**Children’s Right to Play and the Environment**

**Introduction**

I am Rob Wheway of the Children’s Play Advisory Service Ltd. I worked for children’s play since the early 1970s. My relevant knowledge and experience is detailed in an appendix which gives links to appropriate research publications.

This discussion paper is welcome because it does address the issue of play in the environment. The vast majority of children can only play in their immediate environment and so the right to play depends on the right to be able to access the outdoor environment in which they live.

Promotion of facilities with playworkers no matter how good will only ever cater for a small proportion of children. Prestigious play parks to which parents may take their children at the weekend, if it’s not raining and if there are no domestic commitments, will never meet children’s every-day play needs.

What is disappointing in this paper is the fact that there appears to be very limited knowledge or understanding of how children’s play in their own environment and when and if they play in designated play places near their home.

This is particularly worrying as children’s freedom to play has been diminishing for many decades.

By “play” I mean everyday (7 days per week and over 300 days per year) with friends and neighbours and without supervision (control by adults), though there may be oversight (can be seen from home)

**Play in the Environment**

My research has found that 3 key criteria determining if or where children play out are location, location, location.

Location They need to be able to get to the place to play. Parents quite reasonably keep children indoors if the road outside their house is too dangerous. This is not “risk aversion” or “cotton wool children”, it is that the risks of being on the road have risen dramatically in the last century and therefore parents are undertaking a sensible risk assessment in not allowing their children to play out.

Location Children want to play where they can “see and be seen” by a trusted adult. This is somewhat surprising because in remembering their childhood people often refer to “secret places”. During my research children have mentioned their secret place or even shown it to me but the observational research shows that they spend little of the time in this hidden-away place although they can hold it in their minds for a lot of the time. Children are naturally cautious and if they feel threatened want to quickly run home to safety.

Certainly up to the age of 10 my research has found that both children and parents want to keep within sight and sound of each other or the child may be able to play within sight and sound of a friend’s parent.

Location Children want to play in places which are “where it’s at”. In other words they want to be in places where they see people coming and going, not just other children. They want to feel part of the community rather than shut away. It is why, given the choice, children prefer to play in front of their house rather than in back gardens.

What I have found is that children tend to play in places that fulfil these 3 criteria whereas they do not tend to play in places that fail these criteria.

The criteria are so strong that a place which appears to have high “play value” may be less well used than a low play value location which does fulfil the 3 criteria. The difference in distance between the 2 play places may only be 50-100m which indicates how important the 3 criteria are.

It follows from this that the majority of children only have the street outside their homes as a potential regular play place. This has been the case for countless generations. Even though children’s ranges were larger in previous generations nevertheless the regular play place always was the street.

Besides the security of being in sight and sound of home so that they can run home if they feel threatened it is just much more convenient. They can go to the toilet, run home for a plaster or have it “kissed better” if they have grazed their knee, if the ice-cream van arrives they can ask for some money, if they want to change the game they can easily get the ball, toy car, pretend costume, boxed or electronic game etc.

If a group of children decide to travel to a play facility such as a park or public open space they can’t go until the last one is ready and must come back when the first one has to return. On the other hand, games close to home can be adapted as children come and go. Making those adaptions is sophisticated and an essential part of childhood development.

No local authority is going to knock down significant numbers of houses to provide play places. Therefore any solution to the problem of children’s lack of freedom to play cannot rely on play places being created. It crucially depends on children being able to access their immediate environment.

What I have found is that where the road outside the child’s home is safe from motorised traffic then children will play out as they have for countless generations. In addition, where children play out then parents talk about “keeping an eye out” for each other’s children, so there is more neighbourliness. Roads safe from traffic are good for adults as well as children.

In addition designated play places which fail to fulfil these 3 criteria are more likely to be vandalised and to attract inappropriate activities.

We know from zoos that animals, who cannot run around just outside their houses, get fat and display repetitive behaviour. May I suggest you visit your local zoo and see how the Meerkats run around outside their house. Then look at your typical residential road and see how the children cannot play outside their own house.

**Recommendations**

1. Play strategies should be based on increasing all children’s freedom to play rather than the provision of prestigious opportunities for the few
2. In roads of family housing priority should be given to pedestrians unless there are significant reasons such as traffic distribution or emergency vehicle access

**Diversions in the Discussion Paper**

Like almost all play strategies I have seen the discussion document has allowed itself to be diverted away from child’s “right to play”.

Play is more not “equally important” as “organized activities”. We should not be diverted by the strong lobbies for the provision of various facilities. In play children have to make the rules themselves, adapt them to circumstances, resolve disagreements, reach compromises, cater for different ages at the same time. This is far more developmental than when adults make the decisions.

Priority needs to be given to children “playing naturally” rather than having to wait until “natural play” facilities can be established. Children will play out in exciting ways in very ordinary concrete, tarmac or earth/grass areas. They will get the benefit of play far more than if they have to wait years for someone to build a “Garden for Children”. Of course having trees and flowers to play around are desirable but for most children this is not going to be possible for the foreseeable future.

“In many low income communities where there are few alternatives children may play in streets whether or not these are designed for play or not”. This is patronising class bias. My research has found plenty of affluent communities where children cannot play out in the street and where there would be great play benefit to them if pedestrians were given priority.

“Parks and playgrounds are often appropriated by dominant groups, typically older boys”. This is largely a misreading of research. If children are asked what stops them going to a playground they will often state “big boys”. My observational research has found this is rarely the reality. In addition, I have often inspected playgrounds in Belfast, Knowsley (Liverpool), London Boroughs of Lambeth, Newham, Tower Hamlets and other towns and cities where anti-social or other activities might be considered likely. I usually go on my own and given my size and age might be considered vulnerable.

There is little evidence of “dominant groups”. What children are expressing is a fear rather than a reality. It emphasises the need to play within sight and sound of their own home. Emphasising this “dominant group” idea as a major hindrance to play is likely to result in money wasted on policing areas rather than strategies which improve children’s freedom to play. It also fails to understand how massive a commitment of expenditure this would be.

Those promoting children’s “right to play” must stop regarding it as a facility issue or a supervision facility. We are only going to be effective if we realise that play is an environmental issue.

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**Appendix**

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**Publications**

Rob Wheway is the author or co-author of the following publications. These and other publications are free to download from [www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk](http://www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk/)

* “Child’s Play: Facilitating play on housing estates” (with Dr Alison Millward) (1997) (reprint 98); pub. Chartered Inst. of Housing & Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Based on observational and interview research at 12 areas of housing
* “Most Play Strategies are Wrong”, Wheway R – A paper given to the International Play Association conference in Cardiff in July 2011.  Based on observational and interview research at 2 large areas of housing in Cardiff. It explains why children’s play strategies should be based on the outcome of “can children play out?” rather than the output “how many play facilities are there?”.
* “Can Play Will Play – Disabled children and access to outdoor playgrounds”, (with Alison John), Pub. 2004, National Playing Fields Association. Based on observational and interview research.
* “Traffic and Children’s Play”, Pub. Play England and Children’s Play Advisory Service – A study demonstrating how children's transport (walking/cycling) has been misunderstood and ignored with damaging consequences for children's play.  Recommendations are made to rectify this.

**Observational and Interview Research**

Since 1993 Rob Wheway has carried out the following observational and interview research for a number of local authorities and housing associations and submitted reports to them.

The methodology has been to identify routes round a few typical areas of housing and carry out 5 or 6 traverses of them at times when children might be expected to be playing outdoors. It would include play facilities, parks etc., if any were present. The observational research deliberately avoided any interaction with children but noted where children were seen, their gender, approx. age, activity, if accompanied by adult(s).

This was followed by doorstep interviews with children and parents which informed the research further. It also found differences between what people said and what actually happened.

The methodology is further explained in “Child’s Play: Facilitating play on housing estates” (above)

In all over 70 areas of housing in England and Wales have been researched as detailed below.

* Basingstoke & Deane BC (Playschemes, Disabled Children, Play in Environment)
* Birmingham City Council (Play in Environment and in play areas)
* Cardiff City Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
* Elmbridge Borough Council (Play in Environment ,Play Areas)
* Knightstone Housing Assoc. (Play on Housing Estates)
* Lewes District Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
* Lichfield District Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
* London Borough of Lambeth (Adventure Playgrounds)
* Oxford City Council (Playspace, Play in the Environment and Playschemes)
* Medway Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
* Waltham Forest Housing Action Trust (Play/Youth Work and Playspace)
* Waverley Borough Council (Play in Environment, Play Areas)
* William Sutton Housing Trust (Play Areas and Where Children Play)

**Consultations**

Rob Wheway, with colleagues, has carried out over 20 consultations at new sites or where improvements are proposed. Questionnaires are circulated to 300-800 dwellings. To ensure that children’s views are heard the team carries out consultations on site usually on a Saturday.

The questionnaires aim to find out strategic information such as catchment (how far children travel) how often they attend, whether or not they are accompanied by an adult or older sibling, if there is somewhere they prefer, where they play on an ordinary day. They are asked how this particular site could be improved with a limited budget.

Typically about 50 interviews of children and parents are carried out on site and 30 to over 100 questionnaires are returned (dependant on free-post envelope). The answers are analysed with the children’s views separately detailed and a report submitted to the Local Authority with recommendations

This approach has meant that the process is not dominated by a few vociferous adults as often happens with community consultations.

This research gives insights into children’s preferences. It also usually shows that the facility catchment for free play is more limited than imagined and that few children are allowed to travel unaccompanied.

**Inspections/Assessments of “Fixed Equipment Playgrounds**

For 25 years Rob Wheway has inspected hundreds of playgrounds each year (usually to EN1176 including risk assessments). These inspections have included Skateboard areas, MUGAs (ball games areas), bespoke and “natural” play areas and also Adventure Playgrounds (with Playworkers). His observational and interview research has meant that for many of his clients he carries out additional assessments of the play facilities.

These assessments cover casual supervision/social safety, reasons for the level of usage, whether the facility caters for free (unaccompanied daily) play and or visits with parents (usually 1 or 2 times per week), why a facility is, or is not, vulnerable to vandalism, and the Play Value of the equipment provided, User stations, Age suitability. Recommendations are made to improve the facility and what, if any, further development is suggested.

As the majority of sites are re-visited annually (up to 20 successive years) the assessments are fine-tuned and can take into account new equipment being installed or modifications or deterioration of play opportunities through neglect or poor location.

It also means that there is a reality check on playgrounds which have been opened to great acclaim but which over a few years do not live up to expectations