



“ *Children today often live in special environments quite cut off from the working world of adults and often from nature as well. They must be compensated for this loss by being offered play environments rich in opportunities and experiences.*

(Noren Bjorn, ‘The Impossible Playground’)

The importance of play in contributing to the general health and well being of children, extending through childhood and beyond is universally acknowledged. As an essential ingredient to the social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development of children, play provides a mechanism for children to explore the world around them. However, despite the fact that children are the major users of the outdoor environment, there are many factors conspiring against their ability to play safely outdoors. Research has shown that increasing urbanisation, traffic dangers, a general lack of play provision within housing developments and parental fears have reduced the child’s ability to access the environment:

- research shows that the child’s access to the environment has shrunk ninefold in the past 20 years across the UK (Joseph Rowntree Foundation). PlayBoard believes this to be even higher in the case of NI, where children’s access to the environment was restricted for their safe-keeping due to the ‘Troubles’;
- increased urbanisation and traffic levels has resulted in many residential streets being no longer safe for children’s play;
- at an early age, gardens are an important play area for children, but from the age of seven years, more use is made of the wider environment. Due to its proximity to home, and in the absence of specific play areas, for many children the street is the most popular play area. However, little attention is given to the design of streets and spaces for play are consumed when traffic takes precedence over children;
- children’s play needs are largely ignored when housing developments are designed, with developers providing for play on land located on the periphery of housing developments or on ‘left-over’ plots identified only after housing has been sited, if at all;
- the need for safe, quality play in rural environments is as great as in urban communities. Despite perceptions, the reality is that due to safety reasons, children in rural communities do not have access to the countryside which surrounds them;
- the intention to build housing developments in green belt areas throughout Northern Ireland has the potential to further erode children’s access to natural green space and crucially illustrates why play needs to be planned. Whilst the concept of developing

villages with open space and planned play areas is to be welcomed, concern remains that the expensive price of homes in such developments will lead to green living space becoming the luxury of the wealthy in Northern Ireland;

- vandalism in the play environment is a problem for many councils, resulting in expensive maintenance costs and closures. Ironically, the growing tendency within society to wrap children up in cotton wool is contributing to this. Research suggests that children, in order to take risk and create thrills and challenges, misuse play facilities that do not offer challenge to them, or whose focus is predominantly on safety;
- research has shown that harsh and sterile play environments, characterised by concrete surfacing and steel structures, raise aggression levels in children and cause them to misuse equipment;
- Northern Ireland formally protects the rights of birds in the planning process but does not afford the same rights to children.

Regarding the child's access to the environment:

1. PlayBoard requests a formal, recognised role in the planning process, similar to that held by the RSPB. It could be argued that a planning process which appears to offer more rights for birds than for children has got its priorities confused.
2. PlayBoard urges that children and young people are consulted with directly as to the most appropriate play and recreation provision. PlayBoard's experience is that children have articulate and tangible views on their play needs, and that consultation will ensure that developers provide the most appropriate play facilities associated with open space rather than providing fixed play equipment, often assumed as the first or only option and offering little in terms of play value. In addition, research has shown that play facilities which are developed through consultation and participation with children are looked after by children, primarily because it is what they want and because they feel a sense of ownership of it.
3. PlayBoard recommends that the overall design of new residential developments considers children, taking into account how they live, their general play behaviour and patterns, in the same way it looks at the lifestyle of adults. The provision of a play facility alone will not meet children's needs. For example:
 - one large central play facility may not be sufficient in larger developments - it may be the case that more, smaller open spaces that make most use of natural features may be appropriate;

- it is crucial that new residential developments take account of traffic calming measures throughout the development. For example, Home Zones are an example of good practice in public open space and movement within housing developments. They were introduced in the 1970s as a remedy for problems caused by increasing traffic levels in residential areas. PlayBoard has been instrumental in the campaign for the development of the Home Zone pilot project under development in the New Lodge area of North Belfast, which will promote non-traffic uses of public space. PlayBoard recommends the introduction of Home Zones and other traffic calming measures within larger density housing developments as a means of ensuring the integration of landscaped areas, open space and play provision within housing developments, to improve safety and create a better environment

PlayBoard can provide developers with a Play Impact Statement that will guide them in providing quality play opportunities within developments.

4. PlayBoard can provide developers with a design and community consultation service on the provision of appropriately equipped or other play provision in new residential developments, helping them make provision for the future management and maintenance of open space within housing developments.
5. PlayBoard has been lobbying strongly for the introduction of appropriate regional standards or a Good Practise Guide for Children's Play and Recreation in Northern Ireland. This would support local councils in developing play policies and strategies, whose work has tended to fall into a vacuum because it has not been complemented by regional policy or advice.



The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the mind and bodies of its citizens.



(Lloyd George, 1926)



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