

Facilitating play on housing estates

This study, led by Alison Millward and Rob Wheway, looked at twelve housing estates built between the 1890s and 1990s in order to ascertain both children's demonstrated and desired preferences for places to play. Through observation and interviews, the study found that children prefer a diverse outdoor environment on the front street, with opportunities for extending their free range mobility along footpath networks and traffic calmed roads. The researchers found:

-  Children used all the opportunities housing estates offer, not just the designated play areas.
-  Children's needs were multifarious, including: places for physically active play and quiet games; places which encourage social contact; and places which allow them to be mobile on foot and by bike.
-  Children stayed at each individual attraction for a relatively short time. They enjoyed being mobile, travelling from one location to another; their access to as large an outdoor environment as possible was best served by the incorporation of footpath network and a cul-de-sac layout.
-  They enjoyed socialising and wanted to play "where it's at". These were places where there were strong possibilities of interaction with other people, i.e. junctions of paths, by shops, in front rather than back gardens.
-  Most children played where they could 'see and be seen'. This suggests that parks and formal and informal open spaces are best located along the footpath network or adjacent to well-used pedestrian routes.
-  The researchers conclude that:
 - Any policy which tries to corral the children into a 'safe place' would seriously limit their play opportunities and would probably be doomed to failure, because it is likely that it would be ignored or not used effectively.

For children to exploit their environment fully, traffic speed on estates needs to be reduced to 10 mph, with as much of the road and pavement as possible visible to motorists and pedestrians within residential roads.

Introduction

Children playing in the outdoor environment have been a traditional part of our streetscape, usually remembered with warmth and excitement. However, considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that children “do not play out as much as they used to”.

Research has demonstrated that children’s ranges have been dramatically reduced by the increasing dominance of the motor car. Considerable efforts have been made to keep children safe by restricting their movements. These restrictions, together with the view of some that children playing outside are a nuisance, have meant that housing estates have been built with little consideration for how children will use their environment.

The purpose of this research was to gather information which would assist planners and developers to ensure that children’s play is facilitated on housing estates. In addition, the researchers considered feasible and practicable ways that would enhance the estates by enabling children’s play to enjoy its place within the community.

Children at play

Through observing children at play, the study found that:

- a significant part of children’s play activity concerns moving between different preferred locations and visiting, or diverting from a route/activity, to engage with friends and acquaintances;
- a vital part of play is choosing which location or friend to visit and making the journey there. Exercising these choices, and the consequent travel time, take up more time than any other individual activity;
- the majority of play outdoors is active (75 per cent) involving walking, running, ball games, use of wheeled vehicles and play equipment. The highest levels of imaginative play occurred on estates with a variety of front street surfaces, front gardens and access to raw materials from nearby informal open space;
- other research by the authors suggest that periodically, a quiet street game (eg marbles, pegs) will become fashionable.

Differences between boys and girls

The relative proportion of boys to girls (67 per cent to 33 per cent) seen playing outdoors was closer than has been found in previous research. This could be because this study was confined to investigating children’s play relatively close to home. Alternatively, it may be that girls are becoming more liberated in their use of the outdoor environment, as evidenced in the rise of girl’s involvement in football and rugby.

Preferred places to play

There was a marked contrast between what children described as their regular and favourite locations for play in interviews and their observed behaviour.

Children said their regular and favourite locations were:

Open space (park, grassy area, field)	56%
Street/road	23%
Gardens (mostly back)	23%
Play area	21%
Friend’s home	19%
Trees	17%
Outside house	16%
Shops	14%

(percentage total is greater than 100 because some children gave more than one answer)

However, the researchers observed them playing mostly in the following areas:

Roads/pavements	46%
Public open space/grassed areas	18%
Gardens (mainly front)	14%
Play areas	12%

Children still used the road/pavements of the street in front of their own homes as the main place to play. Alternatively, they might play by the home of a friend or relative. Movements away tended to be ‘round the block’.

The influence of estate design

Estates which stimulated the highest level of outdoor play were those with the greatest variety of front street surfaces and the slowest traffic. Estates which stimulated the widest range of play activity and satisfaction amongst both children and parents were ones with footpath networks, cul-de-sac layout, formal and informal public open spaces and play areas.

Children over 10 and teenagers interviewed felt they were not well catered for and wanted more footpath networks, sports pitches and courts and pools for fishing.

Play space and playgrounds

Children placed a high value on playgrounds, parks, public open space, trees and grassed amenity areas. This was confirmed by both the frequency and the enthusiasm with which they were mentioned in the interviews.

Research which has concentrated on the length of stay at designated play places has tended to cast doubts on the appropriateness of such provision. This would appear to be a misinterpretation of the findings, coloured by the belief that what children need is a safe place to play rather than a variety of opportunities to play between which children can make choices. When children observed for the study had a range of opportunities, they freely chose to visit them for short periods rather than stay at one for prolonged periods.

Dangers

Children and parents perceived dangers in moving away from their homes and immediate surroundings. The dangers mainly concerned traffic and bullying and some interviewees also mentioned ‘stranger danger’.

There was some evidence that these fears reduced in areas where traffic speeds were reduced and consequently children moved more freely round their estate.

Guidelines for design

Based on these observations, the researchers make the following recommendations for the design of estates:

Objective	Measures
To enable children to move freely round their estate on foot, bicycle, skates or other wheeled vehicle.	Footpath network linked to grassy areas, school, shops and bus routes.
To travel safely without danger from traffic.	<p>Traffic calming measures to limit car speeds to 10 mph; short straight sections, bumps, cul-de-sacs, change in surface material or colour, roundels, pinch points, mini-roundabouts and sleeping policemen</p> <p>Cul-de-sac and no-through-route layout</p> <p>Narrow sight lines on approach roads and sharp angle turns into residential roads</p> <p>Wide sight lines to enable drivers to see children moving between pavement and road within residential roads</p> <p>Car-parking off road, on drives or in bays to increase visibility of children moving between pavement and road.</p>
To be able to play in front or within sight of their homes.	<p>A variety of play spaces and surfaces incorporated in the front street landscape, such as walls, sitting areas, grassy areas and sections of wider pavement, to encourage girls especially to play outdoors, as they tend to have more restrictions placed on them than boys</p> <p>Front gardens with good visual oversight from kitchens and living-rooms</p> <p>Footpath network linked to grassy areas, tarmacked areas, play areas, school, shops and bus routes.</p>
To be part of the community and the community's interactions.	<p>A variety of play spaces and surfaces incorporated into the front street landscape, such as walls, sitting areas, grassy areas and sections of wider pavement, again particularly to encourage girls to play outdoors</p> <p>Public open spaces located along popular pedestrian routes to shopping centres, schools and other well-used public buildings such as estate offices, to increase the level of informal community supervision.</p>
To be able to play in the natural environment.	<p>Trees and hedgerows conserved and incorporated as street landscape environment features to encourage climbing and imaginative play</p> <p>Public open spaces incorporating play equipment (with swings and a slide as a minimum), trees, wild areas and flat grassy areas for ball games.</p>
To be able to play in purposely provided play opportunities	<p>Play areas located along footpath network, within public open space, adjacent to public buildings or well-used pedestrian routes, to allow for a level of informal community supervision</p> <p>A variety of play spaces and surfaces incorporated into the front street landscape, such as walls, sitting areas, grassy areas and sections of wider pavement, again particularly to encourage girls to play outdoors.</p>
To be able to play football and other ball games	<p>Public open spaces incorporating play equipment, trees, wild areas and flat grassy areas for ball games</p> <p>For seniors and teenagers, a footpath network, flat surface for sporting activity, laid out pitches and courts, a fishing pool and places to meet, in public open spaces, within or adjacent to estates.</p>
To be able to play outdoors within the home environment	<p>Back gardens with sections of fence or gate which allow children to see what is going on in the street</p> <p>Front gardens with good visual oversight from kitchens and living rooms.</p>
To be able to attend playschemes, clubs or other organised activities	<p>Facilities designed or useable for playwork, either paid or voluntary, regular or occasional</p> <p>Play areas located along footpath network, within public open space, adjacent to public buildings or well-used pedestrian routes, to allow for a level of informal community supervision.</p>

Conclusions

Much thinking on children's play, by both professionals and parents, has concentrated on the desire for 'a safe place to play'. Children have been perceived as being in danger or of being a nuisance by being on the streets. The provision of play areas and playgrounds has therefore, been seen as the appropriate response to these perceived problems.

Considerable thought has been given to ensuring that playgrounds for children are both safe for the children and provide interesting play experiences. There has also been considerable research and debate about provision in terms of numbers of playgrounds, either related to population size or distance from home.

This research demonstrated that the main activity children playing outdoors were involved in was purposeful movement: that is, they were walking, cycling or occasionally roller-skating purposefully in a definite direction. Thirty-seven per cent of the observation work showed children engaged in this type of activity, with a further 4 per cent appearing to do this for the purpose of a particular errand.

This finding is crucial to an understanding of how children use their environment and why designing housing estates to facilitate pedestrian and cycle movement for children is so important. Interviews with the children revealed very definite ideas on preferred play places. What is clear is that they travel from one to another, trying them out and meeting different friends. The travelling to and from constitutes a significant amount of time spent outdoors.

This is not to suggest that children no longer have favourite play places. The children's answers to the questionnaires clearly indicate that they have very definite ideas of what are good places in which to play. However, even when somewhere is popular with the children, accessible and safe, they still show no desire to stay there all the time.

The researchers conclude that there is a need to change our way of thinking. The aim should be to provide a safe *and* interesting environment for play, not just safe places in which children can play.

About the study

The aims of the research were:

- to observe children at play on a variety of estates, measuring the range of their activities and the relative popularity of different locations within each estate;
- to interview children and parents to ascertain their preferences for places to play and discover their assessments of how good or bad their estate was for play;
- to provide a set of guidelines for planners, providers and managers of housing estates that might translate into policy and practice which they could implement.

During the summer of 1996, over 3,500 observations were made of children at play on twelve council, private and housing association estates (built 1890-1990). Following the observations, 236 children and 82 parents were interviewed using structured questionnaires. Information was also gathered from estate managers, local planners and youth workers about their perceptions of where children played on the estates and any problems or particular benefits associated with this.

Further information

The full report, *Child's play: Facilitating play on housing estates* by Alison Millward and Rob Whewey, is published by the Chartered Institute of Housing in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 900396 26 2, price £9.95).

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 143 *Housing associations and non-housing activities* (Apr 95)
- 198 *Residents' views of housing association estates* (Nov 96)

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Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3084

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers and practitioners. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.