

## **Street play – low cost, self-sustaining early interventions in children’s health**

This is a briefing for those who work in or represent local authorities and their partners on health and well-being boards. It describes how encouraging unstructured, active, energetic play in residential streets using proven models can help meet public health outcomes at minimal cost.

It aims to help partners understand how street play contributes to the achievement of local health outcomes and how to create self-sustaining local demand by making it easy and affordable for parents and other residents to let their children play out on their doorsteps.

*‘To me, it made sense to provide free, active play on families’ doorsteps, not expecting people to take their children to a specific place to play or be active. I could also see the wider health benefits of people getting to know their neighbours and children learning to cycle and scoot and then using these as ways of travelling to school. To call it a low-cost, multi-generational initiative might seem like unnecessary jargon but in public health terms that’s what it is.’*

*Claire Lowman, Public Health Service Lead for Bristol City Council<sup>i</sup>*

### **What is the issue?**

The Chief Medical Officer’s report *Our Children Deserve Better – Prevention Pays* says:

*‘For the current generation of children in England a number of factors can be seen as contributing to a decline in free play. These include parental as well as children’s own concerns over safety and a lack of appropriate green or urban spaces to play in combined with a reduced general tolerance towards children playing on the streets.’<sup>ii</sup>*

This is supported by the 2013 annual Playday poll of 3,000 children, parents and adults:

- Danger from traffic is the main barrier mentioned by children (35%) and adults (53%)
- 28% of parents say that unfriendly neighbours are a barrier.

### **What is street play?**

Quite simply it is helping parents and other residents to reactivate a culture of children playing out in the streets where they live. Sometimes known as ‘playing out sessions’ – after the Playing Out model<sup>iii</sup> developed by two parents in Bristol – or ‘play streets’, local authorities can support parents and local residents by using their existing powers under road traffic legislation to allow temporary street closures at regular weekly or monthly intervals, typically for 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. Children are able to meet friends, play freely and actively right on their doorsteps - activities that were commonplace for their parents and grand-parents.

*'I have very fond memories of playing out as a child, exploring my local neighbourhood and making firm friendships with other children on my street. Nowadays with traffic dominating our streets, it is much harder for children to play out and hopefully this initiative will be the start of changing that.'*  
Parent, North Tyneside

## **The fit with the public health policy context**

Street play can help deliver on a range of public health outcomes outlined in guidance:

- *Everybody Active, Every Day* advocates developing a co-ordinated approach to promote, walking, cycling, active transport and active play <sup>iv</sup>
- *Healthy People, Healthy Places* briefing on obesity and promoting physical activity through providing opportunities for social interaction and children's play <sup>v</sup>
- *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 <sup>vi</sup>
- The forthcoming Public Health England *Active Children: Active Play* briefing for local authorities and health and well-being boards.

A number of the research studies on which the guidance is based shows that encouraging children to spend more time outdoors playing may be the most effective strategy for increasing physical activity and contributing to preventing increases in overweight and obesity.

## **Benefits of street play**

*Our Children Deserve Better - Prevention Pays* specifically cites the Playing Out model as a case study:

*'This simple, 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 in the UK.'*

Playing outside their homes with their friends is the easiest way for children to get regular exercise. Bristol University used accelerometry and GPS data in the pilot Playing Out scheme to measure changes. Children were outside 70% of the time during the street closures compared to less than 20% on an average school day. 30% of their time was spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) compared to 5% for children of a similar age.<sup>vii</sup>

Existing street play models show that with local policy support they are self-sustaining and indeed grow because they are parent and resident led and hugely popular with children.

The 2013 Playday poll showed that:

- 59% of parents would let their children play out – if other children were playing out
- 45% of adults say that children playing outside can help families get to know each other and 41% agree it can help to improve community spirit

*'I love the way street play brings together children of different age groups. At our first session, some 10 -11 year old boys sat down on the pavement helping two toddlers with Brio. Likewise my daughter learnt to rollerblade by hanging out with the cool older girl up the street; although they go to the same school, they'd never played together before that day. Parents also join in the fun, taking part in group skipping, offering a steadying hand to learner-cyclers or helping with some street art. It's been great to see people who don't have children also getting involved. The older residents also enjoy the chance to get out and chat, I was fascinated to hear one lady in her 80s talk about her wartime memories growing up here'*

## Local parent organiser, Hackney

The London Borough of Hackney has 31 play streets supported by the Council, Hackney Play Association and Hackney Playing Out. Hackney Council's Health and Well-being Board is supporting the development of street play through a commission to the play association. The funds are used to work in partnership with Young Hackney (the local youth service) and local residents to provide additional support for street play in disadvantaged parts of the borough including two local housing estates, four schools and four residential streets each year. The project, now in its second year, supports the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy in Hackney.

## Making it happen

Ingredients for the success and sustainability of street play initiatives include:

- A coordinated local area policy across public health, transport, planning and children's services to make street play an easy option
- Local parents and other residents are supported to take the lead – they know best what will work where they live
- Minimise bureaucracy to keep costs low for everyone concerned – local people and the local authority
- Work with locally based voluntary organisations that can support resident-led street play
- Understand that the play resources are already there – children will bring them out of their homes

## 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](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/>

<sup>i</sup> Claire Lowman, *Playing Out: a public health perspective*. Playing Out guest blog:

<http://playingout.net/playingpublic-health-perspective/>. Accessed 15 January 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Our Children Deserve Better - Prevention Pays. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> The Playing Out story available at: <http://playingout.net/about/playing-story/> <sup>iv</sup> Everybody Active, Every Day: an Evidence-based Approach to Physical Activity. Public Health England, 2014. <sup>v</sup> Healthy Lives, Healthy People: a Call to Action on Obesity in England. Department of Health, 2011. <sup>vi</sup> Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries Chief Medical Officers. Department of Health, 2011.

Department of Health, 2011.

<sup>vii</sup> Summary of the evaluation of the Playing Out project by Bristol University. Available at:

[http://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/playing-out-evaluation\\_Angie-Page.pdf](http://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/playing-out-evaluation_Angie-Page.pdf). Accessed 15 January 2015.