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Beyond active travel: children, play and community on streets during and after the coronavirus lockdown

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Abstract

As countries have imposed lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, cities have been transformed in many ways. In this short article, we consider changes to urban residential streets in England and call for attention to be paid not only to streets as places for active travel and mobility, but also as spaces of dwelling, playing and connecting, especially for children, their families and communities. We argue that integrating these aspects into the reconfiguration of streets during and beyond lockdown requires an explicit focus on dwelling and on children, as this is vital for the health and well-being of children and of urban communities.

Keywords

Streets; play; children

Introduction

Most governments imposed some form of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to try and stop the spread of the virus. Approaches to lockdown have varied, particularly in terms of which outdoor activities were sanctioned, but all have had significant effects on cities and other urban spaces.

In this article, we consider the changes that have happened to residential streets – both organic and planned – following lockdown, focusing on England, UK, recognising similarities and differences of detail worldwide. There is an emerging focus on streets as places for active travel, that is making journeys through physically active means such as walking or cycling. Whilst this is welcome, it is limited, imagining streets merely as places for passing through, rather than places for different forms of mobility and for dwelling - for stopping, connecting, playing and just being. Whilst we recognise that this relates to Disabled and older people, for example, we particularly explore what this means for children, in terms of streets as places to play, which we see as essential to children's health and well-being. Many of the changes to promote active travel could also support children playing, but we argue there is a need for a stronger, more explicit commitment to play as streets are remade, and that this needs to be a part of policy narratives. We explore how children and families have found creative ways to appropriate streets and suggest that these activities benefit not only children but also wider communities and therefore that greater attention should be paid to dwelling, playing and connecting when reconfiguring streets both during lockdown and beyond.

The pandemic has highlighted new questions for theory, policy and practice regarding children and streets. The thoughts offered here represent an early take on a rapidly changing environment, focusing particularly on policy narratives in England, as a starting point for developing critical engagements around children, play and streets.

The remaking of street space in lockdown

As in other countries, English streets have been transformed in many ways during the Coronavirus crisis. At first, lockdown brought dramatic changes, including plummeting motor traffic, down by as much as 73% (Carrington, 2020, cited in Stenning and Russell, 2020) and reductions in pollution, for example, PM2.5, the worst air pollutant, fell by 34.29% in London (Environmental Technology, 2020). Yet, although streets were quieter, they were not necessarily safe. Spatial analysis by ESRI UK and Ireland shows that most pavements are not wide enough to be able to safely pass others at distance without stepping into the road, and the drop in traffic volume has also brought a rise in speeding cars (Stenning and Russell, 2020).

As part of the response to these risks and uncertainties, many local authorities have started to introduce measures to make streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists, including widening footpaths,

creating cycle lanes, reducing speed limits, and closing some to motor traffic entirely (Stenning and Russell, 2020). These initiatives were reinforced by the Government's 9th May 2020 announcement that it "expects local authorities to make significant changes to their road layouts to give more space to cyclists and pedestrians" (DfT, 2020).

Reflecting the Government's message, most of these measures have focused on active travel. Whilst these initiatives are to be welcomed, there is nonetheless a responsibility to think more broadly around how streets might be culturally as well as physically configured to best enable recovery and renewal for all and to address more diverse forms of mobility on our streets. For us, this focuses primarily on the question of how streets are also sites of dwelling, playing and connection and how these other activities connect to issues of health, well-being and spatial justice.

Children need street space too

The UK government acknowledged the importance of outdoor exercise for people's health and well-being by including it as one of the few legitimate reasons for people to leave their homes during the early stages of lockdown (UK Government, 2020). Overwhelmingly, messaging focused on particular, forms of exercise (walking, cycling and jogging) and people were urged not to pause or rest whilst outside.

Although the Government did acknowledge that it was necessary for children to exercise, and recommended that parents "plan time outside if you can do so safely", the focus on walking, cycling and jogging led to confusion about whether children were allowed to be outside (Ferguson, 2019, cited in Stenning and Russell, 2020). This uncertainty reflected the invisibility of children in the Government's narrative, seen across several issues.

Firstly, children are much more likely to engage in 'exercise' through play – chasing, climbing, scooting, jumping, skipping, exploring, for example – than through walking, cycling and jogging. Children's openness to the world means that the smallest detail takes on significance: the camber of the street, kerbs, cracks in the pavement, low walls that ask to be walked on, wild flowers or snails that demand attention. Children's movements are not linear but meandering, pausing, dwelling. Many children have spots in their neighbourhood that have specific meaning. These intimate relationships with local environments are the basis for strong attachments both to place and peers, with benefits for children's physical and mental health (Lester and Russell, 2010).

Secondly, children's play is often seen as frivolous. Yet, it is the primary way in which children are physically active and it enables them to make sense of and feel some control over their everyday lives. Forms of play that adults see as trivial or nonsense are essential for children's well-being. 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 and Russell, 2010). The value of play that helps children mock or make sense of worlds turned upside down or out of control is particularly significant in the context of COVID-19. In these examples, children's ways of being, and their relationships with their everyday spaces, are fundamentally different from adults' and, as such, require different forms of acknowledgement and facilitation. Given children's lack of power, it is for adults to ensure that conditions are right for children to play (Lester and Russell, 2010).

The third issue is that children's access to outdoor spaces to play is uneven and reflects many layers of social justice. Outdoor play offers opportunities to be out in the elements, with greater freedom to run, scoot or climb, to play with others, to be boisterous or creative. Over 1.8 million families in the UK live in overcrowded accommodation (Resolution Foundation, 2020, cited in Stenning and Russell, 2020) and one in eight British households has no garden (ONS, 2020, cited in Stenning and Russell, 2020), with poorer and minority ethnic families in cities being disproportionately affected.

Residential streets offer accessible outdoor space and must therefore be recognised as significant spaces for children to play.

Playing and dwelling on streets during and after the lockdown

We know that children’s play is at the heart of healthy communities, for children themselves, for their families, and often for others too (Stenning, 2020). It supports children (and adults) to develop attachments to people and places (Lester and Russell, 2010). Play can be seen as a catalyst for community, through the importance of space, trust, freedom and, often, intergenerationality.

In the context of COVID-19, neighbourhoods have become key sites of support and will need to continue to be for some time (Stenning and Russell, 2020). There have been countless examples of how children and communities have reclaimed their streets in playful ways, to make connections with each other. Social media have been replete with examples, including chalk hopscotches and play trails popping up on residential streets, families cycling, scooting and running along their quieter streets, and residents posting rainbows in their windows for neighbours to spot and enjoy.

Many of these have been intergenerational, such as this ‘Circus Challenge’ in Nottingham, which encouraged neighbours to time how long it took them to do one lap of the circus. Chalked timings from people aged between 2 and 70 years were recorded, showing how playful activities on quieter streets have been a spur for a significant intergenerational community connection on the street (See Figure 1).

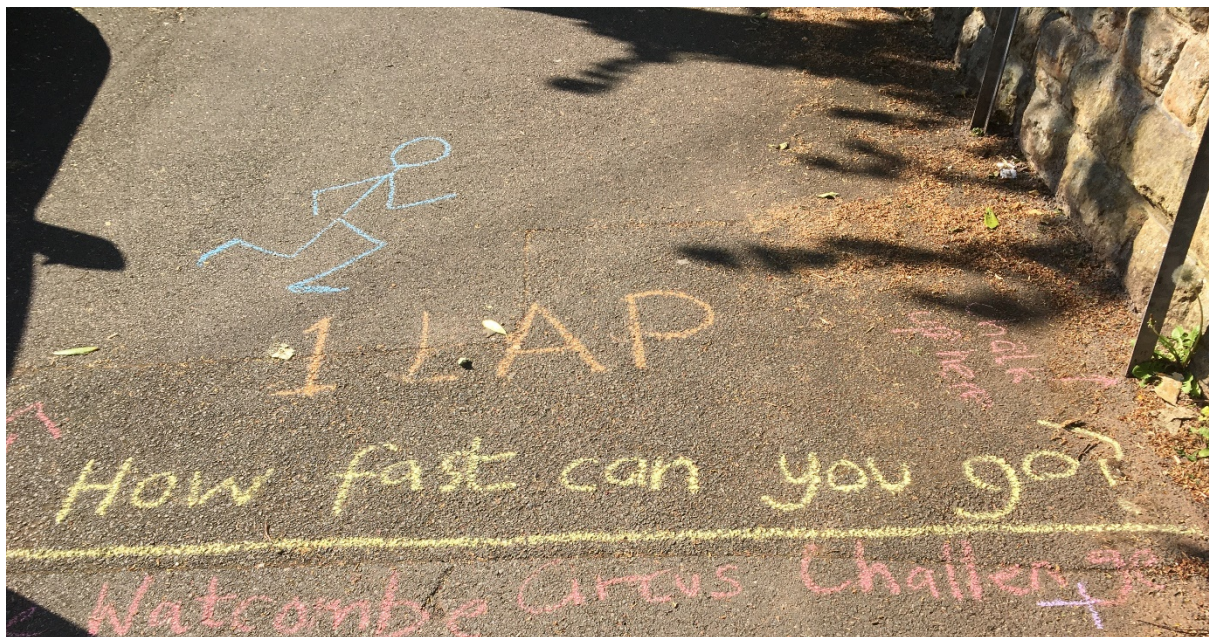


Image: Intergenerational playful use of the streets during lockdown, credit Marek Tobolewski, Nottingham, April, 2020

It is too early to confidently assess the value of these activities, but, building on previous research (Stenning, 2020) and reflecting on ongoing research, we can be fairly sure that they create moments where life feels better, moments of connection and mutual support, and that they create opportunities for children and their families to be physically and socially active at a time when such moments and opportunities are perhaps limited.

This example shows that when conditions allow, children will play out. These conditions include both the physical landscape of streets and attitudes towards children playing out. Lockdown has met

some of those conditions, but these are at risk if planned changes to streets do not explicitly include reference to children's right to play.

Conclusions: children's play, cities and health

Many of the street reconfigurations that support active travel also support children's play; at its most fundamental, the principle is the removal of traffic (preferably both moving and stationary). Actions such as temporary or permanent lane or road closures, lower speed limits, temporary widening of pavements, planting and street furniture, all help. However, the omission of explicit reference to children playing does little to change the culture of public space, where children, and particularly teenagers, can still be seen as 'out of place' on streets. We argue that children and playing, as a part of larger recognition of dwelling and different forms of movement, need to be more visible in COVID-19 policy narratives in order for conditions to be right for play, as is the case in an international guide to streets during and after the pandemic, which states, 'streets are fundamental tools in a risk-reduction public health approach that creates space for people to exercise and play in close proximity to their homes' (NACTO and GDCI, 2020, p. 6).

Lockdown has presented enormous challenges for children's well-being, particularly vulnerable children and those with no access to private outdoor space. Paying attention to children during the pandemic and in recovery means working to create conditions that support their play, and particularly their outdoor play. We argue that, as the governments and municipalities work to rethink street design to support the health of communities in the context of this pandemic, they must fully and vocally consider streets not just as corridors for active travel, but also as sites of dwelling, playing and connection. Such a perspective will benefit both children and the wider community.

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