

EVERY CHILD'S RIGHT TO EVERYDAY PLAY

The Case for Playgrounds

The Association of Play Industries (API) is the lead trade body in the play sector, promoting best practice and high-quality play provision within the play industry. The API campaigns for policy recognition of the value of outdoor play and free-to-use public play spaces. We believe that the provision of high-quality play facilities has a vital role to play in tackling the nation's physical inactivity epidemic and rising mental health problems, as well as addressing wider societal problems like exclusion and anti-social behaviour.

Introduction

For children, outdoor play is as basic a need as sleep, a nutritious diet, supportive care, education and interaction. The absence of any of these elements can significantly impede children's physical, mental and emotional development. Whilst we plan children's education and housing, the oversight in ensuring a dedicated space for outdoor play is a glaring gap.

The issue stems from the misconception that outdoor play is a discretionary luxury—an 'extra' rather than an indispensable element of childhood. In reality, the absence of freely accessible outdoor play areas compels children indoors, tethered to screens and devoid of active engagement. The ramifications of this extend beyond just physical limitations; children miss out on pivotal developmental aspects such as learning about relationships, resilience, compromise, self-reliance, problem-solving and risk-taking.

Without the outlet of opportunity for outdoor play, children miss out on activities to build muscle, develop essential motor and coordination skills and experience the sheer joy of physical activity. They are deprived of learning how to navigate boredom through their ingenuity, resorting instead to screen-based distractions. This sedentary lifestyle contributes to insufficient calorie expenditure and jeopardises their chances of maintaining a healthy weight.

We are setting our children up to fail. With childhood obesity and mental health issues at record levels, never before has a generation moved so little and been so unhappy and unhealthy. A study by the National Trust's Wild Network (2016) reported that children's time spent playing outdoors has shrunk dramatically – a fifth of children didn't play out at all on an average day. A previous study by the National Trust (2012) noted a 'rapid and dramatic' change from outdoor to indoor time, with children playing outdoors far less than previous generations.

The dual challenges of physical inactivity and declining mental and emotional well-being, means we must urgently prioritise outdoor play as a non-negotiable aspect of childhood development.

Playgrounds are the UK's number one location for outdoor play

The largest study of play in Britain revealed that children on average spend more time playing in playgrounds than in any other place. Free-to-access, public playgrounds are the most common places for children to play according to a national survey from the University of Reading .

The British Children's Play Survey, using a representative sample of 1919 parents with children aged 5-11 years, was conducted in April 2020, prompting respondents to reflect on their children's pre-pandemic routines. Beyond the confines of the home, playgrounds consistently top the list as the most favoured outdoor play areas at least once a week, closely followed by green spaces. Furthermore, playgrounds claim the third position as the most adventurous settings for children's play.

Professor Helen Dodd, the lead author of the study, says: *“We can see that playgrounds and green areas are critical spaces for children’s play, particularly outdoor, adventurous play. It is therefore crucial that all children have access to spaces like these for their development and wellbeing. Providing the spaces is not enough though, urban planning must take into account how children and families will travel to and access these spaces and they need to be engaging and interesting places for children’s play.”*

Shrewsbury Town Council’s research underscores this view, noting a significant surge in footfall at public play facilities during the pandemic, highlighting their crucial role in fostering children’s wellbeing and strengthening local communities. The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), representing chief officers across 5,000 town, parish, and community councils, urges the government to acknowledge the pivotal role of playgrounds in children’s physical activity.

Playground closures go into freefall

Research undertaken by the Association of Play Industries first uncovered the extent to which local authorities across England have been forced to close children’s playgrounds. With no dedicated funding for playgrounds from central government or third-sector grants, play provision falls to local authorities whose budgets are squeezed.

In April 2017, the Association of Play Industries [Nowhere to Play](#) report exposed the state of playground decline in England, revealing the closure of hundreds of playgrounds. Between 2014/15 and 2015/16 local authorities across England closed 214 children’s playgrounds, and when asked about future plans they admitted their aim to close a further 234. The API then again asked local authorities in 2018 to disclose their current and planned playground closures and found:

- A decrease in spend on play facilities since 2017/18 of 44% by 2020/21
- A decrease in spend on playgrounds of over £13m each year on average across England.
- Local authorities estimated a decrease in their spending on playgrounds of £25m by 2021.
- England’s playgrounds crumble as council budgets fall

England’s playgrounds crumble as council budgets fall

[Recent research by the Guardian](#) shows that children are suffering from a failure to protect play with park budgets falling by £350m in 11 years. Their analysis of the collective annual park budget around England – which includes local authority play provision – found that it has fallen by more than £350m, adjusted for inflation, since 2011.

In 2010-11, the three-year average spend on England’s parks and open spaces – including funding for national parks – stood at almost £1.4bn. But by 2021-22 (the most recent year for which full figures are available), that figure had dropped to just over £1bn in real terms.

“Playgrounds around England are falling to pieces, missing large pieces of play equipment, or simply being locked up, as councils facing huge budget cuts struggle to maintain them. In some of the poorest parts of the country, family groups are warning that children face a summer spent indoors because of a lack of safe and free spaces to play.”
(Guardian, 4 August 2023)

The shift from outdoor play to indoor screen time

Children are being ‘pulled’ indoors by screens and ‘pushed’ away from outdoor play because of the alarming and continued decline in the number and quality of public playgrounds. A neighbourhood study^[4] found that providing alternatives to screen use by ensuring access to a variety



of neighbourhood places for structured and unstructured activities may be an important strategy for decreasing children's screen time. (Christian et al 2017).

[Research](#) shows that parents are worried about the shift from outdoor play to indoor screen time and the vast majority of parents say that playgrounds are vital in getting children outdoors and active again. A survey of 1111 parents with children aged between 2 and 12 found that 9 out of 10 parents who were not close to a playground said that having access would make their child play outside more.

Of those with access to a playground, 61% said it does make their child play outside more and over half (53%) of parents said more access to playgrounds would make their child more active.

The research was carried out by Mumsnet – the UK's biggest website for parents – and commissioned by the Association of Play Industries. It asked parents about their children's outdoor play and indoor screen time habits and revealed their growing concerns over children's activity levels and the shift from outdoor play to indoor screen time.

Almost half of them said that their child prefers screen time over other activities and almost half of those surveyed said they find it difficult to persuade their child to leave their screen. 69% of parents of 10 to 12-year-olds said their children preferred screen time over other activities.

The research also revealed:

- 72% of parents of children with health issues such as obesity said that the lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's problems.
- Over a quarter of parents surveyed with children experiencing mental health problems said that the lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's difficulties.
- 26% of parents with children who have sleep problems say that a lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's sleep difficulties.

The postcode lottery of play

Further [research](#) by the Association of Play Industries shows that children's access to public play areas is unequal and unfair. A Freedom of Information Act survey of local authorities revealed that some areas of the UK have almost five times the number of children per playground as others. The vast majority of British children live in built-up urban areas, and those from the

The vast majority of British children live in built-up urban areas, and those from the [1 in 8 UK households without a garden \(1 in 5 in London\)](#), rely on public play areas for outdoor play and exercise. For many children, community playgrounds are their only chance to get active and play outdoors.

The research highlights the postcode lottery facing children and families, with some areas well-served and others seriously deprived of community play facilities.

- Children in London have access to almost five times fewer public playgrounds than children in Scotland.
- The West Midlands has the worst play provision in the UK with 929 children per playground.
- London has the second worst play provision in the UK with 866 children per playground.
- Every playground in the North-East and the North-West serves over 600 children, compared to just 196 in Scotland.
- Welsh children enjoy access to over twice the number of playgrounds than children in London.



Playgrounds that exclude

Inaccessible playgrounds are deterring too many disabled children from playing outdoors. According to [research](#) by Scope:

- 49% of families with disabled children face accessibility problems with their local playground.
- 10% parents of disabled children said their child got hurt using inaccessible equipment.

Parents of disabled children say that the playgrounds they use are not designed for disabled children, creating barriers such as:

- lack of inclusive and accessible playground equipment
- inaccessible pathways and tight spaces
- challenging and uneven terrain

Scope are calling for accessible equipment, sensory opportunities and appropriate surfaces and fences, to bring an end to this injustice.

The inactivity epidemic: a Movement for Movement

By the time they finish primary school many children have the highest levels of body fat on record. Rates of child Type 2 diabetes and mental illness are also the highest in our history. Sleep patterns have shifted negatively, leading to an alarming surge in admissions to NHS hospitals for sleep disorders among children. Children are dedicating an all-time high proportion of their time to screen activities and young children have never moved so little.

[Research](#) in 2019 showed, for the first time, a strong link between recreational screen time and children's inactivity. Children are choosing to spend their free hours on screens instead of playing outside.

The report confirms what most parents already know, that discretionary screen time is their children's main activity. Whether it's watching TV, playing video games or spending time on social media, screen time is occupying hours of their day, and has replaced outdoor play.

As children move far more when they are outside than inside, and the majority live in urban areas, investment in attractive, good quality, free and local playground provision is vital so they have somewhere to play.

As an instrument to improve children's health – through movement and outdoor play – the role of public playgrounds is hugely undervalued: we are in danger of taking for granted one of our greatest community resources. For a relatively modest investment in the UK's public play provision, the health of children would benefit greatly for years to come.

Policy should reflect the reality that, in a heavily urbanised and digitally dominated society, public playgrounds really do matter. Now is the time to level up the life chances of UK children by ensuring that they all have access to free, local, high-quality playgrounds.

[i] National Trust (2016) Reported in Guardian. Three-quarters of UK children spend less time outdoors than prison inmates – survey. N. Carrington. 25 Mar 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/25/three-quarters-of-ukchildren-spend-less-time-outdoors-than-prison-inmates-survey>

[ii] National Trust (2012) Natural Childhood. Report. Stephen Moss

[iii] Dodd,H.F.;FitzGibbon,L.; Watson, B.E.; Nesbit, R.J. Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children's Play Survey. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2021, 18, 4334. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18084334>

[iv] Christian, H et al (2017) Nowhere to Go and Nothing to Do but Sit? Youth Screen Time and the Association With Access to Neighbourhood Destinations. Environment and Behaviour. Vol 49, Issue 1, pp. 84 – 108 10.1177/0013916515606189