



## PLAY ENGLAND 2023 PLAYDAY REPORT

## Foreword



**Save the Children**

**Foreword by  
Dan Paskins,  
Director of UK  
Impact at  
Save the  
Children UK**

Every child deserves the right to play. Play is how babies and toddlers build a bond and learn from their parents and care-givers, and how children and teenagers become independent, try new things, spend time with friends and enjoy freedom. Play is the foundation of good mental health, of trusted relationships, and of social and emotional development.

Yet as this new research shows, opportunities to play outside which were the near universal right of previous generations are now available to fewer and fewer children. Many adults, and even other children, see children playing outside as a threat and nuisance, not as something to be welcomed and encouraged.

This is not a conscious decision which we as a society have taken. No government ever announced a fifty year strategy to stop children from playing outside, no local authority had an action plan to put up No Ball Games signs in order to ensure that children had worse mental health, and there are real and justified concerns about children's safety when they are outside and unsupervised by adults. Yet the evidence from this research is clear: the cumulative effect of both long term trends and more recent challenges, from the Covid-19 pandemic to the cost of living crisis, is restricting children's opportunities, in ways which risk causing lasting harm.

These trends are not inevitable. There are many examples of communities taking action to encourage and enable opportunities for children to play. In 2021 together with Play England, Save the Children UK launched the "Summer of Play" campaign and hundreds of charities, businesses and local councils pledged to do their bit to ensure children could enjoy fun, friends and freedom after the Covid-19 lockdowns. Inspired by the work of Playing Out, local authorities are setting up play streets and making it easier for children to play safely outside. And, of course, there are people in communities across the UK who do their bit every day to welcome and encourage children to be able to play.

These are very important research findings. Children are telling us that they want to spend more time in their local area, but are frequently being given the message that they, and their play, are not welcome. Together, we need to listen to what they are saying, and to act. We can and we should make a conscious choice to make it easier for this and every future generation of children to play outside – just as their grandparents did when they were young.

## Comment

**Anita Grant,  
Chair of Play  
England**

Play England worked closely with Save the Children and many other partners throughout the pandemic to argue for children's rights to play. We campaigned for a Summer of Play to mitigate some of the effects of 'lockdowns' that created unprecedented restrictions on a generation of children. This report goes some way to identify the impact and changes for children's lives we have seen giving us the basis to look at how to reopen the world and champion free play so that children can flourish and grow into the future.

**Thanks**

The report was created by Professor Helen Dodd, University of Exeter, Trustee of Play England. Helen would like to thank Tsz (Janet) Wong and Dr Rachel Nesbit for their help with data handling, figures and analysis. Helen Dodd's time is funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship MR/S017909/1.

Thanks to Rob Shaffer, Leeds Play street enablement project, Kidz Club Leeds and Playing Out for help with the photos.



## Executive summary

The Playday survey was conducted by Play England in partnership with Save the Children

This report provides an overview of results from the PlayDay 2022 survey, conducted by Play England in partnership with Save the Children. The survey questions aligned with a previous survey conducted by Play England in 2013.

The report shows how children regularly playing out in their street has declined dramatically over the past 70+ years. Importantly it also demonstrates that regularly playing out is associated with better wellbeing during childhood, as well as better mental health into adulthood. The survey results show that children want to spend more time in the area where they live, and that the proportion of children saying this has increased significantly since the 2013 survey was conducted.



When we look at why children aren't playing out, the survey results show that a range of other people are telling children and young people to stop playing and hanging out in their street or local area. In fact, only one-third of children said that they had never been told to stop. Parents are the most common people to tell children to stop playing, closely followed by neighbours and, interestingly, other children. Parents told us that they are worried about their children's play upsetting neighbours, in particular their child making a noise outside, which over one-third of parents said they worried about. The percentage of parents worrying about upsetting their neighbours has increased substantially since the 2013 survey.

Children told us that having more friends nearby, more space or areas to play and parental/carers permission would help them to spend more time playing close to home.

Overall, the report presents a dire picture of declining outdoor play close to home and a society where parents are made to worry about their children making noise outside in case it upsets the neighbours. Children want to spend more time in their local area but are frequently being given the message that they, and their play, are not welcome.

## Introduction and method

particular  
focus on  
children's use  
of public  
space and  
streets for  
play

In 2013 Play England commissioned a survey to collect data on the state of play in the UK, with a particular focus on children's use of public space and streets for play. In 2022, with support from Save the Children, we repeated this survey, adding in some additional questions around wellbeing and mental health. This report, produced in 2023, provides a summary of the main findings from the 2022 survey as well as comparisons, where possible, with results from the 2013 survey.

The 2022 survey data were collected by OnePoll who surveyed 1000 children aged 6-16, 1000 adults and 1000 parents of children aged 6-16 (note that the parents were not necessarily the parents of the children who responded). OnePoll aim to collect data from a sample who approximately align with the population of the UK on a range of demographic characteristics.

Information about the samples who completed the survey in 2022 are provided in Appendix 1 at the end of the report.

The survey focuses on street play and play close to home. We also include 'hanging out' within our definition of play because for older children and adolescents it arguably better captures how they spend their free time with peers.

play in the local  
area is important  
for children

Street play and play in the local area is important for children for a variety of reasons:

- Because it is close to home, it allows children opportunity for regular, informal play.
- It helps children to connect with and get to know other children in their local area, who might be different children to those they play with in other settings.
- Play close to home is often more accessible for younger children who are ready for some independence but not yet able to travel longer distances without an adult. It therefore gives children some independence earlier.
- When children play out it helps parents to get to know one another as well, which helps to build a sense of community and connection.
- It doesn't cost anything and is environmentally friendly as no travel is involved.

## 1 Regular street play

child and adult responses to questions around street play and play in their local area

The first section of the report focuses on child and adult responses to questions around their street play and play in their local area.

In both 2013 and 2022 children were asked whether they agreed (or not) with the statement 'I regularly play out in my street'.

In 2013, 29.1% of children agreed with this and in 2022 27.4% of children agreed.

This shows a slight decline over time but the difference was not statistically reliable so we cannot conclude that there has definitely been a decline.

When we look at the data from the 1000 adults who were surveyed in 2022, we can see that the older the adults are (up to age 65), the more likely they are to agree with the statement 'I regularly played out in my street' in relation to their own childhood (see Figure 1). As shown on Figure 1, 80.4% of adults aged between 55 and 64 years say that they regularly played out in their street as children. This stands in stark contrast to the 27.4% of children surveyed in 2022 who said they that regularly play out in their street. The figure captures a steady decline in regular street play since the 1950s.

80.4% of adults aged between 55 and 64 years say that they regularly played out in their street as children.

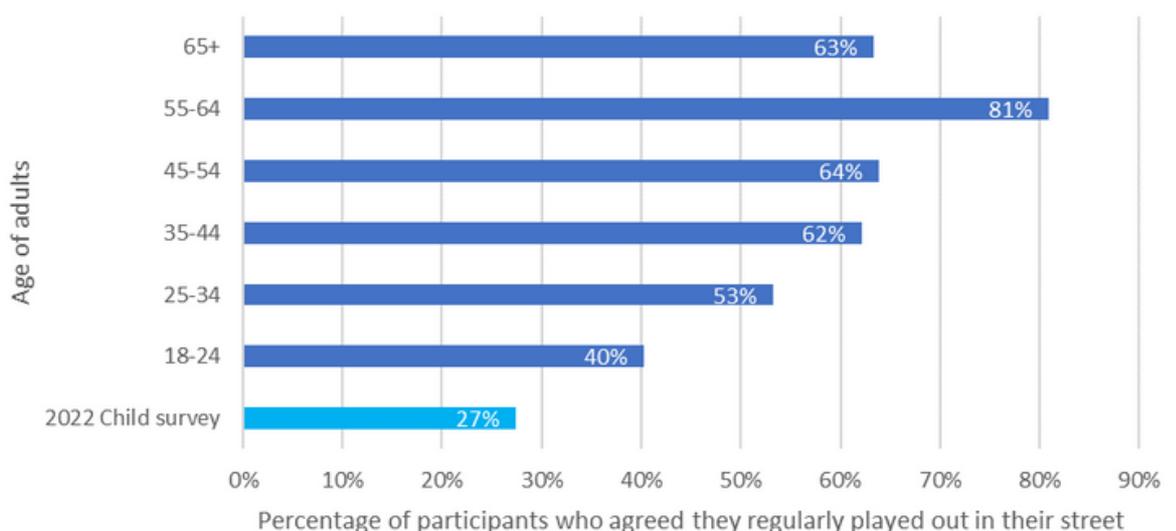


Figure 1. The percentage of adult survey respondents agreeing with the statement 'I regularly played out in my street' regarding their own childhood, presented by age group. The current percentage for the 2022 child survey is given for comparison purposes.

# FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 PLAYDAY SURVEY

**Regular street play and play in the local area close to children's homes"**

To find out more about how children feel about playing out in their street and local area we also asked children whether they agreed (or not) with the statement 'I would like to spend more time in area where I live'.

In 2013 17.7% of children agreed with this statement. In 2022 32.7% of children agreed with this statement. This is a statistically reliable increase over time.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of children who agreed with this statement by age group and across the two surveys in 2013 and 2022.

'I would like to spend more time in area where I live'.

In 2013 17.7% of children agreed with this statement. In 2022 32.7% of children agreed with this statement.

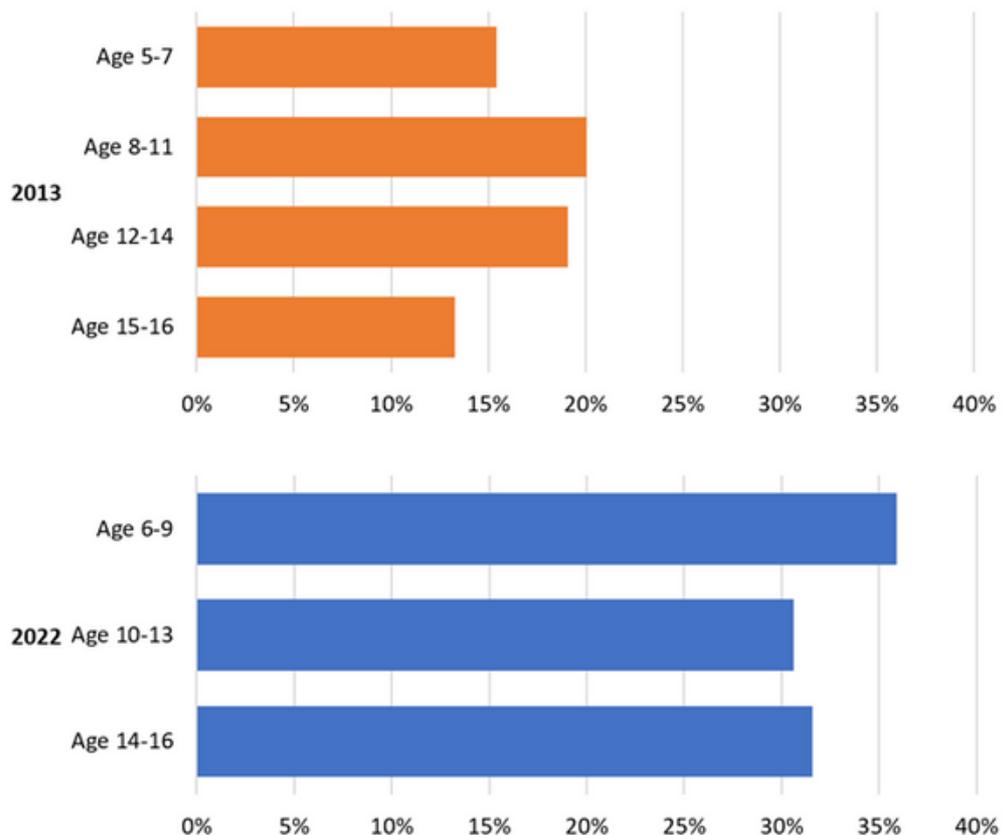


Figure 2. The proportion of children agreeing with the statement 'I would like to spend more time in the area where I live' in 2013 and 2022, split by child age group. Note that different age group bandings were used in the two surveys.

# FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 PLAYDAY SURVEY

**We asked children whether they agreed (or not) with the statement 'There is freedom to go and explore'**

The final question of relevance to this section asked children whether they agreed (or not) with the statement 'There is freedom to go and explore'. The findings for this question are interesting, and counterintuitive.

In 2013 17.4% of children agreed with this statement. In 2022 26.1% agreed.

This was a statistically reliable difference but suggests that more children feel there is freedom to go and explore their local area now than they did in 2013. Without talking to children to better understand this finding, we can only speculate about what might explain it, given how it contrasts with the above findings. One reason might be that in 2022 children were experiencing more freedom than in the preceding two years when there were nationwide lockdowns in the UK due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It may be that children's perceptions of freedom shifted because of those lockdown experiences. Alternatively, it may be that there is freedom, but children don't use it to engage in street play, which would also explain the conflicting result.

When we examine trends in responses to the 'freedom to go and explore' question across the adult age categories (see Figure 5), we find a similar pattern to that seen for street play. As shown in Figure 3, 82% of adults aged 55-64 agreed that there was freedom to go and explore when they were children. This contrasts to 26.1% of children agreeing in 2022. This indicates a gradual decline over time.

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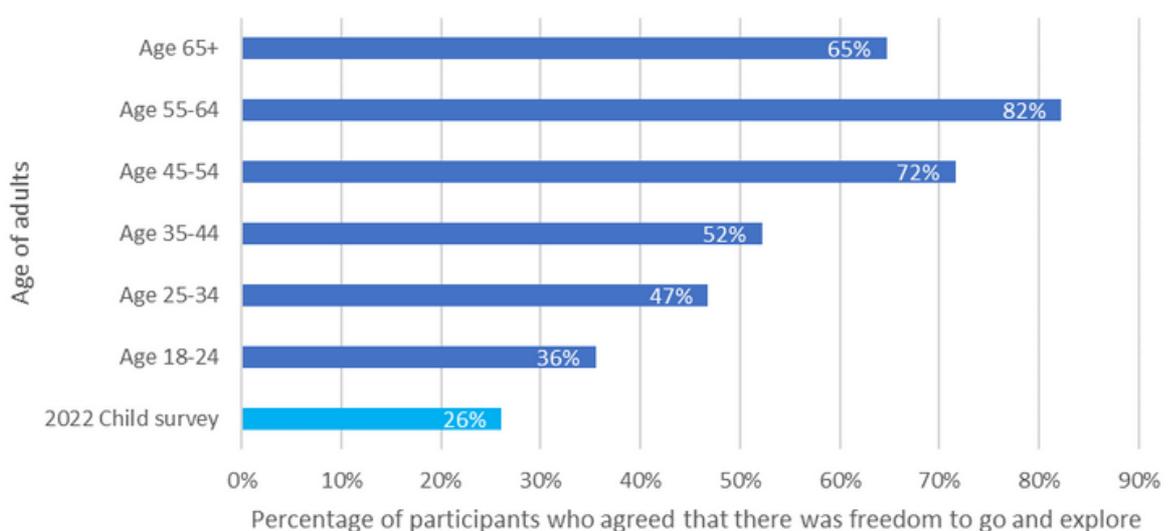


Figure 3. The percentage of adult survey respondents agreeing with the statement 'There was freedom to go and explore' regarding their own childhood, presented by age group. The current percentage for the 2022 child survey is given for comparison purposes.

## 2. Play, wellbeing and mental health

**We examined associations between answers to the play questions and wellbeing in children**

In the 2022 survey we included the Stirling Wellbeing Questionnaire[1] in the child survey and the Kessler-6[2] measure of psychological distress in the adult questionnaire. The Stirling wellbeing measure has two scales: positive emotion, which evaluates the extent to which the child generally experiences positive mood, and positive outlook, which evaluates the extent to which the child feels positive about their future. The Kessler-6 measure overall psychological distress over the previous 30 days and is a general measure of overall mental health.

We examined associations between answers to the play questions and wellbeing in children first. We found that children who said that they **regularly played out in their street** had significantly higher levels of positive emotion (see Table 1). This was consistent across age groups. No reliable difference in positive outlook was found.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviations (in brackets) for the two scales of the Stirling Wellbeing Questionnaire, split by children who said that they regularly play out in their street and those who said they did not. Shows better wellbeing (higher scores) in those who regularly played out in their street.

	Regularly play out	
	Yes	No
<b>Positive emotion</b>	22.00 (3.44)	21.10 (3.91)
Positive outlook	21.93 (3.63)	21.39 (3.62)

children who play out in their street more regularly and have freedom to go and explore experience more positive emotion than those who do not

Table 2. Mean and standard deviations (in brackets) for the two scales of the Stirling Wellbeing Questionnaire, split by children who said that there was freedom to go and explore in their local those who said there was not. Shows better wellbeing (higher scores) in those who perceived freedom to go and explore.

	Freedom to explore	
	Yes	No
<b>Positive emotion</b>	22.03 (3.87)	21.11 (3.76)
Positive outlook	21.85 (3.90)	21.43 (3.53)

Taken together, these results suggest that children who play out in their street more regularly and have freedom to go and explore experience more positive emotion than those who do not. Street play and freedom do not appear to be reliably related to positive outlook.

# FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 PLAYDAY SURVEY

**We found that adults who said they regularly played out on the street when they were children had significantly lower psychological distress scores as adults**

We next examined whether adults who say that they regularly played out and had freedom to go and explore when they were children, have different mental health now as adults, when compared to those who did not have that same freedom. We found that adults who said they regularly played out on the street when they were children had significantly lower psychological distress scores as adults, which was statistically reliable. See Figure 4.

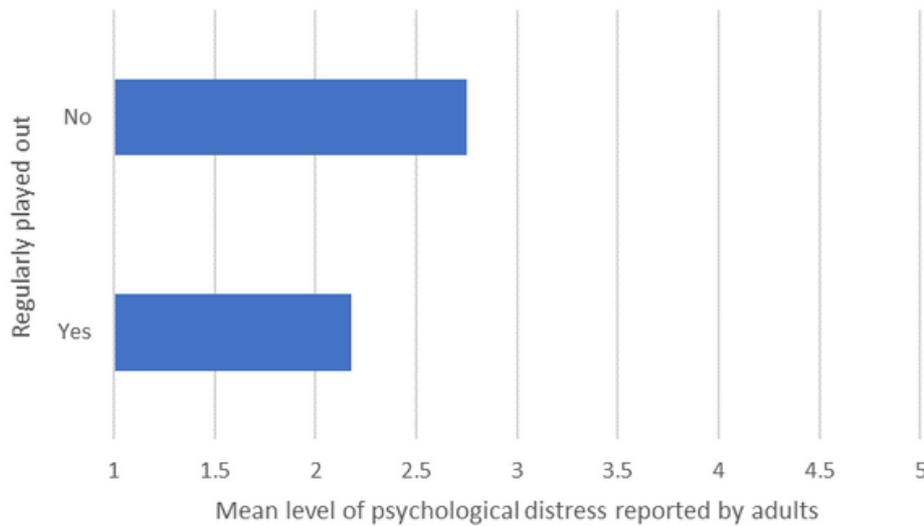


Figure 4 . Mean adult level of psychological distress split by whether they regularly played out as children or not.



**Adults who said there was freedom to go and explore in their local area had significantly lower psychological distress scores as adults as adults**

Similarly, adults who said there was freedom to go and explore in their local area had significantly lower psychological distress scores as adults, which was statistically reliable. See Figure 5.

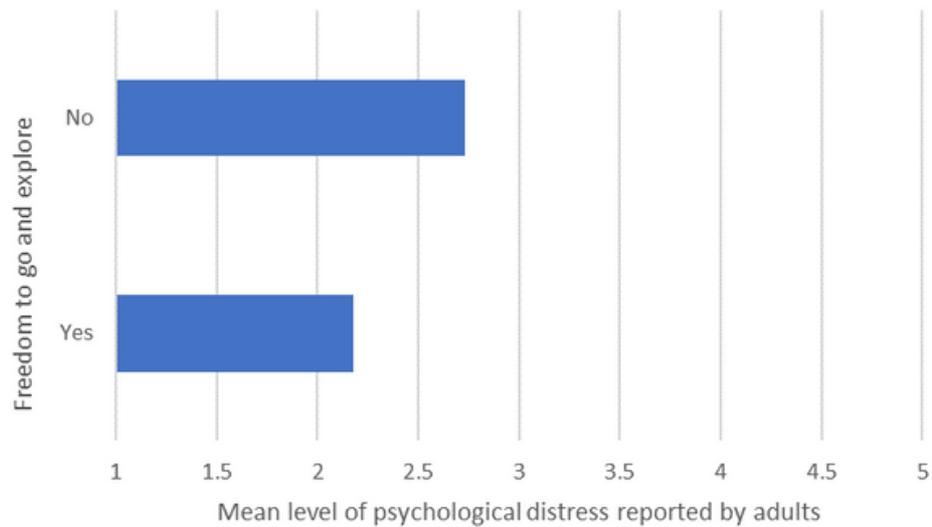


Figure 5. Mean adult level of psychological distress split by whether they agreed there was freedom to go and explore when they were children, or not.



### 3. What is stopping children from playing?

**Parents and carers are the most common people telling children to stop playing out in their street or local area.**

We asked children ‘Have you ever been told to stop playing/hanging out in your street or local area by any of these people?’ And provided a list of people who might have asked them to stop playing (see next section). We also included an item ‘I have never been asked to stop playing’. When we look at the proportion of children who agreed that they had never been asked to stop playing, we can see striking declines between 2013 and 2022.

In 2013, 56.3% of children reported that they had never been told to stop playing. In 2022, only 33% of children have not been asked to stop playing.

We asked children who it was who had asked them to stop playing, both in the 2013 and 2022 surveys. Figure 6 shows the results. Across all of the people listed as options in the survey, all show an increase between 2013 and 2022. Parents and carers are the most common people telling children to stop playing out in their street or local area.

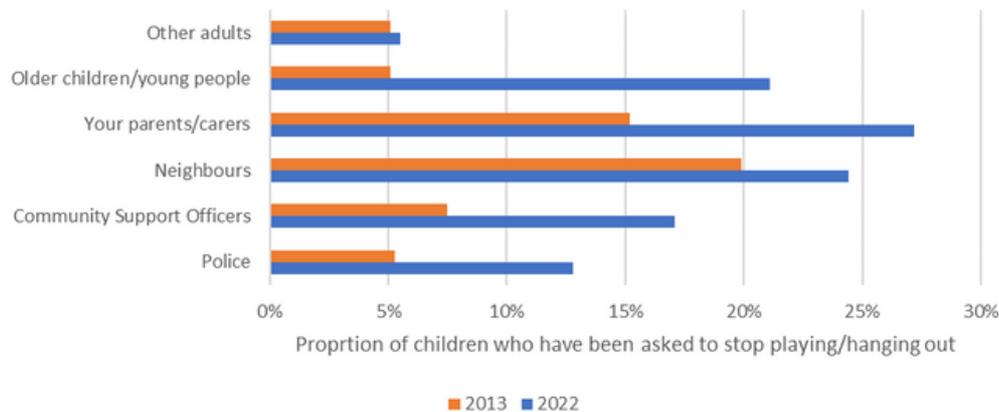


Figure 6. Proportion of respondents to the child survey stating that they had been asked to stop playing/hanging out by people in specific roles.



# FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 PLAYDAY SURVEY

The most common thing children have been asked to stop doing is 'making a noise outside'

We also asked children what activities it is that they have been told to stop doing. The results are shown in Figure 7. Again, there is an increase between 2013 and 2022 across all activities. The most common thing children have been asked to stop doing is 'making a noise outside'.

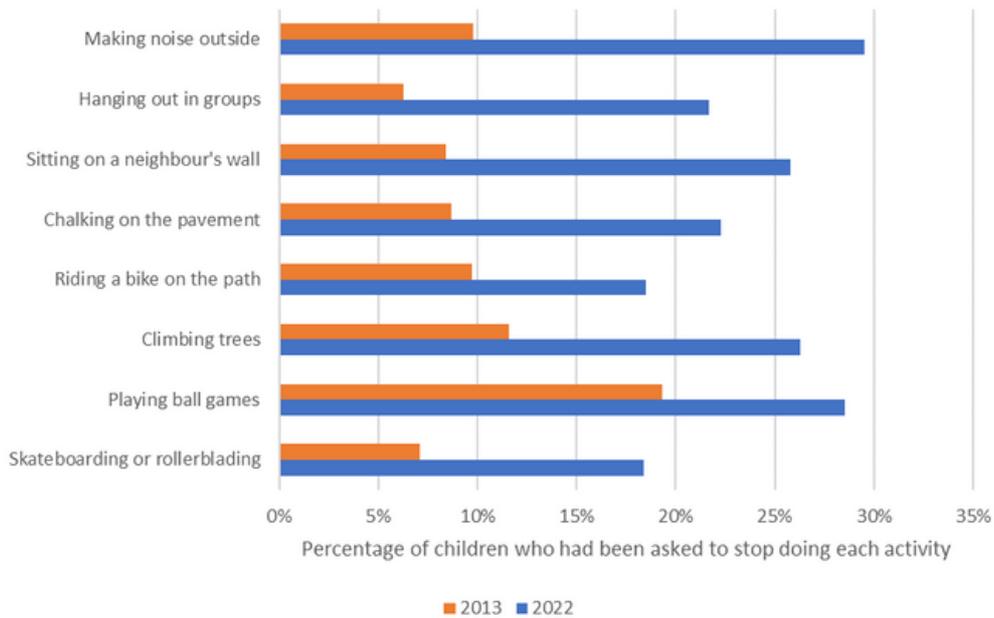


Figure 7. The proportion of children in 2013 and 2022 who have been asked to stop specific activities.

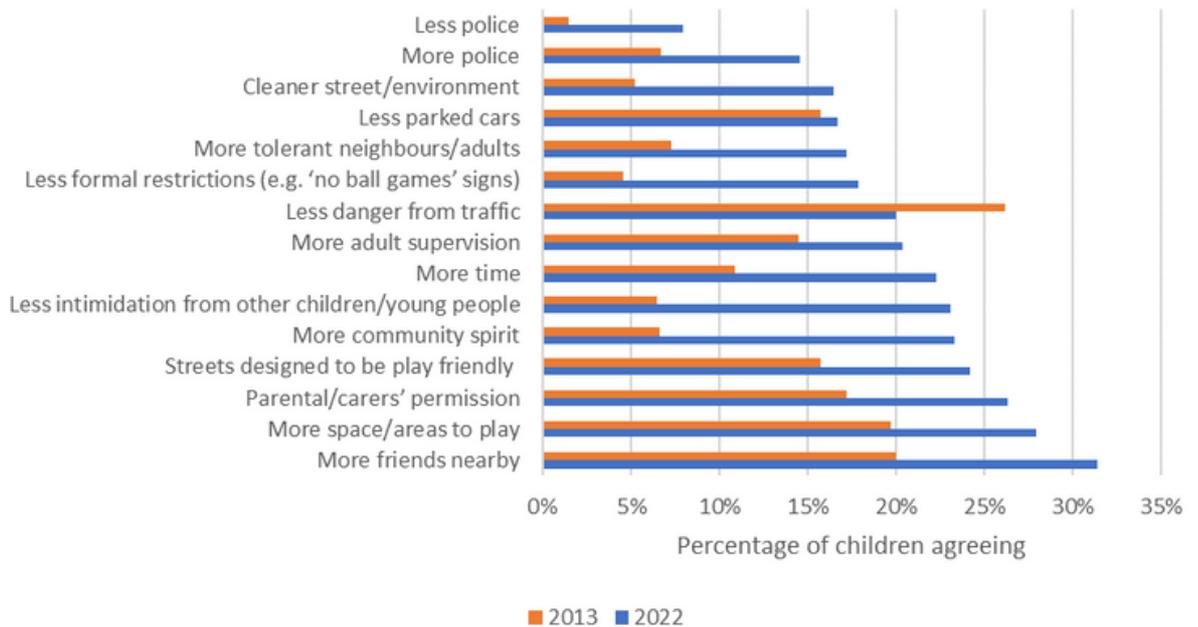


## 4. Encouraging children's play

**What would make them play/hang out in the streets or area around their home more often?**

We asked children what would make them play/hang out in the streets or area around their home more often. Figure 8 shows their responses. Across most of the options, children were more likely to agree in 2022 than they were in 2013, interestingly with the exception of less danger from traffic which has decreased slightly.

The most common reasons given in 2022 were having more friends nearby, more space/areas to play and parental/carer's permission.



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Figure 8. Percentage of children who agreed that each factor would help them to play/hang out in the streets or area around their home more often.



## 5. Parents' perspectives

**Parents are more concerned about almost all of the activities bothering the neighbours now than they were in 2013**

Given that parents and carers are the most likely to tell children to stop playing in the street or local area, we asked parents about what it is like for children to play/hangout outside where they currently live. In the 2022 survey:

- 39% agreed with the statement that where they live, adults tend to disapprove of children playing outside.
- 40% agreed with the statement that it isn't safe for children to play outside without an adult.

We also asked parents if they ever worry about their children's activities upsetting the neighbours. Figure 9 shows the percentage of parents who agreed with each item in 2013 and in 2022. The figure shows that parents are more concerned about almost all of the activities bothering the neighbours now than they were in 2013.

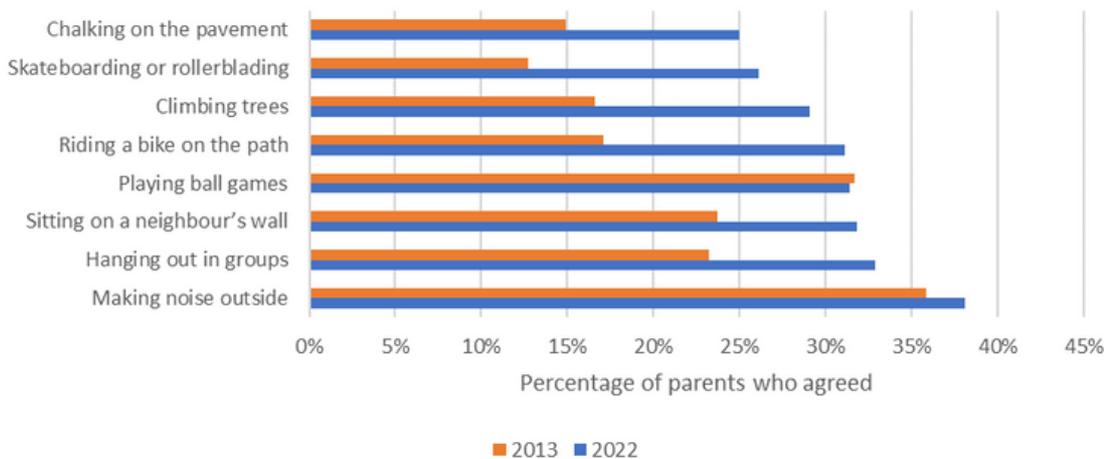


Figure 9. The proportion of parents who stated that they were worried about specific activities bothering their neighbours in 2013 and in 2022.

When parents were asked what the main things are that stop children and young people from playing/hanging out in their area the most common were stranger danger (33%), danger from traffic (28%), intimidation by other children/young people (27%) and parents/carers fears (26%).

Aligned with this, when parents were asked what would need to change, the most commonly selected responses were less intimidation from other children/young people (29%), streets designed to be play friendly (27%), more community spirit (27%), more space/areas for play (26%) and less danger from traffic (26%).

## References

1 Ian Liddle & Greg F.A. Carter (2015) Emotional and psychological well-being in children: the development and validation of the Stirling Children's Well-being Scale, *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31:2, 174-185, DOI: [10.1080/02667363.2015.1008409](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2015.1008409)

2 Kessler R., Barker P., Colpe L., Epstein J., Gfroerer J., Hiripi E., Zaslavsky A. (2003) Screening for serious mental illness in the general population. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 60(2): 184-189.

## Appendix 1

Demographic characteristic	Percentage (number)
<b>Child Questionnaire</b>	n = 1000
<b>Age</b>	
6-9 years	36% (362)
10-13 years	45% (445)
14-16 years	19% (193)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	45% (449)
Male	54% (543)
Non-binary/alternative identity	1% (6)
Prefer not to say	0% (2)
<b>Region</b>	
East Anglia	9% (88)
East Midlands	10% (99)
London	14% (143)
North East	5% (46)
North West	12% (116)
Northern Ireland	3% (31)
Scotland	7% (68)
South East	15% (149)
South West	5% (51)
Wales	6% (59)
West Midlands	8% (84)
Yorkshire and the Humber	7% (66)

## Appendix 1

<b>Adult questionnaire</b>	n = 1000
<b>Age</b>	
18 to 24	11% (107)
25 to 34	17% (172)
35 to 44	16% (161)
45 to 54	17% (170)
55 to 64	16% (158)
65 and over	23% (232)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	51% (508)
Male	49% (489)
Non-binary/alternative identity	0% (3)
<b>Region</b>	
East Anglia	10% (96)
East Midlands	7% (73)
London	12% (123)
North East	4% (35)
North West	12% (115)
Northern Ireland	3% (31)
Scotland	9% (86)
South East	14% (139)
South West	9% (87)
Wales	5% (48)
West Midlands	8% (84)
Yorkshire and the Humber	8% (83)

## Appendix 1

Parent questionnaire	n = 1000
<b>Age</b>	
18 to 30	2% (24)
31 to 40	29% (292)
41 to 50	47% (473)
51 to 60	14% (142)
61+	7% (69)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	54% (541)
Male	46% (455)
Non-binary/alternative identity	0% (4)
<b>Region</b>	
East Anglia	7% (71)
East Midlands	7% (74)
London	16% (160)
North East	4% (38)
North West	7% (73)
Northern Ireland	4% (39)
Scotland	7% (69)
South East	18% (178)
South West	9% (88)
Wales	5% (48)
West Midlands	8% (75)
Yorkshire and the Humber	9% (87)