

Childhood Policy Programme

Perspectives on children's engagement with the environments around them – panel discussion

November 2020

On 09 September 2020, the British Academy hosted an online panel discussion which brought together different perspectives to consider children's engagement with the environments around them.

This online event formed part of the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme. The programme was set up to reframe debates around childhood in both the public and policy spaces, and to break down academic, policy and professional silos in order to explore new conceptualisations of children in policymaking.

The Academy's *Reframing Childhood* series of provocation papers, written by experts from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, accompanies the programme. This event provided an opportunity to debate and discuss issues surrounding two of these provocation papers - Professor Peter Kraftl's paper 'Including Children and Young People in Building Cities' and Dr Nadia von Benzon's paper 'The Need for Nature in the National Curriculum'.

The event was chaired by Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy.

Speakers at the event comprised:

- Professor Peter Kraftl, Chair in Human Geography, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham
- Dr Nadia von Benzon, Lecturer in Human Geography, Lancaster University
- Tim Gill, independent scholar, advocate and consultant on childhood, and author of *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*
- Susan Aglionby, founder of Susan's Farm which offers a range of educational experiences for children and young people
- Judy Ling Wong CBE, poet, painter and environmentalist, best known as the Honorary President of the Black Environment Network
- Matt Larsen-Daw, Education Manager, WWF-UK

Provocation Speeches

Peter Kraftl and Nadia von Benzon opened the event by building on the arguments in their respective provocation papers, published as part of the British Academy's [*Reframing Childhood Past and Present*](#) series.

Peter Kraftl discussed how, despite considerable urban growth in both the UK and elsewhere, and the existence of a UNICEF child-friendly cities initiative, children's voices and needs are often underestimated or ignored when urban spaces are being designed. Peter raised four provocations on this theme:

- 1) **Beyond 'independent' mobilities:** there has been a focus on children's independent mobilities (how far children travel by themselves) and concern over the reduction in this over the last few decades. However, this focus does not recognise the full complexity of children's movements, and the extent to which children do spend time outside playing and socialising either alone, with other children or with adults.
- 2) **More than (child's) play:** there is a need to move beyond a narrow understanding of what constitutes child's play. Planning for play is often limited to the inclusion of a designated playground aimed at younger children, rather than embedding play throughout the urban environment. Children do still play in areas such as wastelands and building sites, and so this kind of play should be incorporated in new urban spaces.
- 3) **Valuing diverse urban knowledge:** children often possess deep and diverse urban knowledge from growing up in a particular space. This knowledge should be valued and taken into account in activities that attempt to engage children and elicit their views.
- 4) **Rethinking 'natures':** there have been efforts to create 'green' urban spaces (e.g. the Garden Communities initiative) however further thought is required as to what kinds of 'nature' are valued? Initiatives need to take into consideration the assumptions that can underpin the benefits of nature that we assume for children. Children's relationships with nature can be complex and situated, and dependant on background and experience.

The above themes have implications for new (and existing) urban spaces in terms of: recognition of the diverse engagement children have with the spaces around them; consideration of the ways we can foster children's meaningful participation; supporting diverse types of knowledge or critiques that children have about their environments; and the need to not consider children's voices in isolation, but rather as part of intergenerational collaboration and conversation.

Nadia von Benzon discussed how opportunities for engagement with nature need to be strengthened through policy and curriculum-based recognition of the holistic benefits of nature and of being outdoors. Nadia spoke of the common discourse that children nowadays are increasingly disconnected from nature, often choosing to stay indoors doing screen-based activities, and also the discourse that contemporary children lack opportunities to engage with nature as compared to previous generations due to a lack of independence. However, also important is the extent to which children's experiences of nature are differentiated: not all children experience nature in the same way, with aspects such as poverty, wealth and class as factors here. Also, discourses that posit children's lack of access to nature as a contemporary and new phenomenon do not hold true. Rather, limited access to outdoor green space has been an issue for poorer urban children from the industrial revolution onwards.

Nadia outlined the manifold benefits that nature can offer children, as follows:

- Numerous physical benefits (exercise, gross motor skills, immune system)
- Excellent opportunities to develop skills such as risk taking, decision making, and problem solving.
- Formal learning opportunities, such as opportunities for cognitive development and hands on learning, for example through ordering and categorising
- Children's access to natural environments encourages the building of lifelong connections with nature, with research demonstrating that children with strong exposure to nature exhibit more pro-environmental behaviour when they're older
- Mental health benefits from spending time in relaxing and restorative environments

As there are so many benefits to experiencing nature, there is huge therapeutic potential in outdoor green spaces being able to make a positive difference in the lives of young people. Nadia stressed that this is especially true for those children who have previously had limited opportunities to engage with nature.

Panel Responses

Tim Gill, Susan Aglionby, Judy Ling Wong and Matt Larsen-Daw then responded to the two provocation authors. Points put forward during this section include:

- There needs to be stronger recognition of the adverse effects of poor city design and planning on children around the world. Change has been slow in terms of creating places that meet the needs of children, and there is a need to strengthen the case for more child-friendly built environments. The numbers of children suffering, and sometimes dying, from factors such as air pollution and pedestrian deaths in car accidents, remains high. There are also equity issues, with poorer children adversely affected.
- Child friendliness can be condensed into two dimensions: one of these consists of 'things to do' (playgrounds, seeing friends, contact with nature, etc) and the other dimension is children's mobility (the opportunities children have to access what is on offer). A truly child friendly city must fulfil both of these requirements.
- Cities that have succeeded in taking action to become more child friendly have focused on three themes: economy & demography; sustainability & community; and children's rights, health & well-being. Many cities have found that working towards child-friendliness is a 'win-win' situation in that it also addresses other strategic concerns.
- A key progress measure of a city becoming more child-friendly is the extent to which municipalities put money and resources towards achieving this goal, rather than simply stating it is something they want to achieve. A municipal official who champions the move towards a more child-friendly city can also be vital.
- For children who struggle in mainstream education or are at risk of exclusion/have already been excluded, spending time (e.g. one day a week) in an environment such as a working farm can bring huge benefits: they learn about themselves and their capabilities, leadership and teamwork skills, as well as about the natural world around them. Early referral to places such as Susan's Farm can mean that the child is more engaged at school during the rest of the week. While there will be a cost for such programmes, paying for a day a week on a farm is better value in the long-run than allowing problems to escalate and paying for the child to attend a Pupil Referral Unit: prevention is better than treatment.

- Some children do not have the opportunity to experience rural life and to explore the outdoors in their day-to-day life. For these children, organised visits to places such as working farms can have a huge positive impact – the freedom to explore woodlands, muddy fields, etc – are experiences that can leave a lasting positive impression. Working with animals imparts vital skills and can increase the self-esteem and confidence of young people. Experiences such as the birth and death of an animal can enable young people to explore philosophical, ethical and religious topics in a real-life situation.
- Consulting with children and young people over the design of the environments they live in is vital. It is important for architects, designers and others to recognise the value of lived experience, including that of children. An initiative by Enfield Council was highlighted as a successful example of encouraging designers and other professionals to transform their working practice to be more inclusive and to consult more with marginalised groups, including children. However, consulting with children (or any other group) should not be seen as doing a ‘favour’ to that group, but about creating a cohesive and inclusive vision of society.
- It was noted that enabling children to effectively articulate their needs and understanding the complexities of their lives can be challenging and time-consuming, but the benefits gained make it worthwhile. One danger can be that consulting with children is seen as a ‘nice to have’ rather than an essential, which means that in times of austerity, initiatives such as children’s consultative groups are vulnerable to cuts.
- One example of good practice, and a demonstration of what can be gained by thorough consultation and good investment, is the redevelopment of Burgess Park, London. Redevelopment focused on creating a range of spaces and activities that appeal to a range of ages, including elements such as a BMX track, café, library, lake, outdoor gyms, tennis courts and free-play areas.
- The linking of outdoor activities to the National Curriculum can be a strong incentive for schools to increase their focus on these activities. Some organisations offer programmes targeted to certain school types; for example, Natural Thinkers in Lambeth was highlighted as a programme designed to be low-cost and adapted to urban schools with limited space.
- A holistic approach to children’s lives is needed. Tackling issues in one sphere (e.g. the provision of more and better green spaces) while ignoring or not tackling issues in other areas (e.g. poor housing, food poverty) limits effectiveness, and an integrated approach is required. Covid-19 has highlighted that many children in disadvantaged communities are digitally poor, lacking access to broadband or laptops and tablets. To address this disadvantage, locally focused research is needed to drive evidence-based policy and the effective implementation for specific groups in specific localities.
- Enabling children and young people to build a strong connection and passion for nature can reap long-term benefits through creating adults with the understanding and desire to protect environments and act in a sustainable way. Instilling a love for nature is important, but it is also vital to ensure that children *understand* nature and their local environments and the need to protect and enhance them. Global issues, such as biodiversity loss, can be hard for children to comprehend, but values such as living in harmony with nature can be successfully embedded and fostered at local levels through direct experience of local environments. Introducing children to the complexity of nature can involve the use of online apps with gamified elements that incentivise kids to go outside and explore.
- Children, and young children in particular, do not differentiate between playing and learning, and often do both simultaneously. This means there’s a limit to the concept of the designated play area, and we should not assume that all of a child’s play needs

will be met by the creation of a designated, purpose-built play area. We need to expand our thinking beyond the narrow purpose-led uses as designated by adult (e.g. a slide is solely to slide down) as children will naturally use an item for a wide range of play and imaginative opportunities.

- Schools can help enable children to connect with their environments in many ways. They can: play an important role in levelling access to nature across children; model positive action in the use and design of outdoor space; involve young people in design decisions; and build understanding of the connection between people and landscapes.

Policy Changes

During the final part of the event, panellists and participants discussed some of the topics raised and considered what policy changes are needed to ensure that children can successfully engage and interact with the environments around them.

Inclusive, child-friendly spaces: The ways in which urban environments can signal (explicitly or implicitly) whether they are inclusive was discussed, including the messages sent by needing to have playgrounds and play equipment present in order to ‘legitimise’ the presence of children in a public place. This is a message sent by adults (developers, planners etc) to other adults (parents and carers) as adults have been socialised to view different behaviours as appropriate for different places and spaces, in a way that children are not yet aware of or constrained by. In a city that is truly child-friendly and inclusive, symbols such as playgrounds are not necessary, and it was noted that some cities are starting to reject conventional ‘fenced off’ playgrounds and investing in attractive, inclusive spaces aimed at a range of ages instead. The idea of children’s ‘secret spaces’ was also discussed – children enjoy having what feels like their own private spaces, which allows them a level of autonomy and independence (within a controlled safe space).

The planning system and sustainable neighbourhoods: A prerequisite for an effective planning system is efficient planning departments that are well-resourced and have the capacity to deal with their workload. A key consideration for planners and developers must be sustainability, and the need to take climate adaptation targets, and the goal of net zero emissions, into consideration. The strongest strategic argument for creating more child friendly spaces is that a child friendly neighbourhood looks like a sustainable neighbourhood – it encourages more walking and cycling, and the design of more compact communities.

Involving children and young people in decision-making: Some planning authorities are taking steps towards involving children more within the planning process, and a statutory planning document that sets out principles for engaging with children, which then structures the planning process from early stages onwards, is currently being co-developed with some planning authorities. In terms of including children (and communities in general) in decision-making, some form of nurturing or capacity-building is necessary to enable people to become ‘consultable’. For example, if an individual is not familiar with examples of good design then how are they going to be able to articulate what good design should look like? Additionally, it was noted that consultations can be tokenistic, and so a challenge is how to ensure that children’s engagement in consultative processes is meaningful.

Socio-economic factors and inequality: Participants considered whether, particularly in marginalised urban communities with limited funding for social infrastructure, it is realistic that the provision of outdoor spaces can have a direct economic benefit. It was noted

that developers are beginning to recognise that if they build developments that are child friendly and inclusive, with green spaces, this will also benefit them economically: it makes the communities more desirable, and therefore easier to sell properties in these developments. Additionally, the economic investment needed is relatively small when compared to the social and cultural gains.

Schools and education: Participants discussed the role of schools and education, in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. There was concern that schools attempting to catch-up on lost education time during the lockdown school closures would result in more regimented school days, with less time spent outdoors or in engaging with free, open-ended play. There was also a feeling of missed opportunities in relation to outdoor learning – as the Covid-19 virus spreads to a lesser degree outside, initially some schools expressed the intention to make greater use of teaching outdoors. However, this potentially exciting and innovative development did not become the reality; the necessary money and support did not materialise and there were concerns about effectively and efficiently managing interactions between children outdoors to prevent virus transmission.