

Children suffering due to lack of outdoor play, UK charities warn

Sandra Laville, 23 Jan 2024, *The Guardian*

Children and young people are suffering huge damage to their health and wellbeing from policymakers refusing to prioritise the need for outdoor play, charities have said.

As MPs begin an inquiry into how better planning could enhance the wellbeing of children, the charities said urgent change was needed. Alice Ferguson, of Playing Out, said: “Compared to previous generations, children’s lives have become incredibly restricted, indoors, isolated and inactive, largely due to changes in the outdoor environment. Government could reverse this trend and hugely improve children’s health and wellbeing by making streets safer and neighbourhoods more child-friendly, enabling them to get outside and play every day.” (...)

The charities said evidence showed the physical and mental health of children and young people was in serious, long-term decline, something that was significantly exacerbated by poverty. The coalition, which includes Playing Out, Save the Children UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link, said children wanted to be outside and be active, playing with friends and walking or cycling to school. But they faced barriers to being able to do so.

“Government policy has not addressed some of the root causes of this – and in some cases has added to the problem. A child-focused built environment policy could transform children’s lives, health and wellbeing ... effective low cost policies could be enacted almost immediately,” they said in a statement.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health said in a report last year that children’s health in the most disadvantaged communities presented “a terrifying picture”. (...) “Traffic-dominated neighbourhoods, low quality housing layouts, inadequate facilities, and poorly designed housing estates, along with a lack of parks and green spaces and other accessible high quality natural spaces, have harmed children’s health, and undermined their quality of life.

“Economic deprivation and racial inequality are both significant additional factors compounding children’s lack of access to outdoor play, physical activity and green space. There is also evidence to suggest girls spend less time outside playing than boys.”

Policies such as “no ballgame areas” were further restricting children from accessing free play areas, they said. (...) “‘No ballgames’ signs and culture are still prevalent in social housing schemes across the UK.”

The committee’s inquiry will start hearing evidence on Wednesday.

1. Summarize the text: What is the inquiry that MPs will begin and why is it necessary?
2. Commentary: To what extent can urban planning be effective to improve children’s wellbeing? Are there other elements that could help?