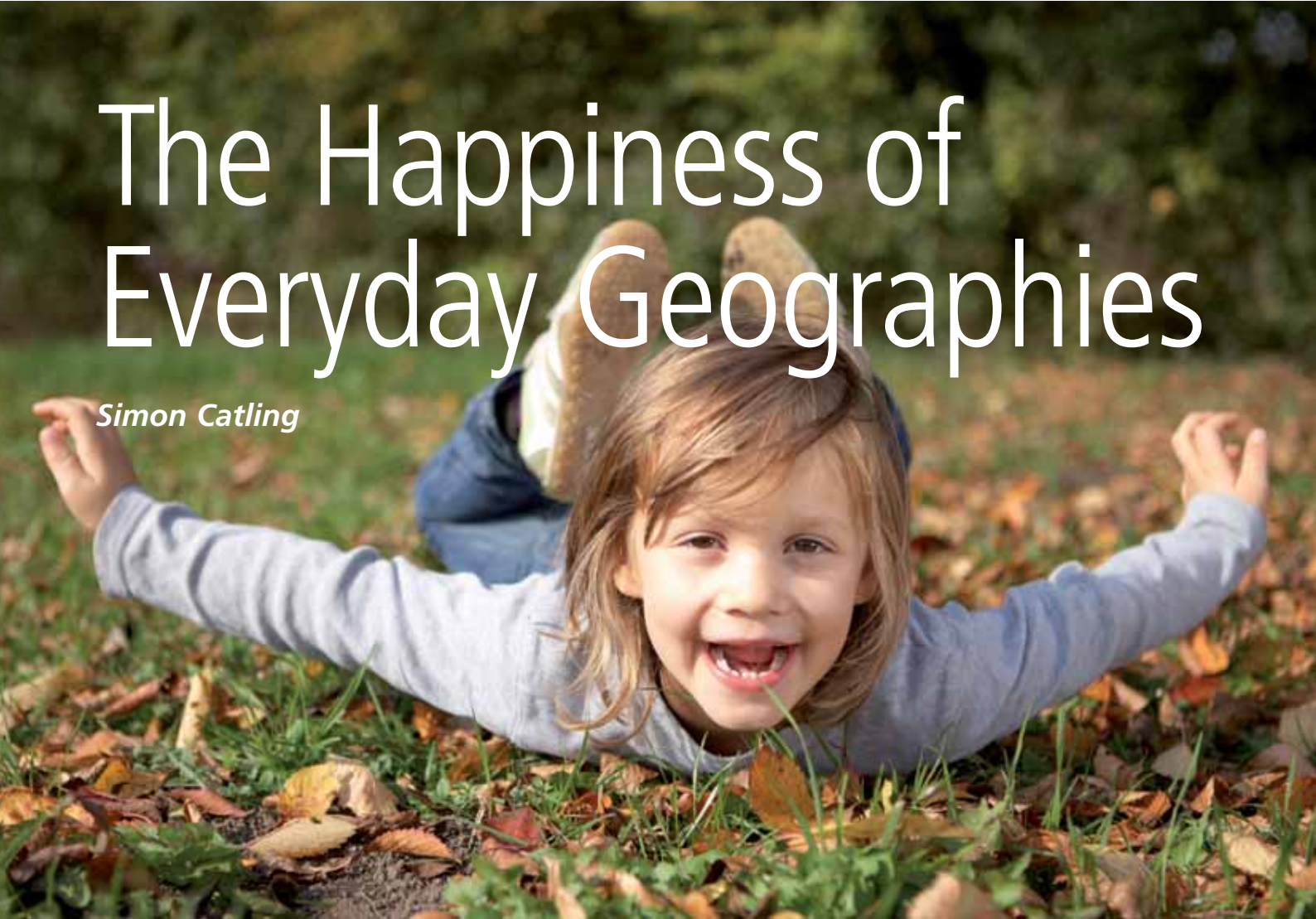


# The Happiness of Everyday Geographies

*Simon Catling*



**Reading this article, the second of three on Children's Geographies, I am reminded of the occasions when I have given one of my young nieces or nephews what I think is just what they want for their birthday, and they have spent their whole time playing with the box and packaging it came in instead! Here, Simon Catling explores the ways in which children often use local spaces in ways that were not originally intended by the adults who designed them, and how enabling young children to participate in decision-making processes at a local level is not only possible, but also contributes to their sense of well-being and happiness.**

The Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2005) identifies both children's enjoyment and active participation as key elements in the framework. While these are strongly linked to schooling and social engagement, the outcomes include 'achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation' and 'engage in decision-making and support the community and environment'.

The *Community Soundings* report for the Primary Review (Alexander and Hargreaves, 2007) noted that where children were engaged in environmental

projects in school they felt positive about the contribution they could make. They enjoyed the work they did and valued their learning.

Pinning down a connection between happiness and children's geographies can seem elusive, but the link is clearly made through aspects of children's environmental experience and participation, accepting that not everything is rosy all the time. While children clearly enjoy and benefit from a variety of activities they do in their home, they also gain much, including enjoyment, from being outside in their own and other places.

## **Children in environments**

Children's opportunities to be out in their neighbourhood occur at three levels, largely but not exclusively age-related: adult-accompanied journeys for younger children to such places as the shops, relatives' homes and the playground; accompanied journeys with friends to agreed places, such as friends' homes; and unaccompanied journeys to agreed sites like the park or to see friends. In all three contexts children seem to have the capacity to make such opportunities their own. Although play areas are created by adults for children and children will often use them for the types of activity adults

'provide', even quite young children will subvert the play area and its features for more imaginative purposes, climbing more precipitously, creating a 'base' area or with a running game. This 'reconstructed' environment may only be glimpsed by the adult because it may largely be in the child's imagination.

Opportunities to go out with friends, or alone to meet them, provide children with a freedom they relish. Not only might they explore beyond the agreed route or destination, but they will use the environment differently from adults (Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; Beunderman *et al.*, 2007). Rough ground can become an imagined environment for pretend games, for group 'get-togethers' or just be a fun place to play in itself. It might be the site for a den, whether naturally in the bushes or built from scraps of wood and other materials. An open space may be used as a games pitch, for skateboarding or bicycle jumps, or simply as a place to gather and be together.

Children's enjoyment in the environment is not necessarily linked to the look and quality of a particular place. Derelict land can at times provide the most stimulating adventure site. Rather it is about how children can use places to serve their own interests. On large estates or

blocks of flats, hidden recesses, stairwells and forecourts can be valued spaces where children can meet and play either away from, or in, the adult gaze. This is not to say that children do not discriminate between what they value and what they dislike in the environment (O'Brien, 2003). They do want to see more 'green spaces' – local, small and maintained – where they can feel safe but not inhibited or constrained in their play or getting together. Children also value and enjoy the choice of a range of local facilities that urban environments provide, alongside the 'excitement' of the bustle, noise and activity of central and suburban centres.

### Activity 1

Ask the children where their favourite places are outside home. If they had the opportunity to take a parent/carer to a site they want to go to, where would it be and why? If they could travel on their own, where would they go and why? The 'why' is very important to explore with the children. What is it that makes a place special to them? You can discuss their reasons and sites across the class. Are there common reasons and places? What does this say about what interests children about places?

Children's experience of their school playgrounds (Catling, 2005) illustrates the variety of places and environments that children enjoy access to. Many children like to have areas in which they can run about and be with others, but they also like to 'get away from it all' to quiet places. Schools that provide such a variety of spaces find that children make more of them, value their school more and are more relaxed and engaged (see [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk)). Where schools provide no such choices, children's own homes can provide such havens, even through what

may be a limited personal space, just 'my bed' in a shared room.

What emerges from research into children's outdoor environmental experience is that while particular types of areas, such as an adventure playground or a wooded area in a park, can provide opportunities for fun and pleasure, it is what children themselves make of such spaces that is vital. Children make their own spaces and places of enjoyment, which to adults may seem incongruous, inappropriate or annoying. Researching children's senses of place (Cele, 2006) and their perspectives and interests in a local environment, perhaps alongside those of local adults, provides an important way into recognizing, appreciating and involving children in their 'living' and everyday geography.

### Children's participation

A major study of children's participation (DfES, 2003) reviewed the many ways in which participation occurs, from consultation to active involvement in decision making and action. It identified key outcomes, such as improved services and facilities, improved relationships and self-esteem, increased political and citizenship awareness, engagement and responsibility, and improved relationships between peers and between children and adults.

Studies of children's participation in environmental projects are not new and have occurred around the world (Hart, 1997). From actively listening to children to their full participation in environmental change projects has provided the benefits noted above, and is increasingly seen to be vital to the development of environmental care and sustainability (Clark and Moss, 2005; Martin and Owens, 2008).

Children enjoy being involved in environmental developments, from the

reorganisation of their classroom as the place of all who work there to the design of a local play area, in school and the neighbourhood. Not only can this involve them in finding out about the place and topic of the project, but it provides the opportunity to engage them in quality research as part of the development of the project (Kellett, 2005) and the possibility of a key role in the decision-making process that leads to new and improved amenities and facilities in their locality.

### Activity 2

Which aspects of changes to places could children be involved in participating in? To what extent would you involve children in creating/reorganising the spatial arrangement of your classroom? Do you feel that it is helpful, informative and useful for children (of whatever age) to be involved in contributing proposals and being involved in making change in places such as the classroom, school grounds or a site in the local area? What would be your reasons for (not) involving children? How does this contribute to their citizenship education and development? Is there something you could involve them in now?

### Activity 3

Ask the children if they have been involved in contributing ideas about places they use. Discuss with them whether they would like to be more involved in providing ideas, discussing alternative proposals and making decisions about things that affect them. What would they enjoy about participating and making a contribution?

Children have views about how they would like their places to be, not fanciful and unrealistic but focused on decency and security (O'Brien, 2003). Active participation brings out a clear sense of commitment. Hart (1997) argues that with

| Indicative ages | Environmental focus                     | Examples                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12 years        | Community-based monitoring              | Monitoring house conditions, waste surveys, traffic flow and issues                                                             |
|                 | Community environmental management      | Managing a local small area or aspects of the school grounds                                                                    |
| 10 years        | Community environmental action research | Interviews with residents and environmental professionals linked to awareness raising and improvements in the neighbourhood     |
| 8 years         | Local action research                   | Observations/interviews leading to improving part of the local environment                                                      |
|                 | Local environmental monitoring          | Wildlife surveys, weather monitoring, traffic and parking surveys, monitoring energy use and efficiency in school, waste audits |
| 6 years         | Local environmental management          | Recycling, composting, gardening at school, monitoring water and light use                                                      |
| 4 years         | Domestic environmental management       | Recycling, caring for animals, gardening                                                                                        |

Figure 1: Developing environmental participation. After Hart (1997; 1990).



younger children it is perfectly possible to provide opportunities to develop children's environmental participation from the Foundation Stage throughout the primary age range (Figure 1).

Evidence indicates that this involvement enhances self-esteem, fosters a more caring attitude and approach to their school and neighbourhood and engenders improved relationships, providing for children a sense of empowerment, ownership and pleasure.

#### Activity 4

Whether it can be done or not, a great deal can be learnt about how children enjoy and might develop their playground area(s) by asking them to redesign how they would like them to be. Why not develop a combined geography and design technology project that involves the children in designing a new playground for their school, based on the current space but with what they would like, where they would place it and with reasons for their proposals.

#### Conclusion

In his recent book, Weiner (2008) argues that in some senses we see both our physical location and our cultural environment as relevant to our sense of happiness.

With our words we subconsciously conflate geography and happiness. We speak of searching for happiness, of finding contentment, as if these were locations in an atlas, actual places we could visit if only we had the proper map and right navigational skills. Anyone who has taken a vacation to, say, some Caribbean island and had flash through their mind the uninvited thought 'I could be happy here' knows what I mean.

It is not, of course, literally like that. It is the state of mind that we are in that is reflected in our level of environmental contentment. For children, such a sense of happiness can reflect the pleasure in being in the places they enjoy in their everyday world, having time to themselves, enjoying a game in the park, chatting with a friend in their den, or taking their new bike for a ride into new streets or paths to explore beyond where they have been before. It can come through such actual or imaginative ways of making their world, just as it may be part of their involvement in a project to clean up part of the neighbourhood or participate with local planners in the design discussions for a new development where thought and input is given to the play spaces for children by children.

For our younger children it is strongly argued that outdoor play is a vital ingredient in their development (Tovey, 2007; White, 2008). This is equally true for older children. But too often adults take a 'risk averse' approach to children's everyday experience and their exploration of and play in their environment (Gill, 2007; Gleave, 2008), inadvertently encouraging subversion. Research into children's geographies provides clear evidence that a resilient approach to risk in the environment – where children learn from their bumps and scrapes and from their explorations and adventures – is not only more enabling of their knowledge and understanding of, responsiveness to, and self control in, the environment, but engenders greater enjoyment and happiness through increased empowerment, self-esteem and confidence. Children's geographies matter for every child's happiness.

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