

# TALKING ABOUT PLAY



## A study of children's play in rural environments

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## **INTRODUCTION (over 30 years later)**

This research was carried out in 1982 by a team of job creation workers employed by the Humberside PFA. I had thought for a long time that those of us in play should be looking more objectively at where children played and what features they enjoyed. I therefore guided the team as they devised the questionnaire and undertook some brief training on interview techniques. We found for instance that interviewing in groups meant that children tended to build on the answer from the previous child rather than answer for themselves. I was co-author of the resultant report.

The book had a very good review in the May 1983 journal of the IPA (the International Association for the Child's Right to Play). Robin C Moore stated:

*"I cannot think of a document more packed with information and insight about children's outdoor play. Don't be fooled by its low cost and modest appearance. The contents are extremely well organised... Much delight and vividness in reading comes from the children's own words quoted extensively throughout to illustrate each point in the analysis. For me it reinforces once more the crucial importance of talking with children and of maintaining the integrity of their own words."*

As a result of that the first edition was sold out with requests "from as far away as Israel, Australia and Saudi Arabia". A second edition again sold out.

Amongst the findings were recommendations which we would now call "natural play" and over 30 years later still seem relevant. Interestingly a colleague, Dr Alison Millward, carried out similar research in a city area and found that there was much less reference to "natural features". It is quite obvious in retrospect that children living in the rural area will have access to (or be denied access to) more natural areas than would city children.

The main recommendations that people should "consider the whole environment", that location is crucial and that the design should include "trees, mounds and undulations" are as important now as they were then.

I was hoping to go on to undertake observational research of children at play. Unfortunately that didn't happen for another decade. Having now undertaken much observational research I do know it tells you more than just talking to the children. Children "voting with their feet" does give greater insight than consultations alone.

I trust people who read this will find this publication of interest.

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September 2013

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The purpose of this report is to make known and to use the views held by village children about their opportunities for outdoor play. The authors of the report are very grateful to the staff and pupils of the Humberside schools where the interviews took place. It is hoped that the children's opinions have been clearly and fairly expressed and will influence the adults who provide and protect the places where children play.

The pilot studies were carried out at St Peter's Church of England School in Barton upon Humber. The final 176 interviews took place at the following schools:

Hutton Cranswick Primary School  
Walkington Primary School  
Bilton Primary School  
Patrington Church of England School  
North and South Killingholme Primary School  
Hibaldstow County Primary School  
St Martin's School, Owston Ferry  
Goxhill County Primary School  
Ulceby Primary School

The survey was designed and conducted by Marion Wilford, Marie Havercroft, Alice Akehurst and the Humberside Playing Fields Association with the guidance of Rob Wheway, Regional Officer of the National Playing Fields Association. The report was compiled and written by Alice Akehurst and Rob Wheway with advice and assistance from Chris Cobley, Secretary of the Humberside Playing Fields Association and Brenda Martin.

# SECTION ONE

The background and purpose of the report and the method used to conduct the survey and compile the report.

## 1. The Background and Purpose of the Report

### 1.1 *The Children's Views Should be Actively Sought*

The National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) and its affiliated Associations, among them the Humberside Playing Fields Association (HPFA), have for many years given advice and information about play provision to both voluntary and statutory organisations. At the Annual General Meeting of the HPFA in June 1981, following a lively discussion, those present agreed that the views of young people and children should be more actively sought. In other words, the advice given by the HPFA should not be just on behalf of children but influenced by them. It was agreed to co-opt two teenagers onto the HPFA's Executive Committee.

### 1.2 *An Opportunity to Seek Out Children's Views*

At that time the NPFA operated a service to children's play through a number of Regional Officers and their Regional Officer, who was present at the meeting, had felt for some time that although the NPFA had much concern and involvement in children's play, there was insufficient research into children's own ideas and preferences. Normally the HPFA has no full-time employees, but at that date they had the services of a three woman Play Team. The team were sponsored by the Manpower Services Commission and based in a small office in Barton on Humber, a market town at the south end of the Humber Bridge. A decision was therefore taken by the HPFA to use the opportunity presented by the Play Team to conduct a survey on play among young children within Humberside. The Regional Officer agreed to supervise the project.

### 1.3 *Children's Views Should Be Put to Practical Use*

It was agreed that the aims of the survey would be:

- To recognise children as thoughtful consumers, even "experts" on what they want, as this would reveal more than theoretical interpretations of their needs by adults.
- To learn more about children's preferences in using outdoor play places by finding out where they play and where they would like to play.
- To use the information gathered to improve the practical advice given by the HPFA for the creation and improvement of play opportunities, particularly in villages.

## 2. Method Used to Conduct the Survey

### 2.1 Initial Planning

The following points were agreed to comprise the most practical ways of collecting the information for the survey:

- THE CHILDREN WOULD SPEAK THEIR VIEWS. Writing or drawing were thought to be difficult to interpret and might have limited the responses.
- SOME OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS WOULD BE ASKED. Closed ended questions or multiple choice questions would limit the responses to the choices offered. It was, however, accepted that some structure would be needed to make analysis possible.
- CHILDREN FROM TEN VILLAGES WOULD BE INTERVIEWED. This would avoid any particular village giving a bias to the results.
- THE SURVEY WOULD BE CONDUCTED IN VILLAGE PRIMARY SCHOOLS. This seemed the quickest way of contacting a reasonable cross section. It was acknowledged that the children at special or private schools would not be included. Interviewing at the play area would have limited the survey to those who use it. It was accepted that some children might be inhibited by being in school.
- FINAL YEAR PRIMARY PUPILS (10 and 11 year olds) WOULD BE INTERVIEWED. The assumption was made that at this age they would be young enough to talk happily about play and yet old enough to express themselves fairly freely but fully.
- CHILDREN WOULD BE INTERVIEWED INDIVIDUALLY. A first pilot study using groups of children led to domination by some, repetition of ideas and competition to claim the biggest/best/most expensive pastime.

A second pilot study using individual interviews, together with ideas from a colleague's children, reduced the number of questions from 6 to 4, changed the order to produce most logical flow and changed the wording to make the questions easier to understand.

THE QUESTIONS ASKED WOULD BE:

- a) When you play outside with your friends where do you like to play best? (*prompt – why*)
- b) I want you to use your imagination. If you could choose anything you liked, what would be a really nice place for children to play? (*prompt – why*)
- c) What places would you like to play in but aren't allowed? (*prompt – what about farmers' fields*)

- d) Do you have a park or playground near you to play in? Do you go there?  
(prompt – why)

THE RESPONSES WOULD BE WRITTEN DOWN BY THE INTERVIEWERS. Recording the children's responses on tape was considered, but rejected, because material could easily be lost through poor technique and the data would be harder to analyse.

## 2.2 *The Interviews*

In the event, information was collated from 176 children at 10 village primary schools spread over the six predominantly rural *districts* of Humberside. Each child was interviewed for about 10 minutes in as private a situation as the school would provide. All the interviews were carried out by members of the Play Team.

As a child arrived for interview, he or she was invited to sit by the interviewer and shown the four questions and the blank sheet of paper for notes. The interviewer then explained that all the children were being asked the same questions and that she would be writing down the answer so that nothing would be forgotten. It was also explained that the names of the children were not being recorded, simply "boy" or "girl" at the top of the sheet. With the interviewer and the interviewee side by side, the children could read the notes as they were being written. This explanation to the child and assurance of confidentiality was considered to be important to build up trust and elicit an honest response rather than the "right" answer.

## 2.3 *Analysis of the Material*

Following the 176 interviews (90 boys, 86 girls), the hurriedly written responses were typed up at once, then duplicated. Each interview was on a separate sheet together with a code indicating the sex of the child and the school attended.

The problem of how to begin sorting the responses was solved by listing the subjective impressions gained during the interviews. These impressions were checked numerically by dealing the interview sheets into piles rather as you would a pack of cards. For example, the very first impression (which was derived from the interviewing as well as the recorded information) was that the girls had responded very differently from the boys. This was later checked in many ways but initially against Question d) *Do you have a park or playground near you to play in? Do you play there?*

Having put the girls' answers in one pile and the boys' in another, each pile was then re-dealt into smaller piles. The responses fell into four categories which emerged fairly easily during the process.

<b>Attitudes to local playground</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>(86)</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>(90)</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>(176)</b>
One of the best places to play	49%	(42)	46%	(41)	47%	(83)
Go there (but it's not the best place)	16%	(14)	31%	(28)	24%	(42)
Not allowed to go (too far or across a main road)	27%	(23)	12%	(11)	19%	(34)
Doesn't like it and doesn't go there	8%	(7)	11%	(10)	10%	(17)
	100%		100%		100%	

After several checks, all of which showed a marked difference between the boys' and the girls' answers, it was decided to keep them separate throughout the analysis.

Responses were sorted to the original questions and also in some cases to a key word or idea which could occur in answer to any of the questions. References to trees appeared in response to all four questions as is illustrated by the following examples:

- a) Question: "When you play outside with your friends where do you like to play best?"

Answer: "I like playing in the fields, *climbing trees and making swings in them*. Something exciting."

- b) Question: "If you could choose anything you liked, what would be a really nice place for children to play?"

Answer: "The best place I can think of would be a jungle, *with trees to climb*, and animals. You could hide."

- c) Question: "What places would you like to play but aren't allowed?"

Answer: "*There's a swing on a tree* and you can swing across a dyke. You're not really allowed there."

- d) Question: "Do you have a park or playground near you to play in?"

Answer: "Yes, there is a park. We go there sometimes. It hasn't got anything except swings and some grass for football. *There aren't any trees to climb*."



Although no question has been asked about trees, they were mentioned spontaneously in this way by:

Girls (46) 53%	Boys (68) 76%	Total (114) 65%
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#### 2.4 *Limitations*

There are a number of limitations which need to be borne in mind when evaluating the survey:

- What the children say they do and what they actually do may be different. Only a rigorous observational survey would indicate the correlation between the two.
- Preferences may tend to be limited by the children's experiences.
- The team often had to interpret what the child meant, particularly when sorting the responses into different categories. Sometimes their statements were unclear and a subjective judgement, bearing everything else a child had said in mind, had to be made before an answer was consigned to a particular section.
- A real difficulty arose in attempting to quantify responses. For example, the children were not asked about playground equipment, but because they were asked about playgrounds some talked about equipment, whereas others did not. It is difficult to gauge at what point spontaneous references to a particular feature become significant.

Because of the above limitations, the conclusions drawn must be tentative. However, this does not mean they are invalid, nor that more detailed and objective research would necessarily reveal different conclusions. What the survey does suggest strongly is the need for that research.

#### 2.5 *Presentation of the Material*

One of the main aims of the survey is to recognise the children as "experts" in what they want. For this reason the statistics are presented with quotes from the children. The quotes illustrate more clearly than the figures alone the importance attached to play places and also the degree to which the children are able to make critical analysis of their environment.

During the interviews it was obvious that most children were delighted to talk about their play. Their words came tumbling out in a way that painted a vivid picture of their environment and activities. A few had to struggle to understand the questions and looked as though they were taking a test which had "right" answers. Others took the occasion very seriously and gave slow, deliberate answers.

The quotes have been chosen to represent the full range of views held by the children and their differing ability to express themselves. Grammar has been changed occasionally and punctuation added to help the reader.

## SECTION TWO

The results of the survey. An analysis of the activities of the children, the places they play, the places they are forbidden to play, their attitude to local parks and play areas and their imaginary, ideal play places.

### 1. The Children's Activities

#### 1.1 *Variety is the Spice of Life*

Although the children were not asked a question about their activities, many of them describe their games when explaining their reasons for choosing certain places to play.

There are nearly as many different activities mentioned as there are children in the survey. Variety, choice and "lots of things to do" are themes in most of the responses.

Within the essential variety of play, certain groups of activities are mentioned frequently and appear to be the basis of a play repertoire. These groups are mentioned below.

#### 1.2 *They Need to be able to Hide*

48% (41) girls and 57% (51) boys talk about hiding in various ways, and the way they talk makes it sound a very interesting pursuit. They play hide and seek, describe various places with mounds, bushes and trees as good for hiding and they find secret, hidden places to make dens and bases.

Both sexes talk freely about hide and seek and good places to hide. The boys talk about den building and secret places in natural areas, while the girls are more likely to use sheds and places in their gardens where they can make little houses.

Often these secret places are mentioned towards the end of an interview. It is likely that many children refrain from talking about the games of imagination they play when they are hidden away.

GIRL: "We play in each others' back gardens or we go to the park, but the gardens are better. They have runner beans and things for hiding. We make up ghost games with hiding. We are thinking of making a den but we haven't tried it yet."

BOY: "There's a tree in this sort of swamp place full of water, and it's fallen down. You can hide, there's lots of cover, you can play army. We've made steps down the side of the ditch and you have to go over this log and the other part of the tree which has fallen down. It's really secret."

### 1.3 *Ball Sports are more important for Boys*

20% (17) girls and 57% (51) boys talk about ball sports such as football, netball, cricket, rounders, tennis, rugby and squash. It is football that accounts for the big difference between the sexes. Only 5% (4) of the girls say they like playing football.

The boys do not necessarily want to play football on a proper pitch. They find garage blocks useful, grass in front of houses (unpopular with residents), the playing field and village greens, in fact anywhere with room to kick a ball about.

### 1.4 *Traditional Games are still Popular*

31% (27) girls and 16% (14) boys describe games like Block (which is also a hiding game), Tiggy, Run Across and British Bulldog. These games, like the ball sports, need plenty of space to run around in.

### 1.5 *The Adventure of Tree Climbing*

20% girls and 34% boys talk about climbing trees, making tree dens and tree swings. These are the most adventurous activities mentioned by the girls in the survey. For some girls it is a forbidden pastime.

BOY: "Down the lane is a large tree to climb and hide in. I love climbing trees. It's scary when you're up high."

GIRL: "We've got a big garden, apple trees and pear trees. I like climbing the trees but I can't manage all of them."

GIRL: "I'd like to play up trees but I'm not allowed to because Mum thinks I'll get too dirty."

### 1.6 *Bicycles Have Many Uses*

15% (13) girls and 33% (60) boys say that riding their bikes is a favourite activity. However, the two sexes seem to use them very differently.

The girls say they ride around the block with their friends or on the streets near their homes or to visit friends or family at the far side of the village.

The boys ride bikes to get far afield, they have races, but most important they use them for scrambling. They look for the muddiest, most slippery, bumpy track they can find. Most of the villages in the survey have informal tracks of this nature which were used as meeting places by the boys. Building sites (usually forbidden areas) are apparently good for bikes because the sand, lying about, makes them slippery and there is material around to make ramps and obstacles. Grass is not slippery enough for this activity whereas woods and marshy areas are ideal.

BOY: "There's a scrambling pit past the side of the church, the track goes round it and it's got high hedges so no one can see you."

BOY: "We're not allowed down in the woods but we go because there's lots to do on bikes. We've made a scrambling course by trampling down grass and getting wood to make ramps."

A few boys say they have motor bikes. It seems this is as prestigious for boys as pony ownership is for girls.

### 1.7 *The Specialists*

A small group of children, 8% (14) of the total number, have specialised interests and their replies to the questions do not reflect the delight in variety felt by the majority.

Nine girls have ponies and spend most of their time with them and five boys are absorbed by hobbies like home computers and model aircraft. The specialist children are like the girl quoted below. They relate every question back to a particular interest.

*Question a)* "I play on the green and at home because you can ride on the green. I have a field and a pony at home."

*Question b)* "I suppose a sports centre would be good, with football and netball and riding. Oh no! The best thing would be a special course for riding, round the village."

*Question c)* "I don't think you should play in the fields really, because you should keep to the footpaths. They ought to have bridle paths because the main roads are too dangerous."

*Question d)* "Well the green is like a park and it has equipment. We do play there a bit but not a lot. The pony is best."

### 1.8 *Other Activities*

As well as hiding, ball sports, traditional games, bicycling and tree climbing, both sexes make frequent mention of kite flying, watching birds and animals, sledging and swimming.

Only girls talk about roller skating, skipping, hula hoops, going for walks, riding ponies, acrobatics, running up and down hills, relays, just running around, "let's pretend", playing house and netball.

Only boys talk about rugby, squash, fishing, playing war, cops and robbers, cowboys and indians and mud games.

### 1.9 *You Cannot Hide on a Football Pitch*

No questions were asked about the children's games. The information in the previous eight paragraphs was offered spontaneously, often by way of explanation for the choice of play place.

The children like variety in their games and plenty of choice too and their favourite games need a variety of environments. The uneven ground with plenty of cover needed for war games is unsuitable for kicking a ball around. The corner of a cornfield where a little house can be made would not be too good for tiggly or acrobatics.

## 2. **Places Where the Children Play**

### 2.1 *The Choice is Limited*

The first question each child was asked was Question a) *When you play outside with your friends where do you like to play best?*

Many replied describing where they usually play rather than the place they like best. The reason seems to be that large numbers of children do not feel they have much choice. Girls particularly seem to be restricted by pressure from parents and sometimes by their own fears.

Children from the same village often see their environment, and its play opportunities, quite differently. Here are two examples from the same village:

BOY: "I play in the park, it's near where I live. There isn't anything else to do really, though there isn't much there. There are no trees to climb. We aren't allowed to play in the fields they'd chase us out if they caught us."

BOY: "Sometimes I play at the park because there's lots to do and we play football. Or at my friend's hose because we made a pulley from a high tree and we swing on it and his brother keeps pigeons and he races them. Then there's the vicarage and you're not supposed to because it's the vicar's but there are high trees and it's next to the park. There is a field where you can put straw in the beck and swing across it. The farmer stopped us, because of the straw I should think but they burnt the straw anyway. There's a garden at the side of a field where we made an underground tunnel. We were stopped from playing at the side of the beck, I think it was because we were making a noise. I like playing anywhere I can hide."

The places the children describe have been categorised as follows:

- 2.2 Home or near home
- 2.3 Streets away from home
- 2.4 Quiet lanes and footpaths
- 2.5 Natural play areas
- 2.6 Local parks or play areas
- 2.7 Other places

Some children mention places in as many as four of the categories.

## 2.2 *Home or Near Home*

63% (54) girls and 20% (26) boys mention playing in their gardens or the streets near their home. For many of these children it is an attractive choice and they have other places to go as well.

BOY: "Mostly we play at my house, we've got a big garden and you can play cowboys and indians, it is out of the way of the big boys."

GIRL: "I play in my garden or round the estate on my bike. It's a big garden with apple trees and we have animals, goats, turkeys and chickens. I like Block and Hide and Seek and it's a good garden for that."

A proportion of the children in this category play only in the vicinity of their own homes.

- i) *24% of all girls (21) only play near home.* They give the following reasons:

- 2 girls have moved house and know no one
- 2 girls live on isolated farms
- 13 girls (15%) are forbidden to play away from home
- 4 girls are afraid of bullying

GIRL: "I live a long way out and we haven't got a next door neighbour. I can play with my little sister. I like going to school because I have people to play with. I live on a farm and Dad is the manager, so we can play but not far from the house."

GIRL: "I stay in the garden, it's safer than anywhere else. There is a park but it's too near the main road."

GIRL: "I'd like to play in the park but Mummy won't let me. She likes to be able to see where I am."

GIRL: "Yes we've got a park. There is only a climbing frame left, the rest has been vandalised. I don't go there because the big children bully you so I stay at home."

- ii) *8% of all boys (7) only play near home.* The small number of boys who only play near home give the following reasons:

3 live on farms and have lots to do  
2 are absorbed by indoor hobbies  
2 are restricted by their parents

From this survey it would appear that in Humberside villages, more girls than boys are expected by their parents to remain near home. Furthermore, even when they have apparent freedom of movement, girls are more likely than boys to choose to stay near home.

### 2.3 *Streets Away From Home*

7% (6) girls and 18% (16) boys. None of the children who play on streets away from home mentions this as their only choice. Most of these children are bike riders and have the freedom to wander but even within this small group the girls give the impression of having less freedom than the boys.

GIRL: "I play on my bike round home or go down to my Aunty's end and ride there."

BOY: "I go round the village, anywhere I feel like, on my bike."

### 2.4 *Quiet Lanes and Footpaths*

16% (14) girls and 16% (14) boys. There is no numerical difference between the sexes in this category but there is a difference in the activities for which they choose the lanes and footpaths.

The girls ride their ponies, walk their dogs, go for long walks, pick brambles and watch for birds and animals.

The boys are much more likely to go to a lane because it has good den-making material or it gets nice and muddy for bike riding.

GIRL: "We go down Brambleway with our dogs, you can see rabbits and wrens."

GIRL: "We go for long walks on the public footpaths, it's quiet there."

BOY: "The Monkey Walk is by a building site. There's trees either side of the path and you can make dens there."

BOY: "We go down the lane where it's all muddy."

It is noticeable that in one village, where the public footpaths along the side of fields are kept open, the children make good use of them.



## 2.5 Natural Play Areas

35% (30) girls and 71% (64) boys play in woods, fields and on waste ground which have been classified as natural play areas. Sorting the answers to get a clear picture of the natural play areas used by the children is difficult because of the response to Question c) *What places would you like to play in but aren't allowed?*

Many children answer the question by describing places where they are forbidden to play and then saying they play there anyway.

BOY: "There's the conker field, it's trespassing because there's bulls and cows and horses there. We go there because the trees are good to climb."

GIRL: "We're not allowed to play in some fields because horses are kept there. I like to play in fields but we're not supposed to. We play Hide and Seek there and there xx good dens."

GIRL: "I don't know if we're allowed to play in the fields because the farmer don't see us so we haven't been caught yet."

### i) Girls playing in natural areas

Only 35% (30) of girls in the survey admit to playing in natural areas although a few of the others may ride ponies in quiet lanes or walk along the side of footpaths with their dogs.

12% (11) girls play in fields belonging to a friend or relative

8% (7) girls play in natural areas

3% (2) girls play in fields after the harvest with permission

12% (10) girls play in forbidden fields in summer

GIRL: "There is a field where my two friends keep their ponies and we have all sorts of things we can do with the ponies."

GIRL: "I'm allowed to play in my dad's field. I live on a farm."

GIRL: "We've got a bull ring here, it's full of nettles and you can jump fences and have Tarzan swings over the beck, you can go paddling and fish."

GIRL: "You go down a public footpath to a field to play cricket. The place is going up for sale though."

GIRL: "I'm not allowed in the cornfield (I know the man who drives the tractor and he'll tell me when a pony is for sale). I do play in the cornfield but I'm not supposed to. I play pretend horses with my friend. You can play a lot of interesting things in cornfields."

ii) Boys playing in natural areas

71% (64) of the boys play in natural areas. Of these:

16% (14) play in natural areas belonging to a friend or relative

29% (26) play in natural areas

32% (29) play in forbidden fields in summer

Five boys in this category play in forbidden areas as well as natural areas where they are allowed.

BOY: "There's an orchard opposite the Rec that you can make dens in. When there are no apples you can go there."

BOY: "Down the saltmarsh there's motorbike scrambling and sometimes you get a ride. There's swans and birds and me and Mark thought we saw a deer."

BOY: "There's a field at the back of my house, it's a lorry park actually. It's got trees, with grass on the floor. It's the only place to play. It's good because it's really secret. The trees are good to climb."

BOY: "The best place is a piece of waste ground. It's bumpy with big hills. A sign fell down and we use it as a ramp, like where people go horse riding. There's a path. We made rope swings over mud patches. We're thinking about making a scrambling net, we learnt about them at Cubs. We like going there because there's lots of places to hide, trees to climb, mainly because it's bumpy and you can have assault courses."

BOY: "I like to go to the forest and build dens. I like building things out of wood."

BOY: "Mostly you can't play in fields but there is one behind my house that has cows and I can play with the dogs there. It has ponds and is wet. We can fly kites there."

The previous quotes describe places where play is allowed. Those that follow describe forbidden places.

BOY: "The best place I told you about, the tree across the beck. Well the farmer comes with a big Alsatian."

BOY: "There's a swing on a tree. A field where you can swing across a dyke. We're not really allowed to play there but we do because when you fall in the dyke, there's hay at the bottom and we like falling in it."

BOY: "You're not allowed down Green Lane with the wood. It's a private road. There's a hollow tree and pond and a farm house. In the wood there's snares and pheasants. You can build in the trees. I try to pull snares away from foxes, it saves them. I chuck them in the dyke."

## 2.6 *Local Parks or Play Areas*

65% (56) girls and 77% (69) boys say they play at least sometimes in their local park or play area. The children's use of, and attitude towards, these places will be looked at in detail later in the report.

## 2.7 *Other Places*

13% (11) girls and 17% (15) boys play in various other places including disused airfields, stables, an automobile service station, church yards, a privately owned, equipped play area, building sites and farms.

*Privately owned, equipped play area.* One village had such a place, attached to commercial premises, and the owner's son was one of the interviewees. Many of his class mates were able to use the facilities with this boy. The trampoline was very popular.

*Farms.* Farm buildings and farmyards have become extremely dangerous places, fully of machinery and chemicals. Farmers are required by law to protect third parties and consequently few children, even those living on farms, are allowed to play there. The few who do, 7% (6) girls and 9% (8) boys are farm children. Even the seemingly innocuous hay barn carries the danger of falling bales and the risk of fire.

**BOY:** "I'm not allowed at the Mill with the Tarzan swing because Mum said there is a tractor with spikes and it rode at a man working there and there is old equipment you could get cut on."

*Building Sites.* These can be as dangerous as farmyards and are often fenced off. The boys in the survey may have had access to small private building sites.

## **3. Forbidden Places**

### 3.1 *The Rules Vary*

Even within one village there are great differences between the freedoms children have, so although the layout of the village and the position of its main roads does influence where the children play, this is not by any means the only factor.

Many children are unable to explain why certain places are out of bounds for them. They are forbidden to go to some places by parents, others by the owner of the land and some by both.

Some girls have more freedom than others and most boys have more freedom than the majority of girls. The individual parents' views, of what constitutes risk or danger for their child, vary a great deal and is a major factor in where a child plays.

The personal connections of the child affect where he or she can play. Farm children and their friends are allowed in fields which are out of bounds to others. Girls with ponies, and their friends, have access to fields and sometimes stables.

Who they know and who they are related to certainly makes a difference to where the children in this survey are allowed to play.

### 3.2 *Dangerous Places*

Although the parents of those interviewees have different ideas about what constitutes a safe place to play, certain places are mentioned often enough to conclude that most of the parents consider them dangerous.

*Water.* The children say they must keep away from river banks, deep ponds and in one village, a pumping station and lagoon.

*Roads.* Main roads and dangerous corners are mentioned as reasons why several girls cannot use their local play area. Presumably considering ten and eleven year old girls less competent to cross roads than boys of the same age is part of a general protectiveness towards girls.

*Empty Buildings.* Old houses and a disused factory are out of bounds but no explanations are offered for this.

*Building Sites.* These contain machinery and dangerous materials.

*Farms.* Most of the children understand that they are not allowed to play around farm buildings but not all understand why. About half the children talking about the matter assume that they themselves are considered likely to do damage. *In fact, farm machinery and toxic pesticides are considered so dangerous that special regulations are in force to minimise the risk to children. A quarter of fatal accidents in agriculture happen to children under sixteen.*

*Lonely Places.* No child mentions the danger of assault but several girls say they must not go lonely places.

*Woods.* Many children say that woods are closed off with barbed wire and one boy explains this is for shooting. In one of the villages the woods have been closed off recently and the children miss this natural area very much.

*High Places.* Some parents are afraid of their children falling. The high places specifically forbidden for some children are trees, garage roofs, shed roofs and hay stacks. No child says he or she is forbidden to play on slides (although such a fall, particularly on to concrete, can cause serious injury).

### 3.3 *Being a Nuisance*

As in the previous paragraph, parents' ideas of what constitutes a nuisance vary and affect where their children play.

Some parents do not want their children to get into trouble and try to avoid it by keeping them at home. Others stop their children going anywhere they will get wet or dirty. Some children are taught to ask before playing on private property.

Owners of land will often tolerate the presence of children they know, others accept the inevitability of children wanting to play on their land and try to compromise. One example was given of a farmer who allows children to collect conkers from his land: "When he puts a notice up on Sundays".

Many children tell us about various fields where they are allowed after the corn has been cut so that they can have straw fights and make little houses. In some places play is allowed around the edges of fields provided the crops are not damaged. Girls with ponies often have permission to ride in places where pay as such is forbidden.

There are several commonly mentioned places where children would like to play but are forbidden because they may cause damage or nuisance.

*Gardens and Orchards.* A few children are not allowed to play in their own gardens. Large gardens and orchards, where they would be trespassing, are often mentioned and for some reason vicarage grounds are particularly popular.

*Barley and Corn Fields.* These are as attractive to girls as they are to boys. The children can hide in the corn and tread it down to make dens.

*Hay and Straw Bales.* Any place where bales are to be found is popular. The children can hide among them, jump from them and make dens. Some children are allowed to play where there are bales, particularly farm children and their friends, but most are not supposed to. Hay and straw fires can be lethal and farmers find twine cut on their bales.

*Fields with Animals.* Farmers do not want their animals disturbed so they are unlikely to let the children play unless they know them.

*Cemeteries and Church Yards.* These are often highly desirable because of conker trees but are forbidden to children. Perhaps adults consider play in such places disrespectful.

*Grass Outside Houses.* Ball games, on the grass outside houses, are a major source of conflict between adults and children. This is particularly likely to be the case on new housing developments and in front of sheltered housing.

*Garage Blocks.* These provide useful open space for children on new housing developments but car owners fear damage to their vehicles and the children are stopped from playing.

*School Playing Fields.* In two villages the children say they would like to play on the school field after school hours if they were allowed.

### 3.4 *Rural Children Do Not Have the Freedom of the Fields*

Question c) *Where would you like to play but are not allowed?* Was followed by the prompt: *What about farmers' fields?* The situation is fairly complex.

There is general agreement that fields where crops are being grown are out of bounds but the children explain these ploughed and muddy fields would not be interesting play places. They are sometimes allowed to play in hay and barley fields once the hay has been cut. This permission depends on whether they know the farmer.

Fields with animals are less likely to be forbidden than crop fields, but the friendliness of the farmer is still the deciding factor.

Where there are public footpaths, kept open alongside the fields, then children use them and seem to understand they must keep to the edges of the fields and not damage the crops or animals.

Waste fields exist in some villages and in these the children may play. A waste field is a piece of land waiting to be built on or sold or too small or awkward for any conventional agricultural use. Several children mention pieces of land where they play at present but which are up for sale.

Many children simply do not know if they are allowed in fields. It seems as though the question has never arisen. These are the children who do not go far from their homes and the local play area.

### 3.5 *Forbidden Places They Still Play In*

11% (9) girls and 32% (29) boys knowingly play where they are not allowed.

Some girls will break the rules to play in:

- Hay and corn fields to make dens and hide
- Hayfields after the harvest to play on the bales
- Fields with baby animals
- Places where there are conkers
- Sheds and barns suitable for playing house

The boys will more readily break the rules and give a longer list of tempting places. These include:

- Hay and cornfields
- Fields with bales and haystacks
- Muddy places, suitable for cycle tracks
- Places where there are conkers

- Streams and dykes
- Any place with trees and bushes for den building
- Disused airfields, for bike riding
- Old buildings
- Garage and shed roofs
- Woods and forests
- Any place that is good for hiding
- Building sites and tips with den building material
- Fishing spots

## 4. Local Parks and Play Areas

### 4.1 Use of Local Play Areas

All nine villages in the survey had at least one piece of land set aside for children’s play and in most cases this land was part of the village playing field.

The children used various terms to describe the play area; park, playing field, “rec”, the Pits and, in one case, the Village Green.

In response to Question d) *Do you have a park or playground near you to play in? Do you go there? (prompt – why?)*, it was found that 71% (125) of the children use their local play area. The responses are summarised in the following table:

<b>Using the Play Area</b>	<b>Girls</b>		<b>Boys</b>		<b>Total</b>	
Regularly	49%	(42)	46%	(41)	47%	(83)
Occasionally	16%	(14)	31%	(28)	24%	(42)
Never: too far, across main road	27%	(23)	12%	(11)	19%	(34)
Never: do not like it	8%	(7)	11%	(10)	10%	(17)
	100%		100%		100%	

47% mention the play area in answer to Question a) *When you play outside with your friends where do you like to play best?* But later remarks often reveal dissatisfaction with the area. For some children it is simply the best of some unexciting choices.

On the whole, the play areas used by the children in this survey have very little equipment. Most just have swings and a slide, two had all the equipment removed because of vandalism, and two were having work done so were disrupted at the time of the interviews.

#### 4.2 *Girls' Views On Their Local Play Places*

65% (56) of the girls use their local play area to some extent, although a quarter of these are only allowed to go there in the summer.

Most of the girls have complaints and feel the play area could be greatly improved. However, it is often their only alternative to playing in the street or garden at home. On the whole the girls express more satisfaction than the boys over the play areas.

*What the Girls say they Like.* In spite of the limited range of equipment, 35% (30) of the girls say that one of their main reasons for going to the play area is to play on the equipment.

The following quotes illustrate some of the positive views held by the girls:

- "You can roller skate on the path"
- "There's a piece of tin and a pile of hay to jump on"
- "I like watching tennis and cricket"
- "We feed the ducks"
- "There's woods behind it, with a Tarzan swing"
- "You can play Hide and Seek in the trees and do handstands on the grass"
- "There are trees to climb up"
- "It's good for Block because it's got bushes"
- "I'm allowed there on my own, it's got lots to do like running around and playing on the swings"
- "It's got lots of space and you can ride your bike"

*What the Girls say they Dislike.* Several girls only go to the play area because they have no other choice and others go there only when they are bored. Most of the girls feel there should be more equipment and list standard items such as roundabouts, witches hats, climbing frames and seesaws. They also ask for Tarzan swings and tyre swings.

The following quotes illustrate the girls' reasons for disliking their play areas:

- "The big children bully us"
- "The equipment is vandalised"
- "There's no trees to climb"
- "It's just a flat, boring field"
- "There's not enough equipment"
- "The ones in Hull are much better"
- "There are no places to hide"
- "They took the equipment away and there's nothing left"
- "If you fall you can cut your knee on glass"
- "They cut down our Tarzan swing"
- "There isn't enough to do there"



#### 4.3 *Boys' Views On Their Local Play Area*

77% (69) of boys use their local play areas to some extent, but are much less enthusiastic about playground equipment. Only 14% (13) say they go to the play area to use the equipment. 29% (26) say they go to the play area to play football and a further 7% (6) go to meet friends.

*What the Boys say they Like.* Besides football, equipment and meeting friends, the boys describe the following attractions:

“There are mud hills and lots of trees for making dens”

“There’s room to play Tiggy and Catch”

“You can climb the trees onto some garage roofs”

“There’s more room to play than anywhere”

“We like making dens in the bushes”

“There is a big hill and it’s great when it snows”

“You can play rounders”

“I ride my bike over a hilly track”

“There’s a place we use as a cycle track at the back and it’s nice and muddy”

*What the Boys say they Dislike.* They boys seem to find the official play areas more boring than the girls do. This is hardly surprising since it has been established that they have more freedom than the girls to seek out the environments they need. Also the boys continually express their desire for adventure. Presumably any specialised play area used with full adult approval might seem tame to some boys.

The boys’ main complaints were about the boringness and vandalism of their play areas. The following quotes illustrate their attitudes:

“It isn’t like an adventure playground”

“There are no trees to climb”

“We aren’t allowed on the cricket pitch”

“It’s alright for the younger ones”

“There isn’t much stuff there”

“If it had a rope-way, I might go more”

“I only go because it’s next to my house”

“They ought to put logs there”

“There is nowhere to have dens”

#### 4.4 *Children Who Do Not Use Their Play Areas*

27% (23) of the girls and 11% (10) of the boys are unable to use their local play areas. They live outside the village, they live on the wrong side of a busy road or, in the case of many of the girls, they are simply kept near home. In the villages where the play area was sited near the primary school, nearly all the children were able to make use of the facility.

8% (7) of the girls and 11% (10) of the boys say they chose not to go to the play area because they do not like it. These children seem to fall into two groups. One group finds the play area too boring to bother with and the other group finds it unpleasant because of bullying and vandalism.

## **5. Description of an Ideal Play Area**

### **5.1 *Limitations in Imagination***

The information in this section was collected in response to Question b) *I want you to use your imagination. If you could choose anything you like, what would be a really good place for children to play? (prompt – why?)*.

Some children found this question hard work and can only imagine their local play area with a few additional items of equipment or remember an interesting place they have visited.

Five children (3%), one boy and four girls, were unable to answer at all.

### **5.2 *Boys and Girls Choose Different Equipment***

The differences in the requirements of the two sexes, shown in the response to this question, exist but would not present a problem for the designer of a play area. The majority of children would like, in any area set aside for play, as many natural features as possible. The difference between the sexes shows mainly in the man-made fixtures they would like added to the natural features of an area. It is possible to make a broad generalisation and say that most boys would enjoy commando courses whereas girls would like up-dated versions of traditional equipment.

### **5.3 *An Ideal Play Area for Boys***

Earlier in this report (Section Two, 1.1) the children's need for variety and choice was discussed. Later the places they play in were examined. It was found that the more adventurous, or those with more freedom, seek out a variety of places to suit their activities. Other children make do with what is at hand or provided for them. The ideal, imaginary, play areas they describe are mainly places suitable for all their outdoor activities.

*Most boys would cater for lots of children.* 90% of the boys describe a play area suitable for other children. However the places vary from a completely natural environment to one which is entirely man-made.

Here are examples of the two extremes:

“A stream with sand and fish in the country, like the Dales. A bit of a rocky place to climb and a big pool to swim and throw stones in. A lot of bushes to play war. A lot of fossils. Some trees, big ones that are hard to climb, grassy with springy grass like on the top of a cliff. Long grass and lots of birds of prey.”

“It would be a big centre with an ice-skating rink and a youth club, because there would be everything to amuse yourself with.”

*The boys' ideas can be subdivided.*

10% (9) describe somewhere that would satisfy them personally but which would not cater for the needs of other children. The members of this group either want a place to be alone in, or one which caters for a particular hobby.

8% (7) want a full scale leisure centre. These are boys whose other answers show them to be very keen on sports.

15% (14) describe traditional play areas with plenty of standard playground equipment and, perhaps, the addition of a swimming pool.

66% (60) describe an environment which provides space, trees, places to hide and the opportunity to be adventurous. Some of the descriptions are of completely natural environments, some include man-made features with an assault course for flavour. Some are ambitious, beyond the powers of a village, others are simple, modest ideas which could be provided by little more than thoughtful adaptations of existing play areas.

*The boys' own words.* It seems worth quoting the boys at length at this point. This is their way of explaining what they want to an adult. The answers to this question make delightful reading and the examples below are an attempt to do justice to the full spectrum of responses:

“An old manor house with massive grounds and secret passages. Lift up floorboards, rope swings in the garden. A really old tractor, five-storey stairs. It would be adventurous.”

“It would be a park, hard surface, with swings, roundabouts, slides and a climbing frame. Grass and trees and cycle tracks.”

“Big hills, tall grass for hiding and dens, with a track cut through for bikes.”

“An adventure park; it would be fun and you wouldn't get tired of things. It would be a wild place, Tarzan swings, nets and a parachute jump, trees and a small swing.”

“It would have a ropeway down it, it would be in a wood and there would be a river for fishing.”

“A place full of things to climb, picnics, friends to play, grass and straw to make seats and dens, tents for camping out. A flat field and a bit of hills. A stream, and carpets to roll about on.”

“I would like somewhere really muddy. A motor bike, slippery track, bumpy so you could go up ramps and then there would be trees round the edge making a roof over the whole place.”

“An adventure playground. Obstacles to climb over; pulley slide; an assault course. Plenty of hills. Not too long grass. I’d like it because we could go home from school and play on it with friends. I could look forward to playing on it. I’d mostly be on the pulley slide!”

“A den in a wood with grass and swings”

“A place to climb trees as long as I had my old clothes on in case they got muddy. Yes, trees, and hilly for bike riding.”

“An army assault course. A big field, sorry and water logged with mud. Lots of trees to find your way through. Somewhere quick to get to, close by. Somewhere that won’t get vandalised. Things to go under. Loads of gravel and mud. Swing, rope swings to swing across on. Things to climb up and get across to another thing from on top. A fence round it so there’s no vandalism, a strong wire fence so they can’t get over or under. A membership card, certain age, not older than 13. Maybe you’d pay towards the funds at the beginning but not all the time. Somewhere you could get changed. Somewhere to get home quicker if you had to be home earlier. A building you could climb with the fire brigade.”

*No Adults Allowed.* Several boys are concerned with protecting their imaginary play area from vandalism. They suggest fences, walls, membership cards, and supervision by adults, as ways of preventing this. However, apart from supervision, which only 7% (6) mention, they say they want a place just for children with no grown-ups.

From what the boys say, two reasons can be deduced for the exclusion of adults. They do not want to be told off, nagged or stopped from doing things and also they have a great need for hiding and secret places and want to try things out for themselves.

#### 5.4 *An Ideal Play Area for Girls*

The girls, like their male counterparts, describe their imaginary ideal play place as somewhere catering for a wide variety of activities. Like the boys, they want many natural features included.

*Some girls found the question hard.* 10% (9) of the girls were either unable to answer or showed difficulty. It is as though they were unused to thinking about what they want or making demands.

(After a long pause for thought) "A field"

"More swings and seesaws (pause). Some playground equipment has been vandalised (long pause). I love climbing frames!"

*5% of girls want a secret place.* These girls describe little houses or dens where they can play quietly with a friend.

"It would be grass and a little hut. My friend would be there and we would have books and toys. We would play Hide and Seek and swim."

*There are 5% (4) girls with unobtainable dreams.* The girls ideas include more mundane suggestions than the boys and also more fantastic or dreamlike notions.

"There would be candy on the trees. It would be a park that leads you to an adventure, there would be only boys and girls there and it would be sunny most of the time. Any kind of imaginary adventures would happen but no one would get hurt."

"It would be a big hidden cave with lots of chairs: an old cave with lots of paintings not discovered. It would have secret passages with a stream at the back."

*The remaining 80% (68) girls.* The majority of girls would like a play area catering for lots of children. They, like the boys, want trees, bushes, bumpy ground, flat areas and streams but they have their own requirements for additional fixtures.

The selection of quotes below is intended to represent the spectrum of ideas presented by the girls:

"A field with horses nearby and swimming."

"An activity centre: outside swimming pool, horse riding, ice-skating and lots of things to do."

"A nice big field with seesaws, swings, and a big roundabout. It would be hilly with long grass, so if you fell off you wouldn't hurt yourself. A spinning wheel which you sit on and pull yourself round. A tyre swing from a tree. A little den up a tree with a little carpet, like a tree house, and a chair in it."

“Lots of tunnels joining which never stopped and you had to find your way out. A field where you could climb up ladders and things. Different slides; bumpy ones. If it was dark you wouldn't know where you were. More children would go there than an ordinary playground.”

“A playground with swings and slides. It would be a hilly field with trees, dens and climbing. There wouldn't be any grown-ups to interfere.”

“A closed in park with supervision, and no boys to interfere with girls' games. A lot of slides and swings, an adventure playground and a lawn.”

“You'd make huts and Tarzan swings, all things we could make ourselves. Grass, trees you could climb, slides and things like that. A few grown-ups to look after the little children.”

“Trees, swings and other park equipment. Places where you can hide, like old tree trunks. Long grass to hide in. A stream, not too big, just where you could sit on the edge and put your feet in. Little creatures and animals would be around.”

“Stables and a sports centre, a swimming bath, some trees to climb and a netball court.”

“A place like an arcade, poles you could climb and ladders. It would be outdoors. No grown-ups.”

“A field, middle size. Perhaps swings, just things to take up a bit of time. Fairly flat and hilly. On the flat are swings and on the hilly you play chasing. Trees for Hide and Seek. Not too much because I think children can sort of find a lot of things to do; make up games. A place to meet friends.”

*The extra features wanted by girls.* As well as the features of natural landscape the girls want:

- Traditional playground equipment
- Lots of climbing apparatus, poles, ladders and steps into trees
- Rope swings and tyre swings in trees
- Little huts and tree houses
- Places to be quiet
- Netball courts, swimming pools and tennis courts
- Ponies

Although many girls want adventurous facilities like rope swings, no girl wants apparatus of an assault course nature, nor does any girl ask for mud or slippery tracks.

*The girls express views about other people.* The girls express views about other people, both positive and negative, much more than the boys.

Many of them say they want no grown-ups in their idea play area to interfere and some of them say they want boys kept out because they interfere or are bossy. Others find roles for a few adults, supervising, preventing vandalism and looking after little children.

Some girls plan their ideal play area with others' interest in mind. They suggest equipment for little children, football pitches for the boys and trees for other children to climb.

## 5.5 *An Ideal Play Area to Suit Both Sexes*

Bearing in mind the limitations of the simple interviewing technique used in this survey, and the consequently hesitant conclusions, there are certain things that stand out as being very important, much liked features of a play area. This is true whether the children are talking about completely natural areas or formal playgrounds and they apply as much to girls as to boys.

*Trees.* Trees, as shown in the quotes, are mentioned all the time. They can be climbed and hidden behind; they can become forts or bases; with their surrounding vegetation and roots they become dens and little houses; they provide shelter, landmarks and privacy; fallen, they become part of an obstacle course or material for den building; near them you find birds, little animals, conkers, fallen leaves, mud, fir cones and winged seeds; they provide a suitable backdrop for every conceivable game of the imagination.

One tree in a play area is better than no trees, a group of trees provides great fun and entertainment and a little wood with vegetation and fallen branches is sheer magic.

This survey showed trees to be top of the playground pops.

*Bushes and undergrowth.* These have as many possibilities as trees. Patches of bramble, gorse and thorn are wonderful for dens and hiding games; they provide cover for war games and children can make tunnels and paths through them.

*Long grass, corn and bales.* Areas of long grass or better still corn and barley can be crawled through on a child's tummy; children see insects and wild flowers as though they are peering through a jungle; they can be hidden in as part of a game or used to hollow out a little place for secrets; mown grass and straw are popular for straw fights; bales are good for dens and jumping and hiding. So popular are corn, long grass and bales that law abiding, compliant girls will break the rules to play with them.

*Hilly or bumpy ground.* Rough terrain is idea for playing war and other make believe games, for cycle tracks, for running up and down, for rolling and sliding on, as part of an assault course, and of course for hiding games.

*Water.* In the children's view, water can add an extra touch of magic to a play area. Deep water for fishing and swimming may well present too many hazards in an unsupervised play area, but a little stream has great play potential. It can be dammed, used to float things in, jumped over, swung over, paddled in, turned into a moat in the imagination, crossed by means of stepping stones or home-made bridges, and of course children can simply sit and watch the water or ride their bikes along the muddy banks.

*Flat grass.* Ball games, Tiggly, acrobatics and general running around need nice large patches of flat grass or hard surfaced ground for bad weather. Such expanses of grass exist in most play areas, but they are often spoilt by broken glass and dog excrement. When areas of flat surface are in short supply they are often taken over by the boys for football and the girls have to find somewhere else to play.

*Traditional playground equipment.* Twice as many girls as boys say they would enjoy a traditional playground equipment ideal play area. The children in the survey were 10 and 11 years old and these findings may not apply to younger children. The following items are mentioned in descriptions of an ideal play area.

Item	Number of Mentions
Swings	27
Slides	19
Climbing Frame	10
Seesaw	8
Roundabout	7
Trampoline	3
Witches Hat	2
Rocket	1
Spinning Wheel	1

*Rope swings from Trees.* The home-made rope swing or tyre swing, hanging from a tree is suggested more often than any piece of traditional playground equipment. It was mentioned 35 times.

*Adventurous playground equipment.* Two thirds of the boys in the survey would like an assault course, either one they could make themselves or one specially provided. They mention rope swings, ladders, nets, pulley slides, ropeways, walls and forts.



## SECTION THREE

The conclusions drawn from the survey, recommendations to village communities for improving play opportunities and recommendations to the HPFA and the NPFA for further action.

### 1. Conclusions

#### 1.1 *The Whole Environment Must Be Considered*

The responses clearly indicate that children play in a variety of places other than the play areas and back garden. Any community, trying to improve play facilities, needs to consider the whole environment as well as the play area.

#### 1.2 *Many Places Are Not Accessible to Children*

If children are unable to go to a place, they will not play there however “good” a play place is. This seeming truism is still a crucial factor. The survey discovered that many places, generally assumed accessible to rural children are, in fact, often out of bounds.

*Distance from home.* Regular play places are often near home and are used even if they are found boring. Interesting play places at a distance are not used as regularly. Using ponies and bicycles seem to extend this distance.

*Busy roads.* Some children are not allowed to cross busy roads or play near them, thus being prevented access to many interesting places.

*Serious hazards.* The dangers of rivers, ponds, farm machinery and derelict buildings have been firmly impressed on the children. Most of them seem to understand the dangers and keep away from such places.

*The risk of nuisance.* The children are often forbidden in places where they are considered likely to be a nuisance:

- Near houses (with balls)
- On cricket pitches
- In other people’s gardens
- In church yards and cemeteries
- Around garage blocks
- On the roofs of garages and sheds
- In corn and barley fields
- In fields with animals
- In crop fields
- In places with bales of hay and straw (there is also a danger of fire)

*Private land.* Fields, paddocks and woods are usually out of bounds although children of the owners and their friends will often be allowed to play in such places.

*Parental influence.* Some children are not allowed to get dirty, climb trees or play out of sight of home. Bearing in mind that these children are ten and eleven years old, this seems like over-zealous care.

*Child conformity with adult wishes.* Some children are obviously inhibited in the places they choose to play. They appear not to wish to test the limits they feel adults impose. Others know the rules, break them and try not to get caught.

The limitations on many of the children in the survey are considerable and affect their activities and expectations.

### 1.3 *Popular Play Activities*

The children talk with great expertise and enthusiasm about the activities they enjoy and the type of environment these activities demand. Whilst there is evidence that, in the same environment, some children will find lots to do and others will be bored, the strong impression is that an interesting area stimulates a wide variety of activities. The children find these stimulating areas exciting and adventurous. Six groups of popular activity are described:

*Hide and seek.* Many games involving chasing and hiding are described.

*Games of the imagination.* War, army, cops and robbers, cowboys and indians are games which involve hiding, taking cover, holding a position and exhibiting bravery. Only the boys in the survey mention this kind of game.

*Secret dens.* Imaginative games based on secret dens, tree houses and "little houses" are very important to the children. The boys are likely to want to build a den and the girls to find one and embellish it.

*Practising physical feats.* Included in this category are tree climbing, rope and Tarzan swings, the use of some traditional play equipment, assault courses, jumping off haystacks and other high places and acrobatics.

*Skills with play accessories.* Practising skills with play accessories like roller skates, balls and bats and bikes is important for both sexes and can take the form of sport or casual play.

*Expression of high spirits.* The children talked about running around, running up and down hills, rolling in the grass, jumping over things, jumping and landing funny ways and crawling around in the grass. Activities for which we have no name but might be described as the expression of high spirits.

#### 1.4 *Popular Components of an Ideal Play Area*

The activities described above require a variety of features if they are to be undertaken satisfactorily. There is a high level of agreement, between children, over the ingredients of an ideal play place. The children's imagination and ingenuity can make an area, with varied features, exciting and adventurous. The children and the play area can enhance each other.

*Natural landscape features.* Natural features encourage most of the activities mentioned and include:

- Trees
- Bushes and undergrowth
- Long grass and bales
- Hilly or bumpy ground
- A stream
- Muddy ground

*A flat area.* The children mainly referred to a flat, grassy area but sometimes a court or hard surface area was mentioned. This is generally required for ball games.

*Equipment.* There is a tendency for girls to favour traditional equipment whereas the boys would prefer facilities of the assault course type. The most popular of the manufactured equipment is a swing, mentioned 27 times; however a home-made Tarzan swing, rope swing is mentioned 35 times.

It can be learned from the children in this survey that their preferred play place is very different from the adult provided places in most villages. The survey found that 71% of the children spent some time in play areas but most seemed dissatisfied with them. Children will use an easily accessible play place where they can meet friends even when they find that place dull and unadventurous.

#### 1.5 *Play Patterns for Boys and Girls*

The survey was not designed to look at differences in the play habits of boys and girls, though some obvious trends emerge. It should, however, be remembered that there is a high level of agreement between the sexes on the components of an enjoyable play area.

*Mobility.* The majority of the girls play near their homes and in the local play area while the majority of the boys play away from their homes and in the local play area. Boys use bicycles more than girls and play in a greater variety of places. Parental controls play a greater part in restricting the mobility of girls.

*Rule evasion.* Girls are subject to more restrictions about where to play than boys and are less likely to play in a forbidden place. Boys are three times as likely to break these rules.

*Playground equipment.* Girls show a greater interest in conventional playground equipment than boys. Boys show more interest in adventurous equipment of an assault course nature.

*Secret places.* Both sexes look for secret places where they can have dens. The boys talk about building dens while the girls describe ready made dens in barns and garden sheds, which they furnish and decorate as little houses. Girls make dens with straw and in cornfields.

*Activities.* The children in the survey play with friends of the same sex. No boys mention girls at all while a few girls say they join in boys' games and a few others say boys spoil games and interfere. Hiding games, traditional children's games and some sports are enjoyed by both sexes whereas football, mud games, bike scrambling and war games appear very popular and exclusively male. Exclusively female activities seem to be pony riding, acrobatics, playing house and skipping.

*Other people.* The girls are more vocal than the boys about other people. Some make allowances for the needs of the boys and younger children in their ideal play areas and suggest useful roles for adults. On the other hand more girls than boys say that adults should be excluded from their play areas and some want boys excluded too.

*Parental influence.* A strong impression is gained, when reading all the responses, that some children are not encouraged to take other people's needs into account, whereas other children are so restricted that they are not getting a chance to become self-reliant. There are more boys in the first group and more girls in the second.

## **2. Recommendations to Village Communities**

### *2.1 Consider the Whole Environment*

One central play area will not satisfy all the play needs of children in any village. The whole environment should be taken into consideration and areas of waste or natural ground, where children play now, should be safeguarded. These areas should be kept free from litter but not formalised. Public facilities should be designed with children as well as adults in mind.

### *2.2 Choose Sites with Great Care*

Accessibility is of great importance. A badly sited play area will not be used. Communities bisected by busy roads or with scattered housing need more than one play area.

### 2.3 *Consider Design Before Equipment*

The design of a play area is more important than its equipment. In developing play areas, natural trees, mounds and undulations should not be bulldozed but retained. Where none of these natural features exist, they should be created through landscaping and planting. If a few natural features exist they should be enhanced by further landscaping and planting.

### 2.4 *Involve Children in Design and Planting*

Children are able to express their ideas and these would be useful in the design of play areas. If the children are also involved in planting during the creation of a play area their sense of ownership and responsibility for that area may be increased.

### 2.5 *Include Quiet Corners*

The design should take into account the need for quiet corners and hiding games and these should not be in the path of more boisterous activities. However if such places are too private, older children may use them for unacceptable activities.

### 2.6 *Include a Flat Area*

In the desire to retain natural features and create an exciting environment, the traditional flat area should not be forgotten. A boundary to this flat area, a wall or mound, adds to the pleasure of ball games, yet protects the other areas from intrusion by footballers.

### 2.7 *Think Before Choosing Equipment*

Equipment, on its own, is of limited value. It can add to the variety of activities possible in a play area and does have the effect of proclaiming the area as a play facility. Swings and slides are the most popular of the manufactured play items though neither is as popular as a home-made Tarzan swing. Traditional playground equipment will be appreciated by girls and younger children, but boys and some girls would appreciate more adventurous equipment.

### 2.8 *Maintenance Programmes*

All play facilities need a regular programme of maintenance if they are to be prevented from falling into disrepair or spoilt by litter and broken glass.

### **3. Action for HPFA and NPFA**

#### **3.1 *Create an Awareness of Play***

Work even more vigorously to create an awareness of the importance of play in the minds of the general public.

#### **3.2 *Consult the Children***

Persuade those involved in children's play to spend time consulting the children themselves.

#### **3.3 *Campaign Against the Loss of Play Places***

Unofficial play places are lost to children every day and it is as important to campaign against this as for the acquisition of play areas.

#### **3.4 *Educate Parents to Educate Their Children***

Parents need help and information about play. There are so many new dangers in rural areas that many parents simply restrict their children's play opportunities rather than to teach them to become self-reliant in their environment.

#### **3.5 *Undertake Similar Surveys***

As a final point, the team who undertook this survey would thoroughly recommend others to talk directly to children. The report cannot do justice to the insight and enthusiasm gained by the interviewers, through listening to the children, on a subject in which they had previously felt themselves more experienced than most.