

Healthy Communities Research Forum

– linking health and sustainable development –

Supporting the health and well-being of children and young people through improved access to green space

Research Forum report

If we are serious about community environmental participation, let's consider this key performance indicator: by what age should all children in Britain have seen a duck? So begins Judy Ling Wong's "Inner City Duck Story".

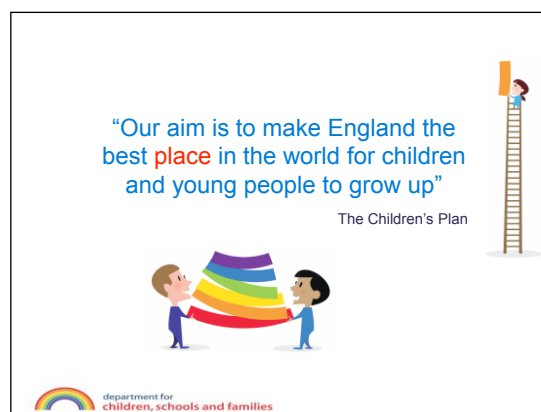
Children and young people's access to green space was the focus of October's Healthy Communities Research Forum. Developed in conjunction with the Sustainable Development Commission the Forum asked:

- what do children and young people *really* want and need from green space?;
- how can we get a more realistic valuation of the benefits of making quality green space accessible to all young people, and what are the costs and risks of not doing so?;
- how can we blend personal experience, intuition and formal knowledge about what works to create a step change in the accessibility and quality of green space for young people (and everyone)?

Child friendly environments: the policy context

Tom Gibb, from the Play and Wellbeing team at the Department for Children, Schools and Families focused on the national policy context for child-friendly environments.

The purpose of the Department for Children, Schools and Families is to "make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up" (from The Children's Plan) and Tom began by making the point that places that are good for children are generally good for everyone.



The Purpose of the Department for Children, Schools and Families

The purpose of this report is to give a flavour of key themes and discussions from the event. The full presentations from the Forum are available on the WHO Collaborating Centre website.
<http://www.bne.uwe.ac.uk/who/seminars.asp>

Tom highlighted the role of consultation and research to develop evidence-based policy that underpins this aim.

Consultation confirms the value that children and families place on high quality, safe places to live, play and relax, and research underscores the health and educational benefits. Nevertheless, children are not playing outside as they used to. Responses to an ICM survey commissioned by Play England for Playday 2007 showed that 71% of adults played outside in the street or area close to their homes every day when they were children, compared to only 21% of children today.

Evidence based policy: research
 Opportunities to explore and play outdoors are good for children

- Health benefits
 - Physical
 - Mental
- Quality of life
 - Environment
 - Social cohesion
 - Enjoyment
- Learning



Being outdoors and being active is proven to benefit mental health
Dr Marcus Roberts of MIND



Research: one element of evidence based policy

Tom also gave an overview of some policies of selected Government Departments that contribute to place shaping, providing a snapshot of how sustainable development, healthy environments and community involvement are Government-wide agendas.

Government policy
 Across Government, policy recognises the importance of sustainable development, healthy communities and place – e.g.

- DCSF
 - Every Child Matters / The Children's Plan
 - Play strategy
- DEFRA: Securing the Future
- CLG
 - World Class Places
 - Communities in Control
 - Eco-towns
- DH
 - Healthy Lives, Brighter Futures
 - Healthy Towns
- National Indicator Set / PSA12 & PSA13



Government policy on sustainable, healthy communities

Tom then showed how central Government policy was delivered through local authority implementation, highlighting a range of planning and provision duties and guidance that authorities need to meet, from Planning Policy Guidance to Children's Trusts requirements on supporting play provision.

Ending on a positive note, the presentation highlighted initiatives in Dudley and Thurrock that demonstrate how the end product is being delivered and how access to good quality green space can be supported and encouraged.

Implementation: Healthy Towns case study
 In Dudley, a programme entitled 'Let's Go Outside' aims to encourage families to make the most of outdoor areas by transforming parks, play areas and nature reserves into 'family health hubs'. Changes to the infrastructure, complemented by a programme of activities and events, will ensure that the hubs promote a healthy, active lifestyle for all ages. Safe, 'active travel corridors' will be set up to join people's homes to the health hubs.



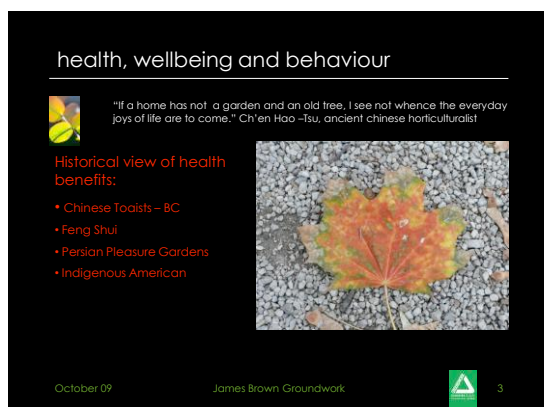


The "Let's Go Outside programme", Dudley

Health, wellbeing and behaviour

The presentation given by James Brown , Principal Landscape Architect for the green regeneration charity Groundwork, looked at the positive impact of green space on health and wellbeing. James looked at this from a number of different perspectives: from the historical, to the personal, to formal evidence and research.

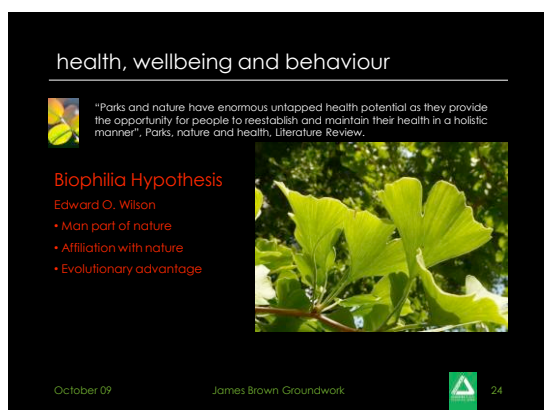
All these sources underscore that nature has multiple positive benefits for human health and wellbeing. The benefits include: reducing crime; fostering psychological wellbeing, reducing stress, boosting immunity, enhancing productivity and promoting healing.



Ancient historical understanding of positive impact of nature on health and wellbeing

Whilst little of the research evidence focuses on children *per se*, James said that arguably many of the conclusions from this broader literature could be extrapolated to some extent to young people.

One of the key themes of the presentation was that humans are maladapted to today's non-natural and technological environments. James spoke about "biophilia", a term **first** used by the German philosopher Erich Fromm in the 1940s to describe a psychological orientation of being



The Biophilia Hypothesis

attracted to all that is alive and vital. The biophilia thesis was famously developed by the naturalist Edward O Wilson who developed the hypothesis that an affinity with nature is engrained in our genotype.

James looked to The Netherlands, Canada and Australia for inspiration about how the UK could better link research, policy and practice in our attempt to make green space

more accessible for children and young people. For example, in The Netherlands a collaboration between the national Health Council and the Dutch Advisory Council for Research on Spatial Planning has established a forward-looking and innovative model. This is based on four key themes: prevention of health complaints; remedying of health complaints; physical exercise and recreation; and child development.



The Dutch Initiative "Nature & Health"

Creating opportunities for communities, and particularly children and young people to not just access, but actively participate in the development of green space is central to the work that James is involved with at Groundwork. Within Groundwork there is enormous personal experience and anecdotal evidence of the positive impact of their work on the health, wellbeing and behaviour of children and young people.

Like many charities, however, their funding model makes it challenging to capture the full extent of the positive impact of their work. Connected to this, their focus at the sharp end of delivery can also make it challenging to place their work in the context of wider discussions around sustainable communities and public health.

With such a compelling body of evidence available to us about the benefits of being able to connect with nature in everyday life, James closed his presentation by urging us to better reflect this wisdom in policy and practice.

Sustainable neighbourhoods for child active life and well-being

Lamine Mahdjoubi is professor of the built environment at The University of the West of England. Lamine began by looking at the major challenge posed to children's health and wellbeing by sedentary lifestyles and the lost connection to nature.

Nature deficit disorder

- Evidence of dramatic decline of children's connection with nature
- Evidence of healthy and therapeutic effects experienced by children exposed to nature*

* Vohs et al. (2007) 'Nearby nature: Bronfenbrenner and behavior' (2007), 517-520

Last Child in the Woods
SAVING OUR CHILDREN FROM NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER
RICHARD LOUV
RECIPIENT OF THE 2008 AUBURN MEDAL

Impact on children of lost connection with nature

Aspects of modern life that encourage inactivity include: loss of streets as play areas, an obsession with safety and minimising risk, "ghettoised play" – confining play to formal "play areas" and prevalence of the fitness culture, and negative public attitudes to children and young people's play whereby children are seen as a noise and a nuisance.

Aspects of modern life that encouraged inactivity
Obsession with 'Ghettoised Play'

- The *Recreation Grounds Act of 1859* paved the way to identifiable play areas
- Since development of 'playgrounds' "stay and play centres, theme parks"
- Ghettoised play and obsession with absolute risk led to playgrounds losing their appeal for children

Unhelpful trend towards "ghettoised play"

Lamine discussed a wide range of research that looks at the contribution of the built environment to outdoor play. Lamine's personal research in this area has focussed on developing new research methods, using GPS sensors and cognitive mapping that provide rich insight into how and where children play.

New research methods

Children's Cognitive Mapping

Physical activity monitoring

Collectively, Offer powerful techniques for data collection and analysis

New methods for monitoring physical activity

The presentation closed with key conclusions from the literature about how the built environment and a change in cultural attitudes can support increased physical activity among children and young people. Key recommendations are to:

- create a built environment that encourages walking and cycling;
- give greater emphasis to the role of informal play;
- make provision for informal supervision and safety;
- re-educate parents and policy makers and wider society about the risks of creating a culture of fear around play;
- move away from a ghettoised approach to play – encourage idea that play is something that can and should happen anywhere.

Knowledge co-creation

The following issues were explored by participants during the session, and in the extensive feedback they gave afterwards – something we consider integral to the process of knowledge exchange within this research forum.

Response from the buzz groups

During the session, participants worked together in break-out groups to discuss the key questions posed by this Forum.

What can we do differently?

- This issue needs to be championed strategically and consistently – promotion isn't a one time thing.
- Create playable spaces for whole communities.
- Embed young people's voices in policy, particularly in planning processes (Bristol Neighbourhood Planning Network identified as possible key mechanism).
- Move beyond the narrow concern with play, and develop a more holistic language and culture around young people and green space that acknowledges the psychological, behavioural and spiritual benefits of opportunities to connect with nature.
- Go beyond the purely physical when we talk about access – e.g. there can also be greater access to green space through the school curriculum.

What are the major challenges?

- There is currently a discontinuity between general principles and what happens on the ground.
- There is a disconnect between what we know as private individuals and what we do as professionals.
- Developing a shared language and priorities across children's service providers and planners.

What research is needed to support this agenda?

- We need to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of what children and young people want and need from green space.
- Research is needed to develop the methodologies for calculating the costs and benefits of investing in green space.

Participant feedback

Key messages participants took away:

Vital to listen to children & young people

- We need to focus more attention on the needs of developing children.
- I'm more aware of the different barriers that prevent young people from participating in physical activity.
- We are not listening to children.

We need to be more joined up in our thinking

- There is a need to integrate this agenda with wider regeneration.
- We need to pay attention to the social aspects of creating, maintaining and developing green environments.
- Promote health through play and access to open space.
- Break down silos and find an agency that can deliver a comprehensive solution and funding.

Relationship between evidence, policy and practice

- Key messages about the value of play are not being translated into practice.
- There is lots of useful research out there that we can use to reinforce our work.

Importance of informal space

- We need to move away from "ghettoising play".
- We should aim to create playable places rather than play areas.
- What works for children is likely to work for all.

An activity, action or change to make

- Allow children to freely play unsupervised within the open space available.
- To use this concept at Local Strategic Partnership/Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership meetings I attend to influence strategy.
- Evidencing our "coal face" work better to demonstrate cost/benefits.
- Link my work in with some of the key strategy documents to better contextualise it.
- Extend green infrastructure story to include health benefits in overall cost benefit analysis.

Useful learning from the session:

- Very insightful to have different keynote speaker's points of view.
- Very useful. Good mix of professions and excellent to have researchers involved alongside them.
- Very useful – particularly raising awareness around the health benefits of green space.
- Very useful to extend my research interests outside my usual field of work.
- Useful to meet people from different disciplines and to get a good policy context overview.
- Thought provoking. Very good for disseminating research findings.

List of participating organisations

4DLD

ARUP, Bristol

Bath and Northeast Somerset Council

Bristol City Council

Cardiff University

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

Department for Children, Schools and Families

Devon Primary Care Trust

Groundwork South West

Knowle West Health Park CIC

London Sustainability Exchange

Natural England

NHS Gloucestershire

Planning Inspectorate

Play England

Plymouth Teaching Primary Care Trust

South Gloucestershire Council

South West Councils

South West Public Health Observatory

Staffordshire University

St George's Healthcare NHS Trust

Sustainable Development Commission

Sustainability South West

Sustrans

University of Bristol

University of the West of England

West of England Partnership

Further information:

- (1) Wong, J.L. (2001) An Inner City Duck Story, *The Ecologist*. December Issue 2001. Also available online at: http://www.ben-network.org.uk/uploaded_Files/Ben_1/Ben_file_1_31.pdf
- (2) Department for Children, Schools and Families: www.dcsf.gov.uk/play
- (3) Play England: www.playengland.org.uk
- (4) Sustainable Development Commission: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/education.html>
- (5) Groundwork: www.groundwork.org.uk
- (6) A poster of Lamine Mahdjoubi's project on how schools can maximise use of their outdoor space is available to download from the Institute for Sustainability, Health and Environment website at: <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/ishe/docs/conference/posters/schools-outdoor-space.pdf>
- (7) Full information and booking details for the *Building Health* conference on January 22nd 2010 are available at: <http://www.architecturecentre.co.uk/events/buildinghealth>

Report prepared by

Sarah Hills and Marcus Grant

WHO Collaborating Centre for Healthy Cities and Urban Policy

Part of the Institute for Sustainability, Health and Environment



University of the West of England, Bristol
October 2009