

PLAYING OUT: PROMOTING COMMUNITY AND BELONGING THROUGH PLAY

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What is Playing Out?

At its heart, the 'playing out' model is a resident-led, bottom-up model for regular, temporary closures of residential streets for neighbours to play and meet. Closures usually last between 2 and 3 hours and take place fortnightly or monthly. Local councils approve applications but in most instances residents themselves establish the closures using Road Closed signs, stewarded by volunteers from the street. Residents are allowed to drive in and out of the street while it is closed, but must do so at a walking pace and guided by a steward. Through traffic is not permitted and will be diverted. Parents or carers must be present to be responsible for their own children. Play is predominantly child-led and tends to involve bikes, scooters, balls, chalk, running, and all sorts of other imaginative, physical and exploratory play.

This model was created in 2009 by parents in Bristol and has been developed by a dedicated social enterprise, Playing Out, and its network of local and national activists. In 10 years, the movement has grown to involve over 1000 street communities in more than 80 UK local authority areas, drawing in an estimated 30,000 children and 15,000 adults. The model has been recognised by national governmental, community and sporting organisations which acknowledge the value of creating space for play on our doorsteps. In the words of Minister of State for Transport Michael Ellis MP, "play streets offer wonderful opportunities not merely for children, but for families and communities" (13.6.19).¹

The Research

This briefing draws on a series of research projects from 2016 onwards. The first was a small-scale project based in North Tyneside. The second, focused on the ways that playing out might help to alleviate loneliness, was funded by Newcastle University's Social Justice Research Fund. It incorporated a survey distributed to all known street organisers and activators, cascaded to neighbours, and interviews with active play streets participants from 8 UK local authorities. The third – and ongoing project – asks how playing out shapes residents' attachments, material and emotional, to their streets and the people on them. This study began before the coronavirus crisis but is now also seeking to find out more about this issue during the crisis.

The Benefits of Playing Out

Previous research by Playing Out and its collaborators has highlighted many of the varied benefits of playing out, and it is useful to list these as context for my own research:

- during playing out sessions, NO₂ levels were five times lower than on a normal afternoon²
- on a 'playing out' day, children are 3 to 5 times more active than they would be on a 'normal' day after school³
- in a 2017 survey of 'playing out' streets, the majority reported that children had learned or improved skills including riding a bike (80%), scooting (85%), roller skating (63%) and skipping (66%)⁴
- many also reported that their children learn about road safety during playing out sessions.

It is clear that there are significant and diverse social, public health and environmental benefits to organising playing out sessions. My focus for the remainder of the briefing will be on the benefits for communities and for belonging.

Academic literatures demonstrate that play itself and spending time outdoors are critical for the formation of a sense of belonging and for relationships to wider communities. Play is often the means through which children (and adults) learn to make sense of their environments⁵ and play encourages us to take notice and make connections to the people and places around us.⁶ Ongoing research and activism around play argues “that children and their play are not separate from other aspects of community life” and that “more people playing out more of the time in more places can improve community cohesion and strengthen intergenerational relationships”.⁷

Playing Out Builds Community

As we might expect, many residents start to set up playing out sessions on their streets to give space to their children to play, but the **desire to meet their neighbours and build a community** often seemed just as important:

“Because I want to foster a community that I want to live in - one that looks out for each other.”

“I wanted to take part in something positive to bring some community cohesion to our street.”

A staggering 95% of respondents to our 2019 survey felt that they knew more people because of playing out sessions and 86.7% felt that their street felt friendlier and safer. 71.7% felt that their children had made new friends and an extraordinary 91.7% felt that they belonged more on their street as a result of playing out. Repeatedly, respondents drew attention to their experiences of real connections being created on streets as they started to play out. Names were attached to faces and then fleshed out with lives and histories, such that streets became animated by the people living and connecting on them:

“just once you get to know a couple of stories about that person suddenly they become a real person that you care about ... just the second you know your neighbour’s name they become a person, don’t they? They become somebody, yeah?”

New relationships between neighbours facilitated **practical and diverse forms of help** to be offered:

“We share lawnmowers, walk each other’s dogs, put out each other’s bins when away, check up on older residents if they haven’t been seen for a while, unscrew each other’s jam jars, lend each other tools, take in postal deliveries for each other, hand down toys and bicycles to younger children in the neighbourhood ... go down into neighbours’ basements to look at fuse boxes when they are too frightened to...”

On most streets, regular playing out sessions were complemented **by online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups**. In most instances, these grew out of the organisation of playing out sessions but often expanded well beyond their initial function and beyond the families that regularly play out. On one street, an estimated half of households have joined the Facebook group as well as neighbours from adjoining streets and, in addition to planning playing out sessions:

“people put on if they’ve got too much milk, if they want, erm, need something like a ladder or something, or recommendations for tradesmen, that’s there a lot, and if somebody’s been burgled or they’ve seen somebody looking a bit dodgy”

Neighbours used Facebook and WhatsApp to discuss planning applications, arrange to lend and borrow equipment, and act as a kind of online neighbourhood watch. These spaces – on the street and online – also facilitated additional street and neighbourhood activities. More than a third of respondents reported that playing out had led them and their neighbours to get involved in other community activities, such as gardening, litter picking, toy, book, plant and clothes swaps, and connecting to wider cycling/walking/better streets campaigns.

Of course, not all neighbours are involved in playing out sessions. Most respondents acknowledged that there was a ‘core’ of neighbours, largely made up of **families with children under 10**. Often these children do not know each other when playing out starts. School children increasingly attend a number of different local schools, reflecting the nature of the school

admissions process; it was not unusual to find primary school children living on the same street but attending up to 7 different schools. Resident children also vary considerably in age, meaning that there are opportunities to play with and connect to older and younger children.

“They have formed friendships that span different schools and age groups and find other common interests.”

“My children also know children from other schools that they would not have known before.”

“They know loads more children on the street. They have made friends who go to different schools. They hang about at sessions in mixed age groups (in a way they don’t normally).”

There is also some evidence that playing out on the immediate spaces of their street is particularly accessible for **children with disabilities** and allows for children who may be educated at home, at special schools, or in alternative provision to meet and play with their neighbours.

A handful of respondents noted the relative absence of men, including **fathers**; one respondent picked up on the sense that mothers generally already had more local contacts and that, in this context, playing out had been extremely important for her husband:

“More importantly for me, my husband has got to know people in our street. He commutes to London and has little in the way of a connection to our area - he could probably live anywhere. Now he has stewarded regularly with a variety of other people and knows (and likes) people that live near us. It’s fantastic!”

More generally, the potential to build friendships with other very local parents was something highlighted by a number of respondents. Of those respondents who had **lived on their street for less than 2 years**, all felt that playing out sessions had helped them meet their neighbours, all had small children who they felt had also benefitted from playing out, and all appeared to have integrated into the street’s networks of support and friendship as much as longstanding residents.

59% of respondents reported that **adult neighbours without children** do join in with playing out sessions, often taking on stewarding roles (that is, securing the street closures and dealing with any cars that need to be guided safely down the street or re-directed). Many respondents gave examples of older neighbours who had been regular and active supporters and participants.

“The older women who live on our street, in their 80s, who were here when the houses were first built, come out for tea and cake, and it’s wonderful!”

“We have an elderly couple who have never missed a session!”

When asked about **barriers to participation**, respondents suggested that playing out may be seen as something for children, that neighbours are wary of coming out to meet strangers, that some are unaware of the events happening as a result of issues with communication, that for some there may be additional cultural and/or language barriers, and that some residents are house-bound, ill, or struggle with mobility. Some of these barriers are mediated by organisers actively doorknocking their neighbours and inviting them personally, by helping less mobile neighbours to come out and providing chairs for them, and by emphasising in all communication that all are welcome. As social media not only served the purpose of communicating dates and times but increasingly also took on additional functions alongside and in-between playing out sessions (discussed above), the exclusion of those without easy access to social media was potentially aggravated.

For a few, the issue of stigma and fear around adults without children was identified as a barrier to participation. Interviewees queried whether adults, and especially men, without children would feel comfortable participating in child-oriented events and if, indeed, neighbours would welcome their presence. Of course, some neighbours simply don’t want to participate. As one respondent to the wider survey, suggested “some people just don’t want to be social and that’s fine”. Some recognised that some of their neighbours might see playing out sessions as an unwelcome blurring of public and private boundaries and a kind of enforced neighbourliness.

Interestingly, **non-participation** does not necessarily mean exclusion from the wider networks and benefits of playing out sessions. In the small survey of non-participants, the majority felt that they knew more neighbours and had experienced a more general friendliness on the street, since playing out started, despite not participating. As one questionnaire respondent noted:

“Just doing it for a while brings huge benefits to the whole street, whether everyone attends or not.”

Play and Community

For children, of course, playing on the street is the primary source of the connection made. Children who likely did not know each other previously play together, connect and start to develop friendships. Play is often the way in which these connections are extended beyond sessions too, through play at school and play dates.

Playing out creates a space for adults to play too, whether that is play as we might understand children’s play or other forms, such as gossip, banter or just hanging out. There are many examples of adults playing during playing out sessions, both with children and without, with scooters or balls or bubbles, for example. Respondents highlighted particular examples where those perhaps reticent or unlikely to join in were drawn out by the possibility of play:

“There was one woman once who was just walking down the street, and I think, I mean, I don’t know for sure, she’s quite self-contained, but she just started skipping and I got into a chat with her and that was lovely, and she started stewarding after that. It certainly helped, just the skipping, she couldn’t resist basically, she just thought I just really want to have a go at that ... and we saw a lot more of her after that”

A number of respondents, both in questionnaires and in interview, gave examples of **intergenerational** conversations around play too; in addition to tea and cakes, one of the common ways in which organisers tempted older neighbours out was by encouraging them to share stories and practices of their childhood play, telling young children about the games they played – sometimes on the very same street – and showing them how to play. In some examples, teenagers – sometimes reluctant to join in playing out sessions – would show younger children how to kick a ball, or would hold a skipping rope, or help to balance a learner cyclist. Other adults without children were also drawn in on occasion to help fix bikes, mend punctures, provide play equipment and, in other ways, facilitate play, overcoming their concerns that playing out ‘isn’t for them’ by helping out with specific, play-related tasks.

Of course, play might also be off-putting for some. The noise of children playing, for example, may dissuade some from coming out, even if they were otherwise tempted. Flying balls, water fights, and scooters and bikes zooming past might also discourage or frighten off more vulnerable or less mobile neighbours, even if organisers do all they can to minimise these dangers.

The Playing Out model also particularly facilitates adult connections. It always starts with a small number of adult neighbours, who in most local authorities are required to consult with every affected neighbour. Many activists highlighted how this initial act of doorknocking and consultation was, literally and metaphorically, the start of doors opening on the street. The Playing Out model also requires adults to be present and responsible for their children and it relies on volunteer stewards to secure the Road Closed barriers. As we have seen, older adults and those without (young) children often offer to steward sessions; this encourages them to join but also leaves parents to play with their children, and with other adults. Parents often congregate around certain points on the street, hanging out with each other, watching their children from a distance. Most playing out streets (65.5% of those surveyed) organise frequent and regular sessions, either monthly or fortnightly. This means that participating neighbours meet and play together regularly, much more than, for example, one-off street parties. This reinforces the potential for connections to be made, maintained and developed.

Playing Out Connects Residents to their Neighbourhoods

This second strand of this briefing is, at the moment, more speculative, based on reflections on five years of activism and on observations on streets since 2016. It is a key focus of my ongoing research, delayed by the coronavirus crisis. Here the key argument is that spending time on streets not only creates opportunities for residents to get to know each other and build community, but also to get to know the street space itself, the houses, the network of roads and back alleys, the green spaces, the trees, plants and wildlife, the views and perspectives, and indeed the textures, smells and sounds, whether natural or not.

Some of the ways in which we see residents, of all ages, connect to their streets during playing out sessions include:

- Reclaiming the street from cars so that all feel like the street belongs to them and sharing the space of the street with each other in many diverse ways
- Learning the shape, slope and camber of the road whilst running, scooting and cycling
- Finding the holes and bumps that make moving around the street more fun or more tricky
- Measuring the length and breadth of the street, with body lengths or timed races
- Sitting and lying in the street, with a different perspective and real physical contact with the street
- Climbing on and jumping off walls, over kerbs, getting to know the different levels of the street
- Chalking on the street, marking it as ‘theirs’
- Identifying the history of the street, through the ages of houses, street signs, other features (drain covers, blue plaques, quirks of design, for example)
- Finding different places for sitting and, therefore, for sociability (walls, fences)
- Hunting bugs in front gardens, crevices in pavements and roads, between paving stones, in gutters, on walls
- Identifying trees and wildflowers in every space on the street and getting involved in tending and planting on shared and personal spaces
- Experiencing the weather and the seasons, with regular playing out in all conditions, rain, snow, sun and shade, wind.

It might appear that these kinds of moments are trivial, but an extensive literature on place attachment suggests that there is real value in enabling children and adults to make tactile, physical and embodied connections to their everyday environments. The benefits accrue both to the individuals themselves, but also to the wider community. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explains: “Place attachment is generally viewed as having positive effects for individuals, helping to enrich people’s lives with meaning, values and significance, thus also contributing to people’s mental health and well-being.”⁸

In the specific context of this research, being able to spend time outdoors, with space for all kinds of play enables the potential for creative activities which, in turn, offer children and adults the opportunity to express themselves. Children and adults who are able to connect playfully with their streets, to spend time on them engaged in meaningful and social activities, and to have priority on them will feel like the streets belong to them, that they have a rightful place on them. Feeling like they belong to their streets and communities enables children to feel confident and secure in reaching out to the world, as they start school, build friendships and start to develop a sense of self.⁹ This kind of place attachment can “provide the ‘secure base’ necessary for healthy development, including the young child’s emerging sense of identity, security and belonging”.¹⁰ Our street is the “starting point for all journeys”¹¹ and a sense of belonging on our street can take us a long way.

Opportunities for on-street playfulness open up space for connection too. When children and adults have the chance to be with each other and build connections to their immediate environments, we see evidence that they also experience an openness to contribute to their

communities through other kinds of activities and commitments (as the evidence above also suggested). Research suggests that those with a strong sense of place attachment are “active in forging and maintaining community relations and engaging with others living or working locally”.¹²

In particular, there is evidence that those who are intimately and intricately connected to the places in which they live are more likely to notice and care for their natural environments. Increasingly, research shows that just noticing nature – even urban nature – has real benefits for individual and community wellbeing,¹³ and longstanding research suggests that those who are connected more to their everyday places demonstrate a stronger commitment to environmental stewardship, both in the present and in the future; if we are connected to the places in which we live as children, we seem to value connections to our communities and environments as we grow up and move to new places.

Playing Out and Covid-19: The Challenges and Responsibilities

All organised playing out sessions have been put on hold during the covid-19 lockdown, but we have seen a number of challenges and responsibilities emerging around play on streets in this context.

Firstly, and perhaps most urgently, we have seen real concerns raised about conditions for children’s play. Play, and particularly outdoor play, are essential activities for children at times like this, so that they can make sense of and find some control in these confusing times. Outdoor play affords far greater opportunities for creative, boisterous, and active play, such that outdoor spaces must be secured – safely – for children to play. This is especially true in large urban areas where there may be significant concentrations of overcrowded housing and/or homes without access to outdoor space.¹⁴ We also know that those families with more limited indoor and outdoor space tend to be poorer and from minority ethnic communities, so there are real social justice issues. In this context, enabling children and their families to play – with safe physical distancing – in the streets would be an important move, for their health and well-being, physical and mental. This would mean looking at traffic and speeding and exploring possibilities for temporary or more permanent closures to through traffic, similar to the playing out model.

Secondly, we have a responsibility to reflect on our what has been happening on our streets during the covid-19 lockdown to ensure that we think carefully about the role of streets and neighbourhood communities in the recovery. We have seen neighbours supporting each other through this crisis, with informal networks of care emerging rapidly in the early weeks of the crisis. These have been maintained and complemented by playful and social acts. At the same time, we have seen traffic on our residential streets decline dramatically and rising numbers of pedestrians, cyclists and others using our streets, while schools are closed and many are working from home and/or furloughed. Many have, paradoxically in this context, enjoyed being able to use their streets more, revelled in the quiet – hearing birds, having conversations over garden walls.

As local authorities are called upon to “make significant changes to their road layouts to give more space to cyclists and pedestrians”,¹⁵ it is also incumbent on them to consider safe access to street space for children and their families, not only for walking and cycling, but also to play and connect.

Conclusions

- Play transforms neighbourhoods, and residents’ relationships with and within them
- The relationships enabled by play support communities’ physical, social and emotional wellbeing
- Through play, sense of community and belonging are strengthened and these have practical and meaningful consequences in neighbourhoods and beyond
- These impacts are all the more important in the context of our collective recovery from covid-19

Further Reading and Endnotes

- For a much more detailed exploration of the connections between playing out and community, see the full research report here: <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tackling-Loneliness-with-Resident-Led-Play-Streets-Final-Report.pdf>.
- For a report on preliminary research in North Tyneside, see <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/potential-space-play-parents-and-streets-a-blog-of-a-preliminary-paper/>.
- For more on the case for opening up street space for play during the covid-19 crisis, see <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/files/2020/04/Improving-Safe-Access-to-Street-Space-for-Childrens-Play-and-Physical-Activity-FINAL.pdf> and <https://www.thedeveloper.live/places/stop-the-traffic-and-make-uk-streets-into-public-spaces-during-lockdown>
- For more information on playing out including advice on how to get started for local authorities and for residents, see <https://playingout.net/>.

¹ <https://playingout.net/uk-government-backs-play-streets/>

² <https://playingout.net/pollution-and-play-playing-out-to-improve-air-quality/>

³ <http://www.playengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/StreetPlayReport1web-4.pdf>

⁴ <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Playing-Out-Survey-Report-2017.pdf>

⁵ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's Right to Play*, Bernard van Leer Foundation <http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/BvLF-IPAWorkingPaper-Childrens-Right-to-Play-Dec2010f.pdf>

⁶ Play Wales (2015) *Play: Mental Health and Wellbeing* <https://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/Play%20-%20mental%20health%20and%20wellbeing.pdf>

⁷ Tawil, B. (2018) Play sufficiency as an organising principle of community development, *Radical Community Work Journal*, 3/2, <http://rcwjjournal.org/ojs/index.php/radcw/article/view/56>

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2008) *People's Attachment to Place: The Influence Of Neighbourhood Deprivation* <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/2200-neighbourhoods-attachment-deprivation.pdf>

⁹ Chatterjee S. (2005) Children's friendship with place: A conceptual inquiry, *Children, Youth and Environments* 15/1, 1-26.

¹⁰ Jack, G. (2015) 'I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from': The meaning of place in social work with children and families, *Child & Family Social Work* 20/4, 415-423.

¹¹ Gill, T. (2007) If you go down to the woods today: why nature and adventure matter to children and young people, in Brown, F. and Taylor, C. (eds.) *Foundations of Playwork*, Open UP.

¹² Ross, N. (2007) 'My journey to school ...': Foregrounding the meaning of school journeys and children's engagements and interactions in their everyday localities, *Children's Geographies* 5/4, 373-39.

¹³ National Trust (2020) *Noticing Nature* <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/noticing-nature-report-feb-2020.pdf>

¹⁴ Stenning, A. and Russell, W. (2020) "Stop the traffic and make space for play during lockdown", *The Developer* <https://www.thedeveloper.live/places/stop-the-traffic-and-make-uk-streets-into-public-spaces-during-lockdown>

¹⁵ Department for Transport (2020) *Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to COVID-19*, 9.5.20 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19>