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*promoting the value of play*

**"Child's play, particularly when it takes place in the great outdoors, is a treasure chest of opportunities.**

It stimulates the imagination, develops social skills, introduces the young to calculating risk, encourages exercise and excitement. Yet, whenever two or more children are gathered together, sooner or later a crabby grown up, influenced by those two magic words, "antisocial behaviour", will start bellowing objections and issuing orders. The message is simple – if it is a public space: children keep out.

There is nothing new in this aversion to children having fun. In the 14th century, the bishop of London lashed out at the young playing games around St Paul's. In Stuart times, it was the beadle's turn to whip, "unlucky boys with toys and balls" from the Royal Exchange. In the 1920s, lads were frequently chased out of the Serpentine in Hyde Park until the authorities saw sense and allowed everyone to take a dip.

Research published today, National Playday, however, reveals a much sharper edge to the traditional hostility shown to the young who seek a toehold in our public places - not least from parents who are, increasingly, the unconscious jailers of the modern cocooned child. The Playday survey questioned 2,800 children, aged between seven and 16. Two thirds said they liked to play outside daily. However four out of five said they had been regularly told off for doing so.

"When the youth club isn't open, we just hang around the shops," explained one 15-year-old girl in Sheffield. "There's nothing else for our age group to do. We can't go to the park a lot because it's full of younger kids and the parents have a go at us."

"I was playing football and it went into a garden," explained a nine-year-old. "I went to get the ball and this old lady pulled me into the house and smacked me. I thought that was nasty."

More alarming, one in four of the 11- to 18-year-olds said they had been threatened with adult violence (although fear of their peers is also a major issue). One in five had been reported to the police. As a result, one in three of those aged between seven and 11 stayed indoors.

Among those under 11, almost half said the main person who told them off for playing outside was a parent.

Tim Lineham, spokesperson for the Children's Society, says: "Playing outdoors is a fundamental part of everyone's childhood, but that is being threatened by a

culture of intolerance. We are in danger of letting grumpy grown-ups tidy our children away."

National Playday, organized by the Children's Society and the Children's Play Council, involves 100,000 children across the country attending 400 outside events - for instance, playing ball games in Trafalgar Square. It is an annual attempt to reclaim a little of the lost public ground.

Colin Ward was a pioneer of the campaign to use urban spaces as a vehicle for children's pleasure and education. In a seminal book, *The Child in the City*, first published in 1978, he gave numerous examples of how the young turn the streets into a play pen and bomb sites into adventure playgrounds. Risk has always been a major element, as has vandalism for the bored. The chroniclers of play, Iona and Peter Opie, describe a game called Last Across, where children run in front of cars across busy main roads, as a source of entertainment. Ward describes how, in the 60s, in the new high-rise flats, children would use lighters to melt the plastic buttons on the lifts to the frustration of the residents .

Nowadays, parents are often too infused with the fear of the motorist, the molester and the mugger to let their children go out the front door. At the same time, the interdependence and collaboration in grown-up society has lessened, so people are more wary about looking out for the children of others. Sociologist Frank Furedi in his book *Paranoid Parenting*, questions whether the damage done to children shackled to the home because of this adult obsession with safety far outweighs the potential dangers.

Some parents place their children under house arrest not only in an effort to meet that impossible goal of absolute safety but also for the sake of the neighbours. "I have two children under 10 and we live in a divided house with a shared garden," says Janet. "I'm always catching myself shouting at them when they're out, for fear that they'll make a noise and upset the people next door. I sometimes feel as if I'm chastising the children just for being children."

Keeping a child indoors is made easier by the fact that the welcome is less and less warm when they are outside. "Because we just hang out on our street, there's a lot of old people that shout at us," said one 15-year-old girl in the Playday survey. Kids Club Network, the charity which provides after school clubs, launched a campaign last year, *Making Space*, which hopes to see the creation of 3,000 teenage clubs by 2015 - a counter to the hundreds which have been closed down. Even with more clubs, however, the issue of access to open public spaces remains.

The demonisation of the young in the media means that prejudice rules and so does adult power. In Cumbria, children raised 163,100,000 British Pounds while 1,500 signed a petition for a skateboard park but it was still refused. The Children's Society also reports that more and more by-laws are inhibiting children's play. In the north-west, 115 No Ball Games signs were counted on one housing estate in which four out of five playgrounds had been shut down.

Ward objected strongly to cities designed primarily for the working adult. He

wanted, "a shared city, not unwanted patches set aside to contain children and their activities".

Helen Woolley, an urban spaces expert at Sheffield University, is optimistic about the possibilities for change. Woolley, the author of *Urban Open Spaces*, has recently been appointed to Cabi - the commission for architecture and the built environment - which comes under John Prescott's remit. Its function is to deliver strategies for open spaces.

"Children should be consulted and involved," she says, "on how to reduce vandalism, on bullying amongst peers and in finding ways of reclaiming parks and open spaces."

She points to the peace gardens in Sheffield and their water features which children are allowed to use (unlike the water feature in Victoria Square, Birmingham). A controversial move, it has proved a huge success, helping to further revitalise the area.

"The attitude of many adults towards children is that it is your space or mine. That has to change," Woolley says. "What are public spaces for if not to bring the community together, including children?"

She echoes the conviction of Ward, who made a point that even grown-ups should be able to grasp: "Most of the environmental policies that improve the lives of children benefit adults, too."

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