

Urban myths about children's playgrounds



Children's play opportunities are being limited because of fears based on myths rather than facts. CAPT's play adviser, Rob Wheway, one of the country's leading play consultants, explodes some of these myths.

- 1) Playground equipment is less exciting than it used to be.
Wrong: It's more exciting and adventurous nowadays.
- 2) Children use playgrounds less because the playgrounds are boring.
Wrong: Playgrounds are still popular play places.
- 3) Children don't use playgrounds much.
Wrong: They use playgrounds a lot
- 4) Parents want safe playground equipment for their children.
Wrong: They want exciting playgrounds
- 5) All the safety surfacing has made the playgrounds less exciting for children.
Wrong: If anything they've made them more exciting
- 6) European legislation has banned exciting playground equipment.
Wrong: There is no European (or British) legislation for playground equipment.
- 7) The European Standard prevents manufacturers from designing exciting equipment.
Wrong: It doesn't.
- 8) Climbing frames are dangerous.
Wrong: It's a misunderstanding of the evidence.
- 9) Local authorities have to make playgrounds safe because they are often sued.
Wrong: They are being sued less.
- 10) You can't let children play out because of stranger danger.
Wrong: We know it's not strangers who pose the risks.

The myths have become quite commonplace, appearing in both newspaper stories and academic journals. They are often repeated by people attending seminars and conferences.

Rob Wheway has carried out thousands of inspections of children's playgrounds, together with operational management consultancy for many local authorities. He has also undertaken much observational and interview research of children at play and consultation/participation exercises for local authorities and housing trusts. The following explanations are based on this research and his wide-ranging experience.

1) Playground equipment is less exciting/ attractive for children than it used to be.

A quick look at a few catalogues from reputable suppliers shows that there is a much wider range of equipment than was the case 20 or 30 years ago. Manufacturers have made determined efforts to increase the play value of equipment. It is true that some equipment, which had a high risk of inflicting lethal injury, has disappeared e.g. plank swing, witches hat. It is equally true that innovative and exciting equipment has come on to the market.

Should you wish to obtain details of playground equipment manufacturers contact:
Association of Play Industries (API), Federation House, National Agricultural Centre,
Stoneleigh. CV8 2RF. Tel: 024 7641 4999.

2) Children use playgrounds less because the playgrounds are boring.

The reasons many playgrounds are less well used than' previously is that children's ranges (distances they are allowed to travel unaccompanied) have decreased. This is because motor vehicles are given priority over pedestrians, even in residential areas. Parents restrict their children if they would need to cross roads with fast motor vehicles i.e. 30 mph. Roads are a much greater barrier to children than they were.

One False Move: A study of children's independent mobility (1990) Hillman M, Adams J, Whitelegg J. published by Policy Studies Institute, explains how children's ranges have decreased because of the motorcar. Research for a variety of organisations by Rob Whewey has confirmed that the differences in 'playing out' are due to traffic. See *Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates* (1997) Whewey R, Millward A. published by Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

3) Children don't use playgrounds much.

Where a playground is in the right location it will be highly used. A good location is where they can "see and be seen" by a trusted adult (usually a parent or a friend's parent) and "where it's at" where there is a high probability that other people will pass by or through. Children tend to stay at any one place for a relatively short period of time but will keep returning to a popular place. A playground in a poor location, even with good equipment, is likely to have low usage and be vulnerable.

For a fuller explanation see *Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates* (1997) Whewey R, Millward A. published by Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

4) Parents want safe playground equipment for their children.

This is a fundamental misunderstanding of consultations. Many interviews with parents conclude that parents want "a safe place where children can play". More detailed interviews however find that parents want somewhere their children are socially safe ("see and be seen" above) typically "where I can keep an eye on them". But both children and parents say that their local playgrounds are not exciting enough and ask for more exciting equipment.

This finding arises from consultation/participation exercises carried out by Rob Whewey for a variety of Local Authorities and Housing Trusts.

5) All the safety surfacing has made playgrounds less exciting for children.

In no surveys have children said that they would prefer to fall on concrete rather than the impact absorbing surfaces. Parents welcome it, although many have unrealistic expectations about the injuries it will prevent (it has a limited effect on leg and arm injuries and is intended to reduce the severity of head injuries). It is possible, though not proven, that children will take greater risks because they think that the surface is 'safe'. What is true is that expenditure on impact absorbing surfacing may have reduced the amount spent on equipment.

David Ball has carried out much analysis of accident data, which has demonstrated the limited effect that impact-absorbing surfaces have on reducing injuries overall. Ball D (2002) *Playgrounds: risks, benefits and choices* Research Report No. 426/2002, Health and Safety Executive.

6) European legislation has banned exciting playground equipment.

There is NO European (or British) legislation for playground equipment. There is a European Standard (BS EN 1176, effective from 1 January 1999) but it is advisory only and in any case is more permissive of adventurous items than the old British Standard (BS 5696: 1979). It does contain useful advice, which should not be wilfully ignored, but unfortunately low quality inspections and poor advice/risk assessments have given an impression that the Standard is mandatory.

The Standard is BS EN 1176 *Playground Equipment* (1998) published by British Standards Institution (BSI).

7) The European Standard prevents manufacturers from designing exciting equipment.

It doesn't. Reputable safety organisations and RPII inspectors have long accepted that a satisfactory Risk Assessment and/or independent third party testing can permit exciting or innovative items, which are not covered by the Standard. Spacenets, overhead scales, maypole swings etc. are widely used, and are accepted as suitable for use by reputable inspectors, even though they did not comply with the Standard. What is true is that the equipment is unsupervised and may only be inspected every few days and this puts some practical limitations on what is acceptable.

For a list of competent playground inspectors contact
The Register of Play Inspectors International Ltd., (RPII),
Federation House,
National Agricultural Centre,
Stoneleigh Park,
Warwickshire
CV8 2RF.
www.playinspectors.com
t: 024 7641 4999

8) Climbing frames are dangerous.

There has been a large increase in the number of 11 "multi-play" items. These have raised decks with a number of elements, e.g. slide, fireman's pole, clatter bridge, scramble net, overhead ladder. The public refer to them as "climbing frames" and so accident reports refer to them as such. As they are a number of items in one piece of equipment we should expect the number of accidents to rise. Also, as they encourage children to move around fast in close proximity to each other, we should expect an increase in the numbers of minor bumps and scrapes, as is the acknowledged case in indoor "soft-play" areas. A conventional climbing frame is used slowly, taking a firm grip on each rung. This explains why spacenets have few accidents associated with them.

Research by Rob Wheway for the Borough of Elmbridge found that parents and children overwhelmingly referred to multi-plays as "climbing frames"

9) Local Authorities have to make playgrounds safe because they are often sued.

Expert witnesses have surprisingly found that the number of reports required has reduced overall. What is true is that fear of being sued, insufficient understanding of risk assessment, assuming that BS EN 1176 is legislation and poor maintenance procedures, contribute to Local Authorities making playgrounds boring, or removing them altogether. Some procedures generate needless work and excessive paperwork, at the expense of simple but effective procedures.

A Play Safety Forum position statement, helpfully explains that children need and want to take risks. The statement is endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive. *Managing risk in play provision: A position statement* (2002) published by Play Safety Forum. Contact Children's Play Council 020 7843 6016, www.ncb.org.uk/library/cpis.

10) You can't let children play out because of 'stranger danger'.

There has been no increase in *stranger danger*. We now know that it is people the children know who pose the greater risk; therefore our fear of strangers should have decreased. It is very likely that restrictions on children's ranges, because of the motor car, mean that children (and their parents) know fewer people in their neighbourhood, therefore the fear of strangers increases. This explains why, within the same housing estate, different levels of 'playing out' are observed. It is the car that is the main limiting factor.

For further explanation of the effect of the car see *Lebensraume fur Kinder* (1994) Huttenmoser M, Degen-Zimmermann D.

See also Huttenmoser M, *Children and Their Living Surroundings*, Children's Environments, 12(4), 403-413.

See *Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates*. (1997) Wheway R, Millward A. published by Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION TRUST (CAPT)

Established in 1979, Child Accident Prevention Trust is the UK's only children's charity specialising in accident prevention. Our focus is on reducing death, disability and serious injury without compromising children's needs to enjoy active, healthy lifestyles.

The Trust has a national and international reputation as a source of expertise and works to achieve a reduction in serious childhood accidents through publicity campaigns, the provision of advice and information to both professionals and parents, training for health practitioners and others, work with central government and standards-making bodies and through consultancy services.

PLAY SAFETY CONSULTANCY

CAPT can offer:

Playground inspections Independent annual inspections, risk assessments, DDA assessments, post installation inspections. These can also be combined with assessments of maintenance, site vulnerability, and cost saving measures. The inspections are carried out by an RPII inspector.

Training Our training courses can either be in-house or delegate based. Based on long experience and delegate feedback, our training courses are valued for their "no-nonsense", "practically based" approach. Subjects covered include inspecting children's playgrounds, managing children's playgrounds, risk assessment, disability discrimination act, British/European standards.

Consultation/participation We pay more than lip service to public consultation on issues such as refurbishment of existing play facilities or siting of new playgrounds. We aim to maximise local adult and child participation through imaginative events that achieve meaningful, representative feedback and ensure the right decisions are made about play provision.

Strategic and operational consultancy Whether it is a detailed area-wide play strategy or an analysis of operational management, the consultancy we offer you will be both cost-effective and reflect your key priorities, achieving safer playgrounds and more robust safety systems, whilst also reducing the number of daily inspections, by prioritising on the basis of risk.

Each of our services is based on our philosophy of helping you to achieve exciting play opportunities and 'Best Value', without compromising safety.

For further information please contact:

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