Right place for some, wrong place for others:
Where do children and young people spend their time?

Marc Armitage

This paper seeks to answer a question: where do children and young people spend their time and what (if any significance) might this have on adult provided services for them? Answering this question may identify potential conflicts between the way in which resources for children and young people are currently spent and the ways in which such resources are actually accessed and used – or, as is possibly the case, not used. In addition, answering this question may provide clues which explain what can sometimes be seen as a hostile, aggressive and destructive attitude that some children and young people have towards the forms of provision that adults provide. The author will seek to answer this question with reference to various research projects and almost 20 years of fieldwork during which countless children have been given the opportunity to share a little about the social worlds in which they move.

From the age of around two years onwards, children in the United Kingdom spend an increasing amount of their time in some form of supervised setting, be it a crèche group, nursery, playgroup, school or after-school scheme. In recent decades, the number children spending time in such settings has dramatically increased. Despite the fact that the number of childminders in the UK has declined markedly in the last decade and a lesser reduction in the number of playgroups the overall number of available childcare places has more than trebled in the same period due largely to a significant increase in nursery and private pre-school provision (DfES 2001). This, and central government policy on early years admissions to school and the development of early years centres, means that almost 95% of all three and four year olds across the UK now attend some sort of supervised setting for at least some of the day on most weekdays (DfES 2001:5-9).

This dramatic increase in the number of pre-school children attending some form of structured setting has been the result of deliberate central government policy. Local authorities, central government agencies and voluntary organisations have found themselves with unprecedented levels of funding with which to put government initiatives in place, establish new settings, train staff and market available places to parents. In addition, initiatives such as the introduction of Desirable Learning Outcomes for pre-school age children and the Foundation Stage for early learning (providing a scheme of learning for three and four year olds) have required closer integration of childcare policy and education initiatives. The result has been a subtle change of direction and agreed purpose in early years work away from 'child care' and the broader issue of child development to one of 'learning' and educational attainment. Playgroups in particular seem to have suffered from this change in direction.

Almost all children of primary school age (five – eleven years) also attend a supervised setting during each weekday in the form of school. The average school day for most children is six to six-and-a-half hours per day. In addition the number of primary school children attending some form of after-school child care setting based at school or close to it has also increased and now stands at around 10% (DfES 2001:5). The field of education, especially in the primary years, and after-school settings have also benefited from generous funding levels to support this with general funding for education at its highest since the introduction of mass elementary schooling in the late 18th Century.

However despite the above, attendance at a supervised adult led setting does not take up the greatest part of children's time during a typical day – even for children of primary school age. Research carried out by the author and Catherine Burke of the University of Leeds in 2001/02 which aimed to investigate where children spent their time during the day concluded that,

> Despite significant increases in childcare places for pre-school and school age children, a majority of children still spend a majority of their time outside of structured, adult organised settings. (Armitage and Burke, *in preparation*)

Questioning over 600 children from the age of four years to sixteen years the research, called *'Hide and Seek: where do children spend their time'*, identified that a significant amount of children's time during the day was being spent in the company of other children without the presence of adults. Most of that time was spent at home or (contrary to the opinion of over 400 adults also questioned during the research) in the outside spaces in and around the local neighbourhoods where they lived. Of those of primary school age children questioned 11.5% reported that they had gone straight from school to some form of childcare setting (this included childminders, after-school care schemes and relatives) and a further 4% had gone straight to some form of open access sports facility or youth club; 6.5% reported that they went straight out to play on their local street or to a local playground but the vast majority (70.5%) went directly home, seemingly to 'check in' because what they reportedly did second was 'play with friends'.

When asked about their favourite places to play it was outside places and various forms of outdoor play that received the greatest number of mentions. Children often referred to specific games when asked this question but more general play forms such as climbing, running around, and 'just playing' were mentioned too. As were activities such as 'sitting', 'talking with friends' and 'just chilling out'.

Attempts to define 'play' are not easy, and there are those that may not see some of the activities above as play. As, Marc Bekoff writes, "Play is not easily defined ... Attempts to define it functionally face the problem that it is not obvious that play serves any particular function either at the time at which it is performed or later in life." (Bekoff 1998:99). In order to get around this problem Bekoff and others define play as an act that 'appears' to be purposeless but yet which might have significant developmental benefits that will not become apparent for some considerable time after the event, if at all. Adults who see children engaging in activities in the company of other children and no adult presence may interpret their actions as just that – purposeless. But, "Some of the most character forming childhood experiences occur in peer group situations, free from adult supervision." (Furedi 1988:117).

Older children, the teenage group, would certainly not use the term 'play' but what they do when in the company of their friends and peers would fit broadly into Bekoff's definition. And what they are doing together with their friends is fundamentally not that much different from what a group of younger children might do with their friends. In this context, therefore, 'play' means what you do when in the company of your fiends without the direct supervision of adults and without any particular outcome expected. As Colin Ward pointed out play is the thing that children *do* "everywhere and with everything" (Ward 1990:72).

Even when attending a structured adult led setting there will be times when what children are doing would fit this working definition of play (such as play at school playtime, for example) but it seems that the principal time for play is after school and the principle place is the outdoor spaces close to where children live.

Adults however, tend to believe that children do not play, or at least do not play the kind of things that they remember playing when they were children,

> It is a commonly heard statement 'children don't play out like they used to'... Yet, where are the sources for this belief? It would appear it is simply 'common knowledge', that is it is so often repeated that it becomes as much a part of the culture as if it were proven fact ... Most of the studies undertaken on children's play bemoan the loss not only of playspace, but also the culture of outdoor play. Whilst the loss of playspace is tangible and therefore demonstrable ... the loss of children's

play culture is often taken as incontrovertible truth without any evidence being presented. (Snell 1996: 2)

This view that adults share seems to be both universal and ancient. Iona and Peter Opie have demonstrated a number of times with historical sources that such views have followed children's play for centuries. As they say, "The belief that traditional games are dying out is itself traditional." (Opie 1984: 14).

The children questioned during the *Hide and Seek* research reported very few restrictions placed on them with regard to playing out, with the exception of not going too far away from home. However, the adults who were questioned, a large number of whom where parents of the children above, reported placing many more restrictions on them; a significant number said they simply did not allow their children out to play unsupervised. This seems to confirm the anecdotal view that parents, possibly out of fear of being called bad parents, say one thing but do another.

The reasons given for placing these restrictions were mainly related to fears over traffic and the dangers of 'strangers' in the neighbourhood. It is interesting to note that adults questioned during the research project *Children at Play* (published by the Department of the Environment in 1973 as *Design Bulletin 27*) had similar concerns and as a result said that they placed restrictions on their children playing out. They also expressed concern that their children could not play out as freely as they had when younger (DoE 1973: 95). The parents interviewed in the 2001/02 *Hide and Seek* research tended to see their time as children as being a much safer time than now with fewer restrictions placed on them by their parents but there is an obvious contradiction here. In many cases, the parents of today are the very children that the *Bulletin 27* research refers to. The 2001/02 research identified that accident rates in the study areas had been steadily reducing over a fifteen year period and that instances of attempted molestation by strangers was unheard of by local police. It seems that the parents of 2001/02 were repeating the pattern of their own parents.

Despite the amount of time being spent outdoors by children after school and during the weekends the resources being made available to support this does not compare well with that made available for indoor supervised settings. Local authorities point to the provision of youth clubs and activities made available during the school holiday periods as funding for unsupervised provision, however,

> No reference or value is given to the quality of the child's life on the streets. In some areas there may be some provision ... in the shape of after-school clubs, and in the holidays summer playschemes. Yet the provision is often an extension of organisational order in children's lives, not a policy recognition of children's ways of seeing how lives are constructed away from adults. (Adams 1995: 166/167)

Local authorities also point to their spending on public playgrounds as being a positive contribution to children's freely chosen time. However, research shows that public playgrounds, even well designed playgrounds that have high play value scores, often do not attract unaccompanied children regularly enough to satisfy an assessment of playgrounds on a value for money basis. For example, the *Bulletin 27* research found that of over 50,000 observations made of children playing outside after school hours just 2% - 13% took place on local public playgrounds; whereas 42% of observations were of children playing on the streets and paths close to their own homes. Hull City Council, in a 1990 review of its playgrounds, concluded that an average of just 3% - 6% of all observations made of children playing took place on their local public playground and 52% of observations were of children playing on streets and paths (Hull City Council 1990). It would seem, therefore, that public playgrounds are not necessarily very popular places for children to visit – nor does this seem a very recent phenomena. Perhaps more worryingly is the fact that once children do visit playgrounds they do not stay for very long, typically less than 20 minutes (Heseltine 1994).

Yet this is not to say that public playgrounds are not important places: they are one of the very few things that adults provide directly for the benefit of children from which we expect no measurable outcome. And yet it would appear that the main users of playgrounds may actually be parents taking their own pre-school aged children for some time outside of the house during school hours (Armitage & Burke, *in preparation*). This may explain why the vast majority of new public playgrounds built in the UK over that last two decades appear to be aimed at very young children. Parents can be a very vocal group in their campaigning for something they see as been important to them. This provision for younger children seems to have happened at the expense of provision for older children and teenagers, as recognised in the recent national review of play, *The Dobson Report,* now published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS 2004).

It also seems that those very same adults that campaign for space to be provided for younger children also campaign for older children to be kept away. In the small Swedish city of Halmstad in south Sweden, old car tyres can often be seen wrapped around lamp-posts alongside paths in housing areas that are near slopes and hills. These have not been put there as an act of vandalism, thrown over the top of lamp-posts by teenage yobs, but instead have been put there by the local authority to lessen the risk of injury to those charging down the hill on bicycles or, during the winter months, on sleds. The typical British reaction to this risk would be very different, as can be seen from the plethora of 'No ball games' and 'No playing here' signs that can be seen in housing estates. Such signs may say No Ball Games but what they really mean is, No Children Here – Go Away.

The author often carries out assessments of damage to public playgrounds on behalf of local authorities – damage that has been assessed as vandalism. However, it is remarkable how often this 'vandalism' actually turns out to be extreme wear and tear from heavy use of a particular playground feature or is, just as often, the result of children making adaptations to existing equipment to make it possible to use the feature in a different way. Where damage really can be assessed as vandalism there are two common factors that become apparent: location and age related provision.

There is an observable connection between playgrounds situated in isolated or 'hard to see areas' and vandalism. This can be a particular problem on UK housing estates as,

> Driven by the need to maximise profits, there is ... a genuine reluctance amongst private house builders to formally allocate land for play purposes within estates ... [therefore] The problem of where to locate play areas is widespread, and often results in play areas been pushed onto land on the edge of estates, away from main thoroughfares and house frontages, which would otherwise afford a level of informal community supervision. (Wheyway & Millward 1997:1-2)

Even playgrounds located in areas with good levels of over-view and informal supervision can be subjected to attacks of vandalism. Where this is the case, a consistent factor seems to be that playgrounds not catering for older users when they are the majority age group in the neighbourhood receive the most consistent damage (Armitage 1998; Armitage & Burke, *in preparation*). Teenagers are most often blamed for this. Yet,

> In the absence of many facilities designed for or intended for them, teenagers will continue to engage in behaviours that are natural to them and that may be innocuous in themselves. But as long as these activities remain visible, they are likely to be labelled 'trouble', and the source of the trouble is likely to be identified as people rather than a non-supportive environment. (Becker 1976: 570)

As Frank Furedi points out, "... rebellious youth has been a constant theme of literature for centuries." (Furedi 1988:108) and no matter how uncomfortable a fact it might be teenagers can be loud, destructive, and obnoxious. But then, teenagers always have been and the forms of 'play' that they seem to engage in are as natural to their level of development as is digging in mud to a six year old. Yet efforts to provide facilities that are specifically for older children and teenagers, such as youth shelters and skate parks for example can face fierce resistance from adults living near a proposed location. In the

context of providing for teenagers it is interesting to note that children and young people in general complain about adults moving them away from favourite play places more often than they complain about the dangers of traffic or strangers (Armitage & Burke, *in preparation*). Making provision for older children, however, can significantly reduce the very damage to the general environment that adults seem to fear. In South Somerset, for example, the local authorities Youth Projects has found that well sited provision for teenagers, close to their own homes, can significantly reduce both the fear of and actual instances of 'anti-social behaviour' that local adults perceive (South Somerset Council).

Research, including the *Hide and Seek* research, shows that children and young people make use of much of their local neighbourhood and they tend to select different types of space to meet different requirements. This does not fit well with the typical British playground which has a location that is defined in very hard terms by the use of an (often high) boundary fence, which excludes teenagers by a lack of suitable provision, and which is devoid of natural features and landscaping that provide the collectables younger children use when playing, like grasses, berries, leaves, sticks and stones etc. As Pia Björklid says, "Many studies have shown that children play everywhere, regardless of whether the space in question has been designed for play or not. Yet when playgrounds are laid out, children are expected to play there and nowhere else." (Björklid 1982:73). This is a point that the author can confirm baffles the providers of public playgrounds who often seem at a loss as to why children stay away from the playgrounds they provide and older children seem intent on destroying something which is ostensibly for them.

Put simply, the outdoor spaces that children of all ages actually choose to spend their time in have fuzzy boundaries: they seem to like wide open spaces for some of the time and at other times prefer places with walls. On a different day they will seek out natural materials with trees, grasses, flowers and water, and on another will stick to the artificial world of the urban street. But one thing they will avoid when making their choice for the day will be fenced in areas. They simply don't like them, and will often actively remove fencing – sometimes to gain easier access, sometimes to make easier escape, but often because they dislike being enclosed (Armitage 1998; Armitage & Burke, *in preparation*). Children and young people in the United Kingdom ignore public playgrounds because these places are simply not as flexible as the wider environment in which they live and because they limit what they can do while there.

However, it is important not to assume that children are using the wider environment at the expense of their local playground because the former has been designed with their needs in mind. Quite the reverse is often the case. *Bulletin 27* for example, concluded that children simply *will* climb onto the roofs of garages in housing areas (collections of garages seem to prove popular with children in general). As these garages have thin roofs this could be quite dangerous and the research recommended that garage roofs should be made strong enough to cope with this as, "It is probably not possible to prevent this" (DoE 1973: 28). The reaction of local authorities to this suggestion, however, was that children simply should *not* climb on these therefore there should be no need to build garages with stronger roofs.

Pia Björklid makes the point that schools and child care settings are planned in an educational context, in other words there is a recognition that what happens there can and should be of positive benefit to the child and eventually to that child's community and wider social group. But the general outdoor environment in living areas is not considered in the same way. (Björklid 1982: 23). If children are spending significant amounts of time in the wider environment of their neighbourhoods – much more time that adults generally do – then it stands to reason that they will be affected by it (and changes to it) much more than will local adults. In terms of behaviour, "We know that social behaviour is not built in, because it varies so much from one group to another. It has to be learned." (Harris 1998: 162). The implication is that the environment in which children spend their time is bound to have an influence on what they do now and on the adult they will eventually become. Central government seems to recognise this when they call for school uniforms to be

compulsory because of the positive socialising effect they claim it has (BBC News 8th July 2004).

Best Play, a document that makes recommendations on what play opportunities local authorities should provide for their children also seems to agree with this conclusion,

> There is a poverty of play opportunities in the general environment, and it is the responsibility of the community to ensure that all children have access to rich, stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable risk, and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore both themselves and the world, through their freely chosen play. (Best Play: 7)

But it would seem that in prioritising resources to supervised settings; by providing public playgrounds that are rigidly defined and which do not meet the requirements of those that are meant to use them; by providing a negative local environment through a lack of sympathetic design and 'No ball games' signs, we are sending the message to children and young people that, when it comes down to it, we don't like you very much: we don't like what you do, we don't like how you do it, and we want you to go somewhere else and leave us adults alone. Then we wonder why children react in the way they do.

To answer the opening question: 'Where do children spend their time'? The answer is that when they have the choice they spend it outdoors in their own local neighbourhood in the places that they feel are right for them, doing the things that are right for them and their friends. But what turns out to be the 'right place' for them is often the 'wrong place' for adults. This produces conflict between what children do and what adults feel they should do and in such conflicts children invariably loose.

Marc Armitage
Independent Children's Play Consultant

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marc@marc-armitage.eu

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