

## **It's not just about 'more'. A research project exploring satisfaction with opportunities to play, for children in two Welsh neighbouring communities.**

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This paper discusses a research project undertaken during spring 2014, in response to the findings of the Play Sufficiency Assessment in one Welsh Local Authority. The results highlighted anomalous findings between two neighbouring communities regarding the children's self-reported levels of satisfaction with opportunities to play. The research study aimed to identify factors which may have caused the disparity in satisfaction between the two communities. The findings of the research indicate that simply having *more* places to play is not automatically an indicator of satisfaction. Factors such as child and parental fear, socio-economic conditions and the development of a 'play culture' within communities have a more significant role in influencing children's freedom and opportunities to play.

**Keywords:** Play, playwork, play opportunities, poverty, deprivation, community tolerance, parental fear

### **Preamble**

For reasons of anonymity, the local authority and the two communities involved in the research study will not be named. For ease of reading, the local authority will be referred to as Newtown throughout.

### **Introduction**

As the first country to legislate for children's play (Welsh Government, 2012), Lester and Russell, suggest that Wales, "...stands as a beacon to the rest of the world in its approach to supporting children's rights generally, and children's right to play specifically" (2013 p. 11). Since devolution of powers from the United Kingdom Parliament, to the National Assembly for Wales in 1997 children "*have been a priority for governments in Wales*" (Croke, 2013 p. 7) and despite little progress at a UK level in the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there have been significant developments in Wales (Save the Children 2011).

The successes in Wales are in contrast to the majority of countries who have ratified the UNCRC. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, identified concerns regarding the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child, Article 31. States Parties are identified as giving poor recognition to Article 31, which specifies that "*States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts*" (United Nations, 1989). The Committee identified that governments evidence little recognition of the significance of these opportunities in the lives of children, which resulted in "*weak or non-existent protective legislation*" and a lack of investment in appropriate provision (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013. p.3). To address these concerns, the Committee published a 'General Comment' which provides an interpretation Article 31 and which offers

guidance on any actions required by States Parties to ensure the successful implementation of the Article (IPA, 2012; OHCHR, 2016).

General Comment 17 outlines various recommendations to States Parties, including enacting legislation to guarantee that children have access to opportunities prescribed by Article 31. This includes an introduction of a wider range of measures to ensure its fulfilment. These measures include the collection of data to map the availability of opportunities for children to participate in play, leisure and recreational activities (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). As discussed below, these are actions which Wales is already implementing.

This paper provides a summary of a research project undertaken in 2014 in one Welsh Local Authority area. The research was undertaken in an attempt to identify why children in two neighbouring communities, consulted as part of the Welsh requirement for local authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities, reported very different levels of satisfaction with their opportunities to play.

The article begins by offering a summary of the context and history of play sufficiency assessments in Wales and their progress as the first country to legislate for children's play. A brief overview of the research project is provided, followed by a discussion of the key findings of the research. These findings are highlighted using extracts from the focus groups to provide insight into the perceptions and experiences of the research participants. These findings are then briefly reviewed in relation to wider literature and research, in an attempt to highlight their significance.

## **Context & History**

In 2000, the Welsh Assembly Government published the document 'Children and Young People: A framework for Partnership' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2000) which made a commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1991). This was translated into seven core aims, including the aim that all children and young people will: "*have access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities*" (Welsh Government, 2004 p.1).

In October 2002 the Welsh Government published its play policy, which recognised the vital importance of play in the lives of children and young people (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). The proceeding implementation plan, outlined various actions directed towards delivering the policy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006). However, the statutory commitment to ensure that children and young people had access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities was not sanctioned until 2010 through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. With clear links to human rights principles (Croke, 2013), the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 made provision to tackle child poverty in Wales and also made statutory provision with regards to play and participation, child-minding and day-care regulations, and integrated family support (Welsh Government, 2013).

Part one of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, entitled "*Child Poverty, Play and Participation*" (Welsh Government, 2011 p.i) outlined the Welsh Government's strategies to meet their aims in these regards. The document detailed the duty placed on local authorities to "*secure sufficient play opportunities for children*" (Welsh Government, 2011 p. 1).

Welsh Ministers decided to commence the duty in two parts. The first part commenced in 2012 and included Sections 11 (1) (2) (5) and (6) which covered the duty on Local Authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities in their area (Welsh Government 2012a). The remaining sections, sections 11 (3) and 11 (4) were fully implemented in July 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014a, 2014b).

### **Play Sufficiency Assessments**

The duty to undertake the Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSA) commenced on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2012, with the deadline for the results and accompanying action plan of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013 (Welsh Government, 2012a). Local authorities were provided with a play sufficiency assessment tool-kit which offered flexibility within a framework, in order to develop a clear national picture of play opportunities in Wales (Welsh Government, 2012c) and a baseline for future play sufficiency assessments, which are required every three years (Welsh Government 2012a).

A requirement of the PSA's included the need to identify gaps in provision and assess both freely chosen play opportunities, and structured recreational activities available to children (Welsh Government, 2012a). Sufficiency was required to be measured in terms of both quality and quantity (Welsh Government, 2012a) with recognition that these measures would be influenced by a range of variables including:

- *The natural environment and geography of the area.*
- *The built environment and characteristics of the communities.*
- *The demography of the area.*
- *Existing play opportunities and provision.*
- *Existing organisational structures.*

(Welsh Government, 2012a p. 16)

### **Newtown's Play Sufficiency Assessment**

In Newtown, sufficiency was identified as the point at which people's opinion of play provision and play opportunities moved from dissatisfaction to a position of general satisfaction. This was considered as the point where people no longer identified many factors which needed to be addressed, to a position where only minor qualitative improvements were required to improve opportunities to play. It recognised that sufficiency of opportunity to play was influenced by various factors, including those listed above; and how these factors combine, would influence people's subjective experience of sufficiency of opportunities to play.

Based on the work of Nottingham City Council and Russell (2006), the Newtown PSA identified that there were various factors which needed to be addressed in order for sufficient play opportunities to be reported. These factors could be arranged across the three themes of:

1. Spatial – (range, quality and proximity to space)
2. Temporal – (time for play)
3. Psychological (subjective and perceptual experience of time and space, permission, resentment, belonging, fear and so on)

(Nottingham City Council and Russell, 2006; Newtown, 2013)

The report concluded that it was not necessary to develop *more* play provision throughout the local authority area, but that emphasis needed to be placed upon these 'psychological factors' that might improve the negative disposition towards children and play, including the promotion of children's play within the wider public realm, not just within parks and playgrounds.

### **Research introduction**

This research project was undertaken in Spring 2014, following the publication of the Newtown Play Sufficiency Assessment in March 2013 which found that children, living in two neighbouring communities, ranked their satisfaction with opportunities to play very differently. These two neighbouring communities varied along social and economic lines. Children living in

Neighbourhood A, being the less socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood, reported lower levels of satisfaction with opportunities to play, than children living in the more deprived Neighbourhood B. The research aimed to identify factors which may have influenced the levels of satisfaction reported by the two communities of children.

When asked how happy they were with their play opportunities on a scale of one to ten (one being low, and ten being a high score) only 35% of Neighbourhood A children rated their satisfaction at seven and above in contrast with 66% of children in Neighbourhood B. The children's responses highlighted other relevant differences between the two communities, including that only 22% of children in Neighbourhood A were happy with the variety of places to play in comparison to 41% of children in Neighbourhood B. 32% of Neighbourhood A children walked to school, against 76% in Neighbourhood B; and the children of this neighbourhood stated that they had 18% more free time to engage in free play opportunities than their Neighbourhood A peers.

To help identify the significance of the contrast in satisfaction levels reported by children in the neighbouring communities, it is important to provide some of the demographic and environmental context for the two neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood A was a small, rural village with a mix of housing association and private housing. Neighbourhood A offered its child population a choice of three fixed equipment play areas. The largest of which neighbours the local primary school and includes equipment for young and older children, as well as a skate park & a Multi-Use Games Area. Beyond formal out of school childcare provision, and uniformed groups, there was no evidence of any free, staffed play provision for primary school aged children, operating at the time the research took place. The local youth club offered activities, three nights a week for young people aged 11 and over.

Neighbourhood B was a large housing estate, predominantly made up of council and housing association housing, built during the 1960's. The children living in this area were able to access four fixed equipment play areas and a Multi-Use Games Area. These play areas were generally small in size, with only a few pieces of equipment. The community also benefited from a range of staffed play provision which included a staffed Adventure Playground, a street play project and a number of outreach play projects, offering a year round service, for a minimum of five evenings per week. The neighbourhood also hosted a local authority leisure centre, offering access to swimming and other sporting and leisure activities.

In terms of deprivation, Neighbourhood A ranks approximately in the middle of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, (Welsh Government, 2011) experiencing lower levels of deprivation than Neighbourhood B which falls into the top 25 most deprived of the 1896 areas on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (Info Base Cymru, n.d, a & b & c; Welsh Government, 2011).

Neighbourhood B has a significantly higher proportion of households with dependent children with no adult in employment than both the Welsh average and Neighbourhood A which has fewer than the Welsh average.

Indicator	Neighbourhood A	Neighbourhood B	Wales
Percentage of households with dependent children & no adult in employment	4.1%	16.1%	4.6%

Figure 1: Percentage of households with dependent children and no adult in employment. (Data taken from Office for National Statistics, 2013a/2013b)

This data begins to identify the significant economic and social disparity between the two communities. Despite this, children in Neighbourhood B were notably *more* satisfied with their opportunities to play than children living in Neighbourhood A.

### **Methodology:**

The aim of the research study was to identify factors which may have influenced the levels of satisfaction reported by children in the two neighbourhoods.

To achieve this aim, a series of seven focus group interviews, reviewing children's play and perceptions of it, were undertaken with children, parents and a range of professionals in their respective communities. Participants were grouped according to the neighbourhood in which they lived and their status as either a child, a parent, a playworker or a professional working in the associated community. The Focus groups were facilitated by a Senior Lecturer in Playwork at Leeds Beckett University, along with a qualified playworker who acted as a research support assistant. Both individuals had experience of working and undertaking research with children, families and professionals and held professional and academic experience in supporting children to access their right to play. The research was granted ethical approval by the Leeds Beckett University Ethics Committee and was undertaken in line with Leeds Beckett Research Ethics policy (Leeds Beckett University, 2014).

In both neighbourhoods, children were recruited via the local primary school. The six children in Neighbourhood A and seven children in Neighbourhood B ranged between the age of nine and eleven. Whilst this group could not represent the experiences of older or younger children, the Newtown Play Sufficiency Assessment focused their group work with children between the age of eight and eleven. As such, the sample was considered appropriate for the nature and scale of the research project.

The professionals, represented across the two communities included members of the neighbourhood policing teams, community development officers, primary school teachers, youth workers, district and town councillors, out of school childcare providers and early years practitioners. Seven professions were represented at the focus group in Neighbourhood A and six were represented in Neighbourhood B. Six parents, in each community were recruited via the local primary school in Neighbourhood A, and the local community group in Neighbourhood B. In both cases, the parents were members of a parent support group.

The participants for the Playworker focus group were recruited via the local voluntary sector playwork organisation. There were seven members of this focus group, all of whom had recent experience of working as a playworker in both neighbourhoods.

During the focus group interviews, participants were invited to comment on a number of distinct topics relevant to the study. Flexibility was offered, to allow the participants the opportunity to discuss anything else they felt was relevant. For adult participants, the topics discussed included:

- Perceptions of children, children's play and play provision within communities
- Barriers faced by children at play
- Suggestions to improve levels of satisfaction

For child participants, the topics for discussion included:

- The places and environments in which they play,
- Factors helping or restricting their opportunities to play
- Their perceptions of adult attitudes towards children at play
- Play during the school day
- Suggestions to improve levels of satisfaction

It was hoped that the insight of the Playworkers would help to identify any additional contrasts between the two communities from the perspective of those professionally engaged with the playwork sector in the local authority area.

### **Data Analysis**

On completion, the focus group interviews were transcribed and the data was analysed using the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo 10. This was a useful tool to interrogate raw data (QSR International, 2014) and a process of thematic analysis was undertaken in order to identify patterns within the transcriptions. This process enabled the research team to categorise the data into themes which emerged from the interviews, and also to assign meaning to the information collected (Newman, 2014). It is on this basis that the following headings were identified:

- Children's fears
- Children's freedoms
- Parental fears
- How parents value play provision
- Community and Environmental design
- Attitudinal barriers and tolerance issues within the communities
- Community cohesion

### **Research findings**

The research findings painted a picture of two very different communities, with different perceptions of children and their play.

#### ***Children's Fears***

Children from both neighbourhoods described various fears, which created barriers for them when trying to play or access play provision. Two dominant fears, shared by both groups included that of roads and speeding traffic and 'teenagers'.

Children in Neighbourhood B felt that a lack of traffic lights on the estate coupled with people driving at high speed, restricted their opportunities to play on the street. The volume of parked cars in Neighbourhood A limited the children's opportunities to play close to home. These Children also described how some car users were discourteous when parking their cars, complaining that despite having a driveway, they still park on the street reducing the opportunities for play.

The issue of teenagers as a source of fear was raised by both groups. The children identified 'teenagers' as a reason why they didn't play in their local parks. These 'teenagers' were seen as: trouble causers, drug users, users of bad language and bullies.

Neighbourhood A Child Participant 1: *There is this group of kids who are teenagers really. They wouldn't stop swearing, so I told them to stop and then they said that they're going to kill me, so I ran as fast as I could, but they were still behind me, and then I, like, tripped over or something. And then they picked me up and then they,*

*and then they, just put me down and they walked off. They just threatened to kill me for nothing.*

Dogs were also presented as a source of fear, particularly for the children in Neighbourhood B who recounted tales of dangerous dogs in their community. For the children in Neighbourhood A, their concerns were focused more towards dog faeces and how this restricts where they play.

Unique to Neighbourhood A was the way in which the children displayed an inherent fear about their community and those within it. The children told stories of people with guns, drug dealers, drunk people, 'psycho's', people setting fire to cars and sheds, people on quad bikes, all of which they viewed as potential threats to their safety and factors which made them fearful to play out independently. The data suggested that these were often more perceived than real threats. In one anecdote, a child described how....

*Neighbourhood A Child participant 4: Some people come on my street to go through the little hedge that you, it's like a short cut; ... But, some people don't just come to look in there, they come along the street and they look in the houses and everything... One time I was in my window and I tried to keep out of my window, so they couldn't see me looking at them. And one time they caught me and he gave me a dirty look and he, and then he swore, well, I think he mouthed swore and then he walked off. And then he went through the hedge.*

Whilst the children in Neighbourhood B discussed a fear of dogs and some teenagers within their community, their responses focused on other factors that restrict their opportunities to play, not associated with fears of other members of their community.

### ***Children's Freedoms & Parental fears***

The data revealed that children in Neighbourhood B, had a choice of spaces in which to play and combined with the acceptance from their community, this offered them the freedom to play where they chose. The children discussed a great diversity of places where they played being both formal spaces for play such as parks and playgrounds, and informal spaces such as the street, the woods and spaces beyond their immediate neighbourhood. It appeared that beyond parental factors, the freedom children had in Neighbourhood B was related to the layout of the streets and housing and the fact that the community was used to seeing children playing everywhere. The playworkers and professionals working in the area described how children were seen playing freely right across the area, evidencing a level of tolerance of children playing within the community.

*Neighbourhood B Professional 3: you often see, you know as you're driving out at home time, you see the children playing on those areas. You do see them playing on the grass, you see them playing on the rocks.*

*Neighbourhood B Professional 1: The forests.*

*Neighbourhood B Professional 3: And the playgrounds.*

*Neighbourhood B Professional 3: Everyone is playing out and it's lovely.*

*Neighbourhood B Playworker 1: And you see that in [Neighbourhood B]. We drove through and I remember seeing [Child]. There was a group of girls and they were by the phone boxes, just on the path. So, they weren't on a piece of grass or anything,*

*and they'd built, like, a massive den out of blankets, and they had all their toy prams with their dolls and stuff. And it's like, wow!*

Neighbourhood B Playworker 2: *Can you imagine, on [Neighbourhood A] high street, seeing a den with covers in it?*

Neighbourhood B Playworker 1: *Yeah, you couldn't imagine it.*

Neighbourhood B Playworker 3: *It's kind of permission that them things can happen in little hidey holes and things, whereas in [Neighbourhood A], permission is the park only. Your kids are only allowed to play on the park because that kind of says, that's what you do. In Neighbourhood B it's not a coincidence that you'll find a den in the corner...*

Parents in both communities held common fears such as fears that their children will be bullied or influenced by teenagers, scared or attacked by dogs or knocked over when playing close to busy roads. However there was a stark contrast between children's freedoms in Neighbourhood A and those of children in Neighbourhood B, and play opportunities were heavily restricted by parental fears and children's own fears.

Neighbourhood A children described how their licence to roam their community was restricted until they are perceived as being old enough to play out unaccompanied. One child explained that she wouldn't be allowed to go to the local shop on her own until she reaches 11 or 12 years of age. One playworker described how a child rode his bike to the playscheme in Neighbourhood A, with his parent driving alongside him and a Neighbourhood A professional disclosed how they had seen an 11 year old child going to the shop for the first time with a walkie-talkie. The parents discussed how they understood the vital need to allow their children to play independently, but their fears limited their ability to allow them to do so. These fears were translated into restrictions and measures in order to reduce parental anxieties. For example:

Neighbourhood A Parent 2: *Well, the 12 year old goes to the [place], or she goes to [the local town], [the child's relative] is a sergeant in the [local] police. And, what they do, they go to town and follow them. They don't know that they're following them, but either via the cameras or parents.*

Another discussion with the Neighbourhood A Parents revealed other 'protective' measures which included constant texting and phoning their children whilst they were out playing, and turning up at the local park to check that they were okay.

Neighbourhood A parents held fears of drug users and associated needles along with general, non-specific 'dangers' and fears of 'undesirables' and discussed a disconnection with other children within their community as a source of fear. They described various incidents which have resulted in them being fearful of intervening or helping other children in case they are accused of being inappropriate.

### ***How parents value play provision***

Parents from both communities recognised the importance of allowing children to have playful childhoods. Parents, particularly in the Neighbourhood A group, identified that their children, and children within their community are often stifled from engaging in the kinds of playful behaviours they experienced during their childhood for fear of being either at risk of harm or being labelled as engaging in anti-social behaviour.

Many parents in Neighbourhood A seemed to value staffed play provision but viewed it as childcare that needed structure and outcomes, and heavy involvement from adults. Parent's experiences of staffed play provision in Neighbourhood A were unfortunately quite negative and



the data revealed a lack of the sort of consistent staffed provision that there was in Neighbourhood B. The inconsistency of staffed play provision in Neighbourhood A created tensions, with parents and professionals commenting resentfully, about the apparent bias towards Neighbourhood B in terms of funding and children's play opportunities.

Unfortunately, in Neighbourhood A, whilst an understanding of the importance of play for children was demonstrated, this wasn't translated into an understanding of what could be understood to be quality play provision. Significant focus was placed on the large investment in the fixed equipment play area as being the only 'offer' to the children of the community and a real rancour was displayed towards the staffed play provision offered in the community during the summer months by the parents and councillors in the area. The perceived lack of 'structure' and adult intervention in the children's play was a real area of contention which resulted in the local councillors being unwilling to provide any further funding for staffed holiday play provision.

Neighbourhood B parents felt very positive about play provision, particularly that which was staffed. They felt that allowing their children to play freely, within their community enabled them to have 'normal' childhoods. The parents valued the support that the provision offered to them, including the opportunity for respite from caring duties, seeing that having time to "*just take a breath*" (Neighbourhood B Parent 3) makes them better able to parent their children. They recognised the benefits experienced by their children when playing and explained how the staffed provision offered reassurance that their children were safe with someone looking out for them.

#### ***Attitudinal barriers and tolerance issues within communities***

Parents and professionals within both neighbourhoods recognised that their communities accepted the behaviour of younger children as being play behaviour. This was something considered as acceptable and behaviour which should be tolerated. The data evidenced a very different view of the behaviour of older children or teenagers, which was perceived as problematic and closely associated with anti-social behaviour.

The Neighbourhood B parents recounted examples where they had been challenged by members of the community for allowing their children to play. They were aware of how children could be perceived by members of the community but were quick to defend playing children.

The playworkers viewed tolerance as a critical factor in improving children's opportunities to play and something that develops only with time and persistence. They found that an important part of their role was building relationships with the local community – a key factor to addressing concerns and being available to advocate for children in the area.

There were clearly barriers to increasing community tolerance within Neighbourhood A, though the views of adults and children did conflict on this point. In this neighbourhood, the local playground is monitored by CCTV which the Playworkers perceived as a marker that children were not trusted. The talking lamp-post, discouraging the congregation of children (Playworker 3) was also seen as a clear marker that, particularly older young people, were not welcome within the community. The parents and children however, saw the presence of CCTV as a measure to prevent '*something really bad*' happening (Neighbourhood A Child Participant 4). Nevertheless, they discussed factors within Neighbourhood A that demonstrate a low tolerance of children and young people, including the talking lamp-post and the fear that children and young people have of getting a 'yellow card' from the neighbourhood policing team for being in the town in a group.

Many of these negative attitudes discussed within both communities appeared to be derived from a lack of understanding of what children's play is, and differing views on what should be considered as being acceptable behaviour. Adults frequently associated children or teenagers congregating together as anti-social behaviour, which appeared to create a divide between adults and children.

### *Community cohesion*

Professionals and parents within Neighbourhood A discussed attempts being made by individuals within the community, to try and bring people together for the benefit of the residents, though this was described as being a challenge. There was a sense that people, particularly parents, wanted to feel safe and part of their own community and there was a real desire for the adults to feel more connected to their community. They saw this as a route to offering greater freedoms for children to play and the professionals identified this as a route to addressing levels of intolerance of children at play.

The parents, professionals and children of Neighbourhood B, all described indicators suggestive of positive community cohesion. The parents recounted tales of being able to call on different members of their community to find their playing children. The children described being helped and fed by other children's families and professionals:

Neighbourhood B Parent 3: *Because, I used to walk around shouting for [child] and people, sort of like, you know... 'Oh, she's down there..'*

Neighbourhood B Parent 2: *Yeah, so it's a case of people watch out for each other and the kids, they get on marvellous.*

Neighbourhood B Parent 3: *I've never had so many kids knock on my door. Where I used to live, we couldn't go out so the kids were literally locked in the house for 3 years. They didn't play. When we moved here, the first thing they did was go out and play. There was a park and it was like, that's it, out of the house. And that's the big difference is that they get the chance to.*

The Neighbourhood B professionals recognised that a 'play culture' existed within the community and that this culture and understanding needed to be developed in Neighbourhood A (Neighbourhood B Professional 2). The Playworkers felt that little value was placed on children in the Neighbourhood A area, and that the perception was that children should be at home and not outside playing in their community.

## **Discussion**

### ***Economic deprivation and satisfaction with opportunities to play***

The data begins to paint a picture of two very different experiences of childhood within the two neighbouring communities. The children living in Neighbourhood B, whilst experiencing greater levels of economic and social deprivation than their peers in Neighbourhood A, have greater access to opportunities to play as a result of the freedoms afforded to them and as such, report greater levels of satisfaction. These freedoms come as a result of various interrelated factors such as greater levels of community tolerance of children at play, children being less fearful of members of their community and a greater range of staffed play provision. This is supported by an assemblage of other factors, including parental confidence in allowing their children the opportunities to play within their community. Ergler, Kearns & Wittler (2013) highlight how for high-income areas, children's autonomous play opportunities have decreased

due to changes in community design, structure, and declining parental licence and this appears to have been the case for children living in Neighbourhood A.

Lester and Russell (2010) identify the impact that the socio-economic status has on children's spatial patterns, thereby influencing where they live and the community resources available to them. They identify that children from middle-class families experience a greater level of timetabling of their free time, which for this group, results in fewer signs of '*spontaneous play in public spaces*' (p. 34). This certainly reflects the experiences recounted by the children in Neighbourhood A and by the parents group. To provide the conditions for play to take place, Lester and Russell (2010) argue that a critical factor is the way in which parents and communities develop cultural practices that produce the necessary time and space for children to play.

Kimbrow & Schachter (2011) found that whilst mothers, particularly those living in high poverty neighbourhoods may be fearful of their children playing outdoors, not all parents living in low social-economic neighbourhoods are afraid to let their children play outside. In fact, they found that children living in social housing were actually more likely to play outside. This appears to have been particularly the case in Neighbourhood B where the parent participants revelled in their confidence in letting their children go out to play independently. Kimo & Schachter (2011) detailed how neighbourhood factors influence maternal fear of allowing children to play outside, and what factors decreased that fear. Drawing from theories of social isolation, Kimbro & Schachter suggest that positive socio-emotional characteristics such as social support and the perception of a high degree of shared trust among neighbours can reduce maternal fear thereby allowing children to play outdoors. This, they consider, provides a buffer to the effects of poverty. This was a significant factor reported by all groups interviewed in Neighbourhood B, which included both the social networks that the children and parents had within their community, and also the role of staffed provision in increasing children's opportunities to play outdoors by reducing maternal fears. Kimbro & Schachter (2011) identify that having these shared social ties results in lower levels of fear. They propose that '*high levels of self-reported neighbourhood collective efficacy will buffer the effects of neighbourhood poverty on maternal fear of outdoor play*' (p. 4). These findings are supported by Foster, Villanueva, Wood, Christian, Giles-Corti, (2014) who found that parents with greater levels of social networks and social integration within their community, allow children greater freedoms.

### ***Parental & child fears***

The various fears, held by the parents within Neighbourhood A and the resulting restrictions upon children's freedoms to play, particularly independently, within their community is reflective of the work of Santos, Pizarro, Mota, & Marques, (2013). Santos et al (2013) found that parental perception of neighbourhood safety is associated with levels of children's independent mobility. The parental fear experienced, particularly by the parents in Neighbourhood A is not unique to the area nor is it a recent phenomenon. In 2004, Clements found that over three quarters of the mothers engaged in their study, did not allow their children to play outdoors because of crime and safety concerns. In 2013 O'Connor & Brown suggested that fear is not a fixed trait, and the intensity of fear is influenced by experience, social interactions and the spatial and historical relationship people have with their environment.

Foy-Phillips & Lloyd-Evans (2011) describe how communication between parents can result in collective anxiety, which '*can lead to powerful social change*' (p. 382). Ergler, Kearns, Witten, (2013) argue that the way in which parents and children view outdoor play reflects

locally accepted cultures about what is considered ‘appropriate’ childhood activity. The freedoms and range of opportunities experienced by children in Neighbourhood B were indicative of a greater acceptance, by the local community, of children at play.

This begins to explain not only the expectations held by Neighbourhood A parents and professionals of what staffed play provision should offer to children and families, but also the influence of commonly held fears and community tolerance, on children’s access to play opportunities. It is clear from the data that having a ‘play culture’ within a community, as was demonstrated in Neighbourhood B, shapes the way in which children and their play and play provision are viewed by residents thereby having the potential to develop a culture of permissiveness. The playworkers identified this as a significant difference between the two communities.

Whilst Bromley and Stacey (2012) identify that children are increasingly recognised as experiencing fear in public space, the principal source of research on fear in the UK is the British Crime Survey which fails to collect data from children below the age of 16 years. The fears of the Neighbourhood A children focused very much on people within their communities and there was an apparent synergy between the fears held by the parents’ group and the child participants. As Dunne & Askew (2013) identified, children are susceptible to learning fear from their parents, and Foster et al. (2014) observed that where parents are fearful of strangers, their children’s independent mobility was limited. The findings of Dunne & Askew (2013) and Forster et al (2014) resonate with the findings from Neighbourhood A particularly in relation to fears of strangers.

Whilst the fear of teenagers is discussed by both groups of children, the needs of both younger and older children need to be balanced. The study undertaken by Bromley & Stacey (2012, p. 441) found that whilst *‘children’s fear of teenagers is a key factor in feeling unsafe’* they assert that *‘hanging out in public spaces is important for older children’s health and socialisation and any fears which might restrict this aspect of children’s lives requires action’*. They recommend that to address children’s fears of groups of teenagers, some social control of public space needs to be implemented by means of the introduction of boundaries (their examples include the drawing of school catchment boundaries) to minimise conflict. They suggest that the promotion of community cohesion is likely to be an effective way of reducing the perceived threats from groups of teenagers, and therefore enable younger children to feel safe.

## **Conclusion**

Children’s satisfaction with opportunities to play in their communities, is influenced by factors more complex, than simply having the time and space to play. This research begins to evidence that one of the greatest barriers was in relation to having *‘permission to play’* (Welsh Government, 2012c p.4). To address these barriers, there needs to be recognition of the importance of play, in the lives of children, from all members of the community. The levels of children’s freedoms to play independently outside, in their local community, appear to differ significantly between Neighbourhoods A and B. Therefore this is assumed to have influenced the levels of satisfaction with opportunities to play reported by the children in the two communities. The interrelationship between child freedoms and parental fears is complex, but community tolerance of playing children and living in a community with close social networks, as in Neighbourhood B, has clearly influenced the findings of the Newtown PSA. In their research, Lester & Russell highlight the need to *‘promote positive attitudes towards children’s*

*right to play freely in their communities*' (2013, p. 4) in order to remove barriers and make a real difference for children in their own streets.

The Welsh Government recognises the negative impact of modern society on children's lives, and the impact this has had on their opportunities to play freely. They recognise the '*poverty of play opportunities in the general environment*' and that play provision which is '*appropriate, local, stimulating and challenging*' offers compensation for these losses (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, p. 3). These research findings evidence that simply providing more opportunities is not the only strategy required to increase sufficiency, and that there are other, more complex issues which create barriers to children playing.

Whilst the children in Neighbourhood B described a greater variety of places to play, what clearly hindered children's access to play opportunities in Neighbourhood A was not reported as a shortage of space, but their own and parental fears and levels of tolerance shown towards children at play.

These findings are particularly poignant for the tackling poverty agenda, and are in-line with the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (Welsh Assembly Government 2011). The anti-poverty agenda also recognises that: '*children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity and aspiration, and this kind of poverty can affect children from all social, cultural and economic backgrounds across Wales*' (Play Wales, 2013 p. 4). This goes some way to explaining some of the issues faced by children in Neighbourhood A. The Play Sufficiency Assessment duty was introduced as part of the Welsh Government's tackling poverty agenda (Play Wales, 2014) and recognises play as fundamental to the eradication of child poverty (Lester & Russell, 2013). The findings of this research, and the Newtown PSA provide evidence that despite experiencing higher levels of social and economic disadvantage than Neighbourhood A, children living in Neighbourhood B have greater freedoms to play, and are therefore more likely to experience the associated benefits of doing so.

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