

Children's Play Debate

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Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): Children's play is important, and I am delighted to introduce a debate that I hope will raise the profile of play and contribute towards a national strategy for children's play. Let me begin with a confession. It was 20 years this summer since I organised and ran my last summer play scheme, and slightly longer than that since I was involved in after-school clubs. However, the issues surrounding children's play have not changed substantially, and I shall highlight some of them.

Children's play is hard to define. It covers a wide spectrum, from intensive adult activity with small children to more informal, open approaches to play, both inside and outside. I shall concentrate this afternoon on the latter. However we define children's play, it is important to recognise that it involves much more than swings and roundabouts; it is an avenue for self-exploration, growth and development.

Although I generally welcome the Green Paper "Every Child Matters", which was published last month, it refers only in passing to children's play. One of my aims today is to make it clear that that document is out to consultation. I hope that our debate can contribute to a firmer children's Green Paper and a set of policies that recognise children's play.

Children's play is important to youngsters themselves. There is a tendency these days to try to make children grow up far too quickly. One has only to look at advertisements and television to see that. In a consumer society, all the emphasis is on making youngsters grow up quickly and reach adulthood. I want children's play and childhood to allow children time and space to relax, find freedom and enjoy the moment. We all know the old adage about all work and no play. Play is important in letting children just take stock as well in their development. It can be exciting and imaginative. I have watched children go deep-sea diving, climb Everest and make the most dramatic space journeys—all in their own living rooms. Playing—that excitement—is a journey, a preparation for life.

Children's play is important for parents, too. In fact, I do not think that we understand just how important parents see children's play as being. There has been a great deal of public polling on it, and when parents were asked what would most improve their area, 43 per cent. cited better facilities for children as their top priority. When they were asked to place children's play facilities among 20 priorities for young people, they put them fifth, which,

interestingly, was well above both health and education. Parents see play as important.

As I look into my crystal ball, which is notoriously cloudy, I think that the notions of space and of owning and being part of one's neighbourhood will be growing political themes in the future. Children have a right to expect part of that space. Parents also believe strongly that in a pressured world, in which they are stressed, in which life can be difficult and in which there are many demands on families, it is important to have time when children can have their own space. Children's play is important to both children and their parents.

Children's play does not have the profile that it deserves. One argument is that that is because local and national structures of government are fragmented when it comes to children's play. People are interested, but nobody has sole responsibility. In Whitehall, for example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has the top interest in children's play, but officials in the Department for Education and Skills are also involved, as are those in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister through planning issues and work with local authorities. The Home Office also has an interest, so four big Departments of state have an interest in children's play.

That situation is mirrored in local authorities, although in many ways things are more fragmented there because local authorities handle children's play in different ways. In some authorities, the social services department is the lead department, while in others it is the education, recreation or leisure departments. There is no clear local authority blueprint for children's play. Such fragmentation does not matter if structures are made to work, and it is essential that all parties, nationally and locally, should talk about children's play.

The voluntary sector is an important stakeholder. In Nottinghamshire and nationally, voluntary organisations—ordinary parents, residents groups and groups with special interests—are making provision for children to play. The voluntary sector has an important voice and must contribute widely to the debate.

In my county, Nottinghamshire, a framework for children's play has been in place for some years. It is not perfect, but it is evolving to meet needs. I am delighted to say that the county council, working with partners in the voluntary sector, has established play centres in each of the districts. There is also a play forum in each district, where partners come together to discuss a local strategy to meet

local needs. I am pleased that 174 after-school clubs are running in Nottinghamshire and that more than 5,000 places are available. That is an important leap forward from what happened when I was involved in the system.

What impresses me most about Nottinghamshire is the training that takes place. The play centres have acted as vehicles for getting out and talking to parents and community groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and are making training available from an introductory level up to NVQ3 level. Adult skills in children's play and the facilities to encourage and excite children are also important. The Nottinghamshire model shows us what can be done.

I want us to go further by building on the Nottinghamshire base to form a national strategy. One tool available is the soon-to-be published work co-ordinated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), whom the Department for Culture, Media and Sport asked to look at how new opportunities for funding for children's play—about £200 million is involved—should be spent. I have not yet seen the final product, but I have witnessed his work. What impressed me was that the team involved had regional meetings across the country and talked to people about the children's play facilities that they need.

The work done directly with young people is particularly impressive. For example, a workshop was held in Birmingham and young people were asked to discuss their views on the provision of children's play. In a debate on children's play, we should hear the voice of the children. One article states:

"In Birmingham the children tended to favour smaller local provision with comments mainly about ease of access and variety. They included, 'Big play spaces cost too much money to get to', 'You can go to different ones to see what different things they do' and 'Lots of small ones means lots of different things to do'."

Concerns were also expressed that big playgrounds might lead to bullying. There is a view that, since big playgrounds might entail the presence of adult staff, smaller provision directed at local neighbourhood need is probably the best way forward.

Children also discussed better school playgrounds and more out-of-school and holiday clubs. Holiday and homework clubs are important but there are dangers in provisions. There is a lot of pressure on schools and teachers to perform. There is a danger that homework clubs may be used to

reinforce learning and schooling. That should happen to some extent, but out-of-school clubs should be more exciting, and different from school. They should be a chance for children to recover and explore after school.

Children had a say in the Dobson review. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts will be able to tell us when it will be published, as I understand that it is imminent. It is important to recognise that it is not a Government report, but a report to the Government. It is a set of ideas to put to the Government, to which they must respond. Clarity on the timetable of the discussion would be helpful.

I do not know what will be in the review, but I can imagine what some of the themes will be. We must examine children's play across the country, but we must consider particularly how to meet children's needs in the most disadvantaged areas. It is also important to consider the play needs of children with special and exceptional needs. They also have a right to play, and the facilities available to them are limited. I am grateful to the National Autistic Society for telling me, in a letter, that a recent survey of play facilities found that

"more than two thirds of disabled children do not use leisure facilities because they are made to feel uncomfortable while doing so. This highlights the need to challenge negative public perceptions if inclusion is to become anything but an aspiration. Over half of the families (55 per cent.) had to travel outside the area to find accessible facilities, with opportunities to access play and leisure limited by financial constraints and difficulties with transport."

It is important to include all children in any national strategy.

It is also important to examine how funding reaches children. It is fairly easy for voluntary groups to find capital for projects, but it is sometimes difficult for them to find the day-to-day resources to sustain projects in the long term. I am concerned that the Dobson review should not reinforce the impression that lottery money should fund children's play, although lottery money can make an important difference. The children's Green Paper and the Dobson report should provoke a stocktake of how much we currently spend on children's play. No one knows the answer, and if we are to develop new facilities and national strategy, we need to start at base one. We need to know and to cost what we are doing before we move into the future.

It is also important for local authorities to examine what they are doing for children's

play. I note that none of the targets set for local government concerns children's play. We should reflect on whether there is a lesson to be learned from that. Should we be talking more clearly to local authorities about the targets that are set?

The important thing is to try to include funding for children's play in mainstream funding—it should not all be lottery money. For example, in big regeneration projects we should examine how some of the project money could be directed towards children's play. We should also use the planning process more sensitively and sensibly, to introduce appropriate provision for children in new developments. That should, but does not always, happen.

There is also the question of how we use schools. Budgets are tight, and the priority is children's education, but we should try to develop schools as community resources—as centres that can reach out to the wider community. That process has already begun, and I am confident that projects such as sure start will enable it to proceed.

We should examine our old Victorian parks. There is an increasing interest in how urban Victorian parks can be revitalised and regenerated. Children's needs should be considered when we are examine ways of developing those parks.

Those are some of the questions that I hope the review will answer. However, the essential requisite for good children's play is good training for the people who are involved in it. In fairness to the Green Paper, "Every Child Matters", I may say that it refers specifically to the need to encourage play training. People who work and play with children are not devoid of skills—they are highly skilled people who can pass their skills on to other child care professionals. I have seen children's lives radically changed through good-quality, thoughtful and structured play. However, for structured play to be done well, both training and resources are needed.

There are signs of progress. I am delighted that the Department for Education and Skills has recently recognised SkillsActive as the sector skills council for active leisure and learning training. Having a body with sole responsibility for certifying and promoting quality children's play training.

The funding now available from the Department for Education and Skills for regional play centres reinforces that approach. In the last year, new regional training centres have been developed in Yorkshire and Humberside, the east midlands, the north-west, the east and the south-east regions, taking the

total regional centres to nine; those are encouraging signs.

I want to continue to work with people within and without Parliament to build on important progress—the Dobson report, SkillsActive and the Green paper—to create a framework for children's play. Some high-quality work is being done, but there are big gaps where there is no appropriate provision, and we must look closely at that. The time has come to take stock of what we are doing about children's play, and to try to move forward and make a difference. It is 20 years since I ran a play scheme but what impressed me then, and still impresses me, was that investment in children and their play is not just for the present, but for the future, too.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre):

It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), whom I heartily congratulate on choosing the subject for discussion.

It is delightful to have this opportunity to discuss children's play, and also surprising because it is taken for granted in the world we inhabit that play is peripheral and less important than other vital matters in people's lives. That view is wholly wrong, and I am disappointed that more hon. Members are not present for this debate.

Members of Parliament are extremely skilful people, adept at communication, building relationships, co-operating and forming—and sometimes breaking— alliances. But those essential social and people skills are not taught at school at any level or in higher education. They may result from the general experience of living, but most importantly they come from the profound learning experience of play. I learned lessons in our back lane that I use every day of my life.

A month or so ago, we held a day in Lancaster called, "What's life like for children in Lancaster," assisted by the great national expert, Professor Al Aynesley- Green, the national clinical director for children's services. About 150 adults and 30 or so children and young people were present, all of whom participated extremely well. One of my community campaigns followed from a suggestion made that day: a young chap from a local primary school stood up at the beginning of the meeting, in front of a large number of adults, and said that what was needed to improve life in Lancaster was a community telescope. That was such a wonderful idea. We are all in the gutter looking at the stars, and

that was a fantastic insight into community need.

Many other young people contributed that day. They concentrated on the important aspects of their lives and the issues that seemed fundamental to them. They said that they needed more parks and more space. They suggested that the old bus garage down the road could be converted into an ice rink and a centre for a whole range of children's activities, saying, "We could run that centre". The children and young people had some strong messages. They want ownership of part of our communities. They want somewhere that is definitely theirs. They want somewhere over which they can exert control. Above all, they have good and solid ideas about their community, what it should provide and what they want to see in it.

I look forward to the report from my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). I welcome the investment that the Government have made. It has come from a variety of sources. It shows its face in our communities. After long struggles and in the face of rampant scepticism from adults, skate parks are being developed in my constituency. That is what young people want. No, it is not a fad. It is the sort of sporting development that they want. Better youth and community facilities are being developed and there are more spaces for people to meet.

Meanwhile, begrudging little spaces are allowed on new housing estates. Planners force developers to include what is laughably described as a play space on estates over a certain size. The developers put them in the most obscure corner of the estate and the people whose houses are built next to them lobby their MP to get the local authority to remove the planning condition. That has been one of my most depressing experiences as an MP. So often we give the message to young people that we do not like them very much and we do not want them around.

We are very critical of young people. We do not like it that they watch too much television and get fat. But we also criticise them when they go out. We are all concerned, rightly, about antisocial behaviour but we can become obsessed by it and we can see it in situations where young people are simply being themselves.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a world of difference between behaviour that is rightly described as antisocial, and which plagues communities and mostly makes victims of young people, and the behaviour of the vast

majority of young people who are bored and looking for something to do? We must stop criminalising children and realise that we must provide something constructive for them to do. We cannot rely on old, Victorian England values under which it was thought that children did not exist unless they were asked to contribute. If we do, we will force them further into problems that it will be costly to sort out.

Mr. Dawson : There is a great deal in what my hon. Friend said. We are discussing a continuum. In certain situations, it is possible to misinterpret the behaviour of young people. When they congregate and become a little boisterous, that is not necessarily a sign that they pose a great threat to our communities. We need to respond to the views of children and young people. A wider range of resources must be made available to them. Above all, they need space. As young people from Lancaster said, they need a meeting place and to be allowed to do their own thing. They should be allowed to run matters and be in control of their environment.

The debate gives us a good opportunity to look back at our own childhood. When my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood was talking, it struck me that he would have been a darn good member of our gang. We had an amazing time. We dammed streams, built wooden houses and climbed up trees. Sometimes, we cut down trees. We had the huge advantage of being near a beach on which we played all sorts of dangerous games. We also spent an enormous amount of time in our back lane where there was a lot of space because there were not many cars.

I recently made a nostalgic visit to the house where I lived 25 years ago. The area was full of cars. Children could not play cricket or cowboys and Indians there now. They could not be involved in grand, construction projects. We always had a few nails and scrap wood. Such items seem to be missing now. We built things out of all sorts of junk. There is not the same tolerance for young people these days. As well as really good, well-organised activities of the sort mentioned by my hon. Friend, we need to provide children with opportunities for adventures. A load of constructive material must be put at their disposal. Children must be able to play games and let their imaginations roam around the possibility of using such material. We need more co-ordination in the way in which we offer play projects. I do not understand from where the different elements of funding come. In our area, the county council provides opportunities for play as does the district council. A community safety budget funds

excellent projects. The lottery has funded various projects, but because it is so diverse and diffuse, play does not receive the attention that it deserves.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood was absolutely right to refer to the Green Paper, "Every Child Matters". If every child does matter, we must ensure that play is a central part of every organisation's work. There are children's trusts, and local authorities, which will have a lead officer—a lead politician—for children's services. We must ensure that those people give play the prominence that it deserves and requires.

We need to recognise that play work is a thoroughly respectable and vitally important profession. As part of that, we need to recognise that there are huge skills in our communities. Across the whole range of work with children, there are opportunities for community regeneration. In some of the most allegedly run-down parts of my constituency—certainly the parts with poorer reputations—there are people who have great experience with children: many of them have been parents, grandparents, brothers or sisters, and have taken part in a wide variety of voluntary activity on the estates where they live. We must recognise the talents of people from some of the most deprived communities in our land: we need to nurture those talents—and support and employ them.

If we really want to get to the nub of the problem of children's health and antisocial behaviour, and if we really want to engage children in our communities and the future of our society, we must give them opportunities to learn, grow and socialise, and to be part of their communities, and to take control. The first step towards that is to listen to children and young people. We have a great opportunity to make the changes that are required.

In a sense, a cultural change is required. We need to understand the importance of play and the significance of childhood. We must ensure that we enjoy children's childhoods, and that children enjoy them, too. If we get that right, we will do a great deal better by our society in the future.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am, I think, quite well qualified to speak on the subject of children's play. I am the mother of three children, who will soon have presented me with five grandchildren, and I am becoming quite an expert on childhood as they all live near me in my constituency.

The title of the debate made me wonder whether we were going a little bit mad. Do we

need a strategy for play? Do we need a programme for it? Will the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) set targets for play? Would that not be the very opposite of what play means? Play means doing something that you like doing—or doing nothing. What is wrong with doing nothing occasionally? If we are to have targets for doing nothing and doing things that we like doing, I dread to think what direction the Government are taking us in.

However, I will take this matter seriously. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing the debate, because play is important. Why have we suddenly—maybe it happened gradually—realised that we need a strategy? One reason is that successive Governments have been very unjoined up in their Departments. People have not actually thought out the consequences of particular policies, and we must start addressing that seriously.

Take the example of school playing fields. I do not blame the present Government for the non-existence of school playing fields, but an awful lot of them have been sold off over the past few decades. When little children, such as my toddler grandchildren, are taken into an open space or empty field, they run and run. The appeal of big empty spaces to a child is great, but, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) said, where can they be found? The hon. Gentleman had his beach when he was a child, but the vast majority of our children are brought up in towns and urban environments where they have no space. They cannot run around and get away from everything. The school playing fields policy was a sad move that meant many schools lost their fields.

The national curriculum is so prescriptive that it does not leave enough time in the day for extra activities. The wetland centre in Barnes, which is part of the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust is a beautiful facility of reclaimed reservoirs with water birds, geese, ducks and all sorts of things for children as well as adults, and it is sad that so few schools visit it. Schools say that the school day is too crowded: they have no time any more to do trips, and teachers are overwhelmed by all the things that they have to do. There is no time and no space. All the targets that teachers must meet daily, weekly, monthly and term by term leave little time or energy to take the children out on an extra spree or trip. They have no time to ensure that the children are doing something constructive or playing happily in the playground rather than drifting around or thumping each other.

Dare I mention standard assessment tests for seven-year-olds? One of the saddest things that we have done to little children in this country is to make them prepare for tests at the age of seven. The hon. Member for Sherwood said that children are losing their childhood. They start taking tests at seven, and I know that the mentality of teachers who want their schools to do well means that they teach for that exam instead of letting children learn through play. Children do learn through play, and it is terribly important that they should, and not just learn in order to pass tests.

Parents are also at fault to some extent. In middle-class areas such as my constituency, I see the poor little souls being picked up from school, the girls being whisked off to ballet and their brothers off to judo. Then they go to piano lessons, and then they must have their extra tutoring at age nine or 10 for the independent school tests. Those children must fall into bed absolutely knackered. They are given so many extra opportunities for acquiring skills that they have no space for themselves. They are not allowed simply to do nothing. My eldest child loved doing nothing. He is a successful person who has done very well, which is partly, I hope, because I sometimes realised that he needed to do nothing and left him alone.

We all know that television and computers are turning us into a nation of couch potatoes, and that children are becoming anaemic and obese, and developing rickets—there all sorts of horror stories about how unhealthy our children have become. However, a lot of that results from parents being too afraid to let their children out, and that is because successive Governments have failed to realise the importance of community safety and the village bobby who knows all the children in the local schools and who can be referred to and relied on.

Yesterday, during discussions on the Sexual Offences Bill in the Chamber, I was thinking about today's debate. A law was passed—although my party tried to amend it—that made it a criminal offence for children under 16 to touch each other sexually. That means that they cannot play doctors and nurses or kiss-chase; they cannot even play postman's knock any more, as I did and as my children did. That is a bit more legislation saying, "You mustn't do that; you must do your reading instead." We do not think enough about the consequences on our children of legislation on other issues.

There have been some tremendous measures recently. I congratulate the Government on sure start. It is magnificent that that is being

rolled out even in my constituency, which is not a deprived area. Sure start is coming, and it involves superb schemes.

Could we please pay tribute to the play group leaders and after-school club organisers who for decades have provided all those things that our children would otherwise have lacked? I applaud and praise them. They have done a magnificent job, and I hope that a lot of support for play groups and play-group leaders will come out of the strategy.

Equipment in municipal and school playgrounds is much better than it was. I sometimes worry a little that putting nice, soft, bouncy surfaces under every climbing frame must make children think that every tree that they want to climb will also have a nice, soft, bouncy surface underneath it. Sometimes, we must remember that children have to learn by taking little risks—supervised, I hope, by their parents. They need to know that there are safe and unsafe things to do.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre on his trip down memory lane—my handkerchief was at the ready, and I bemoaned the childhood of our past—and the hon. Member for Sherwood both mentioned town planning. Where is the waste ground? In my childhood—if I may take a trip down memory lane—it was bomb sites. I was brought up in the west midlands in the years just after the war. We played mothers and fathers in bombed-out buildings. We finished off the job that Hitler started, by throwing stones at windows that were almost but not quite broken. We had a great time on bomb sites; they were wonderful places.

My two boys now have children of their own. Despite their being brought up in leafy, wonderful Kew with lovely playgrounds and open spaces, including Kew green and parks, the boys' favourite playground—I hope that my daughter did not go there—was a derelict public building down by the river that was desperately dangerous. I have only just heard about it. It was right on the riverbank. What has happened to that most favoured place? Developers have built a block of luxury flats on it. That wonderful play space for young people in my constituency has gone. There is no longer anywhere in our communities that does not belong to somebody. As soon as children start playing anywhere, someone complains about them making a noise or kicking balls. Everyone owns everything now; we are all very proprietorial, and children have no chance to let rip. Perhaps they do so in the country or on the beach, but most children do not have that facility.

Let me go back to the subject of SATs at age seven. A recent study compared our country with Sweden. Swedish children do not start formal school until they are going on seven. Until then, they go to pre-school and nursery. They are away from home, but learn through play, communication and interacting with their peer group. Our children are preparing for SATs in those years. What happens? Our children at seven are much better than Swedish children at reading, writing and arithmetic. They gain very good results at seven in comparison. At 14, however—oh dear! There is such a turnaround. The children in Sweden have learned to communicate and have caught up very fast, even though their formal schooling started a little later.

So many parents have to work that we need an expansion of before-school and after-school clubs. They are invaluable. In many areas, the old informal process of "You have the kids on Mondays, I have them on Tuesdays and Mrs. So-and-so has them on Wednesdays" meant that we all had after-school periods and one day off a week and that five mums shared the load. I am not sure that that happens as much as it did. I hope that it does, but in many urban areas perhaps it does not, because people do not make the same contact with each other.

I agree with the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre that we should ask the children what they want, whether it is to do nothing or whether they want skateboards, for example. Requests for skateboard parks in my constituency were pooh-poohed many times as a fad, and as something that the children would grow out of and move on from. However, they did not, and skateboarding is an excellent way of letting out energy.

Finally, let us not forget grandparents. My family has a play strategy for children called Grandpa—actually they call him Poppy. He was the carver of pumpkins last weekend and is the controller of the railway network that is set up in our sitting room on Saturday mornings and which is not dismantled until Monday. He is a hard-working consultant in the national health service but he is also a magnificent play leader for the children. The gap between generations is an extremely useful one, which we do not exploit enough. Grandparents are very good at entertaining grandchildren, because they can send them home in the evenings; they do not have to keep them all night as well. So in our strategy let us not forget grandparents and particularly not the grandparent in my family—I commend him to the House.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on his success in the ballot and on introducing the debate. Judging by the number of interested people in the Public Gallery, it is long overdue and very important to many people. I commend the hon. Gentleman on his excellent speech, which covered all the key points. I have been wondering what I can add to it, but if I left the Minister 45 minutes to reply, she might not thank me, so I will say a few words. I begin with a quotation from a psychologist:

"When we play games with other children we learn how to compete, organise groups, be creative and develop socially. It also helps to relate to others and to form relationships."

That encapsulates everything that we all believe about play and its importance in all its multifarious facets. We have touched on only some of those facets today, and they range enormously—from doing nothing, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, to the structured, formalised play that takes place at certain locations. However, I think that we would all agree that there are problems with the notion and practice of play in this country at the moment. Playgrounds, once a Mecca for children, are in decline, often because councils no longer wish to maintain them because of pressures on their revenue account, or perhaps because they no longer want to face up to the increasing claims for injury as our society becomes more litigious.

There is also a decline in the extended family. It is encouraging and heartwarming to know that there are tremendous granddads around who will look after their grandchildren, but today, unlike in the case of the hon. Member for Richmond Park, many grandparents do not live conveniently close to their grandchildren, which causes difficulties. In the past, the extended family brought on the younger children, but that option is no longer readily open to us, although I heartily agree with the hon. Lady's comment that the age gap between grandparents and grandchildren—between the generations—is often most productive, in that grandparents know how best to use time and have the patience to bring on young children.

I look back not with embarrassment, but with recognition that I did not spend anything like the time—or had the same patience—with my own two children that I spend with my one grandchild. I cannot claim to have more than one—Oh wait, I have two. [Laughter.] One was born two days ago; I had forgotten. He has not impinged on my life yet, but he is there. There is an eight-year gap between them.

As hon. Members have mentioned, we can no longer go out on the streets because of the sheer volume of traffic, and it is not only parents who are anxious about traffic and safety; children themselves are terrified. They say that they do not like going out and being near heavy traffic, and that affects the situation, too.

When it comes to safety, we are not talking only about surfaces in playgrounds. If we attempt to keep children in an ultra-safe environment, we run the risk of losing a key element of constructive play—a sense of adventure. Until I was about 10 or 11, I used to spend my holidays in north Wales, on the sand dunes near Prestatyn, in what we used to call a bungalow; it is a shack now. I went there for about a month every year, accompanied by my brother and my cousins. There were no playgrounds and no facilities—not even a cricket pitch—but every day after breakfast we went out with a sense of adventure and we created things. We must not think that as a Government or as a society we must always produce something tangible for play. We need to think more widely and create the conditions in which children can grow and develop through their own play. Of course, children do not get out as much today as they used to. I have covered some of the ground, but there are other issues. There is a feeling that they do not get out any more, but today's children are damned if they stay at home watching TV or playing video games—they risk being labelled couch potatoes—and damned if they go out, risking the wrath of their parents, who are worried about traffic and other safety issues. The hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and for Richmond Park also mentioned the intolerance of members of the local community, such as neighbours or other people living nearby, who, as we MPs know, regularly complain about the activities of young people in their neighbourhood.

According to the latest research, most children now opt to stay indoors—a sedentary lifestyle that fuels the growing obesity epidemic. One survey of parents found that seven out of 10 children spend more time playing on computers and watching TV during the summer holidays than doing anything else, and 40 per cent. spend seven or more hours a day on such activities. Those statistics show that at least some play is taking place. One might call it domiciliary play, but it is important. Computers and the facility that children have with information technology bring them on much earlier than was the case with our generation. However, underlying the debate and the Government's so-called strategy on

play is the feeling that although that type of play is okay in its place, play outdoors or in more structured areas, supervised or unsupervised, is suffering because children are not getting out of the home. The impetus seems to be towards restoring the conditions that would allow it to happen more.

There is growing concern about obesity, which is costing the health service £2.6 billion to tackle its direct and indirect effects, according to National Audit Office figures from 1998. We understand that that cost is still rising alarmingly. Given that evidence, the Government are right to consider how to develop more activity among our children, whether through play or sport or a combination of both.

We have spoken about structured facilities, and different costs are involved, such as capital costs to put the facility in place and the ongoing revenue cost, which is often the killer punch when local councils are considering whether to go ahead with various projects. However, we have facilities that are underutilised in this country, such as those in our schools, particularly our primary schools. At this stage, like the hon. Member for Richmond Park, I pay tribute to all those involved in play groups and after-school clubs, who do a fantastic job with our children. A report by Learning through Landscapes, a national charity, has found that schools fail to make maximum use of their land and get only about 30 per cent. of the potential benefit from their outdoor facilities. There is the widespread problem of the sell-off of playing fields, which I will come to later, but too much existing land is being underutilised.

Social, educational and play benefits are deemed to accrue from outdoor play facilities, and one example that I have obtained from the Library is that of Ravenstone primary school in Balham, south London. It put improved facilities into the school and saw dramatic changes in bullying, social inclusion, structured play and children's work in the classroom. That did not take a lot of money—about £30,000 was spent—but the effects were dramatic. That could be replicated in existing facilities throughout the country, through the Department for Education and Skills rather than the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we should make the most of underutilised facilities on our doorstep.

Because of pressure on resources, heads and governing bodies cannot spend the money that they should on their playing fields. Fields are not cared for properly, as they are not drained or the grass is not cut, so they end up as no-go

areas during wet winters. They are underutilised because they are not maintained properly. As the heads and governing bodies do not then have the money to bring them back into full use, it is easy for them to take the option of selling the fields. If we gave those schools some ring-fenced money, we could perhaps encourage them to put in facilities that would allow their children to play in a more structured way.

Improvements can range from art, technology and architecture projects to sensory gardens. I opened such a garden at Eye Church of England primary school in my constituency a few months ago. The children had been involved in designing the garden; they related to it and it was theirs. That kind of thing can help children's play activities.

Land use and planning issues have already been covered, but I will mention them briefly. As 200,000 or 300,000 houses are to be built, particularly in south-east England, safe outdoor spaces should be planned as part of the infrastructure.

A recent survey by the Children's Play Council and the Children's Society found that on average, fewer than one playground is provided for every 500 children under 12, and fewer than 40 per cent. of local authorities have either outdoor play policies or strategies for the public realm. At present, 56 per cent. of local authorities do not have an urban green space strategy, and 64 per cent. of those have no immediate plans to introduce one. The hon. Member for Sherwood made an important point when he said that public parks should be brought back into public use, as too many are run down—the same point that I made about revenue funding for the maintenance of school playing fields, which are tremendous facilities that can be brought back into greater public use, to the benefit of our children. The fear of crime, or of being accosted or bullied, drives children and adults out of those areas. We must address the crime and disorder dimension to the problem in parallel with the other considerations.

Mr. Dawson : The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the fear of crime dissuades people from going to open spaces, but is not that fear of crime completely out of proportion to reality?

Mr. Moss : Yes, I accept that fear of crime colours people's judgment in a perverse way, but it is a real fear and it should be addressed. My constituency in rural Cambridgeshire is not supposed to have huge crime problems, and the local chief constable told me last week that recorded crime was going down. That may well be so, but I told him that to judge from

my postbag, crime is going up. People no longer bother to report it because they do not expect the system to deal with it. Small-beer crime such as antisocial behaviour— youngsters banging on doors and causing problems—frightens elderly people and contributes to their fears.

As the hon. Member for Sherwood said, improving the quality of public space is high on the list of issues that people think important to improvements in the quality of their lives. My statistics are slightly different from his: mine put that ahead of education, in the top three or four priorities, along with reducing crime and improving the health service. In spite of that, public space has been overlooked for many years, by this and previous Governments.

I have already mentioned the problems associated with school playing fields. Under a previous Sports Minister, the Government seemed determined to tackle the matter but little improvement has been made and the problems still exist. There has been a steady rise in applications to build on playing fields; there were about 1,325 in 2002–03. Since the Secretary of State for Education took direct control of the disposal of school fields in October 1998, some 213 applications have been approved and only six refused. An alarming trend is developing. Most applications go through and few are turned down. The Government may argue that not all playing fields are lost and that sometimes an indoor facility is built on part of a playing field. I accept that, but neither the local authorities nor the Government have any clear statistics about what is happening out there.

Rather than piecemeal and ad hoc developments that are used by the education service to raise money to prop up education budgets, we need a cohesive view of what playing fields and facilities are needed. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should lead on that, and we need to plan systematically. If we do not know exactly what is going on, a time will come when we say, "Whoops we have gone too far. How do we go back?" Once playing fields are gone, they are irreplaceable. Unless we knock down huge swathes of housing to create new playing fields, they are lost and gone forever. The Government must do more to secure the future of playing fields.

As the hon. Member for Sherwood pointed out, a review was carried out under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). It was set up last October to look at ways in which the £200 million allocated from the new

opportunities fund would be spent on children's play. I understand that that review was completed in March. We were promised the Government's response in the summer. It is eight months since the right hon. Gentleman submitted his report. Like the hon. Member for Sherwood, I hope that the Minister has some good news. Does he think she has some good news? I see him nodding; perhaps that was what prompted the debate, which may be another launch pad for good Government news. I hope that the Minister has some good news and that the report will be published very soon.

I see the Minister looking at the clock, so I shall be very brief. It is funny how time goes. One thinks one has two minutes' worth of stuff to say and it lasts for 12.

I take the line taken by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on strategy for play. It is not the play that is at issue, but facilities and opportunities. Any strategy needs to be inclusive and to cross Departments. I do not mind whether it is DCMS that leads it, but someone needs to. It needs to be more co-ordinated, both nationally and locally. Local authorities seem to do their own thing without any requirement to supply even basic provision. As the hon. Member for Sherwood said, provision is fragmented. Local authorities and planning departments need a clearer role to ensure that land use planning goes hand in hand with our need to provide facilities. All in all the Government are doing some good things with their positive activities for young people, sure start and various other schemes, but it would be interesting to hear what they intend to do about the new opportunities fund money.

The Minister for the Arts (Estelle Morris) :

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) on securing this debate. I had a word with him before it started and reminded him that, although it might be 20 years since he led a playgroup, within months of being elected in 1992 he was asking questions about play and play areas. It is not just in response to the publication of the Green Paper on children that he has shown an interest in play; his is a long-standing involvement. I congratulate him on his tenacity and have every confidence that that tenacity will extend through the months and years ahead.

We hope to publish the report prepared by my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) by the end of the year. Having joined the Department belatedly, I had not realised how long ago the report was finished; I agree with the hon. Member for

North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) that it is an inordinate length of time. That is my commitment and I hope that nothing happens to make me apologise for the non-appearance of the report.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire on the birth of his second grandchild. In time, I hope that he becomes as good a play leader as the husband of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge). I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman's grandson will be imprinted on his mind in a week, not least by the noise, and he will never again forget that he has two grandchildren.

It has been a good and helpful debate, devoid of party arguments or political party points, and I join hon. Members in stressing the importance of play. I was beginning to think that my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood was giving us an opportunity to reminisce about our own play, and there is nothing wrong with making that comparison, which reminds us of the importance of play in our lives. Whether we used spare time in our youth legitimately or illegitimately, nobody would deny that it had formative influences on us.

However, I warn against thinking that everything in the old days was rosy, and that there were long summer days when it never rained, no child was at risk, and no neighbour shouted at a child for putting a ball in their garden. That is not my memory of childhood. I was shouted at for kicking the ball in the neighbours' garden and that will always be part of the essential relationship between adults and children. They were not all glory days, but we were children and did not have much to worry about except whether the ball was kicked into the neighbours' garden. The social context in which children now grow up is very different. It impacts on all areas of their lives, including play. I got out of the neighbours' way by going to the park, but that was at a time when my parents were not worried that I would not come back, and the newspapers were not so full of stories about risks to children. I do not know whether children are at more risk now from traffic and dangers from adults, but parents think that children are more at risk than a generation ago. It is not for the Government or MPs to talk to parents about the risk they take with their children; that has to be up to the parents because the consequences of ill coming to children is borne by them and no one else.

Everyone—the Government, the media, parents or MPs—has a social responsibility to ensure that when we discuss antisocial behaviour, which I suspect has increased since I was a child, and the risks to children, we do so in an open, honest and robust way to warn

parents, but do not go over the top and scare them into altering how they deal with their children.

Mr. Dawson : Whatever we think about antisocial behaviour and crime, it is clear that the risk to children from traffic has increased markedly and continues to do so exponentially every year with more vehicles on the road. It is essential that local authorities address the issues of safe streets for children, safe routes to school and safe places for children to play where they can be fully protected and insulated from traffic.

Estelle Morris : I do not disagree with my hon. Friend, but frankly, that choice has been made. Members of Parliament and our constituents may have two cars whereas a generation ago families might not have had any. We the public are responsible for the increase in the number of cars and untidy parking on streets. Children used to play in the streets but cannot do so anymore; looking around the Chamber, I see that most hon. Members are of a similar age and probably did play in the street. That has changed but it is not controllable; it is the position that we are in. To summarise that debate, there is no going back to the days when back alleys were always safe, when streets did not have cars on them and open spaces were fit and safe for children.

I know that the hon. Member for Richmond Park did not mean her remarks to be so interpreted, but thank heaven that the bomb sites have been cleared. If they had not been, there would have been an Adjournment debate on why successive Governments had not dealt with them. There is a danger in dealing with life as it is and wanting to make play safe in the social context in which we live. Parents want more designated areas for safe play, unless children find their own area and we deem that they are safe for them.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre. Responsibility must be put on the relevant agencies, whether local or national. They must ensure that in each area there are open spaces not only where children feel safe, but which parents consider safe. I could not agree more that the right balance must be struck between organised and disorganised play—an exceptionally good description. One of the exciting things about play is that it is an incredible learning process without children knowing that they are learning; it is about role play; it is about children learning how to deal with emotions; and it is certainly about the transition from childhood to adulthood, which takes 20 or more years. If children cannot play, imagine, be inspired and exaggerate, they will not go

through the necessary transition to adulthood. They will instead become adults without the necessary adult skills.

I have no problem with the general thrust of our debate, which is about the importance of play, of doing nothing and children deciding what is play, not adults deciding it for them. We must acknowledge that all social changes—even ballet lessons, piano lessons, the choir, the orchestra, the scouts and the football club—are what parents want for their children. The Government's response must be to acknowledge that such projects comprise the social environment, and allow people to make their own choices.

I feel obliged to answer two politically contentious points, otherwise they will be recorded as unanswered in Hansard. On standard assessment tests, parents want their children to read and write. It is as simple as that. It cannot be either/or. How much adults worry about children taking tests is certainly an issue, not how much seven-year-olds worry. There is a huge difference in that. The SATs for seven-year-olds are tests that teachers undertake with the children at any point during a week in the school year. As a former teacher—although not a primary school teacher—I think that the best teachers have classes where the children do not even know that they have undertaken those SATs. I accept that the SATS for 11-year-olds are different, but there is absolutely no rhyme nor reason for seven-year-olds to go to bed the night before worried about them.

Most children of the constituents of the hon. Member for Richmond Park can read and write. They have a damn good chance of going to university. Many of my constituents and those of other hon. Members were left out. They could not read or write and did not have life chances. I do not want a play strategy that takes away from the children the ability to learn to read and write. The challenge must be to do both. The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire knows that I will refer to school playing fields. I have not got it at my finger tips, but if he wants a list of each playing field that has been disposed of since the legislation came into force in 1999, I shall make sure that he receives it. He will also receive an explanation of why the disposal took place and what use was made of the funds.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that I cannot give him such information for the years in which his party was in government, because the statistics were not collected then. It is worth his considering such matters because I believe that he cares about them. The reason

why 213 applications were approved and six were opposed is that people know the rules of the game. They do not choose to apply to dispose of playing fields if they know that their application will go against the rules. Selling playing fields to build safe spaces has been mentioned: many designated playing fields were swamps or marshes that were not fit for children to play on.

I will use the remaining time to discuss the play strategy. I thank the hon. Members of all parties who acknowledged the contribution that the Government have made, through many funding streams, to play initiatives. The relevant list includes sure start, increasing the amount of green spaces, sports grounds and playgrounds, and living spaces, the work that has gone into toy libraries, and funds for training and education.

In particular, I wish to mention SkillsActive, which will run as a sector skills council. Training will be covered for the entire sector. I join all Members in recognising the contribution of the voluntary sector: the fact that people are volunteers does not mean that they do not need training. The important thing about the skills training that will be given is that it will be inclusive: people will not have to get paid, or take on a job or be full-time to get training. It is very important that we do not lose the skills and experience that exist in the voluntary sector. I am delighted that SkillsActive is now in place, and I look forward to its working with the Government—the Department for Education and Skills—in the months and years ahead to create a skills strategy that is led by the sector and supported by the Government, so that it is a strategy that the sector wants. Despite all the initiatives, this is not universal.

For all the play areas that I can say have been regenerated and that are now in good order, hon. Members will be able to tell me of an area in their constituency that is not like that. I accept that: the job is not done. There must be more resources. Despite all the money that has been put in, nobody can say that play is now adequately funded. This is only the beginning: there is more to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood said he did not want the play strategy to be funded by the New Opportunities Fund. I understand why he said that, but I disagree. There is an army of people queuing up for NOF funding if play does not want it. We should not turn our noses up at NOF funding. It is real pounds,

shillings and pence that bring about real improvement in play, and that is hard won: it is not easily given by NOF.

I know where my hon. Friend is coming from when he says that he wishes the funding to be mainstreamed. He said that there is more assurance with regard to continuity if funding becomes mainstreamed from local authorities than if there are three-year, time-ended funding streams. I remind him of the days when local authorities had their funding cut. Nothing is forever in public spending. To move funding to local authority expenditure would mean that it competed with other services, and it might be more at risk from future Governments seeking to cut revenue to local authorities than it would be if it were NOF-funded. At this stage in the development of play, we should say yes to any funding stream that comes along—"yes, yes, yes, if it's money, money, money."

I agree with my hon. Friend about something else. This joins up with the points made by the hon. Members for Richmond Park and for North-East Cambridgeshire. I would have worries about a national play strategy. Because of the way that Governments do things, it could end up being prescriptive and full of targets, and it could make all those voluntary workers we have been talking about, and our constituencies with all their different needs, feel that they do not have as much ownership of play as they do at present.

There is something that needs to happen. I had not fully realised until I started to prepare for this debate that the funding streams come from so many different Government Departments. I offer to reflect on something, and to comment on it when we comment on the Dobson report. We must make sure that the guidance that goes out with the funding streams is not contradictory, and that it enables people to have a cohesive provision of play at ground-floor level, while still getting those funding pots.

This is an important topic, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood on bringing it before us, and also on the work that he has done so far to ensure that it will not fall from the Government's agenda. I want to assure him that it will not, and we look forward to the Government's response to the reports by the end of the year.

Compiled by sue wilson

For more information relating to playwork:

<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/wilsonclan23/>

Or email me at - playwork@ntlworld.com