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Wild woods or urban jungle: playing it safe or freedom to roam

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The rationale and focus for this paper is a discussion from five perspectives on the issues surrounding childhood freedoms and levels of physical activity. From our different perspectives we argue that beneath these very real and proper concerns that parents have for their children's safety are societal concerns and perceptions concerning the nature of childhood within contemporary English society. The knock-on effects for children, in terms of physical, emotional, social and creative development are the issues that the paper seeks to raise. Writing this paper together has enabled the continuation and extension of an on-going discussion between the five authors.

Introduction

Whenever there is a high-profile child-abduction case (for instance, that of Madeline McCann from a holiday complex in Portugal in May 2007), issues of child safety re-emerge into the arena of public debate. On 9 June 2007, *The Guardian* newspaper headed its *Family* section with a lead article entitled 'Let's set them free: What would it take to make you happy to let your kids play out alone?' (Moorhead, 2007). The article focused on three areas: road safety, media reporting of incidents of child abduction and community action to ensure the safety of outdoor playspaces.

Underlying the article are the unvoiced assumptions and social concerns that we attempt to unpick and examine within the context of our paper:

- the nature of childhood
- the anxieties of parenting.

In Kenneth Grahame's (1908) *The Wind in the Willows*, Mole is the metaphorical child, emerging from his burrow into the spring sunshine to explore the world, aided by the older and wiser Ratty who knows about the corrupting, un-named evils of the

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Wild Woods. Ratty leads Mole through a journey of education and self-discovery, which leads to the defeat of evil and the redemption of Toad. Beneath the sub-text of *The Wind in the Willows* as a parable of Christian childhood, lies a view of childhood as a time of innocence, freedom and joy, which Grahame makes explicit in *The Golden Age* (1928), into which Wild Woods do not encroach. *The Wind in the Willows* attempts to convey the role of the wise parent in guiding the child through the complexities and grapples with the issues of how far to allow the child to discover for themselves, whilst ensuring they come to no harm.

The aim of this paper is to examine the historical and contemporary social and moral contexts in which such concerns arise.

The nature of childhood

Fundamental to the discussion is the consideration of the nature of childhood and what it means to be a child in Britain at the beginning of the 21st century. Historical roots of this discussion need consideration.

In the history of childhood, the Romantic movement and Rousseau (*Emile*, 1762) in particular, was instrumental in radically changing Western societies' perceptions of children (Darling, 1994). Before this revolution, children were viewed as little adults, full of original sin, and whose natural dark passions needed taming and subduing by adults (as epitomised by the proverb: 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'), and who could be punished for criminal activities by the same standards as applied to adults and be hanged, imprisoned or transported to the colonies.

Reports such as Mayhew's (1861) *London labour and the London poor*, the work of philanthropists such as Barnardo, Lord Shaftsbury and George Muller, together with moral fiction writing (e.g. that of Dickens and Kingsley) highlighted the extent to which many children in industrialised Britain were unhappy, exploited and uncared for. Child labour became regulated through Factory Acts, and Sunday Schools were established to teach Christian virtues as well as basic literacy.

These moral and spiritual concerns for child welfare and safety contributed to the rise of mass schooling in Britain and permeated the structure and ethos of British education from its foundations to the present day (e.g. DfES, 2004). Dickens' portrayal of the urban jungle in which many children were growing up shocked Victorian society: it should not be like this, young children needed protecting. Entwined with this was a belief in the innocence of childhood that should be preserved; the forces of adult society were seen as corrosive, even corrupting, especially in areas of dense urban development. Then, as now, a complex and unpredictable present mixed with the challenges of a complex and unpredictable future led to the re-interpretation of the past as a golden age, and a wistfulness for a supposedly simpler, less complicated and innocent world in which to raise and educate children.

By the first quarter of the 20th century, childhood had become fully recognised as a separate and distinctive phase of life, that was characterised by learning through play and exploration of the world, in which the role of adult was as provider of

opportunities rather than of direct instructor, even as learner by observation of the child:

Now let us imagine a mind filled with a mystic ardour which follows all the revelations of the little child's mind, in order that, with mingled feelings of respect and love, of sacred curiosity and of aspiration after the highest places in heaven, he may learn the way to his own perfecting . . . (Montessori, 1948, p. 11)

The critics (especially R. S. Peters) of the child-centred approach to learning that was championed by followers of such reformers as Froebel, Dewey and Isaacs, identified the gaps between the philosophy and the practice (Darling, 1994). There was a serious ambiguity in the use of the word 'innocence': did it mean ignorance of the world, moral purity or just too young to know any better? Infant school teachers could not see their charges as culpable yet were all too conscious on a day-to-day basis of their naughtiness. Paradoxically, therefore, 'innocent' children appeared to need to be taught moral virtues, especially the more socially disadvantaged children (McCadden, 1998).

In contemporary British society, there continues to be confused notions about childhood and conflicts about child-ness that affect how children are perceived as well as how they are treated and educated. On a national level, there appears to be ambivalence about *what* childhood is for and *who* it is for. It should, on the one hand, be a time for play and the pursuit of individual interest supported by caring adults, whilst, on the other, it is a preparation for adulthood and carries the potential for 'economic well-being' (DfES, 2004). This is reflected in the conflicting messages from central government: issuing clear curriculum guidance recommending whole class teaching (in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies for England and Wales) whilst advocating inclusion and personalised learning on the other. In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES, 2007) appears to endorse play-based learning and yet at the same time, it places heavy emphasis on the acquisition of specific literacy and numeracy skills. In some educational spheres, the implication is that the earlier children are drilled and skilled in the essentials of literacy, numeracy and ICT, the better equipped they will be for achieving academic success and eventual employment as motivated, lifelong learners.

Taking a simplistic view, if the instruction and practise of basic literacy and numeracy skills requires that young children sit still for extended periods, then consideration has to be given to evidence emerging about the rise in childhood obesity and the health risks associated with sedentary life styles, such as early onset diabetes, heart problems, and even muscle degeneration. It also flies in the face of current understandings of young children's predisposition to be active and to learn and develop through rich experiences and involvement in their social and cultural environment. The recent introduction in England of an Early Years Professional Status in 2006 for those working with children under five years old aims to raise status through additional training and qualifications, and yet little has been achieved in addressing the issues of low pay or retention.

Despite political rhetoric about the centrality of the family, there are societal monetary drivers that necessitate parents of young children being in full employment to counter the effects of a demographic shift towards an aging population. Additionally, 'wrap-around care' is to be made widely available in England and may offer parents the option of flexible working hours, but also has the danger, in our present cultural climate of long hours and a consumer-driven economy, of separating young children from their families for a considerable part of each day.

The anxieties of parenting

The issue of children at risk has resulted in a range of government reports (DfES, 2004, 2005), resources (www.kidsmart.org.uk; www.safekids.co.uk) and media articles (BBC News, 2007; Robertson, 2007) aimed at keeping children safe and minimising the risk of physical accident and injury:

In an average year, between seven and nine children are abducted by strangers in Britain: a figure that's stayed exactly the same for the past 30 years. So why are parents gripped with mass hysteria about the dangers of our kids being grabbed from playgrounds by abductors? (Moorhead, 2007)

Described as a 'uniquely dangerous time of life' (Roberts *et al.*, 1995, p. 1), childhood, and more specifically the quality of childhood, has become a subject of public concern. At the same time, concern is rising over the restrictions placed on children's experience of the real world. Adventure and risk taking, which it could be argued are essential to mental health and emotional development, are increasingly being experienced in the virtual world of the computer game. The following observational account highlights the experiences of a five-year-old boy involved in playing a computerised adventure game:

David was exploring new terrain, including a swamp which he needed to cross. He spent some time looking around the area noting landmarks which would help him find his way again and looking out for anything that might help him solve his problem. Eventually he realised that he could swing up to a platform on one of the trees and press a button that would release a bridge that would enable him to cross the swamp. He managed this successfully on the third attempt, picking himself up and trying again after his first two tries left him in pieces on the ground. Once across the swamp he was able to reach the tractor that would enable him to complete the rest of his journey. He then saved his progress so far and quit the game.

Through playing the computer game, as with playing any imaginative game, David has acquired and augmented skills of the imagination and memory. His risk-taking, however, is within this virtual world. He is not testing his body, his mind, imagination or ingenuity against the realities of the physical materials and structures of the natural or human environment. He remains within the play world. This may aid the development of his ability to construct paracosms but may decrease his ability to deal with the reality of the social and physical world. He can manipulate within a closed symbolic system and solve problems within pre-determined parameters, which may

enable him to solve 'this problem and this problem only' earlier so may appear to have acquired higher-order thinking skills earlier than the children of a previous generation researched by Donaldson (1992). However, if this was the only kind of imaginary or exploratory play in which David was engaged, he would probably have serious emotional, mental and physical health problems (Bailey & Dismore, 2005). His ability to make appropriate life choices or design real solutions to real problems might be low.

Hopkins and Putnam (1993) define adventure as 'an experience that involves uncertainty of outcome' which 'involves us doing something new, of moving beyond our experience in discovering the unknown or meeting the challenge of the unexpected' (*ibid.*, p. 6). They set out clearly the ethos of the Outward Bound movement and of adventure education, whilst being critical of the simple assumption that experience equates to education. Viewing education as primarily leading to human growth and development, they stress the need for a dialectic relationship with the outdoor world, referring to the works of the Romantic poets and humanity's 'affair with the landscape' (*ibid.*, p. 14; Drasdo, 1973).

Unless children have regular experience of the outdoor environment, they will miss out on basic experiential contacts with the natural world such as the cycle of the seasons, where particular plants grow, the wonder of suddenly seeing a rainbow, or the play of shadows along walls. Such experiences in the open air help to develop children's large-scale spatial awareness and familiarity with landmarks within their locality (Hart, 1979). Television and other electronic media may bring the world into the living room and extend children's awareness of the world on a global scale but their direct experiential knowledge of the smells, sounds and textures of the natural world may be slight, having extensive knowledge of TV characters and MacDonald's menus but unable to name three birds or flowers (Owens, 2004). Thus children are viewed as needing contact with the outdoors: to make a mess, to trail sticks through mud and puddles, to be hot, breathless, cold and tired and to have safe, risky fun but not quite of their own devising.

Almost as the health threats of malnutrition and physical and emotional exhaustion through child labour are being eliminated across the developing world, so patterns of illnesses of repleteness are spreading in the wake of increased material comfort and security. Inactivity is claimed to be one of the most significant causes of death, disability and reduced quality of life across the developed world (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). A direct relationship appears to exist between children's physical activity and health, including factors such as blood pressure (Malina & Bouchard, 1991) and bone health (Bailey & Martin, 1994). Children's bodies, it would seem, need activity to develop strength and durability. The evidence indicates that certain groups of children (especially adolescent girls) are experiencing a decline in physical activity, which may have serious health implications.

UK guidelines recommend that children require a minimum of 60 minutes of accumulated moderate intensity activity per day for 'optimal' health (Cavill *et al.*, 2001). However, there are concerns that current levels of physical activity in children are insufficient to meet these guidelines (Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). Teaching methods

in schools in England that have favoured children sitting listening and writing for extended periods have been exacerbated by the 'carpet time' of both the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) and National Numeracy Strategy (DfES, 1999) in Key Stages 1 and 2 (ages 5–11), which have often been extended downwards into Early Years settings in order to prepare children for this amount of physical inactivity. Children sitting quietly with heads down over books 'working' seems to be perceived as preferable to children moving, laughing or even standing.

The growing concerns about children's safety in public places, therefore, are juxtaposed with fears for children's physical, emotional and mental health. Balanced against the fear of letting children out of sight to run, cycle and enjoy open spaces, therefore, is the so-called 'obesity epidemic' that has become in recent years perhaps the greatest health concern that adults have for children. As evidence mounts of a relationship between physical activity levels and rising levels of obesity (Gutin *et al.*, 2004) so the discourses take on a language of crisis (Thorpe, 2003; Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). Images of the 'couch potato kid' have appeared in various health publications, e.g. the British Heart Foundation (2000).

The relationship between health and obesity is, however, more complex than this 'obesity epidemic' discourse would suggest (Gard & Wright, 2001). Firstly, there has been slippage between use of the terms 'overweight' and 'obesity'. If some of the figures that appear in the popular press were to be believed, up to five children in every primary school class would be obese. Any regular visitor to primary schools could report that this is not the case. In fact, today's children appear surprisingly healthy. In contrast to 50 years ago, there are now virtually no underweight children in primary school and diseases of malnutrition such as rickets are all but unheard of. Secondly, there are serious limitations in measuring children's body fat (Trost, in press) coupled to the imprecision of the body mass index (BMI) that now typically defines obesity, which takes no account of age, sex, race or level of fitness (Marshall *et al.*, 2004). There is no reason why such measures, devised with respect to the adult population, should apply to children.

It is commonly agreed, however, that activities that involve physical exertion are associated with a longer and better quality of life, reduced risk of a variety of diseases as well as psychological and emotional benefits (Sallis & Owen, 1999). However, as Roberts *et al.* (1974) observed, many of the outdoor adventure activities promoted then, as now, are organised and run by adults, sometimes making a virtue of the regulation and discipline. A healthy body is assumed to be accompanied by a healthy mind and this can be seen, perhaps, beneath the enthusiasm amongst many parents to enrol their children in sports clubs; an assumption that that adult-led educational physical activity will be better for the child than unsupervised child-chosen, unfocused, physical activity that might stray into socially (and perhaps morally) unacceptable activity.

A survey carried out by Barnardo's (1995) expressed concern about children's erosion of freedom and the influence this could have upon their development and independence. The number of unaccompanied activities undertaken by junior age school children at weekends had halved between 1971 and 1990 (Hillman, 1993) and

is probably still falling as local streets and areas such as playgrounds with fallen trees are perceived as areas of risk. As a result, the outside world becomes 'elsewhere' and the territory within which children operate with confidence shrinks to home, school, clubs and shopping precincts.

The concept that direct contact with the real world is an emotional, social and intellectual need for all humans, most especially children, seems, surely, to be simple common sense for a species that is thought to have evolved on the savannah plains of Africa. Spatial awareness, for instance, is probably an inherent fundamental species skill, that evolved within that environment. However, for each individual human, its development will be hindered unless exercised. Young children inevitably begin from an egocentric view of the world, populated by familiar figures and landmarks, which is mirrored in Early Years setting topics such as 'My Home', 'Where We Live' and so on.

Five-year-olds have a very hazy notion of their route to school and will draw it as if it is one continuous path. Older children will be able to give account of turnings, crossroads, roundabouts and other road features. Routes to school, to friends' and relatives' houses, to shops, clubs or swimming pools become part of a child's growing sense of community space and become part of their internalised sense of the geography of their local area. This is, of course, dependent on their mode of transport. A child's eye-view of the world from the 'protective capsule' (Sibley, 1995, p. 136) of a car window is frequently minimal especially when the journey is along a well-driven route, whereas a child walking the same route daily observes directly and experientially the similarities, differences and changes along the route.

For example, one of the authors was investigating five-year-old children's problem-solving skills by presenting a baseboard and a set of building blocks, none of which was long enough to span a painted river. Puzzled by many children laying a row of bricks on the river and standing two bricks upright on top (they appeared to have built the bridge upside down), bridges made by other children from recycled materials provided the explanation. One of the models almost exactly resembled the bridge separating the children's island home from the Kent mainland, as viewed from within a car. This bridge had two tall pillars by which the central span of the bridge was lifted to allow boats to pass underneath. All the children had sat in cars waiting in line for the bridge to come down. From this viewpoint, they could not see that the bridge stood 10 metres above low water level and that the concrete pillars beneath the bridge were nearly as tall as those above.

Places beyond familiar home territory are designated simply as 'elsewhere' (Hart, 1979). For island communities, this is frequently simply 'On The Island' and 'Off the Island'. In large cities, 'elsewhere' may be beyond a small, close-packed group of similar housing, with danger being perceived as threatening those who tread beyond this zone of familiarity, although leaving by car is considered safe and experienced frequently. Shetland Islanders denote all the rest of the UK as 'down south' and may venture there with trepidation. Perception of safety is measured by personal experience and familiarity with the type of terrain or cityscape. For those born in the countryside, woods and fields are safer than any inner city housing estate in the

urban jungle, whereas for city dwellers, the woods are filled with unfamiliar smells, noises and potential dangers.

Building a sense of the landscape connecting nearby places in the environment (even between home to school) are eroded by increased use of cars even for short journeys. Concerns about children's road and social safety, as highlighted by government guidelines about best practice (DfES/Department for Transport, 2003), appear to have had a direct impact upon children's independent mobility. The proportion of children driven to school by car quadrupled whereas the number of children allowed to cross roads on their own had decreased between 1971 and 1990 (Hillman *et al.*, 1990), creating a vicious circle in which less confidence walking the streets means more cars on the roads that in turn exacerbates the traffic problem and lowers pedestrian numbers.

Participation in the locality through a familiarity born of experience and exploration creates a sense of belonging to a particular geographical location, the community and its landscape. Such personal experiences engender a sense of loyalty and care for the local environment (Ross, 2004) and a sense of personal competence and confidence. However, public perceptions of 'good parenting' censor parents who allow their children freedom to roam, even quite close to home, and children are increasingly confined to home and garden (where one exists), with the knock-on effect that children's levels of regular physical exertion outside of organised sports activities is decreasing (British Heart Foundation, 2000).

There is also concern that loss of independence in childhood might prolong the phase in which children find it difficult to take responsibility for themselves and their future (Furedi, 2006). This goes hand in hand with the raising of the school leaving age but conflicts with the legal recognition of young people as adults at age 18, having the right to vote, rent or buy property, marry and have children whilst having limited experience of the adult world. Free to roam at last but with no coping strategies for encountering the wild woods or urban jungles, because parents have played it so safe that their children have grown up without the enabling risks and challenges.

The Living Streets Campaign (2005) asserts that children who 'play out' in streets, alleys and localised open spaces, whether alone or with other children, are not only physically fitter but have better social networks and can entertain themselves for longer periods than those who are kept under closer adult supervision. However, these spaces are increasingly perceived as unsafe by parents, whether this is due to concerns about traffic risks, bullying by other children, violence from older teenagers or encounters with paedophiles. This comes across strongly in the interviews with parents in *The Guardian* article with which this article began.

Public spaces, especially streets, are often, however, the precinct of those young people who feel themselves excluded from activities involving expense (cinema, disco) or adult control (home, youth clubs) and these spaces quickly become defined by young people as territories which they then police in order to exclude outsiders from their territory, which may at times overflow into gang-warfare. Despite boys claiming that their main street activity was 'doing nothing', this 'hanging about' offered the most potential for something exciting to happen (Corrigan, 1979, quoted

in Muncie, 1999). Muncie further makes the point that many apparently public spaces (especially shopping malls) have become semi-private spaces, from which 'undesirables' are excluded by security staff. These youngsters are 'virtually worthless' in terms of the consumerist goals of the social activity within this public space.

The media rhetoric that surrounded the high-profile case of the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in Liverpool in 1993 by two 10-year-olds radically changed public perceptions of childhood. Overnight, children ceased to be seen as innocents but as potential devils:

For many the case demanded that all children be regarded as a threat and that childhood should be redefined as a time of innate evil . . . It was not just two children who eventually were put on trial, but the very nature of childhood itself. (Muncie, 1999, p. 5)

Already afraid of groups of teenagers standing around on street corners, parents now felt that older children were a threat to younger ones. That this case was unique in its generation and that only 27 such murders have been recorded in the UK in the past 250 years (the comparative figure for adults murdering their own young children averages 60 per annum) was the factor that made it so very newsworthy was obscured by the strength of reaction. Each subsequent high-profile case involving the death of a young child (Damilola Taylor, the Soham girls) adds to the hysteria and anxiety of parents and to their burden of guilt of exposing children to extreme danger, simply by leaving them unsupervised or allowing them to walk the streets without an adult.

In conclusion

For many children in the UK, although by no means all, there have been fewer opportunities in recent decades to roam freely and explore. This is partly attributable to parental fears of abduction or child abuse, partly to increases in road use and traffic but also to the loss of spaces because of changes to planning restrictions and the subsequent intensity of buildings. Most feared by the parents who severely restrict their own children's movements are those few (often older and apparently unruly) children who are allowed to roam freely with little or no adult supervision and whose influence and activities are increasingly suspect, even if all they are doing is making a noise.

Although concerted attempts are being made to address children's needs for direct interaction with the outside world both in early years settings and in schools through providing outdoor learning spaces, in many ways these are controlled and ordered places where much is directed and determined by adults, albeit well-intentioned, caring ones. However, the clock cannot be turned back and whilst the opportunity to reclaim wild spaces for children may be a laudable one, it may, in reality, constitute an idealised view of the past.

Many parents, it would seem, are choosing to play it safe. The skills displayed by David, our case study child, as an explorer in the fantasy realm complement his

exploration of the spaces around him, whether in the school grounds, the local streets, the park, beach or forest. Young children become absorbed by the narratives of the games they play and playing on computers is not necessarily the antithesis of playing outdoors. Encouraging personal narratives that, which to the real spaces they know, and providing children with real-life contexts, which pose problems, challenges and risks, can create links between the risks and hazards of the virtual and the real worlds, indoors and outdoors, the inner world of fantasy and imagination and the outer, real grown-up world, that all children must eventually face and conquer, whatever those risks and hazards may be.

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