



## HALF AN ACRE FOR EVERY CHILD

(Half an acre is approximately half a football pitch)

### The Fair Play for Children response to "Embedding the Play Strategy"

#### Introduction

There are many good intentions within the Play Strategy. In particular there are many statements in it which stress the importance of children's need to play out and the fact that such play takes place within the public realm and is not necessarily restricted to specific play facilities. These are to be welcomed.

The document falls down where it fails to give any targets which are measurable and would undoubtedly improve children's freedom to play. The worry is that strategies will be produced which are worthy in sentiment but make little difference to the reality of children's play. This is largely true of the documents which have already been produced by Local Authorities as part of the Government's intention to improve children's play.

There is also a failure to differentiate between children's everyday play which is "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" and other activities such as children's accompanied visits to a play area and school-based activities.

At Fair Play for Children we emphasise "the child's right to play" not "the child's right to an occasional visit with a parent, when the parent has time", nor "the child's right to have fun activities at school premises".

"Play" is an everyday activity for children and not a therapy, treatment or curriculum-based activity

#### Background

To realise how far children's play has been restricted we need to go back to the early 1960s and for generations before then. The reality was that the vast majority of children lived in houses in residential roads and they were free to play on the roads and pavements outside their own house. They could play there unsupervised but with the security of knowing that they could run home if they felt threatened.

Both then and now parents and children liked the play to be within sight and sound of their front door or within sight and sound of a friend's parent's front door, possibly in the next street.

Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.org](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.org)



Then as now they preferred to play out and be part of the community rather than restricted to their own back garden.

The space therefore they had for play would approximate to half the size of a football pitch (half an acre).

The consequence of this was that children got healthy exercise virtually every day. Half the days in the year (school holidays and weekends) children could spend most of the time playing outside and even on school days there was time to play outside. This would average out to somewhere between 2 and 4 hours per school day over the year.

Not only were they getting healthy exercise but they were also developing their social and imaginative abilities.

Any game requires children to learn to take turns, for each one to play a part and to unselfishly admit when you are out or caught. Any game also requires children to develop basic skills of organisation and rule making, a vital part of their development into healthy adults.

All these benefits are without adult supervision or coaching. Children learn them naturally through their play.

What research has shown is that even nowadays where the road traffic is very slow, such as in short cul-de-sacs, children still play out but also interestingly the parents talk about the friendliness between neighbours and how they "keep an eye out for each other's children".

The lack of traffic also benefited older members of the community who could walk and talk in their road with their friends without fear of being mown down. We would strongly suggest it is the children and the elderly who, in many ways, bind the community together and it is the domination of the car which is preventing both from fulfilling that role.

Unless we change the whole priority of residential side roads from priority for the car to priority for pedestrians, children will continue to be worse off than children were up to the early 1960s.

There is no way that the provision of play areas can anywhere near approach the space to play that children previously had. Even if the Government or Local Councils were to insist that 2 or 3 houses were knocked down in every street to provide a play area, the children would still not be able to use them as the traffic would still be too fast for parents to allow them to play out.

**Recommendation:** The strategy should aim within 10 years to enable 80% of school-age children to be able to play out in their own street in safety.

**Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.net)**



## Children's Travel

Again if we go back to the early 1960s and beyond that to when compulsory schooling was introduced the usual practice was for children to walk to school unaccompanied.

Typically a parent would take a 5 year old to school for the first few times but after that they would go unaccompanied or perhaps with a sibling or friend. By the age of 8 children would go to their local church or community building to attend a uniformed organisation or to a local library or other facility unaccompanied. They would also undertake errands to the local shops.

A high proportion of primary school children from 5 years old upwards also came home at lunchtime unaccompanied. They were, therefore, making 4 unaccompanied journeys per day.

The walking to school is clearly not play. However, it is a reasonable assumption that if children were allowed to walk to school on their own then they would also be allowed to play out in their own street and probably go into the next street if a friend lived there and the parent was at home.

There is, therefore, almost certainly a very strong correlation between children's ability to walk to school unaccompanied and their freedom to play out within their own neighbourhood.

Observing children coming out of a primary school now it is usual that almost all are accompanied. It is, therefore, almost certain that very few have the freedom to play out now as their parents or grand-parents would have enjoyed.

There is no reason other than the speed of traffic on residential roads which has made it less safe for children to travel unaccompanied. There has been no increase in "stranger danger". What is happening is that as children play out and walk round their neighbourhood less everybody knows each other less well and so the fear of "stranger danger" goes up but it is the fear rather than reality. This can clearly be seen in research where children on the same estate play out on quiet roads but do not on busy roads. If the fear of strangers was the thing that prevented children playing out, the level of playing out would be constant across the whole estate.

We believe that children's freedom to travel to school unaccompanied is a reasonable proxy indicator of whether or not they can play out. It has the advantage that it would be very simple to collect the data as it would take a school class 2 or 3 minutes to indicate, probably by show of hands.

It is also the fact that successive Governments have not recognised children's walking around their own area as part of "transport", yet where they can play out children make thousands of short journeys each year.

**Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.net)**



Recommendation: We recommend that within 10 years at least 50% of 5 year olds are able to travel to school unaccompanied and that at least 80% of primary school age children be able to travel to school unaccompanied.

Recommendation: The Government includes children's walking/cycling around their neighbourhood as part of its policy and calculations on transport.

## National Indicators

The National Indicator 199 of children's satisfaction with local parks and play areas will not give the sort of information required as it will tend to concentrate on the output of the number and quality of playgrounds rather than children's freedom to play.

A child who is taken to an excellent play area by their parents once a fortnight as long as it's not raining is likely to give that playground a high satisfaction rating but the reality is that they might be confined indoors for the rest of the time and have no freedom to play out.

Conversely a child who can play happily on the green verge or between the garages in their estate and does so as part of daily play may not have a playground within reasonable distance and so may be fairly hazy about whether it is good or not, or it may actually be a very limited playground.

The former child will be counted as having good play opportunities which would be completely untrue and the latter child will be deemed to have poor play opportunities which again would be equally untrue.

This is therefore a poorly thought-out concept and should be abandoned except where a local authority is looking at specific improvements at individual playgrounds.

Recommendation: We recommend that surveys should find out what proportion of children can play out happily in front of their own houses or within sight of those houses.

## The Play Strategy

The Play Strategy funding for "at least 3,500 free play areas and 30 fully staffed adventure playgrounds or parks" is a most welcome development. However it is unlikely to improve the everyday play of more than 1% of the children of this country. Even if twice as many children benefit as we think, that is still less than 2%.

Some will argue that it is a much higher number. We would stress that our concern is children's "right to play" rather than their right to an occasional visit when a parent has the time

**Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.net)**



to take them. Whilst the destination playgrounds are important family facilities, they do not cater for everyday children's play.

In fact the Play Strategy will increase children's freedom to play by much less than the 1% indicated above. At many places what it will do is improve the opportunities available at existing playgrounds rather than provide new opportunities for children who previously could not play out. In fact if children do not have the freedom to play out in an area, the mere provision of a playground, however exciting, will not increase that freedom.

Recommendation: The Government change its focus from one of provision of play facilities to one which gives priority to the child's right to play.

## Conclusions

We do not doubt the good intentions of the Embedding the Play Strategy but feel it will do little to improve children's play opportunities unless its focus changes from provision to one of opportunities for play.

The key question is "Are children free and able to play out within sight and sound of their own front door" If the answer is "no" then they have almost certainly lost the right to play.

For 50 years less and less children have had the freedom to play out. We should be committed to drastically reversing that trend.

Rob Wheway  
Fair Play for Children

30 October 2009

## Appendix

**Observational and Interview Research** The above comments are based on research of children at play carried out by Rob Wheway

"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 12 housing areas)  
From (free) <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/childs-play-facilitating-play-housing-estates>

The following were carried out for local authorities and housing trusts

- Basingstoke and Deane (approx 6 housing areas)
- Birmingham City Council (approx 4 housing areas)
- Elmbridge Borough Council (approx 4 housing areas)
- Guildford Borough Council (1 village)
- Lewes District Council (approx 8 housing areas)
- Medway Council (approx 4 housing areas)

**Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.net)**



# PlayAction Issues

[www.fairplayforchildren.org](http://www.fairplayforchildren.org)

Oxford City Council (approx 6 housing areas)  
Knighstone Housing Association (approx 16 housing areas)  
Waltham Forest Housing Action Trust (approx 4 housing areas)  
William Sutton Housing (approx 10 housing areas)  
Neighbourhood Road Safety Initiative -2 Gr. Manchester Districts (6 housing areas)

Specific consultations at proposed new, or being developed, playgrounds have been carried out for local authorities (approx 22 playgrounds)

L.B. Lambeth - consultancy on 12 adventure playgrounds which included observations of children in surrounding streets and consultations with children at the playgrounds

"Can Play Will Play – disabled children's access to outdoor playgrounds" (with Alison John) (2004) pub. NPFA report can be downloaded (free) from [http://www.npfa.co.uk/downloads/can\\_play\\_will\\_play.pdf](http://www.npfa.co.uk/downloads/can_play_will_play.pdf)

Fair Play for Children, 32 Longford Road, Bognor Regis PO21 1AG Tel: 0845-330 7635  
[administration@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:administration@fairplayforchildren.net) [www.fairplayforchildren.org](http://www.fairplayforchildren.org)

**Published by Fair Play for Children : [playaction@fairplayforchildren.net](mailto:playaction@fairplayforchildren.net)**

*Working for the Child's Right to Play*