

A Tree and a Boy

Marc Armitage

Mike Lanza at Playborhood* recently wrote,

"Most children, particularly young ones, don't care at all about privacy in their yards. Rather, they want to play, and when they reach a certain age, they're very keen to find playmates to share in their play. Most parents ignore this fact when they erect high bushes and fences for privacy."

That's a very good point and in general I agree but want to share one example of where this was not the case.

Throughout most of the 1980s I lived in a house down a cul-de-sac. It was a quite short street with not too many parked cars on and, completely by chance, had three or four playworkers living down it – two of us in the same house.

We had a garden round the back of the house hidden from the street by a combination of high walls and overgrown bushes which was quite small, very wild and overgrown and had as its centre-piece an enormous tree. It reminded me greatly of my own favourite place to play when I was younger (which was not a million miles away from this spot). As children we had called it "The Jungle" because it was an equally wild space full of odd plants and linking paths. I don't recall ever seeing any adult in the Jungle at all but I do remember spending a lot of time there meeting and playing with my friends. I didn't discover until well into my adult years that the Jungle was actually the gardens of four enormous old houses which had long since been demolished but the gardens remained and had simply grown into each other producing a curious mix of domestic garden plants and wildness – hence the name we had given it.

The tree in my 1980s garden was a fantastic climber and so combined with its general wildness it is probably not surprising to learn that it was very, very popular with local children as a place to play. At times there would be hoards of local children playing in the garden and parents would quite often turn up at our front door to ask if their own kids were there.

There was no knowing when children would turn up. They always came in small groups rather than individually and the period immediately after school on a week-day seemed to be the most popular time. When children did turn up I would usually ask, "Do your parents know where you are today?" and if the answer was 'no' (or at times 'yes' but clearly 'no') we would chuck them out, tell them to report in at home and then come straight back. When we discovered new children who we didn't know we always made a point of going round to their parent's house to introduce ourselves and explain that we were playworkers, that our rough garden with its tree had become a very special local playspace, and that they were free to use it when they wished.

We never once had to advertise the garden amongst local children despite its hidden location. They all knew it was there and they all knew it had a great climbing tree, long grass, and a pair of playworkers that fed them on biscuits and juice on hot days. Importantly they also knew that there was a good chance their friends would be there if they randomly called round.

It was one of these random occasions when I could hear someone in the garden – obviously children – so I thought I'd better pop my head round and say hello, just to check who was there, really. There were a good half-dozen of the usual suspects climbing the tree and generally enjoying themselves but there was also one boy that I didn't recognise. He seem to be getting on with everyone so I wasn't too worried but there was this

unwritten rule that we should always know who was in the garden. So I asked one of the regulars, “Who’s your new friend?”

“Him?” he said, “no idea!” And it turned out none of the others had any idea who he was either or where he’d come from. But at some point during the day he had tagged along and they had just accepted him as one of their group. It turned out they didn’t even know his name.

As a group of adults living down that street it didn’t really bring us closer together as a community (although I know plenty of other examples where similar things have). But what it did do was bring the children living in that street together. The boundaries that had been removed here were not the physical ones of fencing and bushes (quite the reverse in fact): it was the boundary of adults trusting each other. It didn’t happen by chance. It happened because someone made the effort to knock on a few doors, introduce themselves and explain a few things.

Local communities need places where children can meet and those places can be private gardens as much as the park or the street – if they are accessible. High bushes and fences can, as Playborhood say, be a barrier but the greatest barrier of all is a lack of trust amongst local adults. Getting that back is the first step to rebuilding playful communities.

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* Playborhood, based in the US and Canada, is well worth a look if you haven’t come across them at

<http://playborhood.com/>
<http://www.facebook.com/playborhood>

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