

Fair play

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

17 July 2008

1. Introduction

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. Play is essential for children's healthy development, but until recently it has attracted little political attention, either nationally or locally. We very much welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and support the principles behind it.

2. Income affects access to safe places to play

In setting out the current situation and priorities for action, the strategy should give more weight to redressing the impact of poverty on children's access to play spaces. A 2007 FPI YouGov survey found that most parents said that they could easily get to playgrounds and green spaces. However, the likelihood that this open space was "well maintained and pleasant" was strongly correlated with income (55 per cent of the poorest respondents compared to 85 per cent of the richest) (James and Gimson, 2007).

Similarly, parents bringing up children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods often relate that their children's play is severely curtailed by environmental hazards, such as traffic, dog fouling and broken glass (Power, 2007, Ghate and Hazel, 2004).

"They used to have a park-keeper. I don't see the park-keeper there now so I have to tell the older kids to be really careful. The parks are really terrible round here. They're awful, lots of dog mess, the equipment is old and dangerous, the swings are all broken. I don't let my youngest out of my sight. I'm too frightened to let her out to play." (Power, 2007, p28)

"There's a park round the corner with a climbing frame and some old swings. But there was a fire and it's all burned. It's not been renewed. There's glass and mess. You can't take your children to play with sofas and fridges and chairs in it; that's spoilt it." (Power, 2007, p70)

3. Park staff

One reason parents in these studies felt there were such problems with local parks was a lack of maintenance and supervision. While the draft play strategy sets out the important role of play staff and maintenance of play equipment, it does not address

the need for more general park staff to be a visible, reliable link with the public, increasing security as well as CABI Space (2005) describes the importance of staff presence and visibility in parks in making them safe and pleasant places to be, including engaging with young people who use parks.

4. High quality places for children to play

With a better understanding of how children play, there has been a move in national policy away from traditional playgrounds towards more exciting environments for children, which is very welcome. We are also pleased to see a focus on 'child-friendly communities' as well as designated play spaces. Children need a neighbourhood where they can move around freely, meet up with friends, cycle, and play. It is clear, however, that the success of this vision will be dependent on the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Transport and local authorities making the needs of children and families a priority.

5. Traffic, transport and children

Both parents and children cite traffic as one of their main safety concerns about playing outside (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2004).

"Despite a beautiful nearby park our neighbourhood is not a pleasant place for children. They have no freedom, even on our quiet suburban street cars roar by at high speeds. My older child is not able to go to the park by himself, there are no crossings. There are no safe crossings on their way to school, they are prisoners. Their school looks like a prison and the postage stamp play area is on the North Circular road, the kids live in the fug of traffic fumes." Parent response to FPI YouGov survey (2007).

We welcome the government's encouragement to local authorities to set a 20mph speed limit on residential streets. Best practice advice should specify that 20mph should be the default limit for residential streets in towns and cities, rather than being restricted to a few areas. Within this, there are some streets where, in the terminology of Manual for Streets, the 'place' function is more valuable than the 'movement' function. To enable children to play freely and encourage community cohesion, further measures should be taken on these to limit traffic movement, following the example of initiatives such as Home Zones and DIY streets.

To enable parents to let their children travel independently from a younger age, there should be more investment in creating networks of walking and cycling routes to link everyday destinations such as schools and shops. Evidence from projects such as Links to Schools suggest that there is potential for a significant shift in behaviour if the infrastructure is in place (Department for Transport, 2006). However, spending on cycling in England is still only around 0.3 per cent of the total transport budget (Sustrans, 2008).

6. Parents may have a range of reasons for limiting their children's free movement

That children's freedom to travel freely and play outside is now much more restricted has been widely documented and discussed (e.g. Whewey and Millward, 1997; Huby and Bradshaw, 2006). Girls tend to be even more restricted than boys (Whewey and Millward, 1997; Matthews and Tucker, 2005). However, parents' restrictions may

often have more to do with speeding traffic than 'stranger danger' (James and Gimson, 2007).

The play strategy proposes local communications campaigns for parents to let their children play outside. Such campaigns would need to be part of a wider strategy including local research with parents to understand whether and why they may be limiting their children's free play outside, followed by action to address any practical safety issues. It is likely that any campaigns would be most effective at a very small scale, for example focused around schools, as parents are more likely to be influenced by their peer group than by media campaigns.

7. Local consultation with parents and children

We welcome the expectation that local authorities bidding for funding will involve children, families and communities in the design of new spaces for play. Parents and children have separate and complementary knowledge about how public spaces can best be designed for children's play.

In consulting parents, existing groups and places such as schools and children's centres can be used to reach families. It is vital that frequently marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, are included, and that the consultation process avoids appearing designed to 'rubber stamp' decisions that have already been made. The Family and Parenting Institute (2007) has published a brief guide to listening to parents.

There are also a range of resources and guidance available to enable children and young people's voices to be heard. Consultation with children and young people is likely to add to the initial costs of a project, but if done well will improve value for money in the long term by creating something more fit for purpose.

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