside, and were considerate of how their play may disrupt others. Although adults seemed to be aware that the media can stereotype children as 'trouble' or 'out of control', they still appeared to reinforce some of these stereotypes throughout their accounts, arguing that children lack respect these days. However, as the focus groups suggest, if children are treated with understanding and respect, they will, in turn, reciprocate. There seems to be a need to distinguish 'playing outside' from 'anti-social behaviour'; as it is clear that participants had confused the two. Such misconceptions could be perpetrating a repressive public realm for children and damaging intergenerational ties.

Adults and children were keen to explore solutions to enable children to play outside more in their communities. Ideas discussed were:

- holding a fun day in a public space
- occasionally closing the street to traffic so children can play
- arranging for shared supervision of children amongst neighbours
- organising volunteering projects to support play
- holding community meetings to discuss play
- educating children to be streetwise
- providing staffed play services.

Participants argued that the practicalities can make it difficult for such initiatives to succeed. Many adults felt constrained by personal commitment and that implementing these ideas could be difficult. However, the adults were aware that they must take responsibility for improving their own communities. Indeed, parents who have already implemented some of these ideas argued that it was a case of adopting a positive attitude and fostering a culture of change. Where these ideas were in place, there was an overwhelming appreciation of the effect on the community and a general sense that it brought community members together and helped children to play more. Play ranger schemes were seen as particularly effective, although tailoring the times and locations to meet children's needs proved to be vital for this to work efficiently. Teaching children skills in order to prepare them for dealing with safety concerns was also important for parents and this is key to long-term improvements across different communities.

Play professionals believe that the best method of teaching children to manage safety issues is to allow them to learn from their own experiences, with additional adult guidance, from an early age. They argue that protecting children from perceived dangers is inadvertently causing children to miss the opportunities of learning to deal with the world through play. This seems to be evidenced throughout by the accounts in this research. It could be argued that, until this cycle is broken, the next generation of children are at risk of even fewer opportunities to play outside in their communities, and this essential part of childhood is at risk.

Making it *Our Place*:

Community views on children's play

This publication and Community Play: A literature review can be downloaded at www.playday.org.uk

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Playday

8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7843 6300

Fax: +44 7843 6349

Web: www.playday.org.uk

Email: playday@ncb.org.uk

This study has been compiled by
Josie Gleave, Play England.



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