

Street play – children playing out where they live

This is a briefing for play associations and other community organisations on working with local people to encourage children to play out on their doorsteps. It draws on successful examples of street play around the country to show how community organisations can tailor support to parents and other residents, and advocate to Health and Well-being Boards for street play as a low cost early intervention in children’s health.

Hackney Play Association delivers Hackney Playing Out which supports residents and schools to get involved in activating street play in their area. Currently there are 31 streets including several estates, taking part. The project is funded by LB Hackney through the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The street play model shows that a bit of support from play associations or other community organisations in the early stages often leads to self-sustaining local activity. In turn, as parents and other residents understand the benefits of street play they tend to become champions for play more widely, for example by offering peer support to other residents and broadening the support base of play and community organisations. Equally, community organisations with interests ranging from play to public health to safer communities find it a great way to work together and share expertise.

What is street play?

Quite simply it is parents and other residents reactivating a culture of children playing out in the streets where they live. Sometimes known as ‘playing out sessions’ – after the Playing Out modelⁱ developed by two parents in Bristol – or ‘play streets’ local authorities enable temporary street closures at regular weekly or monthly intervals, typically for two to three hours at a time. Local parents and other residents act as marshals, allowing their neighbours to drive to and from their homes at walking pace, while through traffic is redirected.

Promoting the benefits of street play

A growing number of guidance documents based on research studies show that encouraging “unstructured, active and energetic play” may be the most effective strategy for increasing physical activity and helping to preventing increases in overweight and obesity.

- *Everybody Active, Every Day* advocates developing a co-ordinated approach to promote, walking, cycling, active transport and active play ⁱⁱ
- *Healthy People, Healthy Places* briefing on obesity and promoting physical activity through providing opportunities for social interaction and children’s play ⁱⁱⁱ

- *Start Active, Stay Active* recommendations of at least 3 hours of ‘unstructured, energetic, active play’ per day for pre-school and one hour for school-aged children ^{iv}
- *Our Children Deserve Better - Prevention Pays* specifically cites street play in a case study ^v

‘This simple, low-cost, resident-led intervention has immediate and long-term benefits for children and the wider community. With widespread uptake, there is potential to change the culture towards outdoor neighbourhood play being a normal part of everyday life for children across the UK.’ Our Children Deserve Better – Prevention Pays, Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013

The role of play and community organisations

Successful street play models are primarily resident-led, though often with initial help from local organisations. This could include:

- Promoting the benefits of unstructured, active and energetic play to local Public Health and Wellbeing Boards and Directors of Public Health
- Running free workshops or information sessions to promote the idea to parents
- Brokering contacts with key elected members and council officers responsible for Health and Well-being, Planning, Highways and Transport
- Local support and signposting through web pages and social media – Facebook groups have been particularly effective
- Facilitating initial resident meetings and attending the first sessions to support residents
- Help with basic materials like chalk tubs, skipping rope and other ‘loose parts’
- Coordinating supply and storage of street closure signage, hi-visibility tabards
- Developing relationships with other community organisations and partnerships working in public health, safer streets and better communities.

Making it happen

Making a success and ensuring sustainability of street play initiatives will mean:

- Working with public health, transport, planning and children’s services to make street play an easy option
- Supporting local parents and other residents to take the lead – they know best what will work where they live
- Support local parents connect with potential volunteers and other organisations who may help
- Encouraging the local authority to minimise bureaucracy to keep costs low for everyone concerned
- Working with locally based organisations who can support resident-led street play e.g. housing associations, active travel organisations and community groups
- Understanding that the play resources are already there – children will bring them out of their homes

For examples of how play associations and community organisations are supporting street play see Hackney Play Association:

<http://www.hackneyplay.org/street-play/>

Better Leeds Communities:

<http://www.betterleeds.org.uk/news/14082014-1223/beeston-residents-reclaim-their-streetschildrens-play>

Further information

For more information about the Department of Health funded street play project visit:

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/projects/street-play.aspx>

For a step-by-step guide and practical advice for residents:

<http://playingout.net/>

For more information and advice on street play in London:

http://www.londonplay.org.uk/content/30290/our_work/recent_work/play_streets

Or join the conversation:

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/playengland>

Twitter: @playengland #streetplay

Or follow the blogs:

<http://loveoutdoorplay.net/category/street-play/>

<http://playingout.net/blog/>

ⁱ The Playing Out story. Available at <http://playingout.net/about/playing-story/> ⁱⁱ Everybody Active, Every Day: an Evidence-based Approach to Physical Activity. Public Health England 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Healthy Lives, Healthy People: a Call to Action on Obesity in England. Department of Health, 2011.

^{iv} Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers, 2011.

^v Our Children Deserve Better – Prevention Pays. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2013.