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Children's Outdoor Play: Exploring Parental Concerns About Children's Safety and the Changing Nature of Childhood

GILL VALENTINE* and JOHN McKENDRICK†

*Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, U.K.

†Department of Social Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University, City Campus, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA, U.K.

Abstract: This paper uses the evidence of research conducted in North-West England to explore the extent to which parents consider that there are adequate public facilities and play opportunities in their neighbourhoods for their children; and it considers whether children's experiences of outdoor play is changing, by comparing contemporary children's play with both previous academic studies of children's independent use of space and with parents' accounts of their own childhoods. The findings presented suggest that the vast majority of parents are dissatisfied with the public provision of play facilities in their neighbourhood. Temporal and spatial changes also appear to have occurred in patterns of children's outdoor play over the last three decades. Fewer children are playing outdoors and the location of most outdoor play is now closed centred on the home rather than the street. There appears to be no link between play patterns and play provision; children are no more likely to play outdoors, or play further away from home if there are adequate opportunities provided within their neighbourhood. Rather, the evidence of this paper is that the most significant influence on children's access to independent play is not the level of public provision of play facilities but parental anxieties about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

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Child's play: political commitment and public anxiety

Play is a means through which children's physical, mental and creative capabilities are developed. This point is not lost on international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) which recognises that play is one of the fundamental rights of the child, alongside more familiar concerns such as protection from exploitation, abuse and neglect, and provision of

health and education services. Formal recognition of this right is expressed through Article 38 of 'The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (hereafter 'the convention') which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and ratified by countries, spanning every continent and harbouring a rich diversity of cultures (Rosenbaum, 1993). The convention directs those governments who ratify the treaty to promote and improve children's play experiences:

State parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child... and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for... recreational and leisure activity (UN, Article 38:2).

Of course, the rationale for this concern varies widely between continents and countries. In contemporary western societies, where the dominant imagining of childhood is of an idyllic, happy time when a child is temporally set apart from the adult world (although there are multiple and conflicting definitions of the age at which this division occurs) and is free from the responsibilities of adulthood (Valentine, 1996a; James and Jenks, forthcoming), concern about children's play is centred on debates about the provision of adequate play facilities (in terms of quality and quantity) and on the ability of children to play safely free from the risk of accidents, and traffic or 'stranger dangers' (Hillman *et al.*, 1990; Cahill, 1990). In contrast, in the developing world, the debate about the right of children to play is concerned less with the practicalities of play, and more with the fundamental right of children to have the opportunity to experience a contemporary western understanding of 'childhood' (see for example, Katz's (1993), comparative study of children in the Sudan and the U.S.). Given such disparate conceptualizations of the right of children to 'play', this paper focuses on one specific context only—contemporary Britain. It begins by outlining geographical studies of children's play; then, using evidence from recent research conducted in North-West England, it explores the extent to which parents consider there to be adequate facilities and play opportunities for their children in their neighbourhoods; and it examines some popular concerns about children's access to outdoor play opportunities by comparing parents' accounts of their children's play with their accounts of their own childhoods.

Geographies of children's outdoor play

The importance of play

While geographers have been criticised for neglecting children in their research (James, 1989; Matthews, 1992; Smith, 1995), there is a significant body of work within the discipline (which also straddles environmental psychology) on children's environments including studies of children's cognition, competence, behaviour, attachment to place, and access to/use of space (see for example, Blaut *et al.*, 1970; Blaut, 1971

and Blaut and Stea, 1971, 1974; Anderson and Tindal, 1972; Bunge and Bordessa, 1975; Moore, 1976, Hart, 1978; Downs, 1985; Moore, 1986; Downs and Liben, 1987; Spencer *et al.*, 1989; Ward, 1990 and Katz, 1991). Two major projects, carried out by Bunge (1973, 1975) and by Blaut and Stea (1971) in the early 1970s appear to have laid the foundations for much of this work. Bunge's (1973, 1975) research in Detroit and Toronto exposed the way children are oppressed by the built environment. This recognition inspired him to advocate that working-class children should be the focus of our academic and political activities (Bunge, 1975). Blaut and Stea's (1971) Place Perception Project initiated a significant collection of studies on children's mapping skills and cognitive development. Much of this work is comprehensively summarised by Matthews (1992) in *Making Sense of Place* and Aitken (1994) in *Putting Children in Their Place* (see also Gold and Goodey, 1989).

Play has been central to study of children's environments because, as Matthews (1992) reminds us, play is the primary mechanism through which children become acquainted with their environment. In particular, the work of psychologist Jean Piaget (1952, 1971) has strongly influenced much geographical work on children's environmental cognition. Piaget argues that a child's intelligence is not innate, but rather is developed in complex ways through its participation in its environment (Aitken, 1994). His theories have been employed (and indeed criticised) by a number of geographers studying children's perceptions of space (Hart and Moore, 1973; Moore, 1976; Michelson *et al.*, 1979; Hart, 1984; Matthews, 1984a, 1982b, 1986, 1992; Downs *et al.*, 1988). In particular, Blaut (1971; Blaut and Stea, 1974) has argued that the freedom to play and move freely in the environment is the means by which children develop 'natural' mapping skills; while Hart (1984) and Aitken (Aitken, 1994; Aitken and Herman, 1995) have employed Winnicott's (1971) psychoanalytical notion of transitional space—the space of play—to understand how children learn to distinguish between self and other.

Play has also been the subject of study in its own right. Perhaps the seminal geographical contribution is Moore's (1986) comparative analysis of preadolescents' play behaviours and preferences in three urban neighbourhoods in England. In this study, he demonstrates the particularities of play, place and the contribution of environmental context in shaping play behaviours (see also Bronfenbrenner, 1979),

while still drawing out the dominant play preferences and temporal rhythms expressed by the children he interviewed. Good design features of planned play areas, observational surveys of play patterns and the debate on the relative advantages of planned and natural play opportunities have also been addressed by Hole (1966), Department of the Environment (1973), Ward (1988, 1990), and Matthews (1992).

This body of research has considerably aided our understanding of the geographies of outdoor play provision and children's play patterns and preferences. Thus, at the macro-geographical scale, Wright (1971) found that larger towns provide more opportunities (formal facilities and behavioural settings) for children's play, while at the micro-geographical scale, Hill and Michelson (1981) charted the uneven geographies of facilities, services, land use, spaces, places, activities and programmes relevant to children and teenagers throughout Toronto, as part of the Toronto Whole City Catalogue Project. Indeed, Playlink, a London-based voluntary organization are currently devising a project to map the field of provision in the U.K.

However, interpreting the geographies of play provision for children is highly problematic. First, analysis must recognise that there are different groups of children with different needs. This is most clearly evident with respect to age (compare the needs of pre-school children and teenagers, for example) but also in relation to gender and disability (Thorne, 1987). While sometimes these differences may warrant different sorts of provision, different needs do not necessarily imply different facilities. As Hayward *et al.* (1974) demonstrate, playgrounds are imbued with different meanings and serve different functions for the same children at different stages in their childhood. A second problem was identified through place-centred research by Moore and Young (1978). Although they confirm the importance of estate design and residential location in delimiting children's play opportunities, they also draw attention to how each estate creates opportunities for play, irrespective of the level of formal play provision.

A more radical line of argument has been made by writers such as Ward (1988, 1990) and Sibley (1991) who suggest that there is often a mismatch between play provision for children and what children actually want. Their research, and systematic observational surveys by the Department of Environment in the

U.K. (Department of the Environment, 1973), have found that children often prefer to play in 'flexible' landscapes, such as waste ground and open spaces, rather than playgrounds and other formally designated and provided playsites. For example, in a cross-national study in the U.K. and U.S., Moore found that open spaces/outdoors, community/commercial utilities and homesites were the three most favoured sites for children aged between eight and 13; while studies by Hart (1978) and Woods (1985a,b) have both observed the amount of time children spend playing in the dirt or the snow, building tree houses and constructing their own dens and secret places. Indeed, one of the very attractions of outdoor play is the possibilities it offers for children to appropriate public space (space which is normally taken for granted as an adult space) for themselves. Aitken and Ginsberg (1988) observe for example, the way children are adept at turning everything from ornamental ponds to walls into skateboard runs, while Hart (1978) notes the way children often give their favourite places names which reflect the way they use them—'sliding hill' for example. Kevin Lynch's (1977) research in suburban Melbourne found that when children are denied this control over their own play environments—the efforts of the children he studied to establish a bike track was thwarted by adults—they become bored and dissatisfied.

Gender, class and environmental location

Various methods have been used to estimate the extent to which children play outdoors: Newson and Newson (1976) utilised a summary measure that classified a child as either an indoor or an outdoor child; the Department of the Environment (1973) has considered the regularity of outdoor play; and Himmelweit *et al.* (1958) measured the 'exact' number of hours children played out. The Newson's found that 60% of children were considered 'outdoor children' by the age of seven. These studies also found that the amount of time children spend outdoors increases with age. Similarly other studies suggest that as children get older they are allowed to range further from home by their parents. In particular, Hart (1978), in a study of children in an anonymous New England town, identified a significant leap in children's, but especially boys', spatial ranges (the distance children travel away from home unaccompanied by an adult) at the age of 10. This was the age at which parents appeared to deem their offspring to be competent to deal with traffic, although their anxieties persisted about social

threats. Similarly, Matthews' (1987) research in Coventry, U.K., found that parental restrictions on children from a suburban housing estate become more relaxed at the slightly earlier age of eight to nine years old.

Significantly, both these (Hart, 1978; Matthews, 1987) and other studies have found that boys are allowed to play further from home unsupervised and to spend more time outdoors than girls (Coates and Bussard, 1974; Payne and Jones, 1977; van Vliet, 1983; Bjorklid, 1985; Katz, 1993). Summarising Hart's work, Moore and Young (1978, p. 99) explain that:

boy's spatial privileges were accorded a more flexible margin of negotiation with more ambiguous rules, according to the maxim that 'boys will be boys'. Range rules for girls by comparison were more clear cut, allowing for less maneuver as circumstances changed.

In *Children's Experience of Place*, Hart (1978) argues that this gender difference in children's geographies is a product of parents' greater concern for daughters' safety and the fact that girls activities are more constrained because they have more responsibilities in the home than boys. Loyd (1975), writing an early essay on gender differences in children's use of space, had already pointed out that girls and boys are taught different gender roles which are predicated on moral understandings about 'women's place' in the home and vulnerability in public space. This explanation, that girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and are less able than boys to defend themselves against assailants, has subsequently been repeatedly used in different studies to account for why girls are more spatially restricted by parents than boys (Saegert and Hart, 1978; Moore, 1986; Steinberg, 1987; Peters, 1994). Contemporary feminist and postmodern research (particularly within sociology) has, however, promoted the need for researchers to recognise the contested and multiple realities of childhood (James and Jenks, forthcoming). Recent studies of children's play, for example, have found commonalities between girls and boys play, but also complex variations between and within these groups (Thorne, 1994; Medrich *et al.*, 1982). Within geography, research has also begun to address diversity and difference in children's use and experience of space (Aitken, 1994), both within modern western societies (see, for example, Aitken and Wingate, 1993; Woolley and ul Amin, 1995 and Kapasi and Shier, 1992), and cross culturally (e.g. Katz, 1993). Aitken's (1994) work, for example, highlights some of the tensions between the structural

constraints on different children's lives and their individuality.

Other important factors influencing the extent of outdoor play are class and environmental location. Studies suggest that 'working class' children's activities and use of space are subject to less supervision by adults than middle class children (Mercer, 1976), while rural children have more opportunities to range further from home and explore more varied environments than their urban counterparts (Ward, 1988, 1990). The children who are most restricted, both in terms of spatial range and the activities they have the opportunity to pursue, are those who live in high rise apartments. Unlike children living at ground level, children who live several storeys up are a long way from the 'street' which means that when on the street they are a long way from parental surveillance. As a consequence, studies suggest that parents living in high rise apartments are more cautious about letting their offspring play outdoors unsupervised because it is difficult to keep an eye on them (Bunge and Bordessa, 1975; Bjorklid, 1985). Not only do children who live in high rise apartments spend more time indoors than children living in low rise accommodation but they are commonly more restricted in the type of activities they can pursue at home because the density of apartments means they have limited privacy or opportunity to be noisy.

Popular concern about the future of outdoor play

Recently, there has been widespread popular concern in both the U.S. and U.K. about the future of children's outdoor play. Both the popular press and some academic studies have suggested that contemporary children are being denied the outdoor play opportunities afforded to previous generations. Aitken (1994), for example, has argued that the growth of modern high rise apartments, office blocks, and middle class suburban housing developments, is diminishing children's access to space for autonomous play, which he suggests will ultimately lead not only to a decline in children's quality of life but also their geographic skills. This view is reinforced by Katz (1994, 1995), who has drawn particular attention to the way that space set aside for children in the city—parks and playgrounds—is being eroded by disinvestment in community facilities as result of economic restructuring. She points out that "public parks and playgrounds suffer disproportionately in times of fiscal crisis compared with other aspects of urban

life" (Katz, 1995, p. 8). For Katz, this deterioration in the urban environment for U.S. children is summed up by the findings of the U.S. Citizen's Budget Commission, which in 1990 classified four out of 10 parks and playgrounds in New York City as unsatisfactory.

A U.K. survey conducted by MORI for the children's charity Barnardo's painted an equally bleak picture of children's play spaces in Britain. Of the 1069 parents who were interviewed as part of its survey, 35% claimed that there was no playground in their neighbourhood and two-thirds of those parents who said there was a playground in their neighbourhood claimed that it was poorly maintained. This depressing view of children's outdoor opportunities is also shared by Ward (1990). He argues that contemporary rural children, like their urban counterparts, have less opportunity to explore their local environment than previous generations. He attributes this shift not only to the "seductive lure" of television but also to changes in the rural landscape and land ownership which mean that children are increasingly denied access to fields and open spaces.

Children's safety in public space from traffic accidents has also been a focus of popular and academic concern in debates about children's lost outdoor play opportunities. In a landmark study of children's independent mobility (which is widely cited in both the media and academic publications) Hillman *et al.* (1990) compared the freedom children were given to travel independently (e.g. to go to school unaccompanied by an adult) in 1971 with the experiences of children in 1990. The study mapped a drastic decline in children's personal freedom. For example, in 1971 their survey found that 80% of seven to eight year old children were permitted to go to school on their own, by 1990 this figure had plunged to a mere 9%. Similarly, the median age at which children were granted 'licences' (their term for the freedom to make non-school journeys involving catching a bus or crossing the road without an adult) had risen by over 2.5 years. Between 1971–1990 they recorded a drop of over 50% in the number of children allowed to go places other than school on their own, while the number of cycle owning primary school aged children allowed to ride on the roads had fallen from two-thirds to just a quarter. Thus they concluded that "The personal freedom and choice permitted a typical 7 year old in 1971 are now not permitted until children reach the age of about nine and half" (Hillman *et al.*, 1990, p. 106). A loss in children's independent activity in public

space which they blamed on the growth in traffic in this period.

Parent's fears about their children's safety from abduction by strangers (so called 'stranger-dangers') have also been attributed with affecting children's opportunities to play outdoors unsupervised. The MORI survey found that 91% of the adults polled considered it very important for children to be able to play outdoors in safety but that 85% of those questioned think that children's opportunity to play in safety has declined since they were very young, 60% stating that they were very worried about their children playing out safely (McNeish and Roberts, 1995). Several academic studies (e.g. Cahill, 1990) also suggest that parents' heightened fears about 'stranger-dangers' are causing them to shield their children from public space.

Parents fears about young children's safety are not only a product of their concerns about violent adults, but are also linked with contemporary popular anxieties about the changing nature of 'childhood' (Valentine, 1996a). Moral panics about everything from child murderers and teenage gangs, to joy riding and juvenile crime rates, have been used to fuel adult fears that public space is being overrun by violent and unruly teenagers who are a threat to the personal safety of young children, women and the elderly and who are disrupting the moral order of the street (Valentine, 1996a, b). Thus, a significant aspect of the contemporary debate about children's play centres on the issue of parents' ability to control their offspring in public space. On the one hand parents are concerned about children's (particularly those under 12) vulnerability to violence (from older children and adults) and therefore seek to control their play in order to minimise their exposure to danger. On the other hand parents are anxious that older children may become the perpetrators of violence and vandalism or become embroiled in smoking, drug taking, drinking or underage sex, and therefore seek to control their teenagers' outdoor leisure activities in order to minimise the risk that their offspring will harm themselves or others.

Summary

In summary, therefore, the geographical literature on children has emphasised the importance of play to children's quality of life and to their geographical and social development; and it has suggested that children's access to outdoor play is mediated by class,

gender and environmental location. There is contemporary popular concern however that children's ability to play outdoors independently is being eroded. First as a result of a decline in the public provision of play facilities. Second, as a product of the rising tide of parent fear about children's safety. Third, because of anxieties about the changing nature of childhood.

The remainder of this paper uses the evidence of research conducted in North-West England to explore the extent to which parents consider that there are adequate public facilities and play opportunities in their neighbourhoods for their children. It particularly examines how popular concern's about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood may be shaping young people's access to outdoor play opportunities. In addressing these issues the paper considers the extent to which gender and class differences in children's play experiences described by previous studies are being reproduced or contested; and it compares parents' accounts of their children's play with their accounts of their own childhoods.

Contemporary play: patterns and concerns

Methodology

The findings of this paper are based on a two year study funded by the ESRC which used a range of research methods to explore parental concerns about children use of public space. The research canvassed the opinions and experiences of parents with a child aged between eight and 11 years old. This age group was selected because this is the stage when children begin to venture beyond the immediate vicinity of the home environment (Moore, 1978; Matthews, 1987), and when independent neighbourhood play becomes a reality. The study consisted of two stages. First, a self-completion questionnaire with cover letter and return envelope was distributed to parents through primary schools. This asked 75 questions divided in seven sections which explored the parents' attitudes to: the local area, the child's play, the child's travel to school, the child's play through time, their concerns for their child and asked for biographical information about all the household members. Parents were asked to give answers only in relation to the child who had been given the questionnaire at school and not to include other children in the household. Nearly 400 questionnaires were completed and returned.

Second, on the basis of the responses to the questionnaire, 70 households were selected to take part in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Where there were two adults taking a parenting role in the household (some of which were 'social' rather than 'biological' parents) every effort was made to interview both of them, although this was not possible in every case. The in-depth interviews were used to develop issues explored in the survey, to cover additional themes of (often local) importance that were not addressed in the questionnaire; and to explore the complexities and contradictions in parents' attitudes and behaviour. The interviews considered not only parental attitudes towards the child given the questionnaire at school but also other children (older and younger) in the household, and so also explored how parents' attitudes to children's play varies according to a child's gender, age and position in the 'family'. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed using conventional social science techniques for handling qualitative data. Both methods were successfully piloted before being implemented in the research proper.

The research adopted an environmental approach to sampling in a stratified purposive framework. Nine areas were selected on the basis of social class, child demography, and macro-geographical environment¹ (see Figure 1). Census data was used to identify possible areas, whose suitability was then verified by field survey. Thus, the implications of residing in particular types of area could be estimated (area analysis) and the likelihood of reaching particular groups of the population would be increased (individual level analysis). A core-control matrix was devised to ensure that the analytical objectives for area level analysis could be met. Response rates were favourable. On average 40% of parents responded to the questionnaire survey, with area rates ranging from 25% to 62%. In common with other surveys of this type, higher returns were received from middle class areas. However, the key point is that the profile of respondents closely matched that of the parental population for each individual area. In other words, the database comprises a representative sample.

Findings

The vast majority of parents surveyed claimed to be dissatisfied with the public provision of facilities and opportunities for children's play in their neighbourhood (Figure 2). This accords with a study conducted by the children's charity Barnardo's. In a survey of 94

Moulton	Urban Metropolitan Borough	Middle Class	Modern private estate	Average
Thorpe	Urban Metropolitan Borough	Working Class	Local authority housing	Average
Ranwell	Urban Metropolitan Borough	Working Class	Local authority estate	High
Tabor Green	Urban Metropolitan Borough	Middle Class	Private housing	Low
Stocksfield	Urban Non Metropolitan	Mixed Class	Adjoining modern private estate & local authority estate	Average
Hunters Bridge	Commuter Village (modern housing estates developed around former rural village)	Middle Class	Modern private estate & private housing	Average
Granton	Rural Town	Working Class	Private estate & local authority housing	Average
Wheldale	Rural Village	Mixed Class	Private housing, small local authority estate, & farms	Average
Shenford	Urban Metropolitan Borough	Mixed Class	Private housing & local authority housing	Average

Figure 1. Characteristics of the survey locations. Notes: 1. The social composition of the area was initially estimated by unemployment rates. Subsequent analysis, when the social class data became available, validated the initial estimations. 2. Ranwell has the lowest proportion of adults of all electoral wards in Greater Manchester (40.5% of the population are aged under 16), in contrast Tabor Green has one of the highest adult populations (26.5% of the population are aged under 16). The average is 30.5%. 3. The settlement classifications are those of the OPCS for the 1991 Census of Population. Source: Valentine and McKendrick.

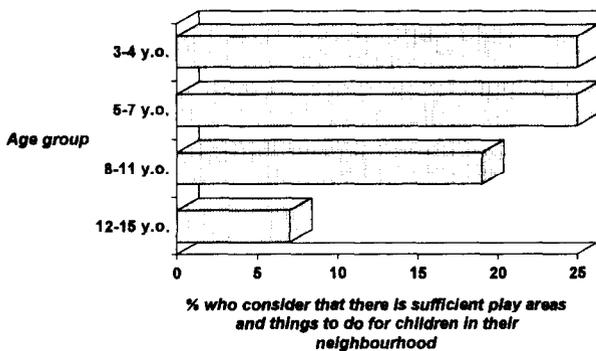


Figure 2. The majority of parents are dissatisfied with the public provision of play facilities. Source: McKendrick.

parents contacted through a range of its U.K. projects, Barnardo's found that parents considered play facilities to be generally poor (McNeish and Roberts, 1995). While there is some variation in the extent of agreement according to the age of the child (the older the child, the more likely it is that parents will consider that there is inadequate provision), overall the status of play provision as a cause for parental concern is readily apparent.

While the opinion that there is inadequate provision predominates for all social groups, there are nevertheless significant (statistically and substantially) differences that can be discerned. First, it is parents who live in predominately working class areas are more likely than those in mixed class areas, who in turn, are more likely than those in middle class areas to perceive a lack of public play provision. Some 91% of working class parents expressed this view, compared to 85% of parents in mixed class areas and 70% of parents in middle class areas (chi square = 20.27675; $P < 0.001$). For example, 96% of parents in working class Thorpe, an area of run-down local authority housing, perceived there to be inadequate local public play opportunities, compared to 75% of parents in middle class Moulton, a modern well maintained private housing estate. Lone parents, are the group most dissatisfied with local public play provision. Their children experience more of the local neighbourhood (more are 'outdoor' children, more play beyond the immediate vicinity of the home) than do children from two-parent families because lone parents com-

monly have less resources (time and money) to supervise and provide other play opportunities for them. Thus, these findings appear to complement the results of the Barnardo's study which concluded that children from low income families and deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to enjoy relatively safe and exciting play opportunities than children from middle class backgrounds (McNeish and Roberts, 1995).

Differences in parent's levels of satisfaction with local play opportunities were also evident in relation to the macro geographical environment. Parents from urban areas (87%) are more likely to perceive a lack of provision compared to parents from rural areas (72%, chi square = 13.00664; $P = <0.001$). For example, only 62% of parents in the rural village of Wheldale were unhappy with local play opportunities, compared to 96% of parents in urban metropolitan Shenford. This reflects the fact that Wheldale parents represented their rural environment as a more idyllic place for children to grow up than the city. The village was seen to offer both access to more space but also more opportunities for environmental exploration, such as den building and climbing trees. Although paradoxically, Wheldale parents simultaneously contested this imagining of the rural idyll, by contradicting popular assumptions about children's safety in the countryside, arguing that Wheldale children unsupervised by adults, are vulnerable both to urban problems such as traffic and stranger-dangers and to specifically rural demons, such as New Age Travellers (Valentine, 1997a). This contested representation of children's outdoor opportunities in the countryside is captured in these contrasting quotations from parents:

Mother: Part of the reason we moved here is cos we've got enough area for them to play about freely and they've got a lot of...

Father: They've got a field to play in and things like that...I'd, I'd be under a lot of pressure before I moved back into a city. Which would be a lot easier for me in a lot of ways, um, to be able to live near the centre but I don't think I'd do it, pure and simple because of the children. (Mother and Father, 'middle class', rural village, Derbyshire).

I mean Slades Lane where the fields are up there, you get a lot of people walking around with their dogs and you never just know who's about. Even when I'm taking the cows up there and I'm walking back—all the wind's blowing at you I always like look behind me because you can't hear anyone coming up behind you...so I won't let them go and play up there. Because we had a load of New Age Travellers up the lane there a couple of years ago and they were there for months. So you never know who's going to suddenly appear around the corner. So it's because of strangers I don't let them go up there (Mother 'middle class', rural village, Derbyshire).

Despite parental concerns about the level of provision of neighbourhood play facilities, at first glance the grounds for public concern over children's lack of actual outdoor play are less readily apparent. Only one-in-twenty parents described their child as an 'indoor child', which was less than a third of the number who considered that their child was an 'outdoor child' (Figure 3a). Nevertheless, this concern can be justified on closer analysis. First, although more parents characterised their offspring as 'outdoor' children, significantly fewer children are now considered outdoor children (23%) compared to when Newson and Newson (1976) conducted their research two decades ago (when 60% of children were described as outdoor children, by the age of seven).

Second, most contemporary 'outdoor play' is actually closely centred on the home and its immediate environs (Figure 3b) in contrast to Moore's study, which found that homesites were the favoured place for only 20% of children's play. While it was often

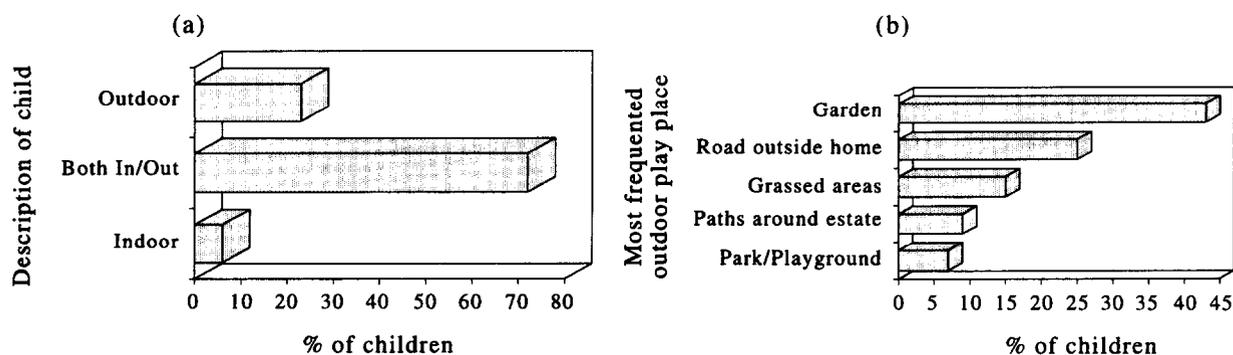


Figure 3. (a) Dominant play domain. (b) Dominant sites of outdoor play. Source: McKendrick.

difficult for parents to ascribe one particular play site as the dominant location of children's play (one-quarter of parents surveyed were unable to provide a single site answer) about 40% of parents responding to the survey said that their children spend most of their outdoor leisure time in private gardens. In other words, a significant amount of children's outdoor play is taking place in 'private' space, rather than 'public' space, so that although children are spending a considerable proportion of their leisure time 'outdoors' (Figure 3a) most have very limited opportunities to play in or explore the public environment independently of adult supervision. Ninety-five per cent of the parents responding to the questionnaire stated that they impose restrictions on their children's outdoor play. This tallies with the Barnardo's survey which found that most children play in their garden or yard (44%) and that 44% of children never or hardly ever played outdoors without adult supervision (McNeish and Roberts, 1995). This woman describes some of the boundaries she imposes on her daughter. They live on a modern private housing estate on the edge of a former traditional rural village, which is now a larger commuter settlement.

She has boundaries here beyond which she will not go. I mean she's allowed to go to the post box which is 100 yards down the road and she's allowed to go up to one of the closes further up. But there are boundaries. She said [her daughter] "could I go to such and such", but I said "no, that's too far". She's got a friend that lives further down but she has to pass the blocks of flats and I am always apprehensive there because it's sort of single people that live there, it isn't parents generally with children and because there's so many people coming in and out there is a place where people could hang round. You see we've got the woods just behind us and they're not—she's not allowed to go in the woods which is—you know causes her real grief cos they'd love to go. And I'd love to be able to let them go and wander through the woods and pick bluebells but it's just too dangerous. I mean there's people go down there and walk the dogs and people go down there fishing. I'm sure they're perfectly nice people but I don't think you can trust anybody these days (Mother, commuter village, Cheshire).

The outdoor play of children who live in rented accommodation (64%) is less likely to be home-based compared to those who live in owner-occupied accommodation (77%, chi square = 5.45394; $P < 0.05$) and children who live in predominately working class areas or mixed class areas (84%) are more likely to be described as outdoor children compared to children living in middle class areas (74%). Indeed, while a clear majority of children spend most of their play time in home-based locations

(Figure 3b), there are particular locales where home-based play is a minority experience. For example, while the outdoor play of 87% of children from Hunters Bridge (a middle class commuter village) could be described as home-based, in Shenford (a mixed class urban metropolitan area) 57% of children spend most of their play time beyond the immediate vicinity of the home.

Dyck (1989a, b, 1990) has argued that routine practices of mothering are constructed and contested locally and that interpretations about how children should be brought up are negotiated and passed on to other mothers at car pools, children's leisure activities, and so on. In the interviews it became apparent that these sorts of social interactions between mothers play an important part in establishing local 'norms' about how far away from home and for how long children should be allowed to play. Thus 'middle class' mothers argued that they experience pressure from each other to impose strict restrictions on their children's play and to chaperone their children to and from social activities. In contrast, mothers from 'working class' neighbourhoods argued that they encounter peer group pressure to grant their children relative independence (Valentine, 1997b, c). These competing understandings of the appropriate way to regulate children's use of space are evident in these quotations:

If I don't go to school to pick the children up I feel very, very guilty because all the mums are there. I wouldn't not pick her up. I think Laura's quite old enough to really walk home from school on her own but guilt makes you go [to collect her] because it's expected [by the other mums] (Mother, 'middle class', commuter village, Cheshire).

I won't say its pressure, I mean sometimes I get a few funny looks [from other mothers] if I say "No they're not allowed", or something like that. And they say "Oh well, you've got to have a little bit of time to yourself, you know, you've got to let them go sometime", and you get that sort of attitude round here. Well that's fine, I'm not telling you to keep them in as long as you don't tell me that I've got to let mine wander out—you know, you work your way, I'll do it my way...I mean if they don't like it well they can lump it can't they, that's the sort of attitude I've got (Mother, 'working class', urban non-metropolitan borough, Cheshire).

Mothers in both 'middle' and 'working class' neighbourhoods whose childcare practices are out of line with the local 'norm' claimed that they were stigmatized and marginalized by other parents. Consequently, some mothers claimed that they restrict their children's play more than they believe to be necessary,

while others give their youngsters greater licence than they would ideally like to, in order to fit in with local 'common sense' constructions about what it means to be a 'good' mother (Valentine, 1997b).

Children of lone parents are the most 'outdoor' children and play most frequently beyond the immediate vicinity of their homes. While many lone parents want to supervise their children's play in the same way as two-parent households, the reality of managing alone is that lone parents often have to allow their children more spatial freedom than other children are permitted because they do not have a partner to share the physical, emotional and financial burden of supervising their offspring with as this woman explains:

Sometimes I think I go too strict and at other times I'm not strict enough. But it lapses you know when you've had enough and they're in and out and in and out and you say "oh go off and play". That's when you run into problems cos they do run off and play don't they (Lone mother, 'working class', urban metropolitan borough, Greater Manchester).

Ironically, while the more heavily chaperoned 'middle class' children are usually perceived to have the better (i.e. more privatized) play opportunities, it is the children from lone parent households whose play is more independent and 'public'-focused. As a result it is these children who may well have the richest environmental experiences because they are able to explore their own neighbourhood environments and to create their own forms of entertainment independently of adult supervision. In doing so they can appropriate spaces such as waste ground for their own imaginative activities and develop local knowledge about their physical and social environment.

The importance of parental restrictions in shaping children's play is also evident in the fact that the adequacy of neighbourhood play opportunities is not linked to children's patterns of play. This seems counter-intuitive in that it would be reasonable to expect that poorer provision in the wider neighbourhood may encourage more privatized, home-based play patterns. However, the proportion of children who were described as 'indoor' children by parents was comparable between those who were satisfied with neighbourhood opportunities (17%) and those who were dissatisfied (21%). Similarly, home-based outdoor play was marginally *more* likely to be the dominant location of outdoor play for children whose parents were satisfied with neighbourhood

play provision (79%), as compared to those whose parents were dissatisfied (71%). Justification for improving play provision on the basis that it will encourage more extensive neighbourhood play experiences therefore seems unfounded because children may not want to play outdoors, or their parents may not permit them to use the public play facilities provided out of concern for their safety.

Gender and class

The picture in relation to gender and play is equally complex. While the parents of boys and girls are equally concerned with the adequacy of play provision, boys are more likely to be described as outdoor children with 84% being described as such, compared to 74% of girls. Moreover, the outdoor play of boys is less likely to be home-based—64% compared to 81% of girls (chi square = 10.78345; $P = 0.0001$). This appears to fit in with the results of the studies described earlier, which argued that such gender differences in play could be attributed to the fact parents are more concerned about girls safety than boys. However, in response to questions about children's safety, 51% of parents responding to the questionnaire said that they considered all children to be equally at risk of abduction. Statistical analysis revealed no significant relationships between the sex of a parent's child and their concerns about safety, the places which they rank as the most dangerous for the child, or the way the child travels to school. Indeed, a common theme to emerge from the interviews was that the publicity given to cases involving the sexual assault and murder of boys has heightened parents anxieties about the safety of boys in public space. Parents also expressed concerns about the vulnerability of boys to violence at the hands of gangs of other children or youths. Unlike girls, who were generally described as mature and sensible enough to recognize and avoid danger in public space, boys were commonly described as at risk alone in public space because as these quotes demonstrate they were described as being more irrational, 'dizzy' and easily led by peers than girls (Valentine, 1997b).

I really don't think girls are more at risk of being sexually abused than boys, it happens to lads as well unfortunately, but I think boys are also more prone to physical violence than girls or getting in with the wrong crowd (Mother, 'middle class', urban non-metropolitan borough, Cheshire).

My son's a bit dizzy [laughter]. He is, he's sometimes not,

sometimes he's on another planet, you know, he, he, he's not very responsible at all really, he's [pause] I mean you do say to him "Don't get into strangers' cars" or whatever but I could see him doing it, I could. She's more level headed. She would come "No", it would come straightaway. She's more sensible. She's quite a dominant person...she can take care of herself [laughter] (Mother, 'middle class', rural village, Derbyshire).

These findings suggest that on the one hand parents' attitudes about boys and girls' vulnerability in public space and their differential abilities to protect themselves may be changing which supports the evidence of recent sociological work on parenting that has argued that "parents are moving toward less sex-typed child rearing" (Coleman *et al.*, 1989, p. 334). On the other hand, however, despite this evolution in parenting, more boys than girls are described as outdoor children.

While overall children's outdoor play is becoming more home centred (and therefore supervised by adults), children are being compensated for the decline in their independent mobility and therefore their independent activity by the substitution of adult controlled institutional activities. Two-thirds of the parents surveyed claimed that their children participate in some form of organized play activities. One fifth of the respondents stated that their child is a member of at least three different groups. This trend reflects parents twin commitments to protect their children from the sort of traffic and stranger-dangers outlined earlier by shielding them from public space on the one hand, whilst still providing them with play, educational and sporting opportunities outside the home on the other (Adler and Adler, 1994).

I take them to various activities e.g. dancing, ballet, tap, gymnastics, swimming and piano lessons...because we live in such an age where we want our children to do anything and everything and because it's so fast, you know, you all want them to achieve all these things, so all these events all happen together, so it's rush, rush, rush, you must get them here, you must get them back home cos they want to keep up with their peers and everything. And perhaps you should slow down and let them only choose what they want to go to (Mother, 'middle class', commuter village, Cheshire).

This public to private shift in children's play has been facilitated by the growth in women's participation in the labour force, which has meant that parents have turned to institutionally—provided play opportunities as one way of keeping their children safe and keeping them out of trouble in the gap between the school-day finishing and one of the parents returning home from

work. Whilst such care was until recently provided by schools in the form of after hours sports clubs and other semi-educational societies, the well documented (Adler and Adler, 1994) recent decline in the provision of these activities has meant that parents now often have to organize these opportunities for their children independently of school.

As a result, children's play, which once took place in the street, is now increasingly being spatially contained within child-adult segregated private spaces, like institutional play schemes, prompting more suspicion of those children who are in public space without adults. This institutionalization of children's play also means that children's use of time, like their use of space, is being increasingly structured around adults' lives (Oldman, 1994). Hillman *et al.* (1990) estimate that British adults spent 900 million hours during, 1990 escorting children. Adler and Adler (1994) argue that this is an alarming trend. They claim that institutional play is characterized by being organized, competitive, and routinized. It is usually adults who establish the rules and regulations and who take responsibility for decision making. According to Adler and Adler (1994), institutionalized play is therefore hierarchical and serious, rather than spontaneous and carefree, and so denies children the sort of opportunities to develop self reliance, co-operation, problem solving and interpersonal skills which more spontaneous independent play is credited with teaching them (see for example, Devereaux, 1976). Other writers have argued that as a consequence, children's street culture is in decline, and that children are losing their capacity for imaginative play. In particular, Buchner (1990) argues that by ferrying children to and from institutional activities parents are robbing children of the opportunity to develop their own understanding of their local environment, and are giving them a dislocated sense of both space and time. Describing children's everyday journeys from one activity to another he argues that:

The spaces in between rush passed and are often perceived only superficially with the result that a child's subjective map becomes a patchwork carpet consisting of islands of apparently unconnected space (Buchner, 1990, p. 79).

In general it is children from middle class areas (80%) who are more likely to participate in organized play than those from low income areas (60%) and their activities are more likely to take place outside the neighbourhood (87%) than those enjoyed by children

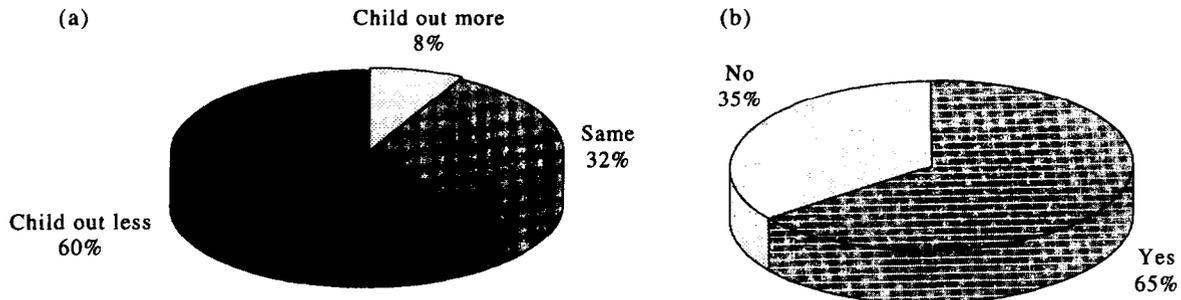


Figure 4. (a) Comparing extent of outdoor play with their children. (b) Were play boundaries regulated as a child? Source: McKendrick.

from low income areas (46%) reflecting middle class parents' superior income and mobility. Thus, Adler and Adler claim (1994) that:

If these experiences [of institutionalised play] prepare youngsters for the corporate work world—partly through their enhanced 'cultural capital' of additional knowledge, skills and disposition and partly through the 'habitus', the attitude and experience of achievement they acquire—then after school activities are yet another route to reproducing social inequalities (Adler and Adler, 1994, p. 325).

Patterns of change over time

The evidence of this paper, that children's play is increasingly home centred and institutionalized, suggests that contemporary children's experience of play is therefore very different to the play enjoyed by their parents during their own childhoods (Figure 4a). For example, three out of every five parents surveyed recall that they played outdoors more often than their children at the same age. This is supported by a MORI poll conducted for Barnardo's which found that 60% of the adults questioned believe that their children spend less time outdoors than they did during their own childhoods (McNeish and Roberts, 1995). Many of the parents interviewed represented their own childhoods in nostalgic terms, as a time of innocence when they were able to explore the countryside or the town without fear of accident or abduction.

I mean you do remember your own childhood and I remember mine. Mine was, you know, it was lovely being able to play outside and I went, um, a lot further a field than what I allow my children to do, you know really when I think about it now, it even frightens meself... You know being able to play out until dark in the summer. There is just something exciting about that somehow, you know it is really good. I mean you know I used to live in

the village next to this one and I mean we used to go for a picnic way, way out of the village in the woods, and it was lovely you know. But if Cody [her daughter] said I'm going to the woods with a friend, you know, you would say "no you're not", you know. I don't think even I'd walk to the woods on me own now, so, um, you know the boundary's come in a lot (Mother, 'middle class', rural area, Derbyshire).

I mean I think back to when I was Carrie's [her daughter] age you know, and I used to get buses to parks on my own and wander for hours, you know. I mean it's not the cliché, you know, the bottle of water and the dripping booty but, you know, we did go, and my friend and I, we used to take ourselves to the swimming baths regularly. And we used to get the bus and we used to go, I mean we were only Carrie's age, we were only 9 and 10 and we'd be sort of all day (Mother, 'middle class', commuter village, Cheshire).

I remember when I was about 9 or 10 I was allowed to cross a main road, the A57 trunk road to go and play football in the park, and ur, everybody did it, you know, my parents were no more or no less free than others and I think you just accepted there wasn't a specific danger, the roads weren't as busy as they are now, the traffic certainly wasn't as bad and I don't think the incidence of abductions and things like that was quite, um, it either wasn't there or it wasn't known about (Father, 'middle class', urban metropolitan area, Greater Manchester).

Such claims about the changing nature of childhood have also been repeated in contemporary newspaper articles. Following the abduction and murder of three children in the summer of 1995 (one from a tent in a garden and two whilst out fishing) both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers lamented, what *The Times* dubbed 'The Death of Childhood' (Ellis, 1995) with headlines such as 'Poor Children 'Prisoners' of Fearful Parents' (Cooper, 1995).

This is not to suggest, however, that previous generations were given complete freedom to explore outdoors by their parents. There is a danger that many

accounts of past childhoods are romanticized or overstated. Indeed, two-thirds of the parents recalled in the questionnaire survey that they were restricted by play rules as a child. But despite the inherent difficulties of mapping the past it is important to consider the changing patterns of outdoor play because remembered childhoods (when children played freely outdoors) whether 'real' or 'imagined' are used as a vehicle for expressing concern with contemporary childhood (the lack of outdoor play) and, indeed, are to some extent a root cause of this concern (changing play patterns).

However, this research provided limited opportunities to explore the reasons why patterns of outdoor play have changed between generations as background data on historical circumstances is understandably incomplete. Two distinct eras can be identified in which the extent of outdoor play has changed. First, the sharply differing assessments of parents aged over 45 (82% of whom recollect that they played outdoors more often than their child), with those aged 40–44 (58% of whom recollect more outdoor play), suggest that significant changes in patterns of play were evident in the late fifties/early sixties (when these parents were the same age as their children). Second, the comparability of recollections of parents currently in their twenties, early thirties, late thirties and forties—61%, 59%, 57% and 58% of whom recollect more outdoor play than their child—suggest that there was a subsequent period of stability (when these parents were children), which has since been followed by a more drastic reduction in outdoor play in the last 10–20 years (since those parents in their twenties were children). These intergenerational contrasts dispute the notion of a constant reduction in children's outdoor play and suggest that there is a need for historical geographers to explore how geographies of childhood have changed over time. A genuine historical geography of childhood would then help us to evaluate and respond to contemporary claims that children are more at risk in public space today than in the past.

Conclusions

Play is a vital means through which children develop physically, mentally and socially but despite the UN's recognition of its importance it remains a low priority issue for the U.K. Government and local authorities. It is clear from the research outlined in this paper that

the majority of parents are concerned with the adequacy of public play opportunities in their neighbourhood. This appears to be consistent with temporal changes in patterns of outdoor play (fewer children are playing outdoors) and the location of most outdoor play (tending to be based around the home). However, outdoor play remains an important element of preadolescents' leisure. The perception that children are spending too much time indoors is misleading; rather they are spending more time under adult supervision, either while playing independently outdoors in the garden, or at institutionally-based play activities. Indeed, on closer analysis, there is no link between play patterns and play provision; children are no more likely to play outdoors, or play further away from home if there are adequate opportunities provided within their neighbourhood. The rationale behind many campaigns for better facilities for children's play is therefore at odds with actual experience. Rather, concerns about safety (from traffic and strangers) and anxieties about the changing nature of childhood appear to play a more critical role in limiting or determining children's play opportunities.

Family status emerges as one of the most important mediators of experience. This is an important contribution to knowledge as geographers have tended to overlook this factor in their accounts of children's play and, more generally, the late 20th century has been characterized by increasing diversity of family forms (McKendrick, 1995). Children of lone parents experience more of the local neighbourhood (more are 'outdoor' children, more play beyond the immediate vicinity of the home), while lone parents themselves are more dissatisfied with local play provision because they have less resources to provide alternative 'private' opportunities for their children. While this 'public' focus permits a richer environmental experience (in terms of their opportunity to explore the environment, develop their own local knowledge, appropriate space for themselves and create their own imaginative play independently of adults) for preadolescent children from lone parent families, than that experienced by children from more 'privatized' families, these children are missing out on the enhanced 'cultural capital' acquired by 'middle class' children when they participate in institutional activities. In addition the research provides some evidence that within families, parents' attitudes to boys and girls' vulnerability in public space may be changing. While previous studies outlined in the first half of this paper suggested that boys

have traditionally been allowed more licence to explore public space independently than girls, this research has found evidence that parents may be moving toward less gendered understandings of children's ability to play safely outdoors.

The research also reaffirms the need for a geographical perspective on play. Parents' concerns with provision vary according to *environments* (with parents from urban and working class areas being more concerned), while local opportunity structure influences where children spend most of their play hours. These differences cannot be explained just in terms of social composition; the fabric of the environment also appears to exert an independent influence. When considering children's play, research must therefore be receptive to general (spaces) and particular (places) geographical variation.

Four areas of further inquiry are also suggested by the current findings. First, although historians have studied the construction and reproduction of the concept of 'childhood', historical geographers have neglected the world of the child (Smith, 1995). The evidence of this paper is that children's use of space has changed over recent generations and thus that there is a need for a genuine historical geography of childhood and children's use of space. In particular, this research has highlighted the value of oral histories which, if viewed in the context of other documentary evidence, offer the possibility for historical geographers to create a much richer perspective on the changing nature of childhood. Such information would then in turn contextualize contemporary work on children's geographies enabling us to relativize and gain a greater insight into contemporary parents' claims that their children are more at risk in public space today than in the past.

Second, while research on children's play and use of space has primarily explored their experiences of the neighbourhood, this research has highlighted the significance of the private garden and the home in general, as a site for preadolescent children's play. There is a need therefore for future work on children's lives which focuses on the ideological significance and utilization of 'private' space.

Third, the majority of work conducted on children's experience of space within geography has in fact focused, as this study has, on preadolescent children. While there is a growing body of work within and

outside the discipline on the experiences of late teenagers/young adults (or youths), there is little work which explores the lives of young teenagers (13–16 year old). Yet this is the age at which young people perhaps have the most complex experiences of public space (see Skelton and Valentine, 1997). On the one hand, they are too young to be fully independent. Their mobility is limited by their inability to drive, and their use of space is restricted by rules governing entry to cinemas, public houses and so on. On the other hand, they are at an age when they perceive themselves to have out-grown publicly-provided play and leisure opportunities and want their independence from parents to explore and negotiate public space for themselves.

Finally, the whole issue of parental regulation of children's use of space requires closer attention. There is a need to consider the extent to which play concerns are driven by broader concerns over issues of safety and the changing nature of childhood. The level of parental anxiety about children's safety in public space (from traffic and strangers) and the growth in home-based and institutional play outlined in this research raises many doubts for those public institutions concerned with providing opportunities for children's play over the utility of the provision of neighbourhood public play facilities. This is not to argue for a *laissez-faire* style 'policy' of non-intervention. On the contrary, there remains much useful practical work to be done by public institutions concerned to facilitate children's play. However, perhaps the primary political objective should be to tackle parents fears about children's safety in public space by adopting a historical approach to explore how and why parental anxieties have increased over recent generations. Perhaps then this knowledge will help to challenge and relax the shackles of parental regulation so that the opportunities embedded in every local environment will be realized by children themselves through independent exploration.

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Note

1. These included middle, working class and mixed class areas with a high, low or average percentage of children, in urban metropolitan, urban non-metropolitan, and rural areas in Greater Manchester, Derbyshire and Cheshire. In order to try and maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of those who participated in the study the places where the research took place and all the people referred to in quotations have been given pseudonyms.

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