Attitudes Towards Street Play

Prepared by ICM Research for Playday 2007: *Our Streets Too!*

May – June 2007

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Contents

1.Background and methodology

Background & methodology (1)

- Play England commissioned ICM Research to conduct a focus group programme to research on attitudes to street play

- Four two-hour groups were conducted across the UK:

Group	Time and Date	Venue Address
GROUP 4 Mix of parents/ grandparents/ pre family	Thursday 17th May 6.30pm – 8.30pm	White Hart Hotel 25, Holywell Hill, St. Albans, Hertfordshire AL1 1EZ
GROUP 2 Mix of parents/ grandparents/ pre family	Tuesday 22nd May 7.30pm – 9.30pm	Cantley Community Centre Goodison Boulevard, Cantley Doncaster DN4 6DF
GROUP 3 Mix of parents/ grandparents/ pre family	Wednesday 23rd May 7.30pm – 9.30pm	Streetly Youth and Sports Centre Streetly Association Foley Road East Streetly B74 3HR
GROUP 1 Mix of parents/ grandparents/ pre family	Thursday 24th May 7.30pm – 9.30pm	AUCHENBACK RESOURCE CENTRE (ARC) 64 AURS DRIVE BARRHEAD, GLASGOW G78 2LW

Background & methodology (2)

- 8 respondents participated in each group

- In each group 3 respondents were parents and 3 were non-parents. 2 were grandparents

- For some of the group-based tasks parents and non-parents were split into separate groups so that attitudinal differences between these could be identified

- Respondents were also given a pre-task exercise to facilitate the discussion. This required them to bring an image which they associated with play when they were a child, and play for children today

- All sessions were audio recorded

- Images used in the report are strictly for representational purposes only and do not refer to any person alive or dead

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Play is being inhibited because of inter-connected factors

- Viewed holistically, the findings suggest that children have become less active in their streets and surrounding areas because of several, interconnected factors

- On the one hand parents see the threats posed to children, and on the other non-parents see them as a nuisance
  - This combined with negative societal and environmental changes has served to squeeze children out of their traditional play areas

- Community bonds need to be rebuilt through initiatives such as Playday before the barriers of apathy, cynicism and time pressures can be overcome

Interconnected factors impinging on outside playing
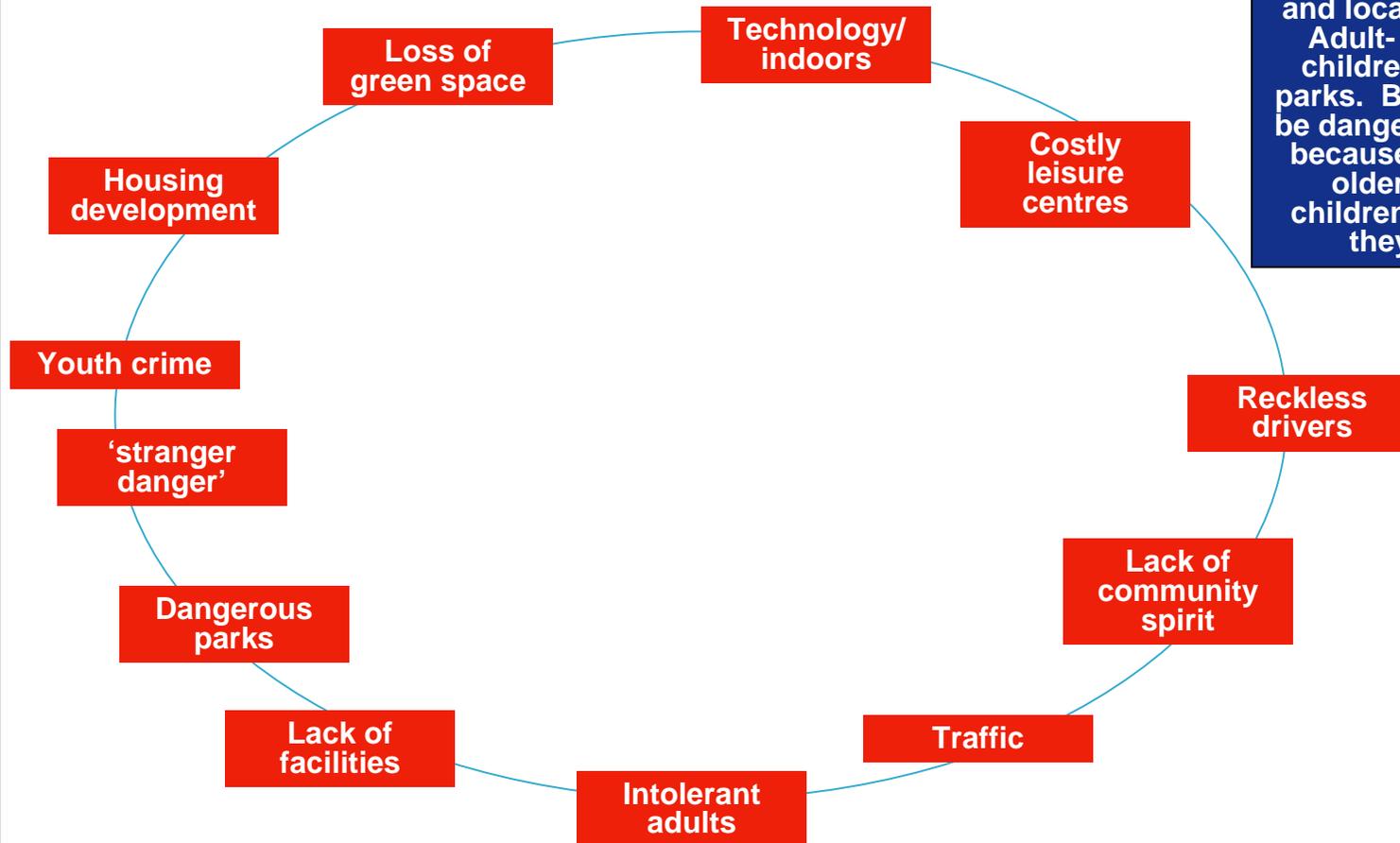
Many factors are interconnected. For example adult intolerance of children playing in the street is attributed to a lack of facilities caused by housing development and local authority indifference. Adult- child conflict leads to children being sent to play in parks. But parks are often felt to be dangerous for young children because they are populated by older children. But older children play in parks because they have no facilities.

Loss of green space

Technology/ indoors

Housing development

Costly leisure centres

Youth crime

Reckless drivers

'stranger danger'

Lack of community spirit

Dangerous parks

Lack of facilities

Traffic

Intolerant adults

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Play brings many benefits

- All respondents associated play with many key benefits. It was associated with:

    - Freedom
    - Laughing
    - Socialising
    - Imagination
    - Good health
    - Fun
    - Independence
    - Excitement
    - Competition
    - Risk-taking
    - Educational
    - Exploration

> It gives them exercise, it gets them to get rid of all that excess energy, so when they do come home they are not running round like lunatics. (St Albans)

> I think it also shows that they are being creative and using their imagination. Because what imagination do you need for anything at a play station? (St Albans)

> It was exciting and it was peaceful and it was fresh air and we were getting exercise. And mixing, you know, there was five or six of us playing together; so we were getting the socialisation as they call it now. (Glasgow)

> Relating more to football apart from other games that we did play; that was a magnificent ambition that everybody had when I was a boy; we used to play genuinely play for Scotland and we obviously weren't good enough. At a young age you felt that was what you wanted to be; they were our heroes; they were good loving family men. (Glasgow)

> You find your own boundaries you push yourself and you find out what you can and can't do. (Doncaster)

> Well more exercise, it gives them a sense of fresh air. (Birmingham)

Play is seen as a key part of a child's development

- Play is overwhelmingly seen as a positive thing

- It is seen as a key part of a child's development

- An educational process whereby children learn to socialise and learn about their physical environment

- A key way in which boundaries are set by establishing what is acceptable risk and what is too risky

- It's about learning a competitive spirit and fair play

- Exercise is also a key part of play and obesity is mentioned a number of times as an issue that play can obviate

- It's also associated with being imaginative and creative

- And about developing a sense of independence

> A lot of them are obese through stopping in and watching telly, I mean, it's just going on now isn't it?
> (Birmingham)

> Climbing up a tree, falling out and hurting yourself is part of growing up.
> (St.Albans)

> I think all the competition has gone out of [play]. . .you might have been only six or seven but you still wanted to win.
> (St.Albans)

Favourite games (1)

- Respondents listed many types of games they loved playing the most when they were young

- Different games were associated with different benefits

- The games listed conjured up associations of freedom, independence, socialising, competition and safety

- However, not all associations relate solely to street-based games

- Green space near streets and the countryside were frequently mentioned

Hide and Seek   **=**   Finding places: exploration

Cowboys & Indians   **=**   Excitement: fun, having a laugh

Favourite games (2)

British Bulldog/Kiss chase = Brought everyone together: socialising

Sky gazing = Making stories from cloud shapes: imagination

Cricket = Brought everyone together: competition

Bikes = Racing, tricks: competition

Swings = Risk: exhilaration

Football = Wanted to be like heroes: Aspiration

Paradise lost? (1)

- Respondents were asked to provide two images, one which represented play today and one which represented play when they were a child

- The two sets of images were radically different. The images representing yesteryear were idyllic, invoking notions of freedom, safety, green spaces, happiness, adventure, nature, sport, heroes and a carefree attitude

- By contrast images associated with play today were on the whole negative. These included associations computer games, a lack of facilities, sterile, man-made facilities, fear, danger, idleness, yob behaviour, no imagination, restrictions, being watched and violence

- This stark dichotomy reveals a tension at the heart of all the discussions: that respondents recognised the enormous benefits of children playing in the street, and outside generally, but that there were felt to be numerous barriers preventing this today

- This has led to changes in parental behaviour and attitudes which are not conducive to children being allowed to play in the street

Paradise lost? (2)

My fondest memories, were playing rounders when were kids, in the street and there were virtually no cars, and all of the neighbours, and all of the neighbour's kids and everything, and we used to play and we used to play until it was dark. Which obviously you wouldn't do now.. (Birmingham)

Yes, but, how, if I had children, I wouldn't want them to be out because there's too many weirdoes around. (Birmingham)

I don't think that many kids actually play outside these days, it's all, like, because they play inside on their computers and watching DVDs and that. I've got a seven year old little brother, and he's hardly ever outside compared to what I was. (Birmingham)

Then, just free, relaxed, enjoying themselves. And do what they want to do, and fire for danger, as how I'd feel now. (Birmingham)

Climbing up a tree, falling out and hurting yourself is part of growing up. (St.Albans)

Climbing up a tree, falling out and hurting yourself is part of growing up. (St.Albans)

I think there's not the same thing as I think there's not as many sort of fields and things as there were, people used to tell us to go and play - and that's not there; unless obviously more sort of media exposure to a lot of other things at the moment that it's putting the fear through parents as well and they're not letting their kids out.

(Glasgow)

Images of paradise. . .(1)

Steve McQueen's Great Escape motorbike scene = the freedom of childhood play
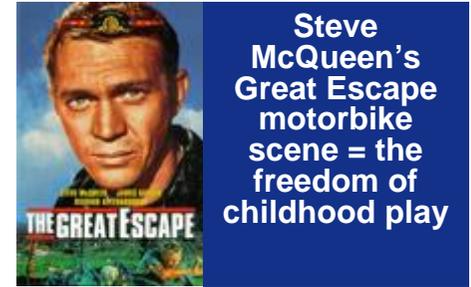
Clowns (fun, happy)

Freedom

Superman (adventure)

County idyll (safe, nature)

Smiley collage
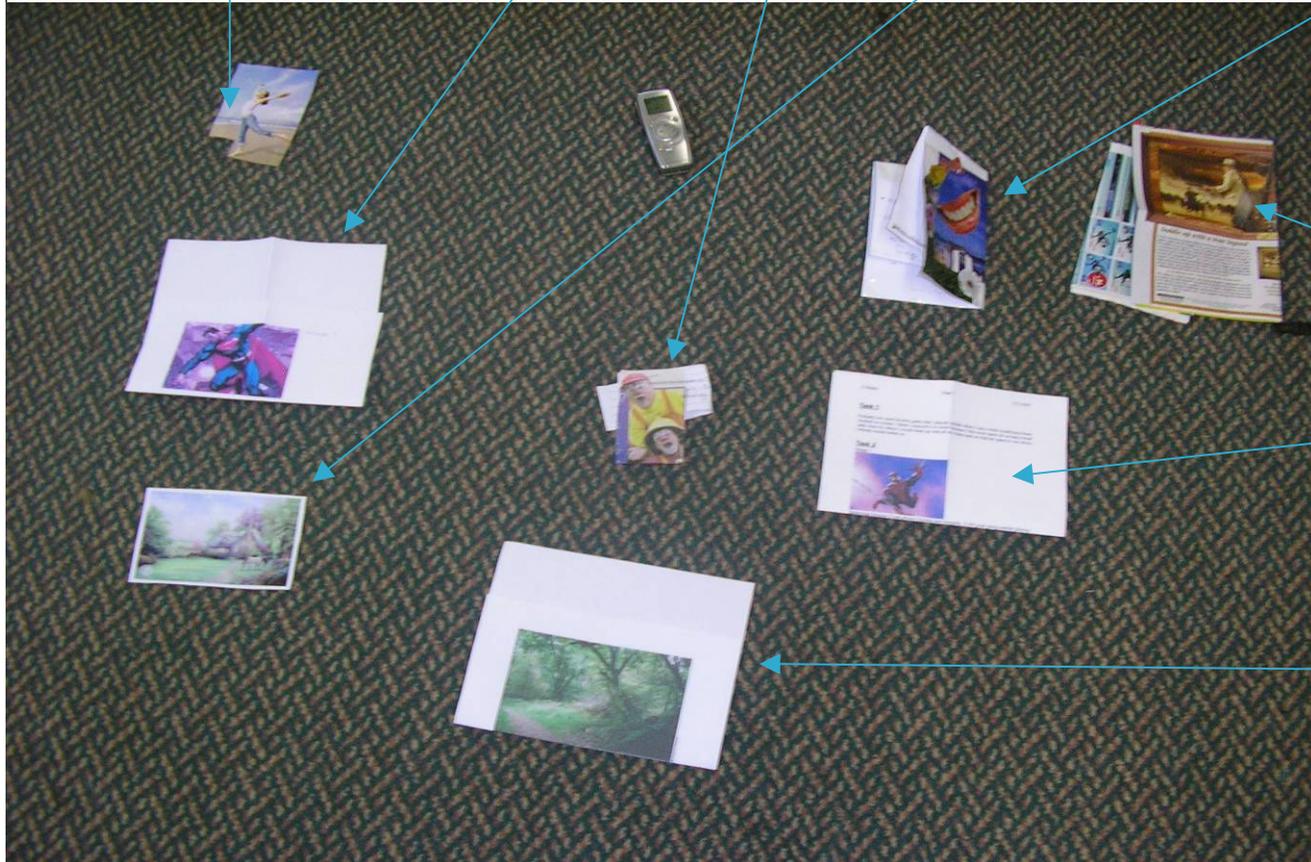
Cowboys and Indians

Spiderman (adventure)

Green space/ parkland

Images of paradise. . .(2)

The activity I most enjoyed as a child was playing rounders with family + friends at weekends + having picnics.

This picture reminds me the good old days of playing outside in the fresh air — being carefree with no worries.

AS A CHILD I WAS EVACUATED TO TENBURY WELLS IN DEEPEST SHROPSHIRE. THE SCHOOL I ATTENDED TAUGHT 5 TO 14 YEAR OLDS IN THE SAME HALL. THE HIGHLIGHT OF MY WEEK WAS OUR WEEKEND WALKS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND WOODS. PRIMROSES WERE THERE IN PROFUSION, AND I STILL HAVE THEM IN MY GARDEN TODAY, AND IF I MOVED HOUSE I WOULD DIG THEM UP AND TAKE THEM WITH ME.
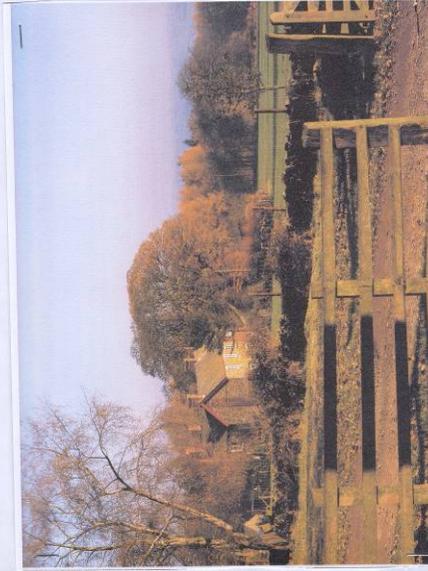
MY MAIN INTEREST FRON THE AGE OF 8 WAS CYCLING. I ENJOYED THE QUIET LANES OF THE WARWICKSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE AND CAME TO LOVE ITS TYPICAL ENGLISH SCENERY. THIS HAS FOLLOWED ME THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, AND I SPENT MANY HAPPY YEARS ON THE CANALS AND INLAND WATERWAYS OF ENGLAND AND WALES.
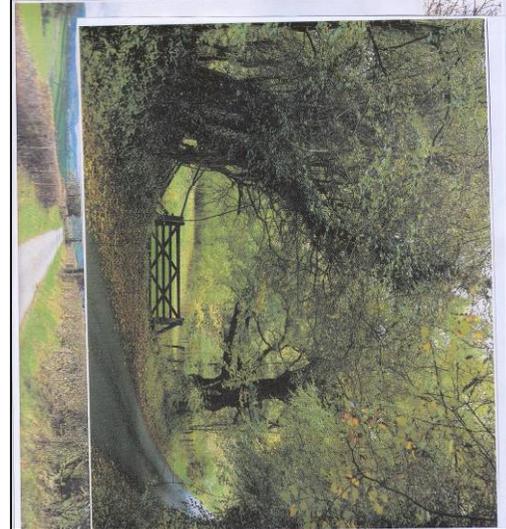
TASK 2

This is how I felt when I used to go out and play as a child. Total freedom.

butterflies.

freedom.

Play time in Days gone by

Freedom,   Security,   Wide open spaces.
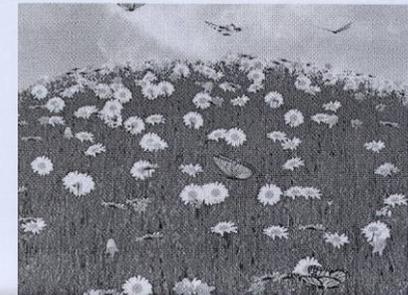
Images of paradise lost…(1)

technology

Rubbish tip (rubbish facilities)
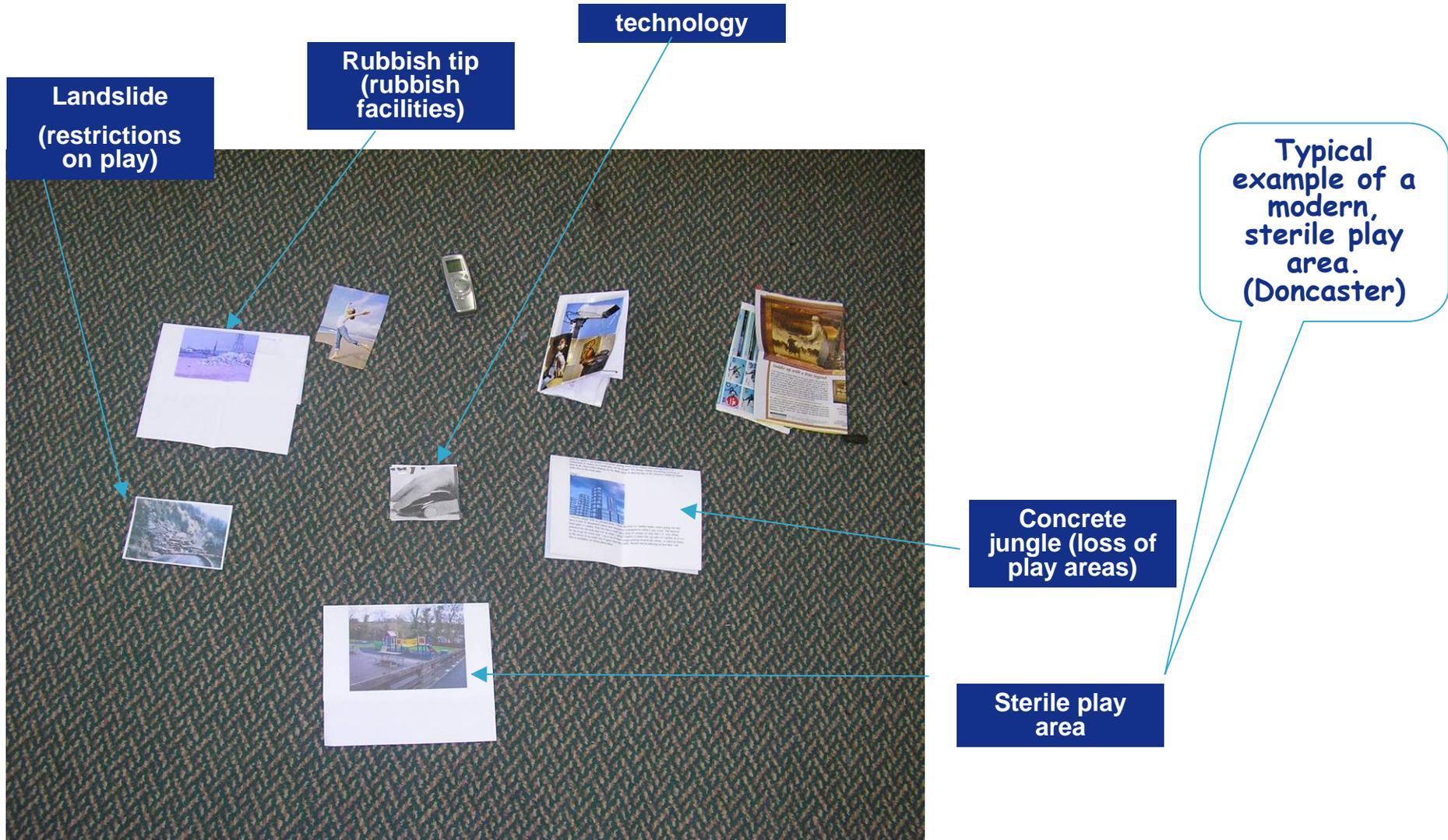
Landslide (restrictions on play)

Typical example of a modern, sterile play area. (Doncaster)

Concrete jungle (loss of play areas)

Sterile play area

Images of paradise lost… (2)

This is how I feel about children playing out today.

Play time in the present time

Street wise,   Unsecure,   Congestion.
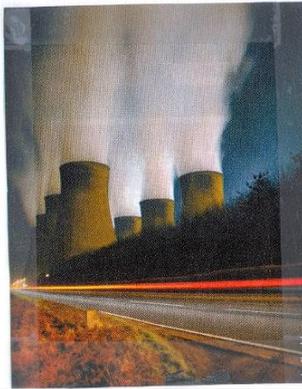
Today I think of outside as grey sky's - concrete buildings - gangs of youths hanging around. Yobs - knives, fearful of what my children may come across or who if they go into the park to play frisbee or football.
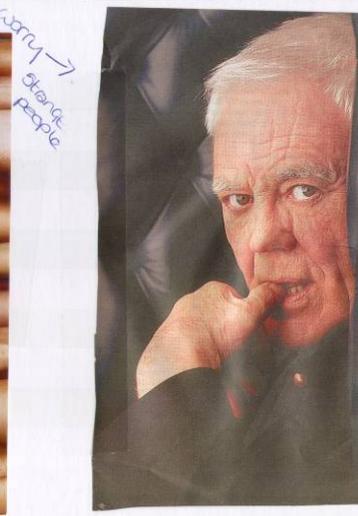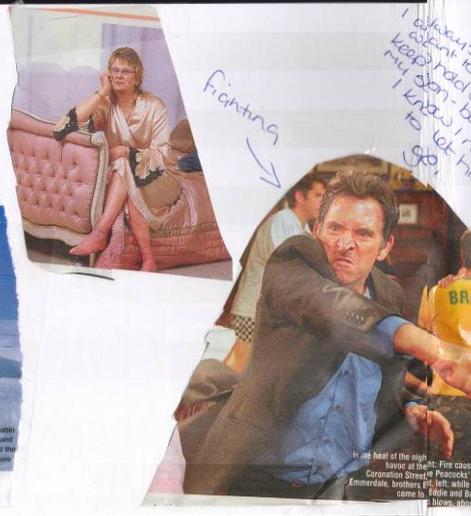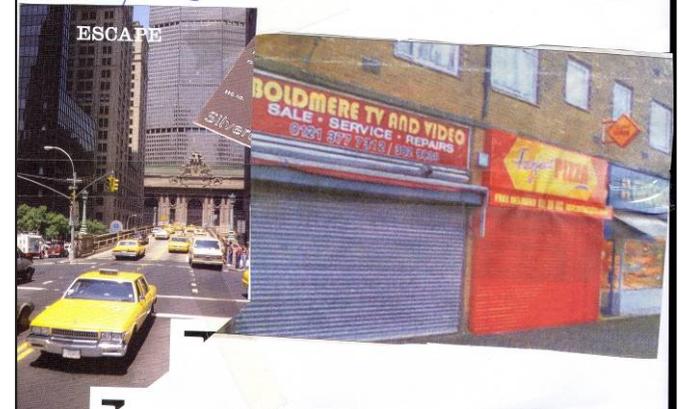
ESCAPE

BOLDMERE TV AND VIDEO
SALE · SERVICE · REPAIRS

Feelings Now

lost in Nowhere!

Worried?

fighting

worry → strange people

I always fight to keep hold of but I know I need to let him go.

Contents

Fears and barriers

- The findings were highly consistent in all groups

- The three greatest fears were:
  - 'Stranger danger'
  - Anti-social violence
  - Traffic

- Other barriers included
  - A lack of play areas
  - Dirty or dangerous play areas
  - Intolerant adults

- The three most talked about issues were paedophiles, youth violence and traffic. These were all seen as being the biggest problems either preventing (younger) children from playing in the streets (and surrounding areas) or preventing parents from allowing children to play in the streets unsupervised

- Traffic, intolerant adults and a lack of facilities combine to displace the problem e.g. children move away from streets to parks, leisure centres, indoors, etc. But this jars with the desire that children should play outside and, preferably, close to the parental home

Stranger danger (1)

- This was a particularly emotive issue

- Felt by many to be a real and growing threat

- Moderators pushed respondents – was this a growing danger or a reaction to media coverage?
  - About half of respondents felt that the threat had always been there but it was better known now
  - The remainder felt the problem had grown recently

- This is a significant barrier to parents allowing children to play outside

- If the threat is real or perceived the restriction is the same

- An interesting connection between the increased anonymity associated with urban growth
  - Everyone used to know who the local paedophile/ 'village idiot' was
  - Increasing migration means an increased number of new and unknown faces
  - A separate linkage (more connected to violence) was made with strangers who had been moved by authorities to local districts

- This was also seen as one of the reasons why parents drove their children to school, thus increasing the traffic problem

Stranger danger (2)

Yes, I know, but you just totally wouldn't let him play out , but not just because of weirdoes, it's traffic and everything. (Birmingham)

About two weeks ago one of the little girls just walked to the shops…and started getting followed …unfortunately the children are now having to stay in. (St. Albans)

The parents know what goes on now [because of media coverage] and won't let the children out to play. (Glasgow)

I wouldn't let my daughter walk to school by myself, no way. It's too risky. (Doncaster)

Real threat

+

Media hype

=

Parental fear

Whether real or imagined stranger danger is a real barrier to street play

Youth violence and anti-social behaviour (1)

- Youth violence and anti-social behaviour is seen as both a nuisance and a threat to other children and adults

- There is the feeling that the problem has become worse over time

- Most were unsympathetic, though we have found a minority view of sympathy for adolescents:
    - They have nothing to do and no place to go
    - Local facilities are very poor
    - Adults don't give them a chance and they respond accordingly

- A greater incidence of knife crime was cited (seemed to be a particularly strong issue in Glasgow). Attributed to a lack of:
    - Respect
    - Deterrence (punishment)
    - Police presence

- We also find that adults perceive the ability to 'hide' in parks and to congregate at shopping areas make them a no go area, indeed they become threatening areas

Youth violence and anti-social behaviour (2)

There's a competition now about whether you can get an ASBO. (Doncaster)

You've got to keep your eye on them. You just can't trust anybody, I mean there's always parks and everything else, but you look at half of them, half of them's no use. And all they're used for on a night is a gang of kids going there. (Birmingham)

There's a park…where a lot of youths hang out… I wouldn't let young children go up there. (Glasgow)

The older children have got nothing around here. (Doncaster)

It's not only sex offenders; there's even kids as young as nine carrying knives.
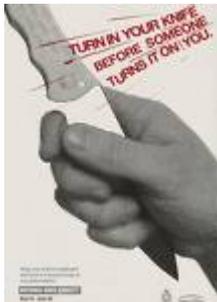
(Glasgow)

I want my children to be walking home [by themselves], I want them to be streetwise but now…you think it's not worth my child dying. (Glasgow)

Changing social attitudes are felt to be to blame (1)

- The breakdown of the community and a feeling of anonymity within the community is also cited

- A lack of respect for elders and the police is felt to have emboldened anti-social youths

- The absence of carers supervising street play is felt to be a legacy of different working patterns

- The increase in the size of areas and the influx of people from different districts was also felt to have undermined community cohesion

- One person cited increased materialism behind an apathetic attitude

- An increasingly litigious society is also making play harder

- A lack of good parental skills amongst some is seen as a key issue

Changing social attitudes are felt to be to blame (2)

There is less community spirit now. (Doncaster)

No community

It has to go back to the [lack] of parenting skills. (St. Albans)

It is going back to a lack of respect for elders…When I was younger it was not just my parents that would tell me off but any adult in the street. (St.Albans)

Litigation

This country is becoming more like America. (Doncaster)

Neglected children

Anti-social

When I was younger, the police walked the beat, and if you were caught doing something you got a tug of the ear and a boot on the backside. And if he took out his notebook and he said, 'Right, what's your name?' you were terrified. Because when you went home and you said to your mum and dad, 'That policeman took my name', you know, you'd get another thump. (Glasgow)

Traffic has increased and drivers have become more reckless

- It was widely felt that traffic had contributed to streets becoming a less safe environment

- The volume of traffic had increased
  - Cars made life more convenient
  - Children are being ferried to school more (partly out of fear/ partly convenience)

- But it's not just the increased number of cars
  - It's also illegal joy riders
  - And legal boy racers

- In terms of solutions to traffic problems some respondents spontaneously mentioned traffic restrictions before the concept of home zones was mentioned

Traffic dangers

Boy racers

Even when they are old enough to drive you get 17, 18 year olds, 3 or 4 lads in cars driving like idiots. (Doncaster)

Joy riders

Joyriding is a major problem round here. (Doncaster)

Traffic volumes

There are certainly more cars on the roads. (Glasgow)

Now over 50% of people drive their children to school. People are in a rush and it's more convenient. (Glasgow)

- Cars are also seen as a precious commodity
- Non-parents don't mind children playing in the street so long as they don't damage their cars
- In effect, children and cars are vying for the same space
- Death or injury caused by traffic is another great fear

A lack of play areas and facilities

- The street was not always viewed as the only appropriate area for play

- Green spaces were also widely mentioned

- The strong desire that children should have the opportunity to play led many to call for more and better facilities

- These included
  - Cleaner and safer parks and green spaces
  - Keeping land undeveloped
  - Ensuring that planners and builders that took up green space built compensatory play areas
  - Free passes for leisure centres
  - More community-based centres

- In relation to streets the emphasis was on safety from traffic and aggressive youths

Unpleasant hazards

There are parks but you see some things that you really don't want your children anywhere near…very often condoms and occasionally needles… (Doncaster)

Need more green space

**Planners and developers have a responsibility**

It's the bloody planners…the council should impose the rules on builders. (Doncaster)

Intolerant adults and restrictions on play

- Another barrier to children playing in urban areas was felt to be the intolerance of adults, including non-parents but especially older citizens

- The friction this caused was said to lead to children being taken off the street and displaced into the house, but more often further afield, and so increasing parental fears

- Those respondents which admitted to finding children playing on the street a nuisance felt the solution lay in tailor-made facilities

- Some found adult and local authority heavy handedness self-defeating, as restricting ball games, for example, could lead to an increase in genuine anti-social behaviour

Elderly people are more intolerant. After the big argument [with them] you tell your children to go up to the park [to play]. (Glasgow)

[children rollerblading] sounds like a train coming past…they should have some proper facilities (Doncaster)

The no ball game signs [are an overreaction] It's just some children kicking a ball around. (St. Albans)

The issues around children not playing out reveal a fear and underlying belief that communities are becoming increasingly fragmented. Something that this vicious circle will only perpetuate.

Fears for children who play out

Become a victim of crime	**Anger neighbours**	**Playground injuries**
Victim of car and traffic accidents	**Become more open to drug abuse**	**Become a perpetrator of crime**

Reasons why children might choose not to play out

They are anti social	**Lazy and lack inclination**	**Poor diet/obesity**
Lack of confidence/ fear	**Bullying**	**TV, games and other distractions**
	Not 'sporty'	

And not playing out leads to

Not being 'sporty'	**Unadventurous children**	**Obesity**
Lacking in confidence	**Anti social children**	**Lazy and lack inclination**
Stymied creativity and imagination	**TV watching and game playing**	

What support might help break the circle?

Traffic calming	**Youth clubs**	**Diet advice**	**Reassure parents**
More space for play	**Involve schools**	**Scouts and Guide movement**	**Police involvement**
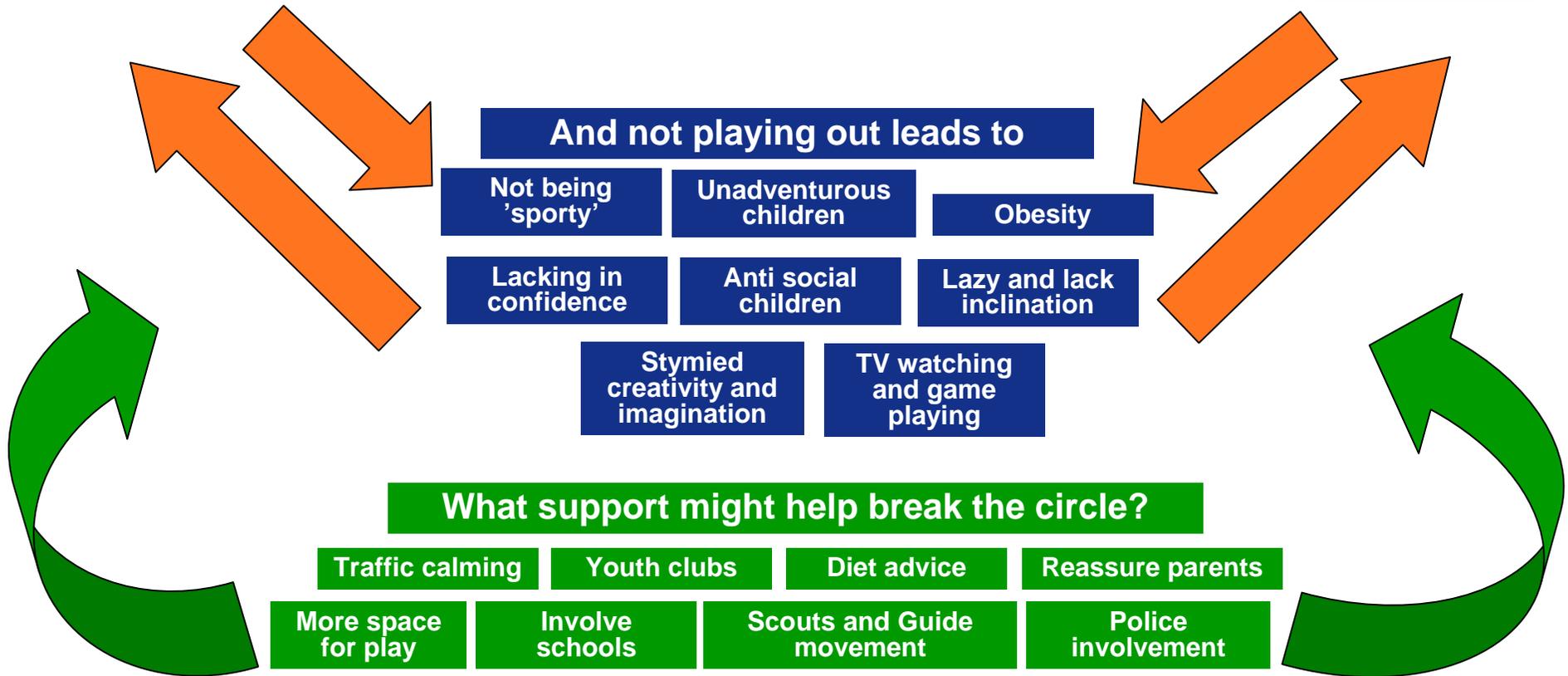
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6. Solutions
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Parents see dangers, non-parents see a nuisance, but both focus on similar solutions

- Non-parents view children as presenting problems to be solved

- Parents, are more aware of the dangers to their children playing outside, which need to be solved

- For non-parents some of the problems were felt to be
  - Annoying people with ball games
  - Making too much noise
  - Children are causing risk of accidents by playing out on the street

- Parents are worried about safety
  - From traffic
  - Paedophiles
  - Youth violence

- Parents and grandparents in Doncaster felt that once a child goes to secondary school they become more relaxed about them playing outside
  - Seen as a right of passage

> The problems were that children were annoying older people with their ball games…and shouting…and there are not enough play areas. (St. Albans)

> [Because of a lack of facilities] you get a lot of children whizzing about on skateboards and bikes. (Doncaster)

> When they go to secondary school they go on their own so you've let them off the lead. (Doncaster)

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Control traffic, provide more facilities and improve safety (1)

- The solutions presented by respondents relate to the controlling traffic, improving facilities and increasing the safety of urban environments

- Parents in particular mentioned reducing traffic in an area or stopping it altogether

- Non-parents and parents were keen for facilities to be improved. By facilities they meant:
  - Retaining green space
  - Cleaning up green space and improving safety by removing trees, having more wardens and improved lighting e.g. making the space transparent
  - Ensuring that new housing developments have provision for good play space including five-a-side, etc
  - Providing dedicated facilities for bikes, rollerblading, skating, etc

- Community-based solutions were suggested and community centres were seen as places which could help with this
  - Youth clubs for different age groups on different nights. Also Installing Playstations in community centres to attract youths in and also to expose them to more active pursuits provided by the centres
  - Clubs and groups making use of community centres

- Home Zones were seen as a good idea
  - One respondent likened them to the attitude which used to exist on housing estates in the past

Control traffic, provide more facilities and improve safety (2)

We used to have things like that in the past when everyone in the street knew that children would be playing there. (Doncaster)

I think some traffic free zones would help. (St. Albans)

They should have Playstations in there to get them in in the first place. (Glasgow)

There's no lighting in [parks] which is why youths gather in them. (Doncaster)

Calm traffic

Better use of community centres

Improve lighting in parks

More wardens/ police
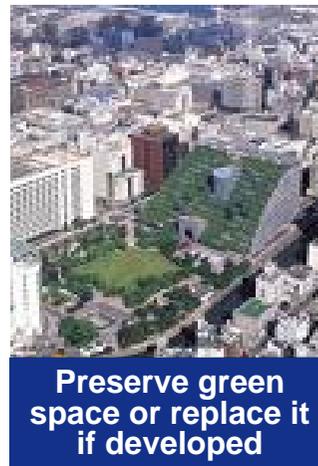
Preserve green space or replace it if developed

New estates are being built [which have] urban play areas. (St. Albans)

Few organisations are currently helping

- Few, if any, organisations were felt to be helping with the provision of play space

- Schools, community centres and churches were mentioned as providing some limited facilities

- The responsibility was felt mainly to lay with local authority who were generally heavily criticised by respondents

- Local authorities were felt to be failing communities for a variety of reasons
  - They were approving building schemes which removed play space
  - They were not subsidising the cost of leisure centres which parents turn to because of a lack of adequate play space

- Central Government's role was felt to be to provide funding

The schools and the teachers aren't prepared to do it, so they don't, they miss out on a lot of that, like weekends away and camping and that sort of thing, because people aren't prepared to take them.

(Birmingham)

The council are supposed to look after the people. (Doncaster)

I think there's not as many fields now…a lot of houses have gone up on [formerly] unused land. (Glasgow)

Ice skating costs money, and they want something to eat it's not always affordable. (Doncaster)

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Conclusions (1)

- Respondents can see the great benefits of play and it is considered a key part of a child's development

- Parents identified many games they used to play and closely linked them with life skills such as socialising and creativity

- However, this was considered a 'Paradise Lost' which today's children are not privy to

- So, parents now feel there are many great barriers to play

- The greatest fears and barriers were 'stranger danger', anti-social violence and traffic

- The worrying tendency for children to be more home bound is felt to be a vicious circle which will lead to a hardening of this insularity

Conclusions (2)

- The current solutions to these barriers involve restrictions on play which they admit are counter-productive
  - Traffic = keeping children indoors, or sending them to parks
  - Stranger danger = can lead to children being kept indoors
  - Youth crime/ anti-social behaviour = leads to children being prevented from playing in certain areas

- Suggested solutions include
  - More facilities for play
  - Better community spirit
  - More green space
  - Less traffic

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