

Playing Out: Promoting Community and Belonging through Play

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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series

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From Newcastle.
For policy makers.

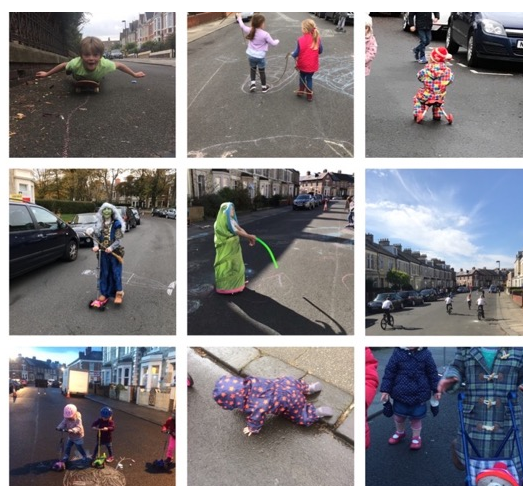
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Quiz Answers

- 68% of respondents to a 2018 survey described their neighbours as "strangers"
- just over half (51%) of respondents had no idea what the children next door were called



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What is playing out?

- A resident-led, bottom-up model for regular, temporary closures of residential streets for neighbours to play and meet
- Monthly/fortnightly/weekly sessions of 2-3 hours
- Resident vehicle access at a walking pace; through traffic diverted
- Model created in 2009 – now over 1000 streets in more than 80 LAs
- “play streets offer wonderful opportunities not merely for children, but for families and communities” (Minister for Transport, 13.6.19)



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The research

- Three research projects from 2016 onwards
 - Preliminary, small-scale project in North Tyneside
 - Collaborative project focused on playing out and alleviating loneliness/building connections
 - Ongoing research asking how play on our streets shapes our attachments to our streets and the people and places on them
- Also a play streets/playing out activist with PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside

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The benefits of playing out



- During playing out sessions, NO₂ levels were five times lower than on a normal afternoon
- On a 'playing out' day, children are 3 to 5 times more active than they would be on a 'normal' day after school
- In a 2017 survey of 'playing out' streets, the majority reported that children had learned/improved skills: riding a bike (80%), scooting (85%), roller skating (63%) and skipping (66%)
- Many also reported that their children learn about road safety during playing out sessions.

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Playing out builds community

- Play is often the means through which children – and adults – learn to make sense of their environments
- Play encourages us to take notice of and make connections to the people and places around us
- “children and their play are not separate from other aspects of community life ... more people playing out more of the time in more places can improve community cohesion and strengthen intergenerational relationships” (Tawil 2018)

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Playing out builds community

- Many residents start to set up playing out sessions out of a desire to meet their neighbours and build a community:
“Because I want to foster a community that I want to live in – one that looks out for each other”
“I wanted to take part in something positive to bring some community cohesion to our street”
- 95% of respondents felt that they knew more people because of playing out sessions and 71.7% felt that their children had made new friends
- 86.7% felt their streets felt friendlier and safer
- 91.7% felt they belonged more on their street

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Playing out builds community

“just once you get to know a couple of stories about that person suddenly they become a real person that you care about ... just the second you know your neighbour’s name they become a person, don’t they? They become somebody, yeah?”

“We share lawnmowers, walk each other’s dogs, put out each other’s bins when away, check up on older residents if they haven’t been seen for a while, unscrew each other’s jam jars, lend each other tools, take in postal deliveries for each other, hand down toys and bicycles to younger children in the neighbourhood ... go down into neighbours’ basements to look at fuse boxes when they are too frightened to”

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Playing out builds community

- On most playing out streets, regular sessions were complemented by online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp that often expand well beyond organising play and beyond the families that regularly play out
“people put on if they’ve got too much milk, if they want, erm, need something like a ladder or something, or recommendations for tradesmen, that’s there a lot, and if somebody’s been burgled or they’ve seen somebody looking a bit dodgy”
- These spaces facilitated additional street and neighbourhood activities, such as gardening, litter picking, toy, book, plant and clothes swaps, and connecting to wider cycling/walking/better streets campaigns

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Playing out builds community

- Core participants, largely made up of families with children under 10
“They know loads more children on the street. They have made friends who go to different schools. They hang about at sessions in mixed age groups (in a way they don’t normally)”
- Some evidence that playing out on the spaces right on their doorsteps is particularly accessible to children with disabilities



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Playing out builds community

- Some disparity between participation of mothers and fathers, but all parents valued their new friendships with other very local parents
“More importantly for me, my husband has got to know people in our street. He commutes to London and has little in the way of a connection to our area - he could probably live anywhere. Now he has stewarded regularly with a variety of other people and knows (and likes) people that live near us. It’s fantastic!”
- Adult neighbours without children participate on most streets:
“The older women who live on our street, in their 80s, who were here when the houses were first built, come out for tea and cake, and it’s wonderful!”
“We have an elderly couple who have never missed a session!”

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Playing out builds community: barriers to participation

- Common barriers to participation:
 - Playing out is seen as something for children and families
 - Neighbours may be wary of coming out to meet strangers
 - Issues with communication (including social media), especially in contexts with language and cultural diversity
 - Some residents are house-bound, ill, struggle with mobility
- May be overcome by doorknocking, providing chairs, and personal invitations
- Some neighbours simply don’t want to participate (and may see playing out as unwelcome) but non-participation does not necessarily mean exclusion from the wider networks and benefits of playing out sessions:
“just doing it for a while brings huge benefits to the whole street, whether everyone attends or not”

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Play and community

- Play is the primary site for connections made by children, during and between sessions
- Playing out also creates space for adults to play too and can draw in the reticent:

“There was one woman once who was just walking down the street, and I think, I mean, I don’t know for sure, she’s quite self-contained, but she just started skipping and I got into a chat with her and that was lovely, and she started stewarding after that. It certainly helped, just the skipping, she couldn’t resist basically, she just thought I just really want to have a go at that ... and we saw a lot more of her after that”
- Intergenerational connections are made through play memories and sharing of skills, but play might be off-putting for some
- The playing out model itself facilitates adult connections



Credit: Playing Out

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Playing our connects residents to their neighbourhoods

- Spending time on streets not only creates opportunities for residents to get to know each other and build community, but also to get to know the street space itself
 - the houses, the network of roads and back alleys, the green spaces, the trees, plants and wildlife, the views and perspectives, and indeed the textures, smells and sounds, whether natural or not
- This enables, amongst other things, **place attachment** through tactile, physical, embodied connections to their everyday environments:
 - “Place attachment is generally viewed as having positive effects for individuals, helping to enrich people’s lives with meaning, values and significance, thus also contributing to people’s mental health and well-being.” (JRF)

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Playing our connects residents to their neighbourhoods

- Children and adults who are able to connect playfully with their streets, to spend time on them engaged in meaningful and social activities, and to have priority on them will feel like the streets belong to them
 - Feeling like they belong to their streets and communities enables children to feel confident and secure in reaching out to the world, as they start school, build friendships and start to develop a sense of self
- When children and adults have the chance to be with each other and build connections to their immediate environments, we see evidence that they also experience an openness to contribute to their communities through other kinds of activities and commitments
- In particular, there is evidence that those who are intimately and intricately connected to the places in which they live are more likely to notice and care for their natural environments

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Playing out and covid-19

- Play, and particularly outdoor play, is essential for children at times like this, so that they can make sense of and find some control in these confusing times
- Real concerns raised about conditions for children's outdoor play, especially in large urban areas where there may be significant concentrations of overcrowded housing and/or homes without gardens
 - families with limited indoor and outdoor space tend to be poorer and from minority ethnic communities
- Enabling children and their families to play and socialise safely and with physical distancing would be an important move for their health and wellbeing, physical and mental
- There is a responsibility to reflect on how our streets have changed for the better in recent weeks, in terms of safety, community and playfulness



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Conclusions

- Play transforms neighbourhoods, and residents' relationships with and within them
- The relationships enabled by play support communities' physical, social and emotional wellbeing
- Through play, sense of community and belonging are strengthened and these have practical and meaningful consequences in neighbourhoods and beyond
- These impacts are all the more important in the context of our collective recovery from covid-19



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Questions and discussion

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make a difference out there.**

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