



Word on the street

Children and young people's views on using local streets for play and informal recreation

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Preface

This report forms part of the research for Playday, which is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland. Playday is a national campaign in its 20th year, which celebrates children's right to play and where thousands of children and young people get out and play at locally organised events.

The theme of Playday 2007 '*Our streets too!*' highlights the need for change, so that children, young people and their families can feel confident about playing in streets and areas near their homes all year round. The campaign also highlights that play-friendly streets offer huge benefits to the whole community.

This report is based upon a qualitative study of children and young people's experiences - good and bad - of using their local streets and wider neighbourhoods for play and informal recreation. Focus groups with children in eight locations took place in England and Wales to find out how children use their streets for play - and what they feel prevents or restricts their use of public space for enjoyment.

The research for this campaign has four parts, which when read in conjunction, provides a valuable insight into how children and young people enjoy the immediate public realm – and worryingly – how their play and informal recreation is becoming increasingly restricted.

The data contained in this document, helped shape a wider quantitative survey of children and adults' perceptions of street play and informal recreation conducted by ICM. ICM also conducted an additional qualitative study with adults; the findings are contained in the document *Attitudes towards street play*. The fourth component of this research is a review of third-party studies and literature entitled *Street Play: A literature review*, which was produced by Play England's policy and research department.

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Executive summary

The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data to support the Playday *Our streets too!* campaign. The focus of the campaign is on making streets and areas near children and young people's homes safe for play and informal recreation. As well as producing qualitative data on children and young people's experiences of playing on the streets and areas near their homes, this study was used to inform a quantitative opinion poll, carried out by ICM, into the views of both adults and children on street play.

Eight focus groups were held, seven in various areas around England and one in Wales. A total of 64 children and young people, aged between 8 and 18, participated in the study. There was an even 50-50 split between girls and boys, and 14 of the children and young people we spoke to reported to have a disability.

Ten of the participants said that they never played outside on the streets and areas near their home. These children were not exclusive to inner city areas or rural areas, and they did not play out for a variety of reasons, including parental prohibition and having to do homework. These children chose a variety of alternative activities including playing outside in their gardens, watching television and playing computer games.

The majority of participants who did play and spend time outside on the streets, valued its role in maintaining friendships and having time away from structured activities and adult supervision. Parks and other green spaces were particularly important and many of the children and young people talked about needing time and space to be alone sometimes.

Children and young people in the groups reported doing a variety of different activities whilst outside on the streets near their homes. Chasing games, bike riding, and skateboarding and informal sports were popular. The use of play equipment was also very popular among the younger children. Older children said that they did not use the term 'hanging out' anymore as this was outdated, they used a variety of alternatives such as 'meeting up', 'going out', 'coming out', 'chilling', 'hanging about', and 'passing through'.

The environment of their local neighbourhood had a significant effect children and young people's play. In rural areas children spoke more about playing near woods and streams, and in the cities the focus was more on parks and green spaces and the role these had in their play. Children in both rural and urban areas had good local knowledge and knew where was good for them to play and where was not.

Traffic was a particular issue affecting younger children's ability to play outdoors. Main roads limited children's scope for play in their streets, and safe road crossings were seen as really important in enabling them to be independently mobile in their neighbourhoods. Younger children

also saw litter such as broken glass as a problem and in some cases a barrier to their play.

Children and young people's own fears were also a barrier to their play outside on the streets and areas near their homes, and these largely focused around crime. The younger children had concerns over strangers abducting them whilst they were playing in their street and also of older children who could commit crime. The older children were afraid of fighting with other young people who they may be in disagreement with and bullying was also a concern. Both older and younger children were worried about getting mugged in the streets and areas near their homes.

The majority of the children and young people that we spoke to were allowed to play outside without parental supervision, but this was mostly within certain boundaries and restrictions. Children who did not play unsupervised said this was because of their parents or carers concerns, which included traffic and bullying by older children. Younger children said that playing in the streets near their home was particularly good because their parents could keep an eye on them and they could go home if anything happened. Some of the older children felt that their parents could be over-protective and that this restricted them in going out in their neighbourhood as much as they would like.

Both children and young people saw other adults as a barrier to their play and use of the streets and areas near their homes. The younger children said that grumpy neighbours got annoyed at them for playing outside, and often told them to go somewhere else. All the groups of young people said that the police were sometimes a barrier to their use of the streets and that they were frequently dispersed and moved on when they had done nothing wrong. One group of young people felt it was fun to be out in groups with their friends and that they should be able to this, however they said that they were more likely to be stopped by the police at these times.

The younger children in the study said that teenagers were a barrier to their play in the streets and local area. A number of the children said that teenagers invaded space that they felt was set aside for their play, such as parks with fixed play equipment. Some of the children cited examples of being teased by teenagers, but for most of them it was a fear rather than a reality. However, a few of the younger children with teenage siblings said that the presence of their brother or sister whilst they were playing was reassuring and protected them from being teased.

As a final activity in the majority of the focus groups we asked the children and young people to come up with changes they would like to make to their street to make it better for play or informal recreation. The changes they suggested were mainly around making streets safer from traffic. Providing better transport was a key issue for the older children. Better opportunities for recreation such as skate parks and bike ramps were also very popular.

1 Introduction

The Research and Evaluation Department of the National Children's Bureau were asked by Play England to conduct this research study. The study forms part of the research for the annual Playday campaign, which is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland. Playday is a national campaign, now in its 20th year, where thousands of children and young people get out and play at locally organised events, to celebrate children's right to play. The theme of Playday 2007 is '*Our streets too!*' and its focus is on children and young people being able to use the streets around their homes for play and informal recreational activities. This report presents the findings from eight focus groups, conducted with children and young people, on the subject of playing or spending time outside on the streets near their homes.

A large-scale opinion poll was carried out by ICM in late June and early July 2007 and the results have been published as part of the Playday 2007 campaign. The poll asked over 1000 children and young people aged 7-16 and over 1000 adults about their views on street play. Play England commissioned this study to gain an insight into the experiences of children and young people using the street for play and informal recreation.

The main aim of the focus groups was to explore children and young people's views about the streets and areas near their home, to collect good and bad experiences and to identify possible barriers to their use of their local streets for play and informal recreation. The resulting data was used to inform the development of questions for the ICM opinion poll.

This study had the following specific objectives:

- To produce a thematic analysis of the data and identify the experiences and main barriers to children and young people's use of the streets for play and informal recreation.
- To use the key themes that emerged from the groups to inform the development of a national ICM opinion poll on street play.
- To explore the language used by children and young people to describe their free-time activities, particularly whilst spending time outside on the streets and in areas near their home.
- To produce a final report for dissemination as part of the Playday campaign.

2 Methodology

This study was exploratory and therefore focus groups were selected as the appropriate method of data collection. The majority of groups were conducted in schools or other educational settings and were split into two age groups: 8-11 years of age and 12-16 years of age. There were some exceptions to this: we consulted one advisory group of children aged 10-13, and a youth group for young people with disabilities where one of the participants was 18 years old. The groups covered the same key questions but the activities and wording differed to make it appropriate for each age group. Different techniques were also used to consult the focus group with young people who were disabled. Details of the activities used in the groups are included in the appendices at the back of this report.

All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Sample

A wide range of children and young people were consulted for this study. Groups were held in inner city, rural and small town locations and the types of setting varied from youth groups, primary and secondary schools, to a pupil referral service and educational medical service. Children and young people all over England were consulted and one group was held in Wales. One of the groups took place in an inclusive youth centre and all the young people who participated had a learning disability.

A total of 64 children and young people participated in the study, 50 per cent were girls and 50 per cent boys, and 14 of the 64 children and young people that we spoke to considered themselves to have a disability. Of the children and young people who took part in the study 34 were aged 8 to 11 and 30 were aged 12 to 18. A detailed breakdown of the ages of those who took part in the study can be found in the appendices at the back of this report.

3 Findings

The role of street play in children and young people's lives

In each focus group, participants were asked who played out or used the street for meeting up with friends - and who did not. Out of the 64 participants, the majority, 54, reported that they did use the streets.

Playing and spending time out and about in their neighbourhoods with their friends was very important to the children and young people who took part in the groups. They enjoyed a variety of different outdoor activities despite the barriers that were mentioned. As one of the participants said, when talking about what he did in his area: *'In the house is lame, man.'* (Secondary school aged boy, inner city)

In all the groups, children and young people said that having the freedom to choose what to do, and where to spend time, particularly in contrast to time spent in school, was very important. Even the youngest children talked about having this freedom and time away from parents and adult supervision.

Three of the groups highlighted a particular need to be on their own sometimes:

If they're really upset they could maybe make, not a den, but this place that they go when they just want to be left alone.
(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

The older respondents in particular enjoyed being able to set their own agenda:

If you go to youth club you're only limited to what you can do. When you're on the streets you can do anything you want to do.
(Secondary school aged boy, inner city area)

In one group of teenagers, there was particular scorn for youth workers, specifically those who patrolled their area trying to persuade them to go to the youth club:

Yeah, they're like, would you like to come round to our community club and get off the streets? No, we're fine where we are, thanks.
(Secondary school aged boy, small city)

In one of the focus groups, the aspect of relaxation came up very strongly. Respondents said that they needed time that was not highly structured and organised, in contrast to the rest of their week:

Well if you like think about it, if you go through your week, you think you've got spare time, but say if you go to something like a sports thing, you go to cricket one night and football the next

night, then somewhere else the next night, and you think that's like your spare time. But when you actually get back you treat it as though you like had to do it, so when you think over the week and you think like that, you don't actually get much time.

(Secondary school aged boy, small rural town)

There was general agreement that they needed time away from structured activities, which often took up their free time, to do what they wanted to. This was particularly prevalent for the young people who were undertaking exams and coursework.

Children and young people across the age ranges valued being with their friends when out on the streets near their homes. Younger children felt it was important to have friends who lived near them, and some cited not having this as a reason for not playing out. They also spoke about going to their friends' street to play if it was better for play than theirs. Many of them had friends that did not go to the same school but lived nearby, so being able to play out together was a way of continuing those friendships.

The young people also said that being with their friends was important, they felt that it was fun to hang out in groups and that they should be able to do so. Many of the young people mentioned local meeting up points in their area, where they congregate, to plan what they are going to do or just to sit and chat. Some reported that at these times they were more likely to be moved on by the police or community support officers, because of the large groups that developed. The young people said that they didn't often go out to do a set activity, with the exception of those who played informal sports, and that what they did would depend on where the mood took them.

It was a specific objective for this report to explore the language used by young people when describing their informal recreation and socialising. It was expected that they would use the term 'hanging out'. However, the young people in the focus groups did not like this term, and said it was outdated. Instead they used a variety of words such as 'meeting up', 'going out', 'coming out', 'chilling', 'hanging about', and 'passing through'.

Some of the activities described by children and young people were highly energetic, such as riding bikes, skateboarding and chasing games. Many of them enjoyed informal sports, such as football, cricket and basketball. There were local variants on time-honoured activities such as taking it in turns to kick a ball against a wall, for example in one area the children kicked a ball against the edge of the pavement and called this 'kerbs'. The use of play equipment was also very popular. The availability of parks and other green space was hugely important:

I love my street because it's got a massive park at the side of my house, then at the front there there's a building site with all grass. Then like not even one mile away there's another park, then a roundabout, then another park and another park, and then there's

another park.
(Primary school aged boy, inner city area)

Children who did not play out were not exclusive to either rural or inner city areas. A respondent from one of the rural primary school groups, who lived on a main road in her area said:

Well I can only play if I've got my mum around me because she doesn't let me go out on my own and I can only bike ride on there and I can only play hoop with my hula hoop. So it's not very good.

The children who indicated that they did not to play out on the streets or areas near their homes said they did a variety of other activities. Playing in gardens or driveways was popular amongst the younger children, partly as these were locations where parents could keep an eye on them. Watching television and playing with computer games were the most common way of spending time indoors. Homework was mentioned a couple of times as preventing use of the outdoors, particularly for the young people.

Environmental factors impacting on children and young people's use of the street for play and informal recreation

The neighbourhood

The environment where they live has a huge impact on whether the children and young people that we spoke to played or spent time outside, and also how much they enjoyed it. A lot of them had a good awareness of their neighbourhood environment, and local knowledge of where they could play and spend time.

Participants from the rural areas spoke more about rivers, streams and woods and the role of these in their play. In the cities, parks and green spaces were really important to the participants. The activities were sometimes different and the children in rural areas spoke about playing in fields and rivers, and less about fixed play equipment. For the participants from rural areas, local knowledge was crucial, as there were many areas that looked inviting but were not appropriate.

When asked how they knew which fields they could play in, one respondent said, slightly tongue-in-cheek:

You don't see cows in them or animals in them and if you go and play you don't get shot. And it's far away from the farm and it's a public footpath.
(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

Children in one primary school group showed how they used their initiative to play in spaces that were not originally designed specifically for them, such as the small area of green space in front of a local pub that they used as a communal local play space.

Traffic

One group of children from a rural area showed that they had a particularly good knowledge of their local area; they knew where they could go to play easily, where it was safe from cars, or cows in the fields. Those who lived in estates of houses occasionally commented on the design of them, one girl in particular said that corners were a problem as cars could appear without warning.

Where we live there's lots of corners. They're not really main roads, they're kind of little places that lead in to all the houses and sometimes it's busy when people come home from work and in the afternoons, but it's not really very busy to be honest. It's just like because it's an estate and people just come home to their houses. It's quite quiet, but it's just the corners.

(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

Traffic was a major concern for all the groups of primary school age children, particularly those who lived in inner city areas. But it was also a problem for those from rural areas who lived on the main roads through their village.

There were instances reported of parents not allowing their children to play out because of the traffic:

I don't really do much out on our street, because I'm not allowed to ride up to Marianne's on my bike or anything because of the main roads and I have to cross over it every day.

(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

The older participants did not mention traffic except as a concern when they were younger, or for younger siblings. Their parents' anxiety seemed to lessen as they became older:

Yeah, I live right next to a main road, so when I was younger my mum would never let me out, so I'm making the most of it now, because I've started going out on my own again. When I was in year five and a bit before that I wanted to go out with my mates, but my mum wouldn't let me because the roads were too dangerous.

(Secondary school aged boy, small rural town)

It is unlikely that the traffic had become better during this period; it is more likely that the participant was perceived by his parents to have become more capable with age.

Some participants showed an awareness of road safety, and a local knowledge of traffic behaviour:

We all complain about the main roads, but lots of us, I'm sure lots of us because I see most of us, walk to the shop a lot and when I used to live up by Annie in Dragon Lane, there was, well just pavement next to the road, so you could just walk up to the main

village shop without crossing any roads and stuff. And if you did cross the road it was a safe road where you could see all directions and stuff. And as well as that it was on the main road, but usually you can cross it.

(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

Litter

Another real barrier to play for the younger focus group participants, including participants with disabilities, was the presence of litter on their streets. They were also concerned about recycling and thought more of this would make a better play environment. A lot of the children spoke about broken glass that was left by people drinking on the street and some spoke about finding dirty needles in their area. These children also felt a sense of responsibility to tidy up, and were aware that this could be unsafe:

Litter on the floor ... we all pick them up.

You'd pick them up if they fell on the floor?

Yeah but sometimes if you don't know what it is like a needle, if you don't know what it is you shouldn't touch.

(Primary school aged boy, inner city area)

The same group also reported that wheelie bins that had been put out on the pavement were an obstacle to many of their games. Although some of them did report on incorporating the wheelie bins into their play activities.

Dog mess

Dog faeces on the streets also impeded young children's play. In fact dogs were a problem for the three groups of primary school age children. The younger children referred to dogs scaring them when they played outside. Sometimes the presence of a dog was used to intimidate them, as one young boy said:

If they're bullying you at school yeah and he's got a vicious dog, a Pit Bull Terrier and he lives in your street, so if you come out he'll threaten the dog to try and bite you.

(Primary school aged boy, inner city)

Some children said that neighbours used their dogs to scare the children away from playing near their homes or cars. Children in one of the primary school groups also said that dogs were dirty and referred to dogs' mess impeding their play; one group even suggested 'no dogs' signs, or areas just for dogs as a possible improvement to their area. The older children did not mention dogs.

The weather

A more minor theme that emerged, again affecting the younger participants, was that of the weather. This was more of an issue for children in rural areas. Some of the children said that the rain or snow would stop them going out, but others said that even that would not stop them and expressed delight at the thought of playing in the snow.

Alternatively, the arrival of summer had a positive effect on their lives, because of the better weather and longer daylight hours:

But in the summer I'm allowed out quite late.
(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

Barriers to children and young people's use of the streets and areas near their homes for play and informal recreation

Although the majority of children and young people that we spoke to did play out in the streets, there were many barriers that made it difficult for them to do so. For those who didn't play out in their neighbourhoods there were also a variety of reasons why this was the case, often because of barriers that impeded their opportunities for play and informal recreation.

Children and young people's fears

Fears were a real barrier for children and young people to playing out in the streets near their homes. All the groups that we spoke to expressed fears about their safety and this was often in relation to fear of crime. The younger children's fears focused on strangers kidnapping them and also on older children who might commit crime. They were also wary of other adults committing crime such as drug dealers, and they felt that it was good for them to play in their local streets because they were near to their homes if anything happened.

The young people were worried about fighting with other young people in their local area who they might be in disagreement with. Some of the young people also spoke about fears of bullying, and this was a particular concern in the group of young people with disabilities. Both the older and younger children said they were afraid of getting mugged.

The young people we spoke to felt safer in larger groups, but this often put them into conflict with the police:

Yeah, I feel safer, in a way from the other people, not the police, other people. But in a way, I don't feel safe from the police.
(Teenage boy, inner city)

In this case, the presence of friends was seen to act as a deterrent to possible bullies, to other young people who may have a score to settle, but increased this young man's fear of being stopped by the police.

Some of the children and young people also spoke about how having a mobile phone made them feel safer, as they would be able to contact their parents or carers if they got into difficulty.

Parents

Many of the children and young people we spoke to were allowed out without their parents, with a few notable exceptions. This was invariably within certain boundaries and restrictions, such as making sure their parents knew where they were going and agreeing to be home at a certain time. Of those who were not allowed out, this was often because their parents were concerned about traffic or possible bullying by older children.

Some participants described having relative freedom to use their local streets:

Well, yeah, I'm allowed outside whenever I want but sometimes not too late or I've got to do my homework or got to have dinner, but it's quite a safe environment so I can just walk up the park. And then if I need to come home my mum just needs to open the window and call me because the park's just over the fence at the top of my garden, but I'm not allowed to go over the fence. So she just needs to call me and I can hear it.

(Primary school aged boy, rural area)

But there were occasions when the children and young people reported that parents' fears and anxieties sometimes affected children's freedom to be outside:

M: Oh yeah, because they used to live in the rough part of London and then their mum, oh, they moved here and then their mum was shocked that we were allowed to just go outside freely and play outside without getting mugged or something.

R: So did it take her a while to get used to the idea?

F: Yeah, yeah.

R: And was there something in particular that changed her mind?

F: Well, she just, because she thought, there's another one which is in Class 2 and she went up to the park with them and she could see all the other children, like my sister she's in Class 2 as well were just playing outside freely. So ...

R: So it helped that there were other children around? It made her feel that, oh, it must be safe.

F: Yeah.

(Primary school age group, rural area)

A primary school girl from a small rural town poignantly sums up children's play being restricted by their parents:

And when I've done my chores, it's about 7.00pm, because I have to do my chores after tea, because it's like washing up, wash the kitchen floor. And then when I've done that it's 8 o'clock so I can't play outside and then when my friend comes, I always ask if I can play outside, but dad says no, because no one's around and supervisory - so my dad always stops me from playing outside. It's like if I was kept in a little box and not allowed to go out.

One group of young people reported instances of parents trying to keep them indoors through fear of them being wrongly detained by the police. One young man said he had been detained without charge on two occasions, another mentioned being detained for 24 hours.

In two of the groups with young people, especially amongst the younger teenagers, there were occasions when they felt their parents acted in an over-protective way and did not trust them to act responsibly:

I have to say though, parents can be, well my parents can be a bit too over-protective sometimes, I mean it's a bit irritating. They think they know where I'm going, they think they know what my friends might do, but I know my friends too well, they wouldn't do anything bad

(Secondary school aged girl, small rural town)

And this boy from a small coastal town gives another more specific example:

M1: My mum rings me every hour, rings my mobile.

R: Just to check that everything's OK?

M2: Oh that's not fair.

M1: And then I have to go in at about 7.00.

We can see from the response of the other boy that this seemed unfair to him. Some of the participants with disabilities reported that although they were allowed out, their parents preferred and were happier for them to stay indoors.

Other adults

For all the focus groups, across the age range, the most frequently mentioned barrier to their play on the streets and areas near their homes was relationships with adult non-family members. This included neighbours or adults in their local area, the police and community support officers.

The younger children complained about grumpy adults, frequently neighbours who became annoyed at them when they played out. The

children felt this was unfair, but reported that it didn't necessarily stop them using the streets. For example, a primary school boy from an inner city area said he continued to play ball in an area labelled 'No ball games here', even though a local resident threatened to call the police.

What was noticeable was the participants' sense of humour about their experiences; they often related them as anecdotes that made their peers laugh.

There was an awareness that some streets were more welcoming to them than others:

F1: The streets that have more children in them, they're most friendly, but some streets which have maybe elderly people

F2: Yeah, not so.

F1: Not so many children. But elderly people probably like to stay there to have peace.

(Two primary school girls from a rural area)

One group of young people in a rural secondary school felt that adults were often afraid of young people their age because of the negative media portrayal of their age group and that this affected their freedom outdoors:

Because I think it's like, because on the news it's like they never talk about how good people are. The majority of us our age are good, it's just that everything that gets on the news is about teenagers vandalising and doing loads of bad stuff, and so we get, we get all that on us as well, so we've been labelled, like thugs, and we're not.

(Secondary school aged girl, rural area)

All the groups of young people reported having some difficulties with the police in their area, and this was the case in areas ranging from the inner city to the countryside.

There were several claims that the police targeted the wrong people:

R: So is there anything that could stop them from playing out in their street do you think?

M: Police.

R: The police?

F: They let the drunken people and the weird people go.

(Young people from a small coastal town)

And from a young male participant from a small rural town:

The police, one time I was in town, like all the drunk ones, they came over to the sober ones really, they never came over to the drunk ones and they just let the drunk ones basically do what they want, shouting and everything, they came over to us, saying why? I never said anything, but it's like they were swearing at us and everything.

Another member of the same focus group mentioned that certain areas become known as areas where troublemakers meet. The young people felt that this meant that law abiding young people had to think about avoiding those areas:

There's loads of groups of people like drinking and stuff, teenagers, round the park, and if you want to go there and just meet up with some people and relax, you don't want to do it because if the police come you'll get accused of doing it too.
(Secondary school aged boy, small rural town)

The young people in the focus groups reported that they were more likely to be stopped by the police if with a large group of their friends, although there were instances of them being stopped in twos and threes, or even alone.

Opinion was divided about community support officers. For example a couple of girls from a small rural town found them intimidating and related negative feelings. But others from the same town found community support officers more helpful than other police officers. They mentioned by name a particular female officer whom they saw as especially good at her job. When she saw them, she knew their names and asked how they were. It was being shown respect that made these young people think highly of the local police:

No because police even though some of them sometimes can be bad, police sometimes treat you with respect.
(Secondary school aged boy, rural area)

The participants were aware of where this respect was absent and spoke of how little respect some police officers had for young people.

Conversely, some of the younger children said that they wanted to see the presence of more police on the street:

... in the park, there's often teenagers hanging around and once, me and my granny were going down and the teenagers sitting on the swings and nobody could go on the swings because they were just sitting there. And maybe if you had a police officer that was in charge of the park and they, if the police officer says, children want to go on the swings, can you go and sit somewhere else?
(Primary school aged girl, small rural town)

Teenagers

Younger children in the focus groups felt a strong anxiety around teenagers in public space. Teenagers were felt to be a barrier to younger children's play, particularly when these young people were using space that children felt was set aside for them:

So if there's teenagers there playing football and stuff you can't stop them, but it's just sometimes when they, they play there when you would like to play there and you've got a reason to play there. But then there is parks where teenagers can play. In the fields they play, but then when they hang around in the park and they're supposed to be for play then it's annoying.
(Primary school aged girl, rural area)

Some of the respondents cited actual examples of being teased by older children, but for most of them it was the fear of this happening that affected them. The young people also felt that some young people were a real problem and a nuisance and that they would get in the way of younger children playing. This indicates that there is a conflict between some young people or teenagers and younger children about using play areas and spaces.

However, for the younger participants, the presence of an older sibling whilst playing was often reassuring:

If teenagers try to boss you around or something my brother can stick up for me or something. Or if someone's trying to hurt me, or something, my brother might tell them to stop it and stuff like that.
(Primary school aged boy, rural village)

Occasionally participants said that they had to be accompanied by older siblings if wanting to go to particular places:

I play in the garden more because if I go out, if I want to go out to the park or something I have to go with my sister or brother because you have to cross the road to get there.
(Primary school girl, rural village)

Changes for better streets for play

In the majority of focus groups the final activity was a brainstorm of various changes they could think of to improve the streets and areas around their home for play and informal recreation. This was done to gain an understanding of the key areas that the participant would want to change.

We developed a list of the participants' suggestions in each group and asked them to vote for their favourite. The results were grouped thematically as the individual numbers for various items were so small. As the table below shows, the most popular type of changes were those to do with traffic and transport; individuals suggested changes in this

area such as free transport, no joy riders, less cars and safer road crossings.

The next most popular was recreation; this covered outdoor facilities such as sports pitches and courts, bike ramps and skate parks but also indoor areas mainly without structured activities and hideaways. The changes involving food included having a 'huge sweetshop' in their street.

Both respondents, who chose police, said that being treated with respect by the police was the change they would like to see. The respondents who chose changes to make a cleaner street environment, included suggestions for areas free of dogs, broken glass and litter and cleaner pavements.

Type of change	Number of votes
Traffic and transport	19
Recreation	16
Food	6
Cleaner street environment	5
Police	2

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers an insight into the views and experiences of children and young people about using the streets and areas near to their home for play and informal recreation. The study highlights that playing outside locally, often on the streets or in areas around them is very important to children and young people. Being out and about in their local community is key to their social development, through making friends in their area, and to their enjoyment of their free time.

Children and young people enjoy a variety of activities when they are out on the streets and the majority of these, particularly for the younger age group, are very energetic. Older children and teenagers like to be outside in groups with their friends but feel that they are often discriminated against because of their age, both by police and other adults in their neighbourhood. This is a barrier to young people's freedom in public space and impedes their opportunities for informal recreation that they need and have a right to. Recent government legislation on 'positive activities' promotes safe places for young people to meet up with friends, but the experiences of young people themselves are in direct conflict with this message.

There is a conflict of ownership around play spaces between younger children and teenagers or young people. A lot of children in the study felt that teenagers were getting in the way of their play, and the teenagers in the study felt that they were being discriminated against because of their age. It is possible that lack of relevant opportunities for young people are at the root of this problem and that creating these opportunities for young people would be a possible solution.

Intolerant adults were one of the main barriers to children and young people's use of the streets and areas close to their homes in the study. Negative attitudes towards children and young people in public space are at the root of many of the problems the study highlighted. Traffic is a barrier to children and young people because adults see themselves as the primary users of public space. Therefore public streets and roads have developed in such a way that children and young people are secondary users, with cars coming first.

Outdoor play and informal recreation is important to children and young people of all ages, and the street and areas near their home are often where this takes place. Therefore it is essential that children and young people have access to the streets and that the barriers they face are addressed.

Appendix 1

Younger children's focus group activity schedule

Warm up

To help the children feel relaxed within the group before the research questions began, they were asked to talk to the person next to them and find out their name, age, and what they had for breakfast. They then introduced the person next to them to the rest of the group.

Activity 1

The focus group was split into two smaller groups, and each group was given two sheets of A3 paper. Each group was then asked to draw a picture of what they thought would be a good street to play in and what they thought would be a bad street to play in. When they had finished their drawings they explained them to the other group. The data from this activity was not analysed, it was merely used to introduce the idea of street play before asking the key questions.

Activity 2

The children were given a piece of card with the following statement on: 'Emma and Jake are both 9 years old. They like to play outside in the streets near their home, after school and at the weekends and school holidays.'

They were then asked the following questions about the statement:

What do you think is good about them being able to do this?

Is there anything bad about it?

Is there anything that could stop them from doing this?

Activity 3

The children were asked to form a line, with those who thought their street was really good for play at one end of the room and those who thought it was really bad at the opposite end. They were then asked the following questions:

Do you play outside on the streets around where you live?

If yes: What do you do?

If no: Why not?

All:

What stops you from being able to play out on the streets?

What do you do instead?

What makes it easier for you to play out on the streets?

Do your parents let you play out on the streets?

How do adults treat you when you are playing outside on the streets?

Activity 4

The children were asked to suggest possible changes that they would like in their street to make it better for play. The researchers wrote the suggestions on a piece of flip chart paper and then asked the children to put a sticker next to the one they felt was the most important.

Older children's focus group activity schedule

Warm up

To help the young people feel relaxed within the group before the research questions began, they were asked to talk to the person next to them and find out their name, age, and what their favourite film was.

Activity 1

The focus group was split into two smaller groups, and each group was given two sheets of A3 paper, one with 'a good street to spend time in' at the centre of it and one with 'a bad street to spend time in' at the centre. The young people were then asked to write or draw around the heading what they thought would be in a good or bad street to spend time in. The data from this exercise was not analysed, it was done merely to introduce the young people to the idea of using the streets before asking the questions.

Activity 2

The young people were shown a piece of card with the following statement on: 'Kelly and Dan are both 13 years old, they live in the

same area. Close to where they live is a row of shops; they like to meet up by the shops and in the streets with their friends at weekends and after school.'

They were then asked the following questions about the statement:

What would you call this activity? Hanging out? (Probe what hanging out means.)

What do you think is good about them being able to do this?

What is bad about it?

Is there anything that could stop them from doing this?

Activity 3

The young people were asked to form a line, with those who thought their street was really good to spend time in at one end of the room and those who thought it was really bad at the opposite end. They were then asked the following questions:

Do you hang out on the streets around where you live?

If yes:

What do you do when you hang out?

Who do you hang out with?

What do you think stops other young people from being able to hang out on the street?

If no:

Why not?

All:

What stops you from being able to spend time outside on the streets?

What do you do instead?

What makes it possible for you to spend time outside on the streets?

Do your parents let you spend time outside on the streets?

How do adults treat you when you are outside on the streets?

Activity 4

The young people were asked to suggest possible changes that they would like in their street to make it better for play. The researchers wrote the suggestions on a piece of flip chart paper and then asked the children to put a sticker next to the one they felt was the most important.

Disabled young people's focus group activity schedule

The methods used for this group were devised through discussions with their youth workers and other professionals working with young people who are disabled. All the young people had a learning, rather than a physical, disability.

Warm up

The researcher arrived at the group setting an hour before the focus group session was due to start, and accompanied the young people on their trip to the park. Spending time and chatting to the young people before the focus group began enabled the researcher to build a rapport with the young people in the group.

Activity 1

Because the group was small, the young people worked on their own rather than in groups. The young people were asked to draw a good street and bad street to play in, but were not asked to explain their drawing to the group unless they wanted to. Some of the young people in the group were asked to select photographic cards with images of things that would be in a good and bad street for play, they then put the cards in two piles one for a bad and one for a good street. This method was particularly important for the young people who had limited verbal communication.

Activity 2

The young people were asked to form a line, with those who thought their street was really good to spend time in at one end of the room and those who thought it was really bad at the opposite end. They were then asked the following questions:

Do you play out on the streets around where you live?

Do your parents let you play out on the streets?

What do you do when you play out?

What do you think stops other children from being able to play on the street?

If they don't play out:

Why not?

All:

What stops you from being able to play out on the streets?

What do you do instead?

What makes it easier for you to be able to play on the streets?

How do adults treat you when you are playing outside on the streets?

Activity 3

The young people were asked to suggest possible changes that they would like in their street to make it better for play. The researchers wrote the suggestions on a piece of flip chart paper and then asked the children to put a sticker next to the one they felt was the most important.

Appendix 2: Monitoring data

Table 1 Group type

Group name	Type of setting	Region	Type of area
Group 1	Pupil Referral Unit	Midlands	Inner city
Group 2	Young People's Advisory Group	South east	Small coastal town
Group 3	Primary School	Wales	Inner city
Group 4	Primary School	North west	Rural town
Group 5	Secondary school	North west	Rural town ¹
Group 6	Medical Service Learning Centre	North west	City
Group 7	Primary School	South west	Rural village
Group 8	Play setting for disabled children	London	Inner city

Table 2 Gender

Group name	Girls	Boys	Disability/spec. needs	Total respondents
Group 1	1	6	0	7
Group 2	3	5	4	8
Group 3	6	5	0	11
Group 4	5	3	3	8
Group 5	3	3	0	6
Group 6	7	4	1	11
Group 7	6	2	1	8
Group 8	1	4	5	5
Totals	32	32	14	64

Table 3 Ages

Group name	8 yrs	9 yrs	10 yrs	11 yrs	12 yrs	13 yrs	14 yrs	15 yrs	16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs
Group 1	0	0	0	0	0	2	5	0	0	0	0
Group 2	0	0	1	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group 3	2	5	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group 4	0	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group 5	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	0	0
Group 6	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	5	3	0	0
Group 7	0	3	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group 8	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	1
Totals	2	14	10	8	5	7	7	7	3	0	1

¹ Groups 4 and 5 took place in the same town; Group 6 was in a small city in the same area.

Table 4 Ethnicity²

Group name	White	Black	Mixed heritage	Asian	Chinese	Other
Group 1	3	3		1	0	0
Group 2	7	0	1	0	0	0
Group 3	2	3	6	0	0	0
Group 4	8	0	0	0	0	0
Group 5	6	0	0	0	0	0
Group 6	11	0	0	0	0	0
Group 7	6	0	2	0	0	0
Totals	43	6	9	1	0	0

² Ethnicity data not available for Group 8.



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