

Improving safe access to street space for children’s play and physical activity.

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Summary

This short paper explores the evidence for families with children to be allowed greater access to very local neighbourhood space, to allow children to play safely within physical distancing rules – through changes to residential streets that might include, for example, speed limits, road-pavement ratios, and user priority.

Children, play and outdoor space

In the current crisis, there is a necessary focus on essential activities – work, shopping, caring for each other, and exercise. For children, there is an emphasis on continuing their education, as far as possible, through ‘home-schooling’.

Play is also an essential activity. It is fundamental to children’s wellbeing, resilience, and development;¹ and it is mostly how they exercise. In their play, children take aspects of their everyday life and turn them upside down to create new worlds that are less boring (being isolated indoors) or less scary (the fear and uncertainty of the virus).² This is more than indulgence; it is the basis of well-being and resilience.

Though some older children and teenagers may enjoy running, cycling or (currently disallowed) team sports, younger children mostly get their physical activity through play – scooting, chasing, inventing and exploring, stopping and starting, jumping, kicking balls, climbing on walls. The playful exercise of children looks very different to that of adults. As a result, there have been reports of children and young people being cautioned by police³ or reprimanded by other adults for being outside other than for exercise. Yet, for children, playing is exercise: with important emotional as well as physical benefits. Play allows children to cope with what life throws at them; it is the responsibility of adults to ensure that they can play safely, inside and out.

The NHS recommends that all children get at least an hour of physical activity daily, varied in form and intensity; and 180 minutes for pre-schoolers. The Government acknowledges this in its guidance on children’s and young people’s mental health during the outbreak,⁴ recognising the difficulties of physical activity at this time. In addition to suggestions for indoor games, it recommends: ‘Plan time outside if you can do so safely’. Children with additional needs, such as autism and learning disabilities, may have even greater need for outdoor and physical activities and this has now been acknowledged by the government through a variation in the guidance for people with autism and learning disabilities.⁵

Some of this can take place indoors – playing with games, imaginary play, even some physical play – but the space afforded by being outside increases play opportunities exponentially. The freedom to run, hop, and skip – to be noisy and exuberant: to ‘let off steam’ – is a vital benefit

of outdoor play which parents and carers know is important to the whole household, especially where it includes working-at-home adults, poorly family members, studying siblings, or proximate neighbours. Time outdoors may also offer access to pockets of nature, with both physical and emotional health effects; recent research from the National Trust concluded that even just 'noticing nature' had beneficial impacts on our wellbeing.⁶

Closure of playgrounds and reduced access to public parks

Playgrounds were one of the first categories of public sites to be closed, even before the lockdown was introduced. Concerns that playgrounds offered meeting points for large numbers of people, including children, and that playground equipment would not be cleaned regularly, were exacerbated by research suggesting that the novel coronavirus could remain viable for up to 2-3 days on steel and plastic,⁷ the typical materials of a standard urban playground.

In more recent days, concerns have arisen about the use of and access to public parks. A number of London parks were closed, or threatened with closure, in response to concerns about some visitors not abiding by the physical distancing and 'stay at home' guidance. Similar concerns arose around the country, in parks as well as on beaches and on walking trails, and while the Communities Minister has reassured the public that access to parks would be maintained, critical voices have emerged raising explicit points about equity issues and the need for access to public space, especially for families living in cramped conditions without access to private outdoor space.

Families and children living in flats/without access to outdoor space

14% of the national population lives in flats, accounting for over nine million people (2017 data).⁸ This varies by region: e.g. 43% of the population of London lives in flats, while it is 29% in Scotland, and only 5% in Northern Ireland. According to the National Housing Survey (2018), 44% of social housing and 37% of private rented properties were flats (compared to just 18% in the owner-occupied sector).⁹ According to the Resolution Foundation, 16% of all family units in London live in overcrowded accommodation, and 13% nationally in the social housing sector. Altogether, those living in overcrowded conditions amount to over 1.8 million families.¹⁰

According to a 2008 report, 15% of dwellings in the UK had no access to any kind of private outdoor plot. Only 25% of flats had private outdoor space, and 'dwellings located in the most deprived areas were the least likely to have any private outdoor space'.¹¹ Another report, from 2009, predicted that by 2020, 2.6 million UK homes would be without a private garden.¹²

Declining road traffic and falling levels of air pollution

The lockdown and 'stay at home' measures have led to a marked decline in road traffic. The Guardian reported that indicators showed 'road travel plummeting by as much as 73%, to levels not seen since 1955'.¹³ In 1955, with car ownership and traffic levels as they were, the routine use of street space by walkers, cyclists, and children was seen as commonplace and widely accepted. We are also witnessing big drops in air pollution, both of nitrous dioxide and

particulate matter, in most UK cities, according to the National Centre for Atmospheric Science.¹⁴ There have been similar reports of declining noise pollution. For these reasons, our streets are in some respects currently safer than usual, and residents are using designated road space to exercise (cycling, scooting, running) with physical-distancing. Conversely, most UK pavements are less than 2m wide, some considerably so, and physical distancing is therefore difficult; even more so for those with buggies and wheelchairs.

Yet, there is also evidence of increased speeding, and of police leniency to offenders.¹⁵ There is some evidence of a small rise in car traffic in more recent days, following the earlier-documented fall. Whilst streets are safer than normal, they are not safe: pedestrians do not have priority; risks from motor traffic remain.

Value of street space

There is considerable evidence across the country of the remaking of street space in the context of the coronavirus, as residents are spending more time in their homes and on their streets, and are connecting to their neighbours in new ways.

Anecdotal accounts from across the country suggest children are managing to play out and get some exercise on their streets – scooting, kicking a ball with siblings, exploring their streets. Remaining in family groups, coordinating formally or informally with neighbours, and staying within the space directly outside their homes means that these children and their families seem to be following guidelines for physical distancing. These are all important examples of how street space is proving critical for the development and maintenance of community support and wellbeing in difficult times.

Action in other countries

Daily, we see more and more examples of cities across the world taking measures to secure children's, pedestrians' and cyclists' safety in their neighbourhoods. Dr Tabitha Combs of the University of North Carolina has been collating examples¹⁶ of moves such as closing vehicle lanes to create room for walking and cycling, closing streets to vehicle traffic altogether, and reducing speed limits. This crowdsourced database lists 48 examples of such actions.

In Berlin, for example, city authorities have reassigned road lanes for cyclists; and in Denver, certain streets have been closed to motor traffic, and the intention is to expand this scheme. Some German academics have issued an open request that: 'Governments should publish evidence-based guidelines for the creation of temporary walking and cycling infrastructure that enables social distancing and increases the health of each individual as well as overall public health.'¹⁷ In New Zealand, the Transport Minister is inviting cities to bid for funding to temporarily widen pavements and install cycle lanes.¹⁸

These moves have been motivated by a number of different goals: reducing the likelihood of road accidents to relieve pressure on hospitals and police forces; creating more space for residents to undertake essential trips and engage in exercise while maintaining physical distancing norms; and creating more safe public space, in particular for those without access to private outdoor space.

Action in the UK

Meanwhile, in the UK, a letter co-signed by many academics and activists, coordinated by Rachel Aldred, University of Westminster, called 'on decision makers to protect the right to walk and cycle safely (from risk of infection and traffic injury) for those who are not symptomatic.'¹⁹ Campaign groups, such as Living Streets²⁰ and Cycling UK,²¹ have produced guidance which encourages walking and cycling for exercise but which emphasises the necessity for the 2-metre distance and the requirement to stay close to home. The group 20's Plenty, who advocate for 20mph speed limits on most roads, are supporting the campaign to 'lower the baseline'²² of NHS demand by calling for an immediate 20mph speed limit on all roads, to reduce road traffic accidents.

There are growing calls on social media, on blogs and in online publications²³ for a renewed approach to urban public space and for a full consideration of some of the measures developed elsewhere. And in the last few days, Transport for London, the London Borough of Hackney, and the city councils of both Brighton and Hove, and Manchester, have each said they are looking into ways to make street space safer during the crisis period.²⁴

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In this context, we believe there is a case to be made for finding ways to ensure our streets are safer for children and adults to use, in the context of physical distancing, for exercise and play.

The measures introduced to aid the country's fight against COVID-19 must be sustainable to be successful; concerns about 'lockdown fatigue' have recurred as these measures are debated by decision-makers, the media and the public. These concerns will become still more intense as the lockdown continues and children face weeks or months of restricted movement. Evidence from Italy and Spain, where the lockdown was introduced earlier, suggests it is difficult to maintain stringent measures without the increasing use of police powers,²⁵ and anecdotal evidence suggests that families with children in small living spaces are particularly struggling.²⁶

Implementing measures to enable safer neighbourhood space might potentially mitigate against these very real pressures, whilst also contributing to reducing pressure on other green spaces, on the NHS, and the nation's well-being.

Potential measures

We recognise the very real need to maintain physical distancing and to stay at home in order to fight COVID-19 successfully, and the need for consistent public guidance on these key requirements. Nevertheless, there are potential measures to ensure safe space for children to play outside, with the attendant benefits to their wellbeing and resilience – and that of their families and communities – while better enabling physical distancing to be observed. Such possible measures include: –

- Enforcement of 20mph limits and reduction to 20mph on urban streets

- Temporary introduction of 10mph limits on residential side roads
- Temporary closure of some streets to through traffic, with road signs and other filters
- Temporary widening of pavement space to create more space for pedestrians; and narrow and slow the flow of motor traffic
- Priority to non-motor vehicle road users on all but main roads

A mix of these measures, as appropriate to different jurisdictions, contexts and locations, may have the potential to make the crisis less damaging to children, more bearable for families – and to increase the resilience of communities to a sustained lockdown.

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