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ARTICLE

# The place where we live: Children, families, play, neighbourhoods and spaces of care during and after the pandemic

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**Abstract**

In this paper, we explore what the experiences of some children and families in their neighbourhoods during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown can tell us about the value and importance of neighbourhood spaces, relations and play in the wider contexts of neoliberalism, austerity and the mooted polycrisis. We use the work of Donald Winnicott, and recent interpretations of his work (by Bonnie Honig and Joanna Kellond), to explore neighbourhood spaces of play as spaces of care, drawing on concepts of facilitating (or holding) environments, potential and transitional spaces, transitional objects (or 'public things'), the capacity for concern and care-cure. We reflect on how children and their families' engagement with their most proximate outdoor spaces—the streets, alleyways and green spaces on their doorsteps—during the first UK lockdown signals the ways in which these spaces, and the play and the relations that can develop within them, should be enabled and nurtured beyond the pandemic. In this way, we argue for the political importance of neighbourhood spaces of care, in crises and beyond, and for the value of the possibility of play in these spaces.

**KEYWORDS**

care, lockdown, neighbourhoods, play, UK, Winnicott

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

When the first UK COVID-19 lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, it was accompanied by guidance which challenged us to remake our everyday geographies in a number of ways. In this paper, we reflect on how, for some families with young children, this moment transformed the relationship with their neighbourhoods, and explore the place of play in these transformations, to understand how these spaces and relations came to act as spaces of care.

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We use the work of Donald Winnicott, and recent interpretations of his work (in particular, by Bonnie Honig and Joanna Kellond), to make sense of the experiences of children and their families on their 'daily walks' and to highlight lessons beyond the pandemic. We draw on Winnicottian concepts of potential and transitional spaces, facilitating (or holding) environments, transitional objects (or 'public things'), the capacity for concern, and care-cure, alongside Winnicott's consistent focus on play, to argue that these neighbourhood spaces hold considerable value for children and their families in mediating the experiences of crisis, threat, change and uncertainty, and that these values have continuing relevance in the context of ongoing and future crises, of various scales and natures, beyond the pandemic. Renewed interest in Winnicott's work in recent years, from geographers and other critical social scientists, underlines the value of his spatial and relational conceptualisations in understanding the contemporary crisis of care in neoliberalism and the spaces of everyday life, in the context of COVID-19 and beyond.

## 2 | COVID-19 AND THE REMAKING OF CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY GEOGRAPHIES

In an immediate sense, the first UK lockdown enforced a much more restricted geography—we were called on to 'stay home' and to leave only for essential activities, such as work, shopping and exercise. Many public spaces were closed (gov.uk, 2020b) and a 'two metre rule' was imposed, requiring this distance from those outside our household (gov.uk, 2020a). Government guidelines also stated that we must minimise time beyond the home and encouraged us to 'stay local' (10 Downing Street, 2020). However, these constraints were also, in a way, permissive; they seemed to encourage some children and their families to make the most of their neighbourhoods.

Exercise was identified explicitly as one permissible reason to leave home while remaining local. Advised forms of exercise included 'a run, walk, or cycle' (gov.uk, 2020b) and questions emerged about whether children's outdoor play—climbing, jumping, exploring, rolling, chasing, for example—would legitimately be seen as 'exercise'. Yet, the widespread naming of running, walking and cycling seemed to encourage children and their families to engage in these practices—often adding in scooting—to an extent they otherwise might not have.

The rules, as they were commonly interpreted, seemed to give people permission to take a full hour for 'exercise' every day—often identified as a 'daily walk'—and integrate this explicitly into new daily routines, around homeworking, furlough and remote schooling. The remaking of home neighbourhoods for some families was strengthened by the new 'proxemics' (Mehta, 2020) that arose through the increasing presence of neighbours and decreasing motor traffic. This was reinforced by the closure of many of the other spaces of leisure and play and by perceived overcrowding, and threats of closure, in many large public spaces such as public parks and beaches.

In all these ways, the spaces within and around people's homes became increasingly important in the lives of children and their families. It is important to note, however, that these remade geographies were uneven. They were founded on the provision of and ability to access public spaces, issues shaped by social, spatial and environmental inequity. Not only is the availability and quality of such spaces uneven, but children's presence in them during lockdowns was unevenly policed, with older children, those in poorer neighbourhoods, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds more likely to be challenged by police officers or other adults for transgressing lockdown rules (Stenning & Russell, 2020). In addition, adults working in essential roles could not be furloughed or work from home (Gibson-Miller et al., 2022), making daily walks more difficult for some.

Developing literatures about geographies of the pandemic offer important contexts for exploring the research reported on here. COVID-19 measures radically reshaped movements, relationships to others, environments, activities and institutions (Barry & Keane, 2022; Mukherjee, 2021). School closures, the loss of peer interactions, children's distress and loneliness, and family stress all took their toll (Waboso et al., 2022). Nevertheless, we have argued elsewhere that accounts of deficit and damage are just one part of the picture (Russell & Stenning, 2023).

There are also more affirmative accounts which explore everyday adaptations to the new measures, the emergence of play, and the revalorisation of neighbourhood spaces. Various studies document how children, and their families, found new ways to spend time together; navigated the rules to make space for play and connection; adapted activities, games and hobbies; and animated everyday spaces in new ways with play and movement (Brownell, 2022; Mukherjee, 2021; Pfeiffer et al., 2022; Waboso et al., 2022). Play emerged as a means of connecting to others, known or unknown, seen or unseen, as 'elements of play lingered … for others not just to see but also to play with' (Brownell, 2022, p. 99), playful units of measurement helped us recognise safe distances (Barry & Keane, 2022), and some neighbourhood spaces became increasingly used as 'playgrounds and chalkboards' (Pfeiffer et al., 2022, p. 2). Walking emerged as a space of respite

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(Lupton, 2022) and a chance to engage, at a distance, with others, human and non-human, and to tend to our health and wellbeing (Rose et al., 2022).

## 3 | PLAY, PLACE AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

There are extensive literatures reflecting on the connections children develop with their neighbourhoods. As Christensen and O'Brien (2003, p. 6) note, 'the spaces outside the apartment or house … become central sites of exploration and are important locations for the creation of confidence in being in the public arena for children'. The neighbourhood is seen as a key site in children's developing orientations to the world. In her foundational study on place attachment, Chawla (1992) argues that the neighbourhood tends to become especially important to children in middle childhood, but the beginnings of this expanding geography start earlier with parents or other caregivers as guides. Rasmussen and Smidt (2003) argue that children develop visual, physical and narrative perspectives on their neighbourhoods that enable a developing sense that they are at home, and that the spaces of familiarity and security extend into the space of the street. Children's everyday routes and routines in and around their neighbourhoods enable them to develop a 'threaded togetherness' (Ergler et al., 2021), connecting stories and experiences of the people, places, things and non-human objects in their communities and children's presence in public spaces contributes to broader intergenerational community connections (Bornat, 2016; Nairn & Kraftl, 2016).

Play is at the heart of these processes; it is the means by which children connect to their environments, and to those they share them with. Through play, children connect to the materialities of their neighbourhood; they do so with playmates and in relation to others, present or absent; and they do so with their bodies—clambering, squeezing, jumping, hiding, touching, smelling, and so on (Bartos, 2013). Through play, children can inhabit, create and remake spaces in their most proximate environments (Wales et al., 2021).

## 4 | DONALD WINNICOTT, PLAY, AND THE SPACES OF CARE

Donald Winnicott, an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst writing predominantly in the post-war period, focused, in part, on 'the psychological geography of relationships, interior and exterior, psychological and social emotional geographies that connect self to others' (Stanley, 2010, p. 261). We can identify some general reluctance on the part of geographers to engage with psychoanalytic theory (Kingsbury, 2004; Philo & Parr, 2003) and some specific concerns about Winnicott, including questions about his normative assumptions, especially in relation to mothering, and his underdeveloped conceptualisation of objects' agency (Aitken, 2001; Harker, 2005). Notwithstanding this, Winnicott's work has attracted the recurring attention of geographers focused on themes such as play, children, creativity, the city, care and families (Aitken, 2001, 2023; Harker, 2005; Kullman, 2010; Latham, 1999; Stanley, 2010). Geographers who draw on Winnicott's work highlight his focus on space and the ways he insistently connects the psyche to the social and cultural, his exploration of self-world relations, and the flows between his thinking and worlds of welfare and care.

These are also spheres that are at the centre of recent, social science engagements with Winnicott, notably by Bonnie Honig (2017) and Joanna Kellond (2019, 2022). It is with this work, in geography and beyond, that we explore the value of Winnicott's ideas and frameworks and the potential of his work to contribute to debates on care, justice, the state and families. In this section, we introduce some of Winnicott's key framing ideas, but we thread further discussion, analysis and reflection through the article, engaging with a wider range of Winnicott's concepts to develop our analyses, and pull these threads together in the concluding sections.

Winnicott was often associated with the field of object relations (Gomez, 1997), which asserts that we can think about relationships, with intimate and imagined others—or objects—as the environment within which we find ways of 'going on being' (Winnicott, 1965, p. 303). At the heart of Winnicott's work was the idea of a holding or facilitating environment, envisaged as a set of relationships that protects us from impingement, from threats in the outside world. Though the facilitating environment starts with the mother (or other primary caregiver), Winnicott (1985, p. 125) describes how 'One can discern a series—the mother's body, the mother's arms, the parental relationship, the home, the family including cousins and near relations, the school, the locality with its police stations, the county with its laws'. Cosco and Moore (2002) argue that the neighbourhood can act as a facilitating environment, offering enough stability and flexibility to enable children to play and make connections to the people and places around them. The facilitating environment is formed out of relationships to significant others—what Winnicott called objects—which includes family, friends, neighbours, but also

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sites, nature, and what Honig (2017) terms 'public things'. Such a relational perspective grounded in care was in line with a growing narrative of his time that moved away from individualistic and selfish pursuit of material benefit and towards a democratic collectivism that underpinned the development of the UK welfare state (Gerson, 2017). The facilitating or holding environment is associated with many of Winnicott's other concepts—play, potential space, transitional objects, and care-cure—which we explore in more detail in what follows.

## 5 | THE RESEARCH

This article focuses on one aspect of the neighbourhood geographies of the pandemic, the 'daily walk' that many families undertook during the first UK lockdown. It draws on online research from 2020 that documented the emergence of play on streets, manifested in street chalking, rainbow trails and more. A qualitative online survey asked respondents about playful activities and changes in the materiality and feel of their street during the first UK lockdown. This was circulated through social media and wider networks in June and July 2020. The 78 responses from across England, Scotland and Wales reflected the limits of such networks, with the majority of respondents being White, well educated owner-occupiers. More than three-quarters of respondents were women and two-thirds were aged 35–54. Accordingly, notwithstanding expressed anxieties around both COVID-19 itself and the changing rules, the shared stories explored predominantly positive experiences of play and neighbourhoods.

We recognise that these experiences were not universal and do not present them here as representative of play in neighbourhoods during the first COVID-19 lockdown. We acknowledge the research that highlights how lockdowns exacerbated economic, social and spatial inequalities, particularly for poorer families, ethnic minorities, those in overcrowded or temporary accommodation, families with health, mental health or drug and alcohol related problems (Holt & Murray, 2022), as well as for essential workers who were unable to be furloughed or work from home (Gibson-Miller et al., 2022). Instead, we use these experiences to explore what this moment afforded, for some, and reflect on what this might tell us about the potential of play in neighbourhood spaces, during and after the pandemic. The politics of access to spaces of care is central to our analyses.

Survey respondents (Figure 1) reported a reanimation of residential streets by those walking, cycling, scooting and playing, as motor traffic declined and the presence of neighbours and passers-by proliferated (Russell & Stenning, 2021).

They also reported having explored their immediate neighbourhoods and it is on this aspect, from the survey and the interviews, that this article focuses. We followed the online survey up with 13 online video interviews with those respondents who expressed an interest in doing so; these interviews included explorations of families' sites of play through

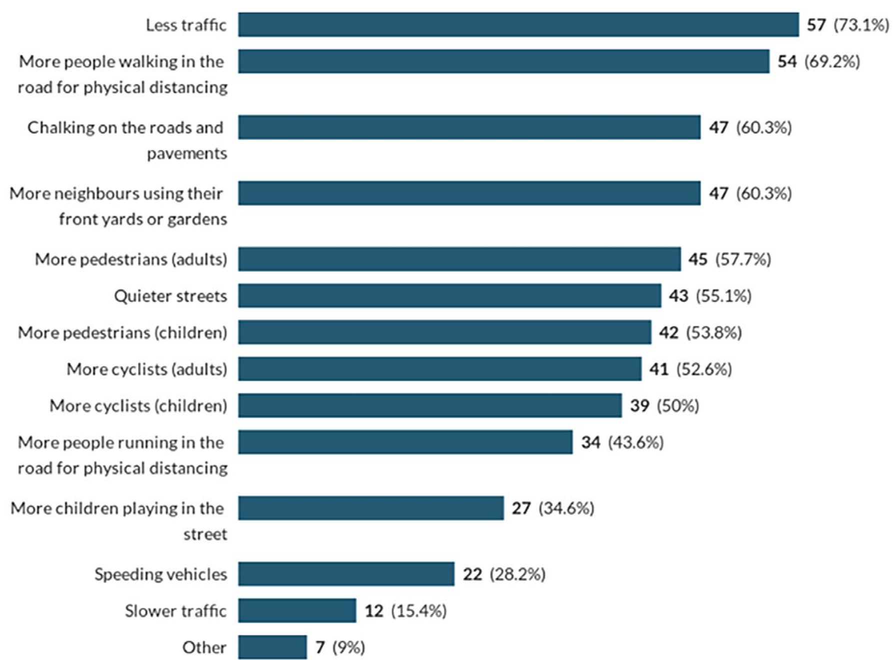


FIGURE 1 Which of the following changes have you seen on your street during the lockdown? Please tick all that apply.

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drawing maps and using Google Maps/Street View on-screen. A total of 12 children aged between 4 and 11 years joined for all or part of the conversations in five of those interviews. The presence of children in the online interviews played out in varying ways, but in all instances they brought a depth to the discussions, adding granular details to the mapping work and narrating poignant and valuable accounts.

## 6 | POTENTIAL SPACE, PLAY AND RELATIONS

For Winnicott, potential space exists 'between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world … [and] depends on experience which leads to trust' (Winnicott, 1971 [2005], p. 139). It is the space where connection and play emerge (Casement, 1985; Dethiville, 2018). The security and dependability of this intermediate space facilitates new possibilities, enabling children to play with 'what is and what may be' (Lieberman, 2016, p. 88); it is a space for imagination (Phillips, 2007) and the pursuit of happiness (Abram, 2007). Play emerges in potential space and also enables the uncertainties of potential space to be borne. The possibility of anxiety in this space is avoided 'by filling in the potential space with creative playing' (Winnicott, 1971 [2005], p. 147).

The value of potential space for the emergence of play is critical because for Winnicott play is one of the most important aspects of life. Given this, facilitating potential space, as an act of care, is critical for a healthy life. Playing is 'creative living and the discovery of the self' (Abram, 2007, p. 247), and 'the capacity to play, to live creatively' (Kellond, 2019, p. 326) is key to wellbeing. In a good enough environment, play enables children to integrate aggression and anxiety, and also affords a space for friendship and relationships with others (Winnicott, 1964), and for developing relations between children and the world outside themselves (Aitken & Herman, 1997). Play has the potential to remake worlds and to mediate the remaking of worlds 'built up on the spaces of everyday life' (Aitken, 2001, p. 176). Play is always object-relating, always connects to others, such that for Winnicott, space to play and connect reinforces our sense of being held (Tuber, 2008).

From this, we can see just how critical play is in a crisis, enabling children—and adults—to integrate challenging emotions, to connect to others, to make sense of remade worlds, and to feel held. And if play is critical, so too is potential space, and here we turn to our analysis of the spaces and relations of our participants' daily walks.

Through daily walks, with the capacity for play and connection, children and their families created potential space, to feel held by trusted objects and environments, and to process and manage change and anxiety. The playfulness of these walks was often quite simple; as Jane[1] describes, 'we made it more playful sometimes, silly things'. Those 'silly things' varied from family to family, but included word games, I Spy, hide and seek, chalking, and all kinds of incidental, shared, playful moments and movements:

> often, she'll start skipping and jumping, or this week, she was pretending she was on a skateboard, but kind of like jumping sideways, jumping but galloping.

These walks were an opportunity to explore, clamber, scoot, glide, hide, fidget, touch, jump. Playful adventures, which brought laughter in the retelling in interviews, were filled with moments of excitement, joy, novelty and much more, as Julia described, talking to her daughter Molly:

> we had lots of adventures in the woods, and she was going in the river every day, and getting your feet wet, weren't you? Fell in lots.

The opportunities created for play and for having fun, for children themselves and with their families, were immensely valuable in the context of lockdown and the threats and uncertainties of COVID-19. In these moments, children were playful and creative in embodied and emotional ways, engaging with the outside world in both familiar and novel ways. In the simplest interpretation, the children were finding space to do what they needed to do—to play—and, straightforwardly, this playfulness contributed to their wellbeing. In the stories we retell, there are no obvious examples of children explicitly working through anxieties around the pandemic (see, among others, Beresin and Bishop [2023] for discussions of pandemic play), but these processes are not always explicit, and the playful acts described here can nevertheless be seen as important for the wellbeing of children and families involved; the therapeutic value of play stems from the process of playing itself (Winnicott, 1971 [2005]).

The potential space of playing extends to the opening up of both familiar and new material spaces. Many families talked about how much of their neighbourhoods they had explored:

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> One of the benefits of lockdown has been playing and exploring in our immediately local area a lot more … we have spent many hours [in the woods] playing and finding new paths. We have also walked the dog, run, scooted and cycled on our neighbouring streets which I don't think we ever did before. When we couldn't go anywhere else we naturally made the most of what's on our doorstep.

This exploration enabled all sorts of connections with human and non-human others, and also afforded a sense of shared joy and wonder, discovering new and exciting spaces and things:

> We have discovered lots of great walks on our doorstep that we never even knew existed!

> We have been amazed when we found unusual things and fascinating hidden corners that we never knew were there.

Focusing on the novelty and wonder afforded by adventures in these previously unknown spaces contributes to the playful process of exploring, mediating and remaking social worlds, and enabled children and their families to see and experience their neighbourhoods as spaces that could both hold and enable their play.

These doorstep spaces created a potential space for playful connections, particularly between children and their parents. Shared journeys, with a playful spirit, allowed family members to play together, jumping in puddles together, telling shared stories about witches, following trails together, imaginary or otherwise. Negotiating the complex experiences of risk, safety, familiarity and home, families' neighbourhoods became the space in which they could play together and, in doing so, connect to each other and to the people and places around them.

As well as connecting and having fun, these playful experiences helped families to make sense of the changes, losses and anxieties of lockdown together (Beresin & Bishop, 2023). As Aitken (2023, p. 135) insists, 'the playful and creative capacities of potential spaces enable hatred, grief, resistance, and push-back as much as they accommodate the possibility of love, gratitude, reconnection, and reconciliation'. Children and their families found creative, playful ways to process much of what was happening around them, to cope with the rapid remaking of their worlds, but also to participate in this by finding new spaces to play, playing with the rules, and nurturing connections. In play, the novel, the scary, and the unpredictable can be simulated safely, producing feelings of excitement and optimism and a sense that life is worth living (Lester & Russell, 2010); it is 'through this playing that children integrate their internal and external worlds' (Wilson, 2010, p. 6).

## 7 | THRESHOLDS, RHYTHMS AND ROUTINES: THINKING WITH TRANSITIONAL SPACE

Winnicott himself did not use the term 'transitional space', and instead talked of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. Many of those who use his work, including geographers, have developed the spatiality implied in Winnicott's conceptualisation of the transitional in both psychic and physical space (for example, Aitken & Herman, 1997; Aitken, 2023; Dethiville, 2018; Gerson, 2017; Harker, 2005). Transitional space shares much with potential space, but here we focus on the explicitly transitional space that sits between 'between the individual and the environment' (Winnicott, 1971 [2005], p. 135).

The spaces beyond 'me' are spaces filled with 'objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control' (Winnicott, 1971 [2005], p. 135) that may facilitate and hold, but may also be perceived as uncontrollable, threatening, or as a source of anxiety. It is in this context that transitional space 'both conjoins and separates' (ibid., p. 138), where the individual can 'experience separation without separation' (Winnicott, 1964, p. 146). Transitional space occupies the space between holding and letting go and this, potentially, enables anxiety, threat or fear to be managed, since the mother/environment can still be depended upon in case of overwhelming anxiety. This is also a space of change, and of making change feel safer, as the out-of-control objects and phenomena can be encountered in the knowledge that a trusted, dependable object is still partly conjoined.

Drawing on these conceptualisations, we argue that the rhythms and routines of the daily walks can be seen as contributing to the holding environment of transitional spaces. The walks tended to have spatial and temporal patterns that enabled them to function as transitions, to mediate internal and external worlds, both emotional and social, in the context of rapid change and emergent fears and threats 'outside omnipotent control'.

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Daily walks involved children and their families stepping over the threshold of the home, a space which had been designated as safe by pandemic regulations and narratives, into a world depicted as risky, with the danger of both infecting and being infected by others. In the early days of the pandemic, almost a fifth of primary-aged children were afraid to leave their homes (Weale, 2020); for many of our respondents, their daily walks developed in ways which enabled these anxieties to be managed.

While calls to 'stay home' positioned the family home as safe (despite the possible exacerbation of dangers in homes shaped by violence and neglect), messaging and legal rules extended a sense of relative safety to the space just beyond the home. Doorstep spaces became encoded as safe enough, particular for brief outings. These external rules and messages perhaps reinforced and/or echoed families' internal assessments, both individual and collective, of what felt safe. Daily walks in spaces close to home, with a quick and easy return, were understood to be a way of managing risk. Just as transitional spaces both conjoin and separate, so these doorstep outings were outside enough to offer respite, difference, even play, but inside enough for a sense of holding to be maintained, for the environment to still feel trustworthy and dependable. Brookes (2020) situates the door as both a border and a crossing point between two seeming binaries of inside and outside, private and public. Yet its liminality can blur that binary, with immediate neighbourhood space becoming seen as a transitional space, between a private inner and a public outer.

The daily walks described were often also characterised by predictable geographies and temporalities, that could be relied on as a means of managing the transition to the outside. Jane's map of her family's '2020 Lockdown Play Route' (Figure 2) depicts a circular route, that took in smooth, safe spaces to scoot, chalked hopscotches on a neighbouring road, and time to run around in a 'secret' green space. Jane explained that one of her children almost always chose to follow the same route:

> we always turn left for some reason, I don't know, for some reason Izzy does not like to turn right, she likes to turn left, and then we go towards the main road, and then it starts there.

In this way, the daily walk functioned as a space of respite, away from the home, but was managed to feel safe and consistent. As Stiegler notes, 'a transitional space is first and foremost a system of caring' (2013, cited in Kellond, 2022, p. 178); in this case, Jane and her partner responded to their daughter's cues and held onto a predictable routine which enabled them to leave the house, and to play and connect with others, while maintaining a sense of safety and care. Other survey respondents also noted that their children seemed to take comfort in the same, or similar, route every day. Transitional spaces can be seen as internal journeys that reflect the needs of the child in transition, and these physical journeys mirrored that conceptualisation, a movement that opens and incorporates external spaces, while maintaining the needs of the child—and adult—to feel safe, mediated and held by what Winnicott terms a facilitating environment.

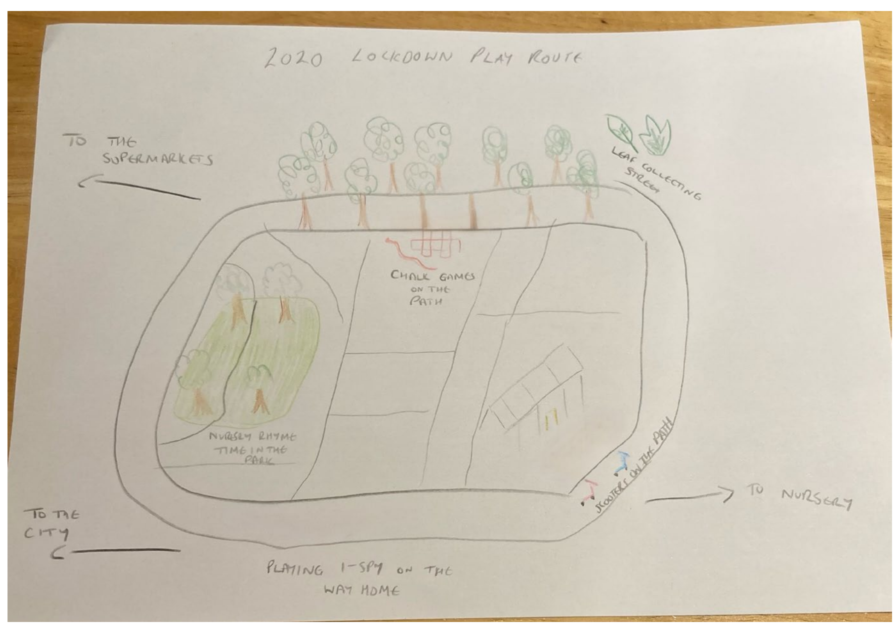


**FIGURE 2** Jane's map of her family's 'Lockdown Play Route'.

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Here we can see the ways parents work hard both as, and within, facilitating environments, echoing Kullman's (2010, p. 830) argument that 'families enact fluid relational arrangements—transitional spaces—to facilitate children's engagements with their surroundings'.

Daily walks often worked too to a fairly fixed temporal routine and rhythm, as a way of marking time and of easing into the new geographies of lockdown. For children involved in remote education, and often also for homeworking parents, daily walks became a means of signalling a transition from work, as Jean, a grandmother living with her daughter and two grandchildren, explained:

> Because [Jean's daughter] Bryony was both home schooling and working, she was absolutely ready to finish work at 4 o'clock and we were desperate really … so everybody knew that every single day at 4 o'clock we were outside.

Others also went out at the same time every day, some in the morning, before the demands for physical distancing become too frustrating. In these ways, regular walks functioned as a kind of transitional space, held by the security of routine, which enabled children and their families to integrate new rules, rhythms and experiences in their everyday lives. The proximity, routine and rhythm of these daily walks, managed by children and their families, enabled the production of a secure and reliable facilitating environment where they could navigate the transitional spaces in between possibility and safety, engaging with an uncertain and uncontrollable outside world.

## 8 | GROUNDING IN PUBLIC THINGS AND THE CAPACITY FOR CONCERN

Transitional objects are at the heart of Winnicott's understanding of the relationship between individuals and their environments. They function as wayfinders that individuals can hold onto to navigate the spaces of transition more easily. A transitional object is a not-me object that facilitates and symbolises the transition from me to not-me, is held affectionately, and must survive (Winnicott, 1971 [2005]).

Archetypally, transitional objects are dummies, teddy bears, or comfort blankets that can accompany children on their transitions, but the idea of a transitional object can be extended to include 'a word, a tune or a mannerism' (Winnicott, 1953, cited in Abram, 2007, p. 340) or even a habit or a practice. As with Winnicott's other concepts, the transitional object has also been drawn into social worlds, for example to describe the 'spaces, materials and practices that help one to switch between private and public worlds' (Kullman, 2010, p. 833).

Honig (2013, 2017) extends Winnicott's transitional objects to think about 'public things', conceived at greater spatial scales than a teddy bear or a blanket. Public things are shared objects to which we develop an attachment, fostering grounded connections to spaces and communities:

> public things are not always in use, not always efficient, not always needed, but are always there, providing a holding environment, by hiding in plain sight (the parks, the prisons, the schools, the streets, the water, the transportation system).
>
> (Honig, 2013, p. 65)

Public things, like transitional objects, 'press us into relations with others' (Honig, 2017, p. 5), are 'objects of common concern' (Honig, 2015b, p. 625), but they also offer 'a space where … feelings of loss, anxiety and grief can be collectively transformed into a mode of curation and repair' (Bergdahl & Langmann, 2022, p. 412). With these public things, Honig argues that it is possible to develop the emotional resources for resilience that enable us to weather impingements, threats and emotions (Honig, 2015a).

The resonance here with the need to navigate anxiety, grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic is clear, and we seek to explore how families' engagement with 'public things' in their neighbourhoods enabled this. Children and their families narrated multiple stories of connection to 'public things', including known spaces, local landmarks, neighbours' front gardens, and features of nature, but also the ephemeral traces of play left behind by others, which proliferated during the early days of the first lockdown (Brownell, 2022).

Although many daily walks were aimless, particular places also featured, including fields, streets, woods and landmarks. In some cases, the walks enabled deepening relationships with already-known places as more time was spent there (Figure 3), embedded through tactile and embodied practices of play, such as crawling on grass and through hedges,

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FIGURE 3 Playing with public things I.

collecting sticks, and jumping off kerbs. Children and their families developed detailed and nuanced knowledges of and relations with the materiality of their neighbourhoods:

> We tend to spend a lot of time looking at things in detail—bees on flowers, hens at the allotment, feeling the texture of different plants and stones, collecting flowers.

And paid attention to their own impact on their environments:

> The grassy area in the circle was overgrown and we enjoyed seeing what grew in there and watching the bushes recover from kids climbing on them.

In less green spaces, the same attention to detail enabled children and their families to map their neighbourhoods through the otherwise banal surfaces and structures, facilitating exploration and new forms of play. Kylie, 9 years old at the time, narrated an increasingly familiar route in real detail, demonstrating a new grasp of her most proximate geography:

> It's like if you cross the metro bridge which is, okay, if you walk out of our house and you go down the road, then you go up the little, yeah, go past the corner shop, round the corner ... and then you walk to the metro, no, no, you walk ... yeah, you walk over S____ Road, yeah, next to the metro track, don't cross it, no, and don't go on to the metro track, please ... and then you go right and there's a little place...

We can see here the very mundane ways in which these public things offer what Honig (2013, p. 60) calls an 'enchanted source of magical comfort', an in-the-moment enchantment shared with family, friends and others. The enduring nature of public things is also important: that these sites and sights could be returned to on regular, routine walks highlighted that they were 'resilient, possessed of permanence, and not prone to obsolescence' (2013,p. 60). In the particular context of the pandemic, when death, illness, distance, uncertainty and absence dominated public agendas, the value of public things 'to enable and inspire resilience in persons' (Honig, 2015a) cannot be underestimated.

A few families talked of identifying landmarks that were both appealing in some intangible way and also enabled children to witness resilience and permanence around their neighbourhoods, as Jane described:

> for some reason, Allie really likes the spire on that church and she used to get really excited when she could see the church from a distance and she knew we would be walking that way ... I guess it was just a landmark for some reason she likes.

Others incorporated landmarks into their play, taking these 'public things' and using them to punctuate their walks and play together (Figure 4).

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FIGURE 4 Playing with public things II.

As we have seen, families also engaged with some of the more ephemeral public things that emerged during the first lockdown—teddy bear trails, rock snakes and neighbourhood chalking, for example. A number of our interviews marked these sites on their maps (see Jane's map, Figure 2 above) and shared stories of following or adding to trails and markings, contributing to a developing holding environment. While these things were marked by ephemerality rather than permanence, they offered connection and enchantment nonetheless. These forms of public play enabled connection to a sometimes 'anonymous other' and allowed both those who created these sites and those who engaged to realise that 'while physically apart from others, they were not alone.' (Brownell, 2022, p. 110). As Rose et al. (2022) underline, simple interventions, such as pebble trails or window posters, helped create a sense of community and mitigated against isolation; they were 'signs of care' (Pfeiffer et al., 2022, p. 6). In these ways, despite their ephemerality, these signs indicated the resilience of others in the community, making it clear that others were surviving in their own homes; they reminded us of what Honig (2017, p. 6) calls 'community obligation, fragility and interdependence'. Such public things, engendered by collective signs of care, are connected to a form of democracy that resists neoliberal efficiency and value, echoing Winnicott's focus on sociability and democratic collectivism (Honig, 2017). They have the potential to engender a capacity for concern, and highlight how children and their families were playing 'a role in shaping the social environments in which living takes place' (Kellond, 2022, p. 54).

As Honig (2013, p. 66) suggests, public things are 'things that conjoin and are shared by people'. Our participants talked of how they shared these spaces and experiences with family and beyond, in person, by phone and through social media. In so doing, they developed stronger ideas about their neighbourhoods, mapped and marked by landmarks, large and small, personal and public, becoming increasingly grounded in the tangible spaces of the neighbourhood, witnessing change in those spaces, and beginning to care for them in new ways.

The capacity for concern, and the ability to take responsibility for others, is a marker of health (Kellond, 2022; Winnicott, 1965). Kellond (2022, p. 53) extends Winnicott to consider 'the capacity to care not only about ourselves and other people ... [but] to care about society more broadly'. A healthy capacity for concern is directly linked to an interest in contributing to the creation and nurturing of shared spaces of care (Honig, 2017; Kellond, 2022); it is both shaped by and shapes 'the care environment' (Kellond, 2022, p. 54) that extends beyond the maternal environment to 'the interlinked environments of care and society' (ibid.), including local, social and institutional forms of support.

The connections of care and concern developed through the families' daily walks went beyond immediate family to include 'significant others' who would, accidentally or intentionally, become part of these journeys. Moments of contact, still at a distance, offered a sense of connection and continuity, despite the ruptures of the pandemic and lockdown, enabling a sense that 'all will be well' (to echo the ubiquitous message of the early lockdowns; Figure 5) and of 'going on being' (Winnicott, 1965, p. 303).

Despite the proscription of meeting others outside your household, and because so many people chose to spend part of their day walking around their most local neighbourhoods, there was always a chance of bumping into friends and acquaintances, as Caroline describes:

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**FIGURE 5** All will be well.

> we used to see Hannah, she lived up the hill but, you know, you'd just see all these people on your hour long walk that you are allowed.

The regularity of the daily walk enabled children and their families to meet and connect in both serendipitous and co-ordinated ways. Caroline discusses how, with friends, they began to meet at a small, wooded area just a few hundred metres from their home.

> We were having kind of socially-distanced play dates in the wood … this became a kind of the thing and all of a sudden the kids could … play on logs and be quite distant from each other, but have the most amazing time.

For one of Jane's daughters, a local teddy bear trail enabled an unplanned, distanced but important connection with one of her friends, on one of the days that Jane, Allie and Izzy were hunting for bears:

> we were walking and she [Allie] saw one of her friends from nursery across the street. This was about six weeks after they hadn't seen anybody. So they were both out doing the same thing which was really nice … when Allie saw one of her other friends, it was like proving, I said, look everyone's fine you know we just have to stay at home and have our walks.

We can perhaps think here about the ubiquitous teddy bear trails functioning, like teddy bears, not only as transitional objects, but also as shared spaces of care and concern. Sharing the teddy bear trail with a friend, connecting at a distance while doing the same thing, was critically important, not only for the girls' friendship and concern for each other, but also for their understanding of the pandemic and of lockdown.

These examples of dense networks of recognition, contact, connection and concern, and the often playful encounters that developed, seemed to enable children and their families to animate the neighbourhood and to map it through new and developing relationships with neighbours, human and non-human, and with public things. In these ways, they engaged in making and remaking an environment of care on their doorsteps.

'Watching' neighbours was an important part of Molly's routine, as her mother Julia described, making the most of both the neighbourhood's social affordances and public things:

> She has a thing about benches and her favourite part of a walk is often sitting and having a snack and people watching.

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Reflecting the rules that curtailed physical contact and that sought to enforce a two-metre distance, connections to neighbours, known and unknown, often took the form of watching or recognition rather than conversation or contact. By contrast, physical contact with animals was not proscribed, and a number of respondents discussed meeting and petting local dogs and cats on the route of their regular walks:

> There's a couple of dogs that live on the street that she goes and strokes through the gates, they walk past us a lot and you give them a stroke, so the neighbours walking their dogs we see quite a lot.

> The children have enjoyed getting to know the neighbourhood's cats on our routes!

Local animals featured more widely in these walks too, as destinations and companions. For Julia and Molly, visits to a local horse became a common route:

> And we'd go and visit the horse that was up in the field up the street, so we'd take the scooter and we'd go round the estate and go and visit the horse.

In the survey, one respondent recorded that they often had 'Nice long walks with deer', in the absence of permission to walk with other humans.

Through the families' daily walks, neighbours—human and non-human—seemed to form into webs of recognition and familiarity that reinforced families' sense of connection and belonging, developing the capacity for concern. They increasingly knew, and were increasingly known in, their neighbourhoods, and this seemed to act as an additional layer of grounding, alongside the friends and family and public things that also marked the routes and routines of lockdown life.

## 9 | CARE-CURE: THE PLAYFUL NEIGHBOURHOOD AS 'HOLDING ENVIRONMENT'

For Kellond (2022), one of Winnicott's critical interventions is his notion of care-cure, contrasted with a more medicalised and professionalised conceptualisation of remedy-cure. Care-cure signifies 'the healing potential of relationship and practice' (Kellond, 2022, p. 2), 'environmental provision of the holding variety' (Winnicott, 1986, p. 119). This notion draws attention to the social, relational and environmental contexts in which people seek, and find, less measurable and more feminised forms of care that make life liveable; 'existing, feeling real, feeling alive and having a sense that life is worth living are all states of being made possible by experiences of care, which take the form of both physical and psychic holding practices' (Kellond, 2022, p. 4).

In the context of the pandemic, both care-cure and remedy-cure were invoked in different but interconnected ways. Considerable emphasis was placed on a growing scientific understanding of how the coronavirus worked and on the development of vaccines, treatments and cures. Alongside this, in the remaking of everyday relationships and spaces, through closures, enforced distances, and calls to look after one another, the importance of relationships and collective responsibility, or a capacity for concern, was also evident. As Kellond notes, '[i]nfrastructures that were not previously viewed as providing forms of care, including school systems and supermarkets, have come to be perceived as such' (Kellond, 2022, p. 6). Following government-imposed rules and guidelines was evidence of a capacity for concern linked to the idea of a care-cure. The families we worked with in this research navigated with care the rules for friends and family, proximate strangers, and themselves, often managing the contradictions between these with attention (Russell & Stenning, 2023).

## 10 | AFTER COVID

In reflecting on the necessity of these kinds of spaces in times of crisis, we call for a politics that enables such spaces beyond the pandemic. We argue that, in the stories explored in our research, the COVID-19 crisis allowed us to see how neighbourhoods can function as holding environments for children, families and wider communities. Part of our argument, therefore, is that we should not only value the spaces, relations and playfulness that emerged in neighbourhoods during lockdown, but that these spaces of care are equally valuable in ordinary times. Yet, we also argue,

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following Lauren Berlant (2011), that the neighbourhood as holding environment should be seen as important in the context of 'crisis ordinary', a crisis of care, or what commentators (for example, Tooze, 2022) identify as polycrisis or permacrisis.

Variously, this broad conceptualisation of crisis enfolds the climate emergency, the ongoing impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, the slow violence of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis, Brexit, the destruction of our social infrastructures, the rise of the far right, war, migration, and future pandemics. These crises are seen to be connected in complex ways, potentially uncontrollable, and demanding of attention among policy makers at national and global scales. Tooze (2022) also draws attention to how these are felt as shock, uncertainty, and as 'stressful and disorientating'. Berlant's 'crisis ordinary' precisely engages with the idea that 'crisis is not exceptional … but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming' (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). 'Crisis ordinary' sits alongside the more recognisable 'crisis extraordinary', such as the pandemic.

Honig (2017) talks about the importance of political and democratic work in sustaining public things in the context of both kinds of crisis. Both Kellond (2022) and Honig (2017) work with Winnicott to consider the neglect, decline and crisis of care, broadly defined, and of public things. Honig (2013, p. 59) notes that 'neoliberals have sought to privatize public things', and others have drawn attention to the ways in which neoliberalism has enabled and encouraged, even been founded upon, the erosion of spaces of kinship, community, state and society that have previously provided a caretaking or holding function (Applegate, 2012; Layton et al., 2006; Peltz, 2006): 'there is no longer an infrastructure for holding the public as a public' (Helms et al., 2010). Drawing on the work of the Care Collective, Kellond (2022, p. 6) makes a similar point about 'decades of organised neglect' and sees 'this particular juncture' as a care crisis; 'a moment when both the time and capacity to care for others have become scarce', adding, 'neoliberalism represents an attack on the structures of holding' (ibid., p. 171). Alongside but absent in the affirming stories of the holding and facilitating environments of our respondents, such crumbling infrastructure was evident in the experiences of those who did not have access to such spaces of care during the lockdown (Gibson-Miller et al., 2022; Holt & Murray, 2022; Mukherjee, 2021).

## 11 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored how, during lockdown, neighbourhoods were experienced, for some, as spaces of care, and how the routines, routes, rhythms, sites, objects, practices and play that animated them for children and their families facilitated moments of feeling alive in a context of threat, risk and impingement. We have used Winnicottian concepts of potential and transitional space, play, transitional objects, and the capacity for concern to map out overlapping spheres of experience that seemed to enable environments that held children and families in a time of crisis. The overlapping spaces, faces, routes, objects and sites encountered on daily walks became connected through the temporal, spatial and modal routines of lockdown to create and nurture 'a belief in a benign environment' (Winnicott, 1965, p. 32). Such a reparative environment worked to hold them during the lockdown, bringing relief, respite and reassurance to children and their families, and enabling the possibility to 'go on being', to play and to live, in the face of the impingements and uncertainties of the pandemic.

Evident, too, in our analysis is the political work required to rebuild and care for spaces of care, drawing attention to the vulnerability—and value—of public things in the varying contexts of neoliberalism, crisis ordinary and the crisis of care. Honig (2013, p. 65) pleads 'They may decay if untended. They may be sold off, unguarded, privatized if undefended. They won't be there in a few years unless we commit to maintaining them so that they may maintain us'. Kellond argues for 'a radical politics of holding-care' (2022, p. 201) focused on maintaining and nurturing the psychic and material environments that sustain life and the creation of 'institutions capable of holding citizens' (ibid., p. 23). These calls reflect Winnicott's central commitment to 'the importance of a stable and consistent environment' (Kellond, 2019, p. 328), itself borne out of the catastrophes—of war and evacuation—when children's worlds, their homes and environments, were disrupted and remade (Honig, 2013).

The particular contexts—and impingements—of COVID-19 made the spaces, relations and playfulness explored here both more possible and more necessary. The temporal, spatial and modal rules of the UK's first lockdown enabled a very particular set of circumstances in which the routines, rhythms and geographies of everyday life were restricted but also paradoxically permissive, such that some children and their families were able to participate in nurturing the kinds of facilitating environments described here. In this way, neighbourhoods could be mapped and nurtured as facilitating environments, animated by webs of people, places and public things that served to enable children and their families to play, tolerate uncertainty, and develop a capacity for concern. Acknowledging the unevenness and differentiation of such

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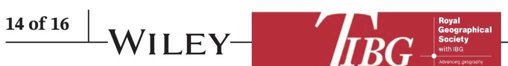


spaces and experiences, we call for neighbourhoods to be enabled and nurtured as spaces of care, beyond the crisis itself, extending to contexts and communities where these capacities have been especially undermined.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For reasons of ethics and privacy, data are not publicly available.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Newcastle University.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] Quotes with names derive from the online interviews; all names have been changed to preserve respondents' anonymity. Quotes with no names attributed come from qualitative responses to the survey.

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