



# Community play: A literature review

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## 1. Summary

Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play. This year's Playday, theme *Our Place!*, is encouraging children to play outside more and enjoy being part of their local communities. Research has been carried out to support the campaign, including a qualitative study, an opinion poll survey and this literature review. The literature review gathers the evidence, examining the importance of community play, patterns in children playing outside, and attitudes towards children playing. The term 'community play' used in the review refers to children playing out in their local streets and surrounding area near their homes. Literature was sourced through a systematic search using the Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) at NCB.

### **Children and others in the local community benefit from children playing outside in their neighbourhoods**

A number of studies have suggested that community play is important because:

- it fosters positive social relationships for children and adults alike
- it gives children the opportunity to explore their local environment and learn life skills
- it is vital to constructing personal and social identities
- children who are given freedom in their area and are perceived as valued members of the community are more likely to act positively and wish to contribute towards their local neighbourhood.

### **There has been a breakdown in community cohesion over time**

There is evidence of a general belief that community spirit and participation has worsened over recent years but there are some encouraging findings. For example:

- Findings from the Families and Neighbourhood Study show that 45 per cent of parents believe that communities are worse for children now than when they were growing up. Only 17 per cent stating that it is better now and 20 per cent reported it was roughly the same.
- A 2008 Living Streets study found that 72 per cent of respondents aged 65 and over remembered knowing at least five of their neighbours well enough to engage with in conversation when they had a young family. Of today's parents, more than a quarter knew less than two of their neighbours on this level.

- Research conducted by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People suggests that adults do not have much interaction with local children. When asked about informal contact with children and young people, just under one in three participants (32 per cent) stated they had had ad-hoc contact with children in the street within the last six months and only 14 per cent said they had had any encounters with children in public open spaces, such as parks and playgrounds.
- Schools can play an important role in building and maintaining community ties.

### **Public space is a vital play arena for children**

- Children greatly appreciate local play and recreational facilities, but also use the built environment as play spaces.
- 'Hang out' areas where young people can socialise are also important to children and young people.

### **Children's presence in the community has declined**

- Children are unwelcome in public space due to either fears about their safety or concerns that they will cause trouble or become a nuisance.
- Street play has declined dramatically in recent years. Research from the organisation Living Streets shows that while only 12 per cent of the 65 and older age-group claim that they never played out as children, almost half of today's children say that they never play out.
- Parents seem to be reluctant to allow their children to play outside. Studies in the UK mirror those from other countries and a study from the USA shows that of 482 parents from disadvantaged communities, nearly half reported that they kept their children in as much as possible.
- Children's independent mobility does not necessarily increase with age. Some research suggests that parents can be more protective of teenage children, particularly girls, who are perceived to be vulnerable to attacks.
- However, there is evidence that adults do support children playing out if certain barriers can be overcome.

### **Public space is often perceived as unsafe for children**

- Concerns about traffic, 'stranger danger', violence and vandalism means that public space is often feared by children and their parents. There is evidence that these fears are often exaggerated.

#### **There is a lack of trust**

- One study shows that only 28 per cent of UK citizens believe that 'most people can be trusted', comparatively lower than other countries.

#### **Children may be just as safe from certain dangers, if not safer, outdoors than they are in the home**

- It is argued that fear of strangers is exaggerated. Some statistics indicate that the average annual number of child abduction cases has changed little over the last 30 years.
- One study illustrates that nearly half of adults (48 per cent) avoid contact with children because they fear being accused of harming them.
- Some evidence suggests that 63 per cent of parents believe that abductions are more likely to be carried out by a stranger. This is despite statistics that suggest that children are far more likely to be harmed by a trusted adult in the private realm.
- Commentators are critical of the apparent public/private divide, where public space is associated with danger and the private realm is seen as safe.

#### **There is often a hostile attitude towards children in public space**

- The stereotype that children in public spaces cause trouble prevails. This is despite evidence that the vast majority of young people are simply hanging out with their friends and do not wish to cause trouble.
- Children and young people hanging around in groups is viewed negatively, despite one study documenting that 82 per cent of children said gathering in groups made them feel safer.
- Negative attitudes towards children have led to the banning of activities that appeal to younger people, such as ball games and skateboarding in community space.
- This hostility towards children and young people in the local community leads one researcher to question whether public space can indeed claim to be public at all.

### **The media has a role in shaping negative stereotypes of children and young people**

- A 2004 MORI survey found that young people were presented negatively in 71 per cent of media images; while only 14 per cent presented them in a positive light.
- Elsewhere over half of children have reported that the media had a negative influence on perceptions of young people.

### **Places for children to play must be welcoming and well maintained**

- Issues such as vandalism and litter make public spaces less attractive and accessible for children to play in.

### **Children and young people's views must be listened to**

- Consulting children about issues in their local area is important if their needs are to be properly addressed and they are to enjoy community play.

### **Staffed play provision can improve children's opportunities for community play**

- While it is important for children to be able to play unsupervised in their community, staffed play provision can help towards allowing them greater freedom to play outdoors.

### **Children have the right to play in public space**

Findings from research indicate the need for a more tolerant attitude towards children's presence in public space and efforts must be made to ensure a welcoming environment for children if they are to enjoy all the benefits of community play.

## 2. Introduction

Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play. This year Playday – focussing on *Our Place!* – is celebrating and encouraging children to play out in their local communities. Research has been undertaken to support this year's campaign, including a qualitative study, an opinion poll survey and this literature review.

This literature review gathers the evidence examining the importance of community play, patterns in children playing outside, and attitudes towards children playing. Literature was sourced through a systematic search using the Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) at NCB. It was undertaken in March-April 2010, using the search terms 'play', 'community', 'neighbourhood', and 'public space'. The review is primarily concerned with empirical research and so comment pieces were discarded.

Texts were then selected based the relevance to the campaign theme and the following criteria:

- the benefits of community play
- neighbourhood relations and sense of community spirit
- how children utilise public space and their independent mobility in public space
- concerns and attitudes towards children playing outside and the influences of this.

The term 'community play' is used throughout the review to refer to children playing out in their local streets and surrounding area near their homes. The literature review begins with a discussion about the **benefits of community play**. Here, it is argued that community play has important implications for children's identity and helps them to foster positive local relationships. It is also argued that community play can help to benefit other local people by strengthening community ties.

The literature review then moves on to look at the **sense of community**, followed by a section on **neighbourhood relations**. The evidence suggests a general belief that communities have changed for the worse in recent years and there is less interaction amongst neighbours. The section on **children's use of public space** demonstrates how children use the local landscape and the importance of formal and informal play space.

The section on **independent mobility** highlights research which suggests that children have fewer opportunities than in the past to play and move around the local area independently of adults. It also examines gender differences in this trend. The section on **safety concerns** raises the kinds of concerns children and adults have about children being in public spaces and examines whether these fears are justified. The **trusting**

**others** section suggests that trust amongst local people has declined and fears over 'stranger danger' have heightened.

The review then examines **hostility towards children**, providing evidence of negative attitudes towards children in public areas, while the **places to play** section looks at more practical problems children face in playing outside. The final section, **solutions in policy and practice**, uses evidence to suggest how to overcome some of these barriers.



### 3. The importance of community play

*'In the street, particularly in the nooks and crannies of public space not under the watchful gaze of adults, children may thus begin forming a public identity and establish their own selfhood and independence'*

(Spilsbury 2005, 81)

For many years, research findings have demonstrated the value and importance of community play to children's well-being. This was recognised in the 1960s when Mead (cited in Blakely: 1994) pointed out that neighbourhoods provide vital opportunities for children to explore their environments without adult direction and learn life lessons about the 'familiar' and the 'strange'. Mathews (2003, cited in Spilsbury: 2005) who investigated public space in relation to 9- to 16-year-old children suggested that public space acts as a 'liminal' or in between setting, in the right of passage from childhood to adulthood. In fact, evidence suggests that limiting children's freedom in the area can restrict their opportunities to create social networks and hinder their ability to build strong trusting relationships (Groves: 1997, cited in Spilsbury: 2005). Elsewhere, Valentine (2004) argues that public space is vital for young people in order to escape adult supervision and define their identities. Findings presented by Irwin et al (2007) suggest children with poor play opportunities were less likely to have friends in their community and that this has an impact upon their social well-being and identity construction (Irwin et al: 2007).

It is now widely believed that play is important for children to maintain a sense of community. For adults too, children's play can help to build good social networks, as it provides them with opportunities to interact with one another at places children play. Research from Switzerland show a positive correlation between outdoor play and good social networks (cited in Conservative Party: 2008). Similarly, Worpole and Knox found that public space is highly valued for socialising opportunities and developing community ties. For children specifically, public space allows them to build friendships and learn rules of social life. Public space is also cited as an important play arena, whether on the streets or in more secluded areas. Significantly, findings show the continued importance of these settings, despite popular beliefs that children no longer play in these places (Worpole and Knox: 2007).

It is not only in the UK that community play has been shown to be of value to children and communities. Evidence from Australia also illustrates that involvement with the community plays an important role in children's development and suggests that positive associations with community life can help to prevent 'conduct problems' as children grow up (Edwards and Bromfield: 2009). A nationally representative survey, consulting 4,983 four and five year olds across 257 neighbourhoods, illustrated 'undesirable' behaviours, such as lying, fighting and temper tantrums can be associated with children who lack a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. It is argued that community development initiatives should be employed to increase children's feelings of inclusion, by building on social relationships and establishing trust.

Working in Italy, Prezza and Pacilli (2007, cited in Lester and Russell: 2008) suggest that developing relationships with adults in the local neighbourhood is vital for children and young people. The authors state that 'autonomy and play in public areas during childhood influences more intense neighbourhood relations, a strong sense of community and less fear of crime and, in turn, these later variables consequently reduce feeling of loneliness during adolescence'.

## 4. Sense of community

The term 'community' is a widely discussed concept, with definitions varying – some referring to people, some to places and some to both. Rather than viewing 'community' as specific space, Valentine (2004) suggests it should be perceived as unfixed and unstable; structured around shared meaning rather than physical space. In fact, research carried out by De Visscher et al (2008) suggests children's attachment to particular places in their neighbourhood is born out of social aspects, such as the people they meet, rather than the physical environment alone.

Research from the USA compares children's and parents' views of their neighbourhood. Consultation took place with 60 children aged 7 to 11 and their parents across five neighbourhoods in Cleveland, Ohio (Spilsbury: 2009). Two interviews took place with children, including a 'neighbourhood walk'; alongside interviews with parents. From this data, children's and parents' spatial dimensions were mapped, producing findings that suggest children's perceptions are not simply based around their parents' views, but are constructed through their own concept of neighbourhood. It was also found that, while children's conception of neighbourhood related to their home range (the areas that they are allowed to travel to independently or with friends), most children believed their neighbourhood boundaries to be larger than this.

It seems that, as adults and children have different conceptions of neighbourhood, care must be taken to include children's identification of their neighbourhood in programmes designed to improve communities. Improvements to the local area must take place in space that is visible and recognised by children, which may differ from adults' descriptions (Spilsbury: 2009).

The 2004 Office for National Statistics Omnibus survey (Department for Transport: 2004) revealed that almost three quarters of respondents (74 per cent) rated the sense of community within their local neighbourhood as 'good'. This was particularly the case within rural areas; with figures rising to 80 per cent amongst communities with a population lower than 10,000. City residents were less likely to have a positive sense of community; falling to 69 per cent for London respondents.

However, elsewhere there is evidence that the positive aspects of community life has decreased over recent decades. Barnes (2007) conducted a large-scale analysis based on the findings from the Family and Neighbourhoods Study, carried out across four communities in England, including a city, suburb, seaside and town neighbourhood. The sample included families with children within three age brackets: infants; those aged between 4 and 5, and the 11 to 12 year olds. The research included a structured face-to face survey with 781 mothers followed by qualitative interviews with 142 of these participants. Parents were asked to indicate how they compared their current community to the neighbourhood they grew up in during their childhood. Almost half the parents stated that the community was worse for children now, than when

they were young (45 per cent), 17 per cent believed it was better now, 20 per cent reported it was roughly the same and a further 13 per cent claimed that it had changed but was not significantly better or worse.

## 5. Neighbour relationships

In the report *No Ball Games Here*, the charity Living Streets provides evidence that the decline in use of the street and public space has led to poor neighbourhood relations. Their 2008 study found that 72 per cent of respondents aged 65 and over stated that, when they had a young family, they knew at least five of their neighbours well enough to engage in conversation. Of today's parents, more than a quarter knew less than two of their neighbours. An increase in road traffic seems to be partially responsible for these findings. The research also cites *Driven to Excess*, a study carried out by the University of the West of England, which examined three streets in Bristol with varying levels of traffic flow. Social relationships amongst local residents were far weaker in areas with busy roads. Living Streets also point out that car usage is increasing, with more children being chauffeured to school than ever before. This can have a negative impact on community ties, as children who walk to school seem to have more active engagement in their local community and stronger social relationships (Living Streets: 2008).

Elsewhere, there is evidence of better neighbourhood relations. Children in Davey's (2008) study welcomed the prospect of neighbours looking out for one another as this gave them a sense of belonging and allowed them to feel safe. Research carried out on behalf of the Home Office examined perspectives of children, adults and community professionals across four deprived communities using qualitative interviews and focus groups (Camina: 2004). Here, it was noted the vast majority of children were able to name at least one neighbour who they felt they could turn to in times of trouble and neighbours often took advantage of shared lifts to school. However this was not universal. In one area, many children felt there was no sense of community because 'no one gets on' while in another, mothers stated that there was little neighbourliness where they lived.

Barnes (2007) found it was rare for participants in their study not to have local acquaintances in their neighbourhood. The vast majority of respondents stated that they knew 10 or more adults in their neighbourhood to whom they would say 'hello', although the proportion varied depending on the type of community (city 69 per cent, town 80 per cent, seaside 86 per cent and suburb 88 per cent). It was extremely rare for participants to not know any of their neighbours on this level, although city residents from an ethnic minority background were least likely to have these community links. Barnes documented how neighbourliness varied across different communities. While overall, parents perceived their local area as friendly, this was less the case in urban areas with a diverse ethnic makeup (Barnes: 2007).

Barnes (2007) found that many participants identified 'friendly people' as the best aspect of their community, although this too varied depending on the type of locality. Over one in four of the participants (27 per cent) living in the town, 20 per cent of seaside residents, 17 per cent of those living in the suburb, and 11 per cent of city residents stated that this was true.

Although some respondents were able to identify 'friendly people', developing close friendships with community members was less common, particularly in the city, where a quarter of respondents claimed to have no friends who lived locally. The author contends that a significant number of mothers, largely from deprived inner-city areas may lack connections with the local community.

In terms of neighbourhood participation, such as social involvement; sharing of advice and information about local services; and carrying out favours for one another, there was consistency across all four communities studied by Barnes (2007). Schools appeared to play an important role in allowing people to meet others in the neighbourhood and access support from members of the community. This was particularly the case in the suburban neighbourhood, where 78 per cent responded that contact with other mothers was gained through interaction at their child's school. Elsewhere, national statistics also suggest that the street was viewed as a good place to stop and chat to neighbours with 81 per cent of participants in the Department for Transport's study (2004) agreeing with this.

Brown et al (2008) also found that, although children's friendships were most commonly formed through schools, boys also established friendships from within their local area and girls had more widely scattered friendship networks. Girls often built friendship patterns through other social networks, such as their mother's contacts or through religious institutions. Boys also reported having more friends than girls did. Almost a third of boys (31 per cent) claimed to have over 20 friends; this was true for only 19 per cent of girls. Other studies suggest that a positive neighbourhood outlook is commonly associated with children who have access to friends close to their homes (Morrow: 2003 cited in Brown et al: 2008). Brown et al argue that boys may therefore develop a more positive sense of community because of their neighbourhood friendships. The authors argue that more consideration must be paid to gender related behaviour patterns in order to create environments that meet the needs of both girls and boys.

Examining children's health, Irwin et al (2007) used an ethnographic approach to consult with children from a community characterised by relative to high levels of vulnerable health factors. Fourteen children, aged between five and seven were studied over a 12 month period through a variety of methods, including interviews, parental questionnaires, observation and informal conversations. Children were able to articulate descriptions of their own neighbourhood, but classified only the people that they personally knew as 'neighbours', and not others who live on their street or close to their homes. The researchers note that some children living in blocks of flats did not associate their own building as being part of the neighbourhood. They speculated this may have been because of their restricted opportunities to explore and play in the local area leading to feelings of isolation from the rest of the community. For some children who had experienced frequent residential moves, there was little connection to the local area - these children claimed they did not have any neighbours at all (Irwin et al: 2007).

Through face to face surveys with 1,093 participants and follow up focus group sessions with a proportion of these respondents, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2007) explored adults' decisions to have contact with young people in everyday situations, work and volunteering. The results highlighted the influence of gender in adult-child contact, suggesting that women are far more likely than men to have contact with children, through work or volunteering. Of the sample, 22 per cent of women had formal contact with children compared to just 12 per cent of men. Respondents were also asked about less formal contact with children and young people within certain contexts. Just under a third of participants (32 per cent) stated they had ad-hoc contact with children in the street within the last six months and only 14 per cent said they had encounters with children in public open spaces, such as parks and playgrounds.

## 6. Children's use of public space

A cross-Atlantic study compared teenagers' use of public space in Edinburgh, UK and Sacramento, USA using qualitative focus groups (Travlou et al: 2008). 'Place mapping' was used in order to document how young people, aged 12 to 17 years old, perceive and utilise the physical environment and the symbolic meaning of this. The accounts showed how the young people in Edinburgh utilised and appreciated local facilities, but did not necessarily use them for the purposes that they had been built. For example, the benches at the square were used by teenagers to perform skateboarding tricks. Travlou et al (2008) suggest that the design purpose of public space was of little interest to young people; it was the potential for social and physical interaction that was important to them. They argue that this provides children with opportunities to make their own rules, and this played an important role in shaping children's identities. Similar findings were illustrated in a small-scale case study examining the views of local children and young people aged 10 to 14 within an urban regeneration area in Edinburgh (Elsley: 2004). Elsley notes that children spoke positively about their local environment highlighting the presence of areas such as play parks and all weather football pitches. However, such places were rarely used in the ways they had been intended. For example, children and young people spoke of using the football pitches out of the scheduled hours and building or modifying equipment to play on. This, according to the authors, could cause friction with other stakeholders.

Elsley also found that children were able to name more informal places in their locality when they enjoyed playing there. Streets and shops were mentioned, but most favoured seemed to be 'wild areas', such as cornfields, woods, castles and ruined buildings. Participants disliked areas where they felt threatened or had witnessed unpleasant events, or places that were perceived as unattractive or unsafe. Specific examples included littered streams or areas with used needles or vandalism.

In addition, Elsley found that young people were not always enthusiastic about playing in the streets near their homes. Many of them noted a lack of peers to play with in their immediate neighbourhood or described receiving complaints from older residents. Young people also talked negatively about the play areas available to them because they only catered for a young age group. This is not to say that children and young people challenged the usefulness of formal play areas, but argued that the current facilities did not meet their needs.

Through an examination of research projects, carried out across England and Wales, Worpole and Knox (2007) give an overview of the meaning and value of public space to children and young people. The authors note how public space is occupied by different groups at different times of day. While older people tend to be present in public areas in the morning, and other adults tend to occupy public space at lunch time, children are more visible in the late afternoon after school finishes. There did not seem to be evidence of significant conflict between different groups, but this was



partly because public space was avoided by some groups at specific times.

Travlou et al (2008) also investigated the use of public space by different groups of people. Young people from Edinburgh tended not to use areas in their community where they felt unsafe and areas that were occupied by other groups of children who had different styles and behaviours to their own; 'goths' were highlighted as one such group. It seemed that different groups of children claimed ownership over different sections of the neighbourhood. Areas were often actively avoided on this basis.

These examples of the selective use of public space by children and young people are not unique to the UK. In Sacramento (USA), Travlou et al (2008) found that young people valued local 'hang out' areas where they could socialise. Commercial areas were important to them because they were away from adults whom they knew. Places that were viewed as fun, or offered unique experiences were also enjoyed. Young people were less likely to want to be in areas of the community that felt dangerous, or that were littered and dirty. The parkland along a river was also enjoyed by some young people for the freedom and relaxation it offered. Others, however, did not go there as they perceived it to be too dangerous. Teenagers who did use this space were surprised that others felt afraid to go there, as they did not think this was justified (Travlou et al: 2008).

## 7. Children's independent mobility and outdoor play

Evidence suggests that children's independence in the local community is influenced by a number of factors. These include friendship networks, access to good quality play space, perceptions of safety, gender, age, cultural difference and local social policy (Veitch et al: 2006 cited in Lester and Russell: 2008).

Children's presence in public space seems to have declined dramatically in recent decades. Spilsbury (2005) argues that public space in the USA has come to be recognised as adult space, an argument mirrored in the UK. Children are unwelcome in the community because of the perceived dangers the world presents to them. According to Spilsbury, high profile cases about child abduction or 'out of control' young people have led to 'moral panic', responded to by keeping children away from the public realm. Spilsbury blames the media's sensationalism of rare murder and abduction cases, which distract attention away from realistic threats, such as poverty.

By comparing the views of parents today with previous generations, the charity Living Streets documented changes in the community and the impact of this on children's presence in the local area (Living Streets: 2009). Supporting the findings of previous research (Prezza et al: 2007, cited in Lester and Russell: 2008; Hillman et al: 1990), Living Streets' study suggests that street play has decreased dramatically over time, with only 12 per cent of the 65 and older group claiming that they never played out as children, and almost half of today's children saying they never play out. Playday 2007 research also documented a decline in street play showing that, while 71 per cent of adults reported playing in the streets or areas near to their home everyday when they were children, only 21 per cent of children now-a-days claim to do so. Living Streets report that parents are reluctant to allow their children out due to the perceived dangers. According to the 2006 Children's Society research, 43 per cent of adults felt that children should not be allowed out unsupervised under the age of 14 and 22 per cent thought children should not venture out alone until they are 16 (cited in Living Streets: 2009).

Mathews and Tucker (2006) suggest that girls, particularly, struggle to gain acceptance in public space. It is argued that both urban and rural settings are gendered, with girls acquiring fewer opportunities to utilise public space. Similarly, outside spaces that children and young people can use, were often considered 'boys places', where boys play football games and socialise. 'Girls places' were not identified and they felt that they must stay out of the 'boy's areas'. Therefore, girls had no choice but to keep on the move while in public space or avoid it all together. Some girls chose to hang around in mixed groups to help avoid these issues.

Analysing their findings, Brown et al (2008) identified clear gender differences in children's relationship to their local environments. Their research, using a multi-method approach to examine mobility patterns of

children in Hertfordshire and Lewisham, highlights how boys tended to be allowed out more than their female counterparts. Parents were more inclined to allow their daughters out if they were with peers or if they were going out for more focused activities (for example, to play games rather than simply 'go for a walk'). While boys played out most days, the results show that it was rare for girls to do so. It was even rarer for girls to play outside beyond sight of their home.

Not only this, but boys tended to travel on foot more than girls, who were more likely to use public transport or travel by car. In fact, girls were found to travel further distances than boys in order to see friends and visit shops. The findings suggest that girls prioritise their friendships, while boys have a more direct relationship with the physical environment. Shopping centres offer girls a place to meet and socialise, while maintaining a level of freedom. Brown et al argue that, although girls are less present in the local community, they do utilise other space in ways that suits them (Brown et al: 2008).

Brown et al also found that friendship and children's mobility in the area were strongly associated; the more friends that children had, the more independence they acquired. The fact that boys spent more time in the local community is largely because they had more friends and more friends who lived close to them, while girls' friendship networks were more widely spread.

Concerns about children in public space have seemingly contributed to the decline of community play in the USA as well as in the UK. An investigation into young people's different behaviours and sense of community notes that, due to their restricted independent mobility within the local neighbourhood, children had few opportunities to build friendship networks. Parents appear to adopt a number of strategies to protect their children from the perceived danger of violence in the neighbourhood; this includes enforcing curfews, accompanying children around the neighbourhood or restricting their free play and mobility in the local area. A study from the USA shows that of 482 parents from disadvantaged communities, nearly half reported that they kept their children in as much as possible (Fursterberg et al 1999 cited in Spilsburg: 2005). Similarly, Outley and Floyd (cited in Spilsburg: 2005) note that 10 and 11 year olds living in a socially isolated area in Houston, US have restrictions imposed on them and found that this constrained children's participation and exploration of the local play and leisure facilities.

In Canada, Irwin et al (2007) found that although children in their study were aware of the benefits of outdoor play in relation to their physical health, they also spoke of their limited access to playing freely outside their home. Children expressed their fears over the safety of their neighbourhood and their lack of friends in the local area.

Although some research suggests that children's freedom increases with age, Spilsbury warns us against making any generalisations. In fact, findings from the USA suggest that female access to public space may actually decrease with age, due to concerns over their vulnerability to crime or attacks (Katz: 1998 cited in Spilsbury: 2005). Spilsbury's (2005)

findings show that fears over the safety of girls, particularly aged 10 to 11 meant they had low levels of freedom in the neighbourhood. However, he also found evidence of children adapting strategies to obtain greater access to public space. Elsewhere, Valentine provides evidence that, while parents view children aged six and seven as being in equal danger in public space, they saw older girls as more in danger than boys in the public realm (Valentine: 1997 cited in Spilsbury: 2005). Morrow (2006) notes how gender influences children's safety fears. Their review of previous research suggests that, in general, boys have more freedom in terms of where they are allowed to go compared to girls.

Brown et al (2008) note that, despite there being some evidence that daughters were perceived as more vulnerable than sons in public space, there was little evidence of parents acting on these concerns and wished to give their daughters a degree of independence. It seemed that what the children were 'allowed' to do was a process of negotiation. Brown et al (2008) point out the influence of parental social interaction on children's use of public space. They note that the boundaries parents set for their children is to some extent dependent on the behaviour of other parents and this can sometimes lead to gender differences. For example, if one or two parents are particularly protective of their daughters then others seem to follow. Mothers were more inclined to allow their children out to play if they were taking part in a specific activity or game, rather than simply 'hanging around'. With a strong connection to football for many boys, this meant that boys were more frequently out playing in the local community.

Research suggests that adults would like children to be playing out in the community more than they currently do. In the 2004 Office for National Statistics Omnibus survey (Department for Transport: 2004), 43 per cent of respondents believed their street should be prioritised as a good place for children to play, ranking second in the overall priorities. Most support for this came from parents and those living on cul-de-sacs or in villages. However, over half of these respondents (52 per cent) reported that they would not be prepared to park their car 50 meters away from their home in order to meet these priorities. The vast majority of respondents also acknowledged that it was important for children to play safely in the road or street where they lived. In fact, safety was a major issue for 80 per cent of the respondents, who stated that this was their primary concern when choosing a place to live. Most participants (87 per cent) valued streets as a place to spend time and 62 per cent supported the idea that street should be used for community activities rather than simply a means of getting around.

Elsewhere, findings suggest that young people believe their parents and carers encourage them to play out in the community, although they still follow time and place regulations set out by their parents (Elsley: 2004). Ross (2004 cited in Lester and Russell: 2008) studied children's ability to negotiate their way around public space, and found that parents were supportive of children acquiring independence in their communities. Ross argues that this gives children a sense of community spirit and a strong attachment to their neighbourhood.

## 8. Safety concerns

However, Davey (2008) suggests that concerns about children's safety are a prominent factor contributing to the decline of children playing out in their communities. Both children and parents express their concerns over possible dangers, which prevent children from playing out. Indeed, Davey found that a quarter of children did not feel safe in their local neighbourhood, for numerous reasons, including fear of bullies, gangs and crime levels in the area.

A qualitative research study with 10 and 11 year olds investigated children's relationships with their local environment using a combination of interviewing and observational techniques (Thomas and Thompson: 2004). The study illustrates that children associated different parts of their neighbourhood with different things. Children were aware of the places that parents approved or disapproved of them spending time, and public space was often perceived as dangerous. Children expressed a variety of concerns over their safety in the community, including worries over traffic, strangers and bullying. This fear of bullying, it is argued, has contributed to a great decline in out-door play. Figures provided by the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey suggest that bullying accounts for 20 per cent of why children feel unsafe in their neighbourhood (Triakha: 2003).

Thomas and Thompson (2004) found that the streets were seen as the most dangerous place to be in terms of 'stranger-danger' and it was very uncommon for children to play in the street. The majority of children felt that the only outdoor space where they felt safe from strangers was in their private gardens. Surveys with parents were also conducted and similar fears were recorded. Children also felt endangered by trains and by terrorism. As it is unlikely that these fears pose any real danger, the authors argue that media coverage played a role in constructing children's fears.

The Family and Neighbourhoods Study suggest that although mothers feel very attached to their community, they reported numerous concerns about their local neighbourhood in terms of their children's welfare (Barnes: 2007). Often, participants talked about fears for their children's safety, particularly with reference to traffic, 'youth nuisance', violence and drug taking. Because of these issues, parents showed some reluctance to allowing their children to play out in the community and limited their own use of the local area.

Parents' concerns over their children's safety seem to vary in accordance with the characteristics of their neighbourhood. Valentine reported that worries over 'gangs' and traffic seemed to be much greater amongst certain communities than others (Valentine: 2004). According to findings from the Family and Neighbourhoods Study, parents' fears of strangers were prominent in the seaside neighbourhood and were associated with the beach; in towns, strangers were perceived as a danger in the local parks. There was also a general feeling that there was not enough good quality children's play equipment available locally. Vandalism also

seemed to be a problem; this was most commonly reported in the city community but was also common in some other neighbourhoods. Dogs were also an issue raised, particularly for seaside residents, 71 per cent of whom rated dogs as a problem in their community. This was agreed by 40 – 55 per cent of respondents across the other three communities (city, town and small town). Mugging was viewed as a problem in the city neighbourhood, but less of a problem amongst the town and suburb areas. It seems that, while many parents had local play spaces to take their children to, there were a number of factors that prevented them from doing so. Although this varied depending on the type of community, the use of public space was limited in all four types of locality (Barnes: 2007).

A study by Mathews (2003, cited in Morrow 2006) with children aged 10-14 in Northamptonshire uncovered that girls also tend to be more afraid of public space than boys. When boys did express fears over their well-being they tended to identify traffic as their primary concern; while girls highlighted their fear of strangers, youth gangs or being attacked. Petrie (2000 cited in Morrow: 2006) points out how over-protective attitudes towards females mean that these children lack secure friendship circles preventing them from using the public realm. This is not to say that boys do not feel vulnerable in their neighbourhoods. However, gender seems to be only one factor that affects children's experiences in public space. Socio-economic status, age and ethnicity are amongst other indicators of how children experience public space, with particular reference to fears for their safety (O'Brien: 2002/3 cited in Morrow: 2006).

Barnes (2007) also highlighted issues relating to children's access to public space. He found that children had limited use of outdoor space, such as parks and grassy areas, despite having these facilities near by. It was felt that these areas were often poorly maintained or prone to anti-social behaviour, such as drinking and drug dealing. Parents' primary concern was the dangers of smashed glass and discarded syringes. However, parks and open spaces were still valued for active play opportunities and offering something for different age groups that may not be available at home.

Barnes (2007) notes that for some parents, allowing their children to play out alone was viewed as too risky, while others set rules and limitations, in terms of their children's age and the distance they are allowed to travel alone. Many mothers felt that their children would be safer outside in groups, rather than alone, despite the fact that they labelled other groups of children a 'nuisance' if they hung around in public places together. Some mothers talked of the difficulties they experienced in keeping their children safe, while allowing them some freedom and independence in the neighbourhood. The authors suggest that, in today's society, that offers some potential dangers, children must be given opportunities to learn how to deal with the world they are presented with through developing some freedom in their local area (Barnes: 2007).

Barnes (2007) illustrates that some parents felt that children have less freedom now than they had done in the past and talked of the potential dangers their children could be exposed to in public space. There was a

general belief that young people who were out in the local area without an adult supervising them were causing trouble of some kind. In deprived areas, parents felt it was inappropriate for younger children to be out without an adult or at a later hour. There was a strong sense that parents wished to stop their own children from mimicking bad behaviour from other children.

## 9. Trusting others

In January 2008, the Conservative Party published *More Ball Games*, part of its Childhood Review, which argued that changes in the outside world have driven children away from public space and impacts their health and well-being (Conservative Party: 2008). The report suggests that parents should not be blamed for this and that parents are, in fact, spending more time with their children than ever before. According to statistics from Egerton and Gershuny's time use survey (2004 cited in Conservative Party: 2008), parents were spending an average of 99 minutes per day with their children compared with just 25 minutes in the mid 1970's.

*More Ball Games* insists that there is a lack of trust amongst adults in communities, causing parents to become isolated from parental support networks. It points to evidence from the European Commission which shows that only 28 per cent of UK citizens believe that 'most people can be trusted', which is comparatively lower than most West European and North American countries. *More Ball Games* argues that the reconstruction of playgrounds, proposed in the Children's Plan (DCSF: 2007) will only have the desired effect if the trust issues are tackled, at the same time as the physical environment for play is improved (Conservative Party: 2008).

Irwin et al (2007) provide further evidence of distrust amongst members of the community. They found that the majority of parents characterised their neighbourhood as unsafe and felt that their local neighbours could not be trusted to look after their children. This lack of trust drove children away from the community spaces because adults chose indoor activities for their children rather than outdoor play. These views were mirrored in the children's perspectives, many of them expressing their anxiety about their safety in the local neighbourhood, particularly in relation to 'stranger danger', and this prevented them from playing outside. From the findings, it is argued that neighbourhood programmes that encourage social connections, play and activities are needed to improve children's relationships with their local neighbourhood. The report claims that less affluent areas may not have the same cohesive context as more affluent areas, and there is a need for adult role models to support local children in the neighbourhood (Irwin et al :2007).

The Family and Neighbourhood study (Barnes: 2006) also evidenced a lack of community trust. Across the four communities, only those living in the suburbs claimed that they trusted others and felt as though this trust was reciprocated. Informal interaction seemed to be highest in communities where people knew one another, shared information and socialised together.

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2007) found that participants highlighted many barriers faced by adults in making contact with children and young people, and trust seemed to be at the centre of these issues. Nearly half of all participants (48 per cent) avoided contact with children because they feared being accused of harming



them. This was especially true for men who were concerned they may be confused with sex offenders and could not justify taking this risk. This was associated with the general belief that children and young people hold too much power and 'take advantage' of their rights. A substantial proportion of parents (34 per cent) also reported that they avoided contact with children because of their anxieties about teenagers. When asked about how these barriers could be reduced, the highest proportion of parents stated that they did not know (40 per cent). Small proportions of people believed more control over children would help (eight per cent), while the same amount also felt that fewer restrictions would overcome these barriers.

In the Scotland Commissioner for Children and Young People's survey (2007), parents were offered a number of 'intervention scenarios', and asked to rate, on a scale of one to five, the likelihood that they would intervene if they witnessed a child or young person in danger or distress. Adult intervention was most likely if the child was female or of a particularly young age. These groups were perceived to be most vulnerable. Teenagers were least likely to receive intervention from adults as it was felt that children of this age were more capable of looking after themselves. Situations that involved any physical contact also received low intervention levels, which was particularly true for men who worried that their motives would be questioned.

It seems that children in public space in parts of the USA also have similar concerns. Ethnographic research with 60 children between the ages of 7 and 11 in Ohio illustrates children's relationship with adults in local space, with particular reference to help-seeking behaviour (Spilsbury: 2002). Regardless of children's age, gender or their community characteristics, the majority felt concerned about violence in their community. From the 60 children consulted, half of them raised their concerns over being kidnapped, assaulted or stalked within their local community.

The Ohio children used various strategies in order to deal with their safety concerns in their neighbourhood. If children were involved in an accident, had become victims of bullying or were involved in an argument, a number of them said they would seek out a familiar adult in their neighbourhood to assist them. However, another common strategy adopted was to prevent strangers from intervening by refusing their assistance. Many children stated that they would not accept help from a stranger, often due to fears over kidnapping or harm. Many of these children used further strategies to prompt the stranger to leave, such as pretending they were not hurt even if they were. Although strangers were generally treated with caution, many children believed they were able to identify 'safe' strangers from more dangerous ones. Children stated that while they would seek help from females, people in uniforms or elderly people, they would avoid teenagers and men with certain characteristics, such as tattoos or dirty hands. Finally, children coped with their safety concerns by limiting the assistance they accept from strangers to 'acceptable actions'. Children seemed to welcome immediate help to place them out of danger but reported that they would also get away from the unknown adult as soon as possible. This study highlights the active

role children take in their local neighbourhood and their ability to negotiate their safety. However, this lack of trust towards strangers may not be legitimate and should be readdressed (Spilsbury: 2002).

An earlier study in the USA had also demonstrated how neighbourhood qualities impact on parent's perceived dangers and their decisions about letting their children play out (Blakely: 1994). Interviews took place with 42 parents within two multi-ethnic urban communities in Queens, USA. Here, Blakely notes how the social inequalities of their neighbourhood shaped parental concerns for their children's safety. Parents reported that their children felt nervous around people who were unknown to them, particularly girls, and this often resulted in children being reluctant to leave their parents' side. Parents felt that children were particularly vulnerable to assault and abduction; fears which were intensified by media sources and local gossip. Parents limited their children's outdoor play in the area because of their safety concerns, but at the same time they admitted that children were missing out on important play opportunities involving physical exercise and social interactions with other children from different backgrounds. Parents frequently reported their reluctance to allow children to visit friends or unsupervised play facilities because of their worries and believed that the safest place for their child is at home.

Valentine (2004) conducted a two-year study examining parental views of children's use of public space. Four hundred parents with children aged between 8 and 11 were consulted through a self completion questionnaire, alongside interviews with 70 of these respondents. Ethnographic research with police and teachers involved in safety education and focus groups with children were also carried out.

Valentine argues that parents have developed a fear of children in public space. She is critical of the apparent public/private divide, whereby public space is associated with danger and the private realm is connected to safety. Her research showed that child abduction was the major concern for most parents. Over half of parents (63 per cent) believed that abductions were more likely to be carried out by a stranger, with much smaller numbers stating that abduction was most likely to be carried out by a person known to the child (16 per cent) or by an estranged parent (10 per cent). Sixty per cent of respondents were most wary of parks as a target area for abductions, followed by shopping centres (34 per cent) and playgrounds (33 per cent). Parents from rural areas felt just as concerned about 'stranger danger' as parents from urban communities, as it was felt the open landscape attracted 'suspicious' characters (Valentine: 2004).

According to some sources, this concern about 'stranger danger' is largely unjustified, with some statistics indicating that the number of child abduction cases has remained relatively similar over the last 30 years (Gill: 2007). Others have argued that statistics relating to child abductions are inconsistent and it is impossible to say with complete certainty whether the number of child abductions has increased or decreased over recent years. What is certain is that the number of cases remains low and that children are more far likely to be harmed by a trusted adult in the private realm, than by a stranger in their local community (Gill: 2007;

Valentine: 2004). It seems then, that children are represented as vulnerable in outdoor space even though, statistically, they are safer from abduction or abuse outside than they are in the home.

Valentine (2004) contends that this misleading message is delivered to children through numerous sources, including schools, the police and education programmes. She suggests that schools ignore the issue of violence within the private sphere, which reinforces the image of home life as safe. Instead, adults choose to educate children about 'stranger danger', to avoid dealing with the sensitive subject of abuse by people known to the child. This gives children a false perception of the world, in which all private space is safe and all public space is dangerous. Valentine found evidence that fathers are reluctant to interact with children, including their own, in public spaces as they are concerned that this will be misinterpreted. The author argues that children are taught not to trust men.

Although 65 per cent of respondents in Valentine's study rated the chances of their own child being abducted as low or fairly low, there was an overarching feeling that, despite the unlikelihood of such an event taking place, it was simply not worth the risk. Similar findings are mirrored in the USA (Spilsbury: 2005).

## 10. Hostility towards young people

Coupled with the concern for children's welfare in public space, is the idea that children, themselves can be the cause of concern in the community. Margo et al document a 42 per cent increase since 1996 of the perception of teenagers 'hanging round' as a major problem (cited in Conservative Party: 2008). Play England's findings from the Playday 2007 research found that 51 per cent of children had been told, by adults, to stop playing in the streets or area near their home. One in four adults also admitted telling children off for playing in the streets or area near their home. Of these, 39 per cent intervened because they feared the children would cause damage to property, while only 19 per cent stopped them playing because they would be concerned for the child's safety (Playday: 2007).

Valentine's research highlights how 'gangs' of children were perceived as threatening for many participants (Valentine: 2004). Valentine uses the term 'alternative scripts' to illustrate how young people use public space in a different manner to adults, by claiming certain public areas through their physical presence and marking their territory (graffiti etc). She insists that this kind of behaviour is important for young people to perform, in order to develop their sense of being, but argues that their presence and behaviour in community spaces is often misinterpreted as deviant or troublesome and perceived as a threat to others in the neighbourhood.

Mothers from Valentine's research (2004) claimed that they adopted certain behaviours to avoid groups of children, such as avoiding specific routes, through fear of being approached. However, she points out that the vast majority of young people are simply hanging out with their friends and do not wish to cause trouble to others. In fact, children's accounts suggest that a lack of decent facilities, open extended hours, such as local youth clubs, has meant that children feel as though they have no alternative but to hang around the streets and other public spaces. While parents recalled spending much of their youth hanging around in their local neighbourhood, there was a general perception that this was 'innocent' play while this same behaviour was deemed unacceptable for today's children. Due to the hostility towards children in the local community, Valentine questions whether public space can indeed claim to be public at all (Valentine: 2004).

Findings from the Families and Neighbourhoods Study also exemplify concerns over children's presence in the local area (Barnes: 2006). The study examined four areas; an ethnically diverse city, a deprived mid-sized town, a small town by the coast in a rural setting and a more affluent suburb near a large city. Parents' concerns over children's freedom seemed highest in the city, where 64 per cent of parents felt that 'Too many children are allowed to run wild'. Similar rates were found in the town (58 per cent) and the small town (56 per cent), but only small numbers agreed with this in the suburbs community (five per cent). Barnes argues this may be due to utilising garden space or involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Parents were also asked about adult roles in 'controlling' children in the local area. Just under half of the city (43 per cent) and town (47 per cent) residents believed local people should correct a child's behaviour; while in the suburbs this was the case for 76 per cent. Only a third (31 per cent) felt locals should intervene in other children's behaviour in the small town. It seems that such issues are dependent on the type of the community. There is also evidence that residents from economically disadvantaged communities, with high crime levels face more problems in creating a sense of community spirit. Barnes highlights that, although it may be promising that locals are willing to intervene in children misbehaving or to protect a child, this must be handled with caution. This must not be used to legitimise adult control over children's behaviour in the community by assuming that all young people are acting badly or are putting themselves in danger (Barnes: 2006).

Research by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2007) showed that, when describing their encounters with children and young people, most adults concentrated on negative experiences, often illustrating times they had felt threatened or intimidated. These negative experiences were most likely to be encountered in unstructured space, while more positive encounters with children were documented in more controlled environments. However, it seemed that, for the majority of these incidents, children were not actually causing any threat to the adults; it was rather just the size of the group or the 'boisterous behaviour' that was disliked. Whilst it was generally acknowledged that only a small minority of young people set out to cause problems for others, it was commonly believed that young people were not sufficiently controlled by the police. Those who had regular contact with children were more likely to talk about positive experiences than those with no regular contact. Davey's study also suggests that, while gangs were seen as a source of threat to children, it also revealed that children gather in groups for their own safety, and 'hang around' the streets because they have little else to do (Davey: 2008).

Negative attitudes towards children have led to the banning of activities that appeal to younger people, such as ball games and skateboarding in community space (Worpole and Knox: 2007). Children utilising facilities for their own enjoyment were often frowned upon. For example play on street furniture or areas not designed for play, despite no damage being caused, was not welcomed. Worpole and Knox argue that children must have opportunities for outdoor play that stretch beyond fixed playground equipment in order for them to participate fully in the community and develop a sense of belonging.

In addition, legal powers exist which can exclude young people from feeling they belong in their community. In accordance with Part 4 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act (OPIS: 2003), police across England and Wales have the legal authority to disperse groups of two or more people from designated areas if they have reason to believe that the group is displaying anti-social behaviour or causing intimidation to others. Crawford's research (2009) analysed the use of dispersal powers over a 12 month period across the UK. He interviewed practitioners working in

13 police force areas and national policy makers. He also conducted city based studies in Sheffield and Leeds, and examined strategy development over time, the distribution of orders across the city and the impact of this. Interviews were also carried out with individuals involved in implementing dispersal orders, such as police and local authorities. Information from recorded police data from across London over 12 months was also recorded. Finally, he undertook two case studies in North Yorkshire (termed Northton) and Outer London (termed Southby). Here he carried out surveys and focus groups with children aged 13-18 and adults and interviewed local police, residents and practitioners.

Crawford's findings (2009) show that despite perceptions of children as a threat when they congregate in groups, to the children themselves this gives them a sense of security. Eighty-two per cent of children stated that gathering in groups made them feel safer. Generally, they did not believe that hanging around in a group is anti-social, but were aware of how others perceived them. Crawford is critical of the lack of clarity between young people socialising in public space and anti-social behaviour. The young people claimed they felt they did not have any other place to go to meet friends. This is backed by evidence from a government survey which stressed that 77 per cent of young people believed that more places to go and things to do would be the most effective way of reducing anti-social behaviour (cited in Crawford: 2009). The case studies showed how children were moved on from well lit, busy areas, such as shops and greens, to places that felt unsafe and were poorly lit. This was backed up by police interviews, where officers admitted that police powers meant that they simply moved children from one area to another rather than addressing the root of the problem.

The research documented a reduction in the number of children socialising in the community due to bad relations between young people and the police. Young people felt stigmatised and excluded. Indeed, some 61 per cent of young people in Southby and 43 per cent in Northton believed that young people were unjustifiably targeted by the police. Young people felt that relations between adults and children in public space had soured (Crawford: 2009).

The study found that young people reacted more positively towards police orders if they were listened to and addressed in a respectful manner. Young people had not been consulted about the implementation of dispersal orders, which reinforced the idea that children's views were irrelevant. It was also reported that police judgments were based heavily on the appearance of young people, such as the clothing they wore. The authors have argued labelling young people as anti-social and unwelcome in the community can impact on their collective identities (Crawford: 2009).

Crawford's study (2009) highlights the use of the Mosquito, an ultrasound device that emits a high-pitched noise across a 20 meter radius that can only be heard by people under the age of 20. Crawford argues that this device is a means of discrimination and offers nothing to promote positive behaviour in the community or teach moral values. The report argues that

meeting peers in public areas is a vital component to young people's social lives that helps them to develop a sense of identity and learn to manage risks. The authors conclude:

'In effectively saying to young people that they are not welcome in certain essential public places, we may not only be criminalizing youth sociability and alienating swathes of young people on the basis of adult's anxieties and assumptions about what young people might do, we may also be conveying stark messages about the status and value of young people in society.' (Crawford 2009 p22-23)

The Conservative Party's report *More Ball Games* argues that, while there is a need for more street policing, harmless play should not be stopped or questioned. Children must be allowed to be 'seen and heard', while working to make the streets safer (Conservative Party: 2008). It claims if this is not allowed the problem will continue to develop.

Hostility towards young people is apparent in rural communities as well as more urban settings as demonstrated in interviews with groups of 15-16 year olds and 17-18 year olds carried out across five rural settings in Scotland. In this study Hendry et al (2002) identify some of the conflicts young people experience within public space and the impact of this on their experience of life in their communities. The interviews show how youth rivalry between different sub-groups had meant that certain areas were out of bounds for the young people and some leisure facilities had been vandalised by other groups. However, Hendry et al's work (2002) suggest that 'gangs' of other groups were not perceived as a serious issue for these young people, but just part of community life.

Hendry et al (2002) note how, within the rural communities examined, places for young people to meet up and 'hang out' were viewed as very important. They argue that this was valued as it provided opportunities for young people to enact 'identity-related roles and behaviours', away from adult presence. This kind of behaviour, however, was treated with caution by the adult community. The young people described how adults stereotyped them as trouble-makers and how they were often 'chased off' if they gathered in public space. Hendry found that in some rural townships in Scotland, young people told of how adults had actively campaigned to move children from off the streets. It seemed that young people strongly identified with their local community, yet simultaneously felt unwelcome in public space.

The writers conclude that the biggest threat to young people's ownership of rural public space comes from adults, rather than divided groups of young people. They argue that, as children's leisure time is mapped out for them by adults, children wish to create their own leisure pursuits. However, these leisure pursuits do not always fall in line with societies values and present an image of young people as 'out of control' (Hendry et al: 2002).

These concerns of children and young people in rural areas are reflected in other countries. For example, Narin et al (2003) aimed to capture young people's attitudes towards public space, with particular relevance to an

urban and a rural community in New Zealand. They used numerous methods, such as informal street interviews, observations, focus groups and photographs in order to gauge how young people negotiate their experiences in public space, and how their experiences are bound up with power relations. The study was carried out with young people aged 13-18, interviewing 131 young people from an urban community and 76 people from a rural setting. The paper challenges the notion that rural communities provide an idyllic outdoor environment for young people, by arguing that exclusion of young people persists, in spite of the demographic area.

According to their findings, young people seemed to indicate that they felt welcomed in more natural areas of the locality, partially because of the lack of surveillance and policing in these areas. Areas that provided opportunities for socialising were also acknowledged as places where young people felt welcomed in their communities. Young people's feelings of inclusion were slightly higher in the urban environment than in the rural setting (Nairn et al:2003).

In Nairn et al's study (2003) it seemed that social exclusion was not defined by the space alone, but also by the social relations and meaning attached to this context. It was the way young people were treated by others in the setting, rather than the physical setting itself that was influential. Shops and shopping centres were often highlighted as places of exclusion, due to the inhospitable approach towards young people (assuming they are there to steal or cause trouble). Peers too, could be the source of exclusion if children did not fit in with a certain group. Indeed, the same space could simultaneously be a site of both inclusion and exclusion, depending on the circumstances. Young people also experienced a sense of exclusion in places designed specifically for adults, such as pubs and bars, or children, such as playgrounds and swimming pools. The research concludes that children do experience exclusion in public space, but develop strategies in order to deal with this exclusion. It is argued that young people's experience of exclusion is complex, diverse and situational but these feelings are apparent regardless of the urban or rural setting.

Considering teenagers (aged 13 to 15) in rural communities in Northamptonshire, Mathews and Tucker (2006) note how the adults' conception of 'idyllic' rural childhoods may in fact be a myth. Drawing on many empirical studies, using multi-methods, such as interviews, photographs and in-depth discussions, they showed that young people had very few opportunities for free outdoor play, due to 'fenced off' private land and farming. Young people commented that they were constantly battling against adults for access to open spaces. Adults would move children on for trespassing on their land and making too much noise. Parental fears and anxieties only restricted children's mobility even further, with many parents feeling concerned that rural settings heightened the chances of stranger danger. Mathews and Tucker note that, while rural communities are valued for their sense of community spirit and sense of belonging, this feeling was not mirrored in teenager's accounts. For them, there was a strong feeling of anger and resentment



that they were constantly unwelcome in public space, while there was no formal leisure space for them to use either. Furthermore, they felt powerless and excluded by the fact that no one listened to their views, which were either ignored or tokenised. With a lack of places for children and young people to socialise in rural settings, Mathews and Tucker argue that this resulted in a dominant older group taking over the space and excluding others.

## 11. Media influences

Evidence suggests that negative perceptions of young people in the community may be, at least in part, a result of their representation in the media. A 2004 MORI survey (cited in Lester and Russell: 2008) found that young people were presented negatively in 71 per cent of media images; while only 14 per cent presented them in a positive light.

Elsewhere, Davey (2008) found that over half of the children studied reported that the media had a negative influence on perceptions of young people, most commonly associating them with youth crime. Eighty-one per cent of children felt that youth crime could best be handled by an improvement in youth facilities to distract children from anti-social activities. Most agreed that an increase in police patrol would not be an effective way to reduce crime rates; this was largely due to the perceived penalisation of young people by the police. Instead, strengthening community spirit so problems could be tackled collectively was prioritised by many young people.

Other evidence suggests that adults, too, believe that children are represented negatively in the media (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People: 2007). Not only this but adults also felt that media was critical of projects that tried to help young people. Others suggested that the media always sensationalised stories in order to sell more papers. However, some respondents still felt that children were beginning to live up to their media stereotype. While adults in the survey acknowledged the role of the media in shaping peoples opinions, the respondents still contended that their own perceptions of children were based on experience rather than media representation.

Valentine (2004) points to the media as a source of rising concerns over children's safety particularly in relation to child abductions. She argues that the media creates and reinforces irrational worries and creates a divide between 'normal' people and 'monsters'. Parents react to this by restricting their children's local freedom. According to Valentine, the media plays an important role in fuelling anxieties. Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2007) found that while over three quarters of participants (75 per cent) had heard from the media of a child being harmed, only a small number of these personally knew of a similar case. Media stories tended to focus on cases of 'stranger danger' despite them being extremely rare. NSPCC conducted an internal survey of newspaper reports, examining media cases relating to children who were killed or died in suspicious circumstances. According to their findings, out of the 128 cases analysed in 2000/1, not one involved a child who had been of a child who had been abducted and killed by a stranger (NCPCC: 2007). However, Valentine (2004) argues that media influences are coupled with shared experiences and circulated rumours about strangers. This is particularly the case in small communities where information spreads quickly through close-knit networks.

## 12. Places to play

Evidence collected by a group of young researchers examines children's views on their local neighbourhoods, including play facilities in their area (Davey: 2008). The research consisted of web-based surveys with 1,362 children and young people across England and 48 focus groups. There was a general feeling amongst children from the focus groups that play facilities in their local area were poor, however, some areas seemed to provide a good range of facilities with help from local schools, local authorities and voluntary organisations. The findings suggested that facilities and schemes, aimed at children, needed to be better publicised so that more people were aware of them. The survey found that, despite 75 per cent of children reporting there were some facilities in their area, such as a swimming pool, playground, green space or football pitch, around 39 per cent also claimed that these facilities were not readily accessible to them due to restricted opening times, the run down or broken equipment or because children and young people were banned from using the area. Teenagers, particularly, noted there was a lack of facilities for their age group as most facilities were aimed at a younger audience.

Over one in three of the children in Davey's survey (2008) believed that play and leisure facilities in their area were too expensive. Many children reported using public transport to make use of local facilities (61 per cent) but many commented that the travel costs alongside entrance fees meant that children had limited access to these facilities. Participants suggested that children and young people should be entitled to free travel on local buses to overcome this. As a result young people reported hanging out with friends in local streets, but felt they were unwelcome there, and were stereotyped as 'troublemakers'. Some children admitted that they engaged in anti-social or illegal behaviour to tackle their boredom and many requested extended opening hours of leisure facilities.

Younger children also felt that play provision in their area was poor. Despite the fact that 80 per cent reported that they had a playground within walking distance from home, a further 80 per cent of these children complained the space was poorly maintained, littered with broken glass, rubbish and graffiti. During the focus groups some children requested more CCTV to deter anti-social behaviour (Davey: 2008).

Some young people suggested that an increase in youth clubs could help to build community spirit and defuse gang rivalry by allowing different groups to socialise. There was a lot of support for schools as a means of promoting and facilitating play in the local area. However, the survey showed that a mere 11 per cent of children had access to the playground after school. Children were supportive of the idea that play facilities in the local area should cater for everyone's needs, including disabled children (Davey: 2008).

The Family and Neighbourhood Study (Barnes: 2006) also notes how mothers felt a general dissatisfaction with the play and leisure facilities

that were available for children in their neighbourhood. This was particularly true for parents living in the suburbs neighbourhood, who rated a lack of things for children to do as the second worst aspect of their community (Barnes: 2007).

Another study, carried out on behalf of the Home Office examined perspectives of children, adults and community professionals across four deprived communities using qualitative interviews and focus groups (Camina: 2004). From the data collected it seemed that individual's perceptions of a desirable neighbourhood were based on good neighbours, regardless of the community setting. That is not to assume that other issues did impact on perceptions of the communities. Poor transport links and a lack of facilities also shaped negative views about the local area. Street litter was a major issue across all four communities. Where litter was a very serious problem, participants complained that the dirty street had led to a rat problem in the area and parents reported reluctance to allow their children to play outside because of this.

Schools were viewed as a potential source for encouraging community involvement and school run play schemes provoked positive reactions. The four communities were extremely diverse in terms of access to outdoor space and play facilities. One area (Meredith) lacked any open space and relied heavily on the school playground, which was open out of hours. In another community (Redstone), open space was available but this did not receive a positive response from the participants, who complained that the areas were poorly maintained. The third community (Parkland), although offered a wealth of open space, such as woodlands and lakes, offered only restricted access for children to play due to safety concerns. Parents also noted that these areas were not easily accessible for pushchairs because of the off-path routes. In the fourth community (Hightown), the parks and open spaces had undergone recent improvements and this was appreciated by the local people, who spoke positively about their local environment (Camina: 2004).

In another study, children aged five to seven from three different communities were interviewed and they viewed their 'community' as their immediate surroundings, their homes and their school. Overall, these children liked the area in which they lived and felt that the people, rather than the physical environment made the community what it was. If this age group did raise concerns about their neighbourhood, they usually related to litter problems, strangers or bullying. Children aged ten and eleven defined their community on the physical location rather than the neighbours, while slightly older children talked of the community as people working together to achieve similar goals. (Camina: 2004).

Eight and nine year olds tended to be critical of their community, one area (Parkland) expressing concerns about anti-social behaviour. While another (Meredith), complained about litter. However, the children also had positive feelings about their community and were able to point out things they enjoyed doing, such as playing with friends (Camina: 2004).

The 10 to 12 year olds had more desire to explore their local area and establish their own space. Two communities reported their struggle over

finding things to do in the local area and felt there was a lack of space where they could play. In one neighbourhood (Hightown) that was considered relatively safe, children were allowed greater freedom to travel further a field, but this was seasonal, and in the winter months children complained that the clubs tended to close in colder months. There seemed to be some generational conflicts in the communities that needed to be addressed. Residents from Parkland reported that play equipment had been poorly maintained, resulting in it being removed and while younger members of the community wanted it to be replaced, older residents were against this. Adults often complained of teenagers causing problems in the neighbourhood, sometimes this related to children simply out playing, while other times it related to serious offences (Camina: 2004).

Overall, residents wished to have their area cleaned on a regular basis, and children also called for more play and leisure facilities. Where local clubs and youth centres were available, children still chose to spend some time in public space with friends where they do not have to follow adult rules. Camina argues that children and young people's views on the neighbourhood must be taken into account in order to respond to them appropriately (Camina: 2004).

Barnes (2007) notes how access to play and leisure facilities differ depending on the characteristics of the community. In terms of indoor play and leisure facilities, urban residents seemed to have greater availability and choice. Seaside and suburban residents reported more problems in accessing and affording leisure facilities for their children. Some mothers claimed that accessing groups, such as mother and toddler clubs, were difficult because they felt they did not 'fit in' with other members of the community. Others choose to go outside of their own community to use leisure facilities but this posed transport problems for less affluent mothers who relied heavily on public transport, which was an often unreliable and costly (Barnes: 2007).

Davey (2008) argues that facilities seemed to cater for boy's interests rather than girls, such as football clubs. Women of some cultural backgrounds faced further difficulties, as simple matters such as a mixed sex changing room meant they were unable to use near by facilities. O'Brien (2000, cited in Lester and Russell: 2008) also notes how social and cultural influences have an effect on children's usage of public space. Girls and children from minority ethnic groups tend to have the most constrained use of the public realm. These findings highlight the importance of individual difference and children's access to their community space, suggesting that exclusion is an issue that affects individuals differently.

## 13. Children's stake in the community

Research suggests that children display a sense of loyalty to their community and a desire to improve their local area (Thomas and Thompson: 2004). However, children seem to have limited access to information about their role in the community. Thomas and Thompson (2004) revealed that most of the children in their study were not aware of the local authority's role in the maintenance of public space. Nor did they know how to report a complaint or access information.

Elsley (2004) notes that most children felt that their views were listened to by those adults with whom they had a close relationship, but beyond this, children felt their views were largely ignored by other adults in the community. Children reported a lack of consultation regarding decision about their local area, offering examples of when their views were overlooked. Children unanimously expressed a desire for more and better parks and recreational facilities, but felt that this was not acknowledged by the adult community.

Elsley argues that providing expensive play and leisure facilities are relatively ineffective without consultation with local children during the planning and development stages. The researchers interviewed officers from the local regeneration agency and the national agency for regeneration and found that, while there was commitment to encompassing the needs of children and young people in national and local regeneration strategies, there were extensive problems in how to engage young people in their work. The authors argue that involving children in these structures and responding to their needs is an issue that must be addressed (Elsley: 2004).

Elsley (2004) points to previous research by Fitzpatrick et al (1998, cited in Elsley: 2004) which suggests that children's input into regeneration issues is compartmentalised, only relating to youth specific matters, rather than issues that affect the whole community. Elsley suggests that local regeneration organisations were not designed to incorporate the views of young people; the vast majority of community representatives were aged over 30 and so children's needs were only addressed through an adult perspective. While physical regeneration was high on the agenda, little emphasis was placed on the physical environment for children and young people. Whereas adults addressed issues concerning young people 'hanging around' streets and fear of crime, the young people interviewed by Elsley (2004) wished to have more formal designated play space. The research indicates that children and young people's needs within public space have been overlooked within this urban community. Children and young people seemed to have clear ideas on improvements that could be made to their local community but felt they were not heard.

Davey (2008) notes how children and young people wished to be consulted over the play provision available. From this survey, it seemed that schools were most likely to converse with children, as 55 per cent of respondents had been consulted over the sport facilities and clubs held by

the school. Consultation with children was less likely to come from local authorities, as only 28 per cent had been asked about equipment for the local playground and 28 per cent about the activities at the youth club. On the whole, only 15 per cent of children felt that their views were listened to when planning for play and leisure facilities (Davey: 2008).

Parents often acknowledge that there are not enough activities for children and young people in the local community, but evidence suggests a general reluctance amongst adults to involve themselves in tackling the problem (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People: 2007). In Scotland, adults often felt they did not have the time to involve themselves in child provision, despite supporting the idea of more activities for children and young people. Some participants in the study pointed out the importance of mutual respect between children and adults; by speaking to children in the community trust would develop and children would talk to adults more.

## 14. Solutions from policy and practice

### *Increasing young peoples contribution to public space*

Evidence suggests that it is important for their health and well-being for children and young people to feel a sense of belonging in their local community. However, as a result of concerns for their safety and hostile attitudes towards their presence in public space, children are often discouraged from being fully integrated into community life. Poor maintenance of community space and an unwillingness to listen to children's views in community planning has only intensified the problem. Central to their sense of belonging is children's input in community life. Elsley (2004) contends that three issues must be addressed in order to increase the contribution of young people in public space. Firstly, methods must be used to ensure children's active participation in everyday practice (including participatory activities by seeking and providing information to engage in formal structures or organisations); this should be monitored by national agencies as an indication of good community participation. Secondly, more consideration should be put into planning and development policy aimed at improving the public realm for young people, by noting how children wish to use public space. This should take into consideration children's age related needs and the diversity of children's experiences. Finally, policy makers should ensure that public policy is influenced by children's perceptions, so it accurately represents children's views, rather than making assumptions about these.

### *Staffed play provision*

Staffed play provision can help tackle issues concerning children's safety and encourage free play in the local community. Beunderman (2010) undertook an in-depth social analysis examining the impact of staffed play provision on children, families and the local community. Six case studies of play provision aimed at children aged 8 to 13 were carried out using a combination of methods of data collection, including observation and semi-structured interviews with children, staff, parents or carers and stakeholders. The researcher illustrates the importance of staffed play provision as offering safe opportunities for free play. While public space can offer a hostile environment for children, staffed provision allows children to 'roam free' and socialise with peers without the overriding concerns of unsupervised play. Beunderman is careful not to belittle the importance of unsupervised play within the community, but suggests that staffed provision can provide a unique and important contribution to local play opportunities. It is important not to confuse staffed play provision with structured activities, as only within the former do children have the opportunity to direct their own play and create their own boundaries. Staffed play provision can help nurture adult-child relationships and establish a sense of trust that is often absent in the current social context. The case studies demonstrate children's involvement in the consultation



process and construction of play provision gave children a sense of ownership and equality within the community.

Beunderman shows how playworkers relate their work to the wider community, often utilising public space to expand the play opportunities, providing an integral contribution to public services innovation. Children in the study talked of the life skills that they had acquired through play, such as sharing, looking out for one another and asking for help. It is argued that such skills can provide them with a more positive outlook on the neighbourhood through gaining trust, feeling welcome and knowing others in the community. It seems that having a place to go, where children are listened to and respected gives them a positive perception of their local area. Through their engagement in the local environment and with others in the community, children not only had better relations with adults, but had more respect for the public arena allowing them to make a positive contribution to their local neighbourhood.

In Beunderman's study parents, like children and playworkers, were able to articulate their experiences of how play provision had benefited them and transformed the local community. Through this, parents had created social bonds with their neighbours and established support networks. This was particularly valuable for parents living in deprived areas where there may be more feelings of isolation. In fact, some parents noted that good quality play provision was an important factor in deciding which community they chose to live in. Parents also claimed that the presence of staffed play provision had contributed to a greater sense of community by uniting different social groups and bringing neighbours together and it also offered a vital setting for community involvement. Through volunteering, parents also reported learning valuable skills. Volunteering also seemed to have economic advantages for the local community.

It is argued then, that staffed play provision can be used to open up the public realm to children and young people and assist community cohesion. Beunderman emphasises the importance of investing in skilled staff to help embed play in the community, rather than simply investing in the physicality of the area. It is the people who can transform the space into opportunities for play, and revenue funding should be channelled towards this.

Beunderman recommends that clear communication, explaining the value of staffed play provision, must be aimed at policy makers and the general public. This could be achieved through holding open-days to illustrate the benefits of play. Volunteering opportunities should be opened up to the whole community. Play providers must assess the usage of their service so they can target hard to reach groups and foster links with other third sector and public bodies to strengthen their presence in the community.

Greater adult supervision (play provision and shared supervision) in public space would undoubtedly encourage children's presence within the community, but it is also believed that preparing children to deal with problems they may encounter in public space is also important to open up the public realm to children. The Family and Neighbourhood Study (Barnes: 2006) found that schools played an important role in bringing

communities together, by holding various events. The author argues that attending schools that are within walking distance is important for building social networks.

### *Improving local streets*

Projects that aim to improve local streets through regular clear-ups or altering design layout can have a substantial impact on community spirit and open the public realm to children and young people. *DIY Streets*, a project carried out by Sustrans ([www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)), which enabled communities to re-design their own streets to make them safer and more appealing, carried out research to evaluate the effectiveness of their work. The project was carried out in 11 communities with the intention of expanding the programme nationwide if it was successful. The evaluation illustrates the importance of the physical environment in creating community ties. Questionnaires were completed by residents before and after the street improvements were made. The results show that before the project the majority of residents (61 per cent) strongly disagreed that their street was an outdoor space in which people could socialise, whereas only three per cent strongly disagreed with this statement after the improvements had been made.

Nearly half (46 per cent) of participants also agreed or strongly agreed that they had spent more time with their neighbours or within the community as a result of the DIY streets project. A further 50 per cent also agreed that they were socialising with people in their street more than they had previously. Most interestingly, 44 per cent of participants now claimed that their streets are safe environments for their children to play, while previously, this figure was only eight per cent.

### *Changing attitudes*

Moore's classic study (1986) proposed some benchmark policy directions, which are still influential in driving action today. His study compared three diverse neighbourhoods across England, primarily consulting with children through drawing consultations, map work and interviews. Moore concluded the need for diverse environments that are accessible to all. However, he notes how children must be accepted as part of the wider community for changes to be effective. He states that 'the principle need was for a welcoming attitude in places where young people clearly had the right to be' (Moore 1986: 237), without which children cannot fully participate in community life and the rest of the community will suffer.

### *Putting children at the heart of community agendas*

The Demos publication, *Seen and Heard*, using case studies to explore children's experiences in the public realm (Beunderman et al: 2007), exposed how the design of public space segregates different generations. It acknowledges how children and young people share the same needs

wishes of others in terms of what public space can offer them. A number of recommendations to change public space for children and the rest of the community are proposed. These include the importance of aligning with children's view points by placing children at the heart of community agendas. Reiterating Moore's points (1986), the report argues that children and young people must be valued in public space and that children must be allowed to have safe, informal areas where they can hang out without adult supervision, DEMOS promote 'the importance of the everyday public realm as a legitimate site for children and young people's informal recreation, and a dimension of wellbeing' (Beunderman et al 2007: 113 ). This should stretch across all aspects of public space, beyond playgrounds and include all community members, regardless of age. They advocate traffic calming measures to help open up public space to children.

Demos also advocate collaboration between different sectors and involving children and young people in consultation, not just about playgrounds and youth centres but across all aspects that effect communities. It is argued that wider issues, such as crime reduction that also have an impact on children and young people's wellbeing, must be recognised and addressed. Professional organisations should also consider the impact of their practice on children and young people and work holistically to ensure children's needs are met. The report concludes the 'we need to start a different kind of conversation where children are not just vulnerable but also vocal and active agents of their own lives and the places where they live' (Beunderman 2007: 114).

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# Community play

## A literature review

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