

URBAN MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUNDS

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

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| 1) Playground equipment is less exciting than it used to be.
X Wrong: It's more exciting and adventurous nowadays. | 6) European legislation has banned exciting playground equipment.
X Wrong: There is no European (or British) legislation for playground equipment. |
| 2) Children use playgrounds less because the playgrounds are boring.
X Wrong: Playgrounds are still popular play places. | 7) Climbing frames are dangerous.
X Wrong: It's a misunderstanding of the evidence. |
| 3) Children nowadays don't use playgrounds much at all.
X Wrong: They use playgrounds a lot. | 8) Local Authorities have to make playgrounds too safe because they are often sued.
X Wrong: They are being sued less. |
| 4) Parents are risk averse and want safe playground equipment for their children.
X Wrong: They want exciting playgrounds. | 9) Children don't want to play out, they prefer to play computer games.
X Wrong: They still want to play out as they have done for countless generations. |
| 5) All the safety surfacing has made playgrounds less exciting for children.
X Wrong: If anything they've made them more exciting. | 10) You can't let children play out because of stranger danger.
X Wrong: We know it's not strangers who pose the risk. It's the car which prevents children from playing out. |

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 undertaken observational and interview research of children at play at over 60 areas of housing in different parts of the country. He has also undertaken consultations of children and parents for Local Authorities and Housing Trusts at a wide variety of proposed or developing play areas.

He has carried out thousands of inspections of children's playgrounds, together with operational management consultancy for many Local Authorities. The information in this document is based on this research and his wide-ranging experience.

1) Playground equipment is less exciting/ attractive 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 much more innovative and exciting equipment is regularly installed in new playgrounds.

Should you wish to obtain details of playground equipment manufacturers contact: Association of Play Industries (API) Tel: 024 7641 4999. <http://www.api-play.org>

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

Some playgrounds are less well used than previously because the distances children are allowed to travel unaccompanied have decreased. As motor vehicles have priority over pedestrians, even in residential areas, parents stop their children going to play if they have to cross roads with fast traffic, ie 30 mph (even 20 mph is too fast). Roads are a much greater barrier to children than they were for previous generations.

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

3) Children nowadays don't use playgrounds much at all.

Where a playground is in the right location it will be highly used. A good location is where they can get to it unaccompanied, 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 more vulnerable to vandalism.

For a fuller explanation see "Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates." (1997) Wheway R, Millward A. Pub Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk/publications.html>

4) Parents are risk averse and 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 equipment that is bigger, higher, faster and generally more exciting. They ask for skateboard areas which are far more challenging than equipment which was installed 20 or 30 years ago. When consulted hardly any parents think that their local playground equipment is too dangerous.

This finding arises from consultation/ participation exercises carried out by Rob Wheway 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 to 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. What many people have failed to realise is that grass will wear out in heavily used areas and so some hard-wearing surface is needed.

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) but it is advisory only and is more permissive of adventurous items than the old British Standard (BS 5696:1979). It does contain useful advice but unfortunately low quality inspections and poor advice have led to good equipment being unnecessarily removed or modified.

Innovative items (not covered by EN 1176) can still be installed if they have had third party testing or independent risk assessment, eg Spacenets and overhead scales were common on playgrounds before they were covered by the Standard.

The Standard is BS EN 1176 "Playground Equipment" (1998) pub British Standards Institute (BSI) Revised (2008)

7) Climbing frames are dangerous.

This is a mistake by researchers. There has been a large increase in the number of "multi-play" items. These have raised decks with various elements eg slide, fireman's pole, scramble net, overhead ladder. The public call them "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. 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 Elmbridge Borough Council found that parents and children overwhelmingly referred to multi-plays as "climbing frames"

8) Local Authorities have to make playgrounds too 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 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) pub Play Safety Forum. <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/managing-risk-in-play-provision-a-briefing-for-risk-managers>

9) Children don't want to play out, they prefer to play computer games.

People thought the rising popularity of the television in the 1950s would stop children playing out. It did not. Of course children do still enjoy watching the television and playing on the wide variety of computer games available. However, given the opportunity, they still want to play out in the fresh air with their friends. What is happening is that parents know that the roads are too dangerous to let the children play out and so the children don't have the opportunity to play out with their friends and are consequently stuck at home in front of the computer or television.

The publication "Fun and Freedom - What children say about play" is available to download from Play England
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/fun-and-freedom---what-children-say-in-strategy-consultations>

It demonstrates that children put a high priority on physical activity and outdoor play.

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 much 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 "Lebensräume für Kinder" (1994) Hüttenmoser M, Degen-Zimmermann D. See also Hüttenmoser M "Children and Their Living Surroundings", Children's Environments, 12(4), 403-413. See also "Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates" (1997) Wheway R, Millward A. Pub Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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