

# Letters to the Telegraph

10 September 2007

## Let our children play

Since last September, when a group of professionals, academics and writers wrote to The Daily Telegraph expressing concern about the marked deterioration in children's mental health, research evidence supporting this case has continued to mount.

Compelling examples have included Unicef's alarming finding that Britain's children are amongst the unhappiest in the developed world, and the children's charity NCH's report of an explosion in children's clinically diagnosable mental health problems.

We believe that a key factor in this disturbing trend is the marked decline over the last 15 years in children's play. Play – particularly outdoor, unstructured, loosely supervised play – appears to be vital to children's all-round health and well-being.

It develops their physical coordination and control; provides opportunities for the first-hand experiences that underpin their understanding of and engagement with the world; facilitates social development (making and keeping friends, dealing with problems, working collaboratively); and cultivates creativity, imagination and emotional resilience. This includes the growth of self-reliance, independence and personal strategies for dealing with and integrating challenging or traumatic experiences.

Many features of modern life seem to have eroded children's play. They include: increases in traffic that make even residential areas unsafe for children; the ready availability of sedentary, sometimes addictive screen-based entertainment; the aggressive marketing of over-elaborate, commercialised toys (which seem to inhibit rather than stimulate creative play); parental anxiety about "stranger danger", meaning that children are increasingly kept indoors; a test-driven school and pre-school curriculum in which formal learning has substantially taken the place of free, unstructured play; and a more pervasive cultural anxiety which, when uncontained by the policy-making process, routinely contaminates the space needed for authentic play to flourish.

A year on, the signatories of the original letter to the Telegraph are joined by other concerned colleagues in calling for a wide-ranging and informed public dialogue about the intrinsic nature and value of play in children's healthy development, and how we might ensure its place at the heart of twenty-first-century childhood.

**270 eminent signatories**