Chapter 4

Children’s play patterns
Having considered the importance of play in children's lives from a benefits perspective, this chapter looks at where and how children actually play. It considers both playing out and playing in, bringing in studies of children at play in urban and rural areas, in the natural, the built and the home environment, as well as children's play with new technologies. It then considers constraints on children's play and concludes with a restatement of the importance of environments in which children can play.

Children's play patterns

Children's lives are complex, unique and inherently spatial, situated in time and place, and their spatial patterns will be a reflection of a web of factors including gender, ethnicity, family culture, and local and global factors as well as local place characteristics (O'Brien and others 2000; Spencer and Blades 2006). Their social and environmental transactions occur in the home, school, playground, street, shopping areas, natural spaces and all the places in between. Also children are increasingly developing virtual spaces and online identities through the use of media technology. Children are very good at circumventing adult expectations; they construct their own meanings and use of space, often without adult knowledge or involvement. Yet at the same time children are also subject to the prevailing sociocultural norms that influence their lives and their emerging identities.

This section will explore some of the general themes in children's play patterns, bearing in mind that the influence of the wider sociocultural processes of gender, ethnicity, family culture and so on will contribute to creating for each child a unique pattern of playful relationships with both the physical and social environment.

There is a lack of child-centred primary data when it comes to researching children's access to space and use of time (Mayhew and others 2004). Other than the 2002 UK Time Use Survey, there are no quantitative data sources that directly seek to explore where and how children spend their time.

Adult understandings of what children do in their free time are a mixture of personal memories and experiences, media reports, political rhetoric, limited research and anecdotal evidence. Collectively, this presents a picture where the environments in which children and young people currently live are markedly different from those of previous generations; the outdoors now generally presents a site of risk and danger. Any adult representation of childhood is embedded in a set of cultural values that distance us from the child's actual experiences. There may be a dissonance between our expectations of what children are doing and what children are actually doing (Aitken 2001). Philo (2003: 19) implores researchers of children's spatial experiences to 'try to re-envisionage ourselves once again as children daydreaming about families and witches, friends and dinosaurs, local streets and distant space craft [in order that] we might end up writing more 'accurately' about children's geographies'.

Traditionally, children have been misunderstood and overlooked as reliable sources for understanding their own relationship with environments and communities (Burke 2005). However, in recent years there is increasing evidence of researching with rather than on
children and discovering in greater depth children's experiences of space and place (Roe 2006). The disciplines of children's geographies and environmental psychology have produced some detailed ethnographic studies of children's play lives. The classic works of Ward (1978, 1988), Hart (1979) and Moore (1986) have established benchmarks for approaches to working with children to discover the realities of their everyday encounters with their physical and social environments. As Ward (1978: 86) asserts 'children will play everywhere and with everything'.

More recent studies, and the development of a range of research tools to enhance an understanding of children's 'ways of seeing' (Burke 2005: 28) have enabled further detailed descriptions of the things children actually do and what they find of particular value in their immediate environments. As Fattore and others (2007) suggest, such evidence allows a greater appreciation of children's subjective well-being. Spencer and Blades (2006) in their introduction to a number of studies exploring children's relationship to their environments note that environmental psychology is one of the least neutral fields in the tradition of psychology, as it strives to work for better environments that support well-being. As a discipline, it acknowledges that places where children grow up, play and learn are generally designed by adults or are spaces 'left over' from the adult world.

## Playing out

A range of studies has recently provided details of children's play patterns (Thompson and Philo 2004; Percy-Smith 2002; Rasmussen and Smidt 2003; Rasmussen 2004; Roe 2006; Armitage 2004; Burke 2005; Ross 2004; Matthews and Tucker 2006). Collectively, these studies explore both the formal and informal sites that children use in their daily play experiences. Formal sites are those planned spaces designed for use by children and young people; informal spaces are the spaces not specifically sanctioned by adult authority (Thompson and Philo 2004). These informal spaces are often the most attractive to children. Matthews and others (2000: 63) refer to these informal sites as 'the street':

> ... as a metaphor for all public outdoor places in which children are found, such as roads, cul-de-sacs, alleyways, walkways, shopping areas, car parks, vacant plots and derelict sites.

Thompson and Philo's (2004) study in Livingston, Scotland, using interview and mapping techniques with children, identifies the 'street' as a significant site for children's play. Children's maps and drawings produce a mixture of preferences for 'adult spaces' along with the 'informal' spaces that children carve out for themselves:

'It is interesting to note that the places that children value are the places for creating their myths, story telling, jokes and nonsense rhymes.'
Because the children were as likely to draw a local shop as a leisure centre, a canal walkway as a local authority play space, a car park as a public park, the implication is that Livingston boasts a more chaotic social geography of play than might have been expected (at least by the policy makers). (Thompson and Philo 2004: 116)

When asked what things they played in these places, children’s favoured responses were playing on bikes and rollerblading, playing in tree-houses and dens and playing in play parks. The second most favoured response was ‘other’, signifying those ‘messing about’, ‘nothing doing’ forms of play. It is interesting to note that the places that children value are the places for creating their myths, story telling, jokes and nonsense rhymes. As the seminal work of the Opies (1959) clearly shows, this form of playing is simply not intended for adult consumption and, indeed, an integral part of its attraction is that adults know nothing about it. If adults do discover it, they usually frown upon it and forbid it (which may indeed raise ethical issues for this field of research).

The research also examines the spatial boundaries set for children. For the most part children had a clear understanding of why such boundaries were set when playing out, although some admitted to testing these boundaries on occasions, with one particular child who confessed:

I’m not allowed down at the burn (stream), in case I get wet, but I still go. (Thompson and Philo 2004: 119)

Children seemed aware that there were territories belonging to specific gangs, and that these were often sites of contest (raiding dens and tree houses). Thompson and Philo (2004: 121) note:

It becomes apparent that there is here another layer of boundary constraining the movements of these children: one invisible from the adult gaze, one created by and for the young people on the street or in the woods, but also one that they are trying to conceal from both adults and other young people.

Roe’s (2006) in-depth study with a small group of children in a village in County Durham highlights a complex pattern of relationships with the local environment. It is evident that the outdoors plays an important part in the lives of the children who recount significant valued aspects: trees for both an aesthetic and practical purpose, the river that runs through the village as both a site of fear of falling in and as an attractive play feature, and special places created in natural spaces (such as long grass or branches in trees). Natural environments represent different play opportunities for children. The rough surface provides movement challenges, and topography and vegetation provide a diversity of different designs for playing and moving (Fjortoft 2004).

Roe’s (2006) study highlights the importance of diverse landscape elements and opportunities within children’s immediate environments:

There is a need to retain wild places at the borders of children’s boundaries – particularly so that each child can create special places. This presents a considerable difficulty for landscape managers, indicating the need for less highly manicured areas, particularly the need for trees, large shrubs and long grass – exactly the kinds of areas that are often criticised as harbouring social dangers. (Roe 2006: 176)

Burke’s (2005) study of children’s play in east Leeds, using photo-diaries with children aged 6–11 years, notes that a large proportion of children’s accounts of their play lives feature natural materials and environments. Her study revealed that 70 per cent of children’s photographs were of outdoor spaces. Photographs of ‘open’ space were prominent in children’s accounts, as one child explained: they represent ‘lots of space … there’s space to be stupid’ (Burke 2005: 43). Within these open spaces, local landmarks (street lamps and other prominent spots) had significance for social interactions as they often act as meeting places and talking with friends. Other features, apparently meaningless to an adult, acted as significant features to support play, such as kerbs or ‘found’ natural materials. As an example of this playful relationship with the outdoors, Burke explores the use of grass in children’s play accounts:
Young children appreciate grass, its aesthetic, its feel, smell, and function as a building material. They fight with grass and they mark out their boundaries with grass. Grass left after a mowing can transform a landscape into a new play opportunity. [Burke 2005: 46]

Rasmussen and Smidt's (2003) study of how children in Denmark perceive and use their environment provides further insight into the range of spaces and uses valued by children. Children's photographs of their favourite places depict a neighbourhood of a 'chaotic multitude of places, items and persons' (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003: 89). This includes a variety of places that are designed by adults (playgrounds and formal public places) and discovered and used by children for their own play needs (natural features such as trees, walls, shrubs; transitional spaces between the home and the more formal public areas). A significant feature of children's photographs is the different ways of moving between these sites, for example, on bikes, roller blades and home made go-carts, along with the more formal, accompanied forms of transport such as cars and buses.

Rasmussen and Smidt note that it is not surprising that children's photos included local playgrounds and when follow-up interviews were conducted with children there were two significant factors associated with these places:

- excitement factor – places of challenge and thrills;
- imaginative factor – the ability of the place to support fantasy, engage imagination and so on.

Rasmussen and Smidt (2003: 95) also detect the ability of the children to subvert adult designed spaces to their own needs and uses, particularly through the use of transitional niches to create their own dens and special places:

There is an inherent latent conflict between, on the one hand, that which has been planned and organised by adults and, on the other hand, the children's recreation of public space and locations into their own territories. Only rarely are children allowed to take possession of essential parts of public places. It is for this reason that dens and secret places are found on the extremities of the recreational areas, in the country or in the transitional space between the landscaped areas and the overgrown areas.

In a later study Rasmussen (2004), again using photographic research with children, comments that children relate not only to the official places created for them by adults but establish their own informal 'children's places'. One particular set of photographs produced by a child shows a patch of rough land that children had reclaimed as a special place. Here they built their own 'houses' from mud with 'roads' and 'fields'; but to an adult, it appears as a seemingly random plot of ground. Reviewing another set of photographs taken by children living in urban areas, Rasmussen (2004) highlights the significance for children of a tree in a courtyard, 'the best tree for climbing' (Rasmussen 2004: 161); but children were prohibited from climbing on this tree and instead were expected to play on the adult designed swings and slides. Again, this denotes the contrast between a 'place for children' represented through adult design and 'children's places' in which children seek to claim space for their own play. The study describes a range of children's places – chalk drawings on the path, goal posts between bushes, a hole in a fence that offers a short cut; what Factor (2004) refers to as children's 'playlines'. These spaces are found close to where children live and can only be defined by children themselves. A place becomes a child's place after a child connects with it physically and experiences the physical sensations and emotional attachments from being in this place. Children's places are established in different contexts and will have individual and collective meanings for children. They can be short-lived or the relationship with a particular place may last for a long period of time. Also their use will be subject to a range of external conditions, in particular seasonal influences. However, to adults they often represent sites of 'disorder, mess, destruction and prohibited behaviour' (Rasmussen 2004: 162).

A study of children's play in urban and rural areas of Fife (Ross 2004) also highlights the significance of natural and unkempt environments. Ross notes the diverse ways in which
children use natural features and resources in their play, citing examples of children using trees for climbing, hiding, den-making, swings, goals, and general meeting places and ‘bases’ for a range of games. Local woods provide attractive ‘scary’ places for children, simultaneously offering dark and mysterious sites that are appealing for risky and exciting play forms. The study also highlights children’s ability to claim local unkempt places through play, using whatever materials were at hand within these spaces to develop impromptu play forms. Children’s play in these sites often met with parental disapproval. As Ross notes, a part of the attraction of such sites is their marginal status; they have not been named and fixed by adults, and they are often ignored by adults as being of any significance.

Percy-Smith’s (2002) study of children and young people’s experiences in Northampton highlights the complexity of their daily interactions. The children and young people expressed the importance of being with friends, having fun, messing about, playing sports, and doing something different as central to their use of free time. From this, it is apparent that the expressed needs are dynamic and will change as children move through and grow up in their neighbourhoods. Elsley’s (2004) research with children from an urban area in Scotland emphasises that children generally like where they live and appreciate the spaces that are designed for them, citing play parks and the all-weather football pitch as examples of valued places. However, at times their use of these facilities contravened adult intended use and as such was often a focus for tension. Alongside these formal spaces, children also expressed liking for a wide variety of informal spaces: the streets, shops and especially the local ‘wild areas’.

In both Percy-Smith’s and Elsley’s studies, while children value the local parks and play places, they were critical of the poor conditions of many of these spaces and the inappropriateness of the equipment to support their changing needs. As Percy-Smith (2002) notes, the parks cannot satisfy all children’s needs, and for many of those interviewed in the study a significant part of their outdoor activities did not involve predictable place behaviour. The research notes the ways in which children used discarded items (supermarket trolleys, rope, tyres) and street furniture for their play as well as adapting the environment itself to create their own special places:

In their search for fun, excitement and new experiences young people often discover hidden corners of their environment, places abandoned by adults but invaded by children. (Percy-Smith 2002: 67)
Armitage (2004) suggests that there is a mismatch between the resources allocated to supporting children's supervised time and those dedicated to supporting children's free time. Armitage's research for the Hide and Seek project asserts that children manage to spend some significant time during the day away from adult supervision and in the company of other children. When asked about their preferences for this time, children report the significance of outdoor places and playing a variety of impromptu games with friends:

... the outdoor spaces that children of all ages choose to spend their time in have fuzzy boundaries: they seem to like wide open spaces for some of the time, and at other times prefer places with walls. On a different day they will seek out natural materials with trees, grasses, flowers and water, and on another will stick to the artificial world of the urban street. But one thing they will avoid when making their choice for the day will be fenced in areas. (Armitage 2004: 189)

This will be revisited later in this section when we explore the range of constraints that impact on children’s opportunity to utilise outdoor spaces fully for their play needs.

Playing at home

While studies of children's spatial lives outdoors have attracted increasing interest it is also recognised that the home has become an increasingly significant element in the landscapes of children's play (Percy-Smith 2002; Valentine 2004; Nilsen and Rogers 2005; Karsten and van Vliet 2006b). There is widespread concern over the safety of children in the outdoors (see later in this section), and the spatial independence of children has become increasingly restricted as parents attempt to limit children's independent movements.

Karsten's (2005) study of children's play in the Netherlands notes that, whereas in the 1950s children's play meant playing outside, today many more play activities happen inside the home. This has led to a change in the ways in which children use the home through negotiating and contesting the available spaces. As Karsten and van Vliet (2006b) comment, the emergence of a category of indoor children who hardly ever go outside to play is a new phenomenon in Dutch history.

Harden (2000), in her study of children's perception of their public and private spaces, finds that children construct the home site as a place of safety and security and express concerns about their vulnerability in public space. Harden's research identifies that children see the public space as one of risk and threat, with expressed fears of getting lost, the nature and visual perception of the physical environment, and the people who may inhabit the public realm.

Manzo (2003), reviewing the literature that explores children's place attachment, suggests that the use of ‘home’ acts as a powerful metaphor which attracts a wide set of associations, values and meanings. Home has become associated with the physical space of the ‘house’ (and often implicit images of safety, joy, comfort and so on) in comparison with the other sites encountered in daily interactions, the ‘outdoors’, which may increasingly be associated with less positive feelings. Such binary oppositions of indoors and outdoors may mask a whole series of complex issues, and Manzo highlights the importance of moving away from this to an appreciation of other places and experiences of ‘residence’, so we are better able to see the full range of places, feelings and experiences that combine to develop a sense of place.

Manzo's review reveals that attachment is largely viewed in terms of positive affect. However, it is clear that not all humans will have positive feelings about their local spaces, both indoors and outdoors. Citing the work of Giuliani and Feldman (1993) Manzo (2003: 50) notes:

If we accept the prevalent definitions of place attachment ... that it is an affective bond to place, we need to consider whether or not to include ... a negative emotional relationship. To speak of negative attachment contrasts with the everyday meaning of the word.

We can see that for some children the residence may not be a place of safety but instead is a place of fear and violence. For others, given increasing time spent indoors, it can be a site
for increasing tensions with parents over the use of space. Nilsen and Rogers' (2005) study of children in their homes in Norway acknowledges that each home is a unique social construction of cultural meanings and practices. Within these, the family meanings may be both shared and contested.

Equally, the traditional notion of the early stages of childhood being centred on the home may be changing due to increasing services that offer affordable collective childcare, often connected with other political and economic agendas such as 'children's place is no longer seen to be always in the home' (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 16).

Burke's (2005) study notes that indoor and outdoor play in 'closed' intimate spaces is an important theme in children's stated preferences. Children's photographs from Burke's research suggest that they value a sense of enclosure and privacy, as suggested by their photographs of gardens, bedroom, cupboard and car. Equally Rasmussen (2004) highlights the importance of gardens in the daily lives of children. Reviewing children's photographs of playing in their gardens, Rasmussen draws on a particular example of a garden swing. To the child, this represents a special place of physical activity, imagination, daydreaming and songs. Valentine (2004) comments that most outdoor play is now closely centred on the home and its immediate surroundings. Valentine's research suggests that around 40 per cent of parents who responded to a questionnaire survey indicate that children who have access to private gardens spend most of their outdoor leisure time there.

With the apparent shift from outdoors to indoors, the home provides children with a variety of resources for their own, often unsupervised, use, both alone and with friends. However, as Nilsen and Rogers (2005) suggest, this does not necessarily imply that children have independent control over this space.

Pahl (2006), in a detailed photographic study with children from three families in London, highlights the intricate relationship between children and their home spaces. Pahl's field visits to the family homes over a two-year period establishes an 'inventory' of the toys, programmes watched, games played, care of pets and other domestic routines in the lives of the children. Analysing children's photographs and narratives, Pahl comments on the visible ways in which adults and children represent themselves in the home space. The ways in which adults formally order the arrangements and displays of the home contrasts with children's temporary and transient use of this space. This is demonstrated by children's photographs of their bedrooms as play spaces, with toys scattered around the floor and a general expression of excitement about playing in this space along with a perception of this as a 'mess' by adults and constant instructions to tidy up. The more formal shared spaces of the home appear to have an influence on the ways in which children used these spaces for their play. For example, a child playing in the front room with a play mat conformed to the space limits presented by the mat, and play was contained to this area in a very formal manner.

**The importance of the bedroom**

The bedroom is particularly important in the home as a space children come to appropriate and claim as their own, especially as children get older (Mayhew and others 2004). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) note the shift in play patterns that has traditionally seen boys being allowed into public spaces, while the 'bedroom culture' offered girls an alternative cultural space, often arising from parental restrictions on girls' access to public space. With the apparent reduction in access to public spaces and the increasing proliferation of modern technologies, the bedroom culture is being transformed into a 'digital bedroom' – a private space for children's cyber play – which engages both boys and girls in a virtual space that is both private and public at the same time. However, Sutton and others (2007) note from their comparative study with children from working and middle class backgrounds that middle class children valued the home for its affordability of 'personal space', while the working class children rarely mentioned this as an important space, possibly attributable to the fact that many of the children shared a bedroom with their siblings. Similarly, the children from the working class area had less access to media resources.
For many older children and young people, the bedroom is converted to a private, personal space reflecting the child’s individual tastes and interests (Livingstone and Bovill 2001). It becomes a place where friends are brought into and others excluded. This is the place where they can listen to their personal music choices, read magazines, play their games and unfold their private lives (Mayhew and others 2004). For most adolescents, the bedroom becomes a personal space in which they can express and experiment with their identity.

Livingstone and Bovill (2001) note that, even for younger children aged 6-7 years, just over 50 per cent do not have to share a bedroom. The figures for older children show an even higher proportion: 69 per cent of 9- to 10-year-olds, 77 per cent of 12- to 13-year-olds, and 82 per cent of 15- to 16-year-olds having their own bedroom.

**Children’s play and media technology**

Accompanying this trend towards the home as preferred site, the advance of new technologies (computers, video games and other electronic media) adds to the attraction of spending time at home. This is not a universal pattern, and age, gender, socio-economic status and so on are highly influential in determining preferences and patterns of use (Livingstone 2006). Indeed, as Mayhew and others (2004) highlight, a common feature within the literature and in children’s own narratives of cyberculture is that of ‘difference’: virtual space is more accessible to some children than others and it is accessed from different places in different ways. Research suggests ‘new sites of social exclusion are emerging in the UK because of different patterns of children’s access to virtual space’ (Mayhew and others 2004: 32).

While initially the preserve of teenage children, computers and video games have become more widely designed for and available to younger children. Marsh and others’ (2005) research in Sheffield notes that many young children’s lives are ‘media-rich’ and children are developing a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of media from an early age. Parents interviewed in the study report that media technologies play an important but not overwhelming role in children’s leisure activities. In addition, engagement with media technologies ‘appears to be a primarily social, not individual, activity, taking place most often with other family members and in shared parts of living spaces’ (Marsh and others 2005: 5).

Livingstone (2006) notes that in the UK 87 per cent of children have a computer at home (71 per cent with internet access), 62 per cent have digital television (17 per cent with internet access), 82 per cent have a games console (eight per cent with internet access), and 81 per cent have their own mobile phone. In addition, those who have internet access at home are also more likely to have these other technologies.

Research collected from the UK Children Go Online project (Livingstone and Bober 2003) indicates that only 16 per cent of children and young people interviewed who use the internet on a weekly basis make use of this for discovering basic information. A further 29 per cent use the internet for games and email; yet a further 27 per cent expand their peer-to-peer uses with instant messaging and music downloading; and the remaining 27 per cent make a broad use of the internet, taking up such opportunities as completing quizzes, creating websites, voting, contributing to message boards, offering advice, filling in forms and so on.

Children’s and young people’s use of media technologies represents complex and multiple contradictions for adults. On the one hand adults value the fact that their children are ‘safe’ indoors, yet at the same time there are anxieties and tensions about what children actually get up to. Adults rarely understand the fascination of gaming (often hidden away in bedrooms and concealed from the scrutiny of parents), dismissing it as frivolous or sometimes dangerous in its capacity to ‘corrupt’ vulnerable children (Crowe and Bradford 2006). Just as parents control children’s access to outdoor space (Valentine 2004) and impose temporal regulations (Christensen 2002), parents may seek to limit children’s access to virtual space.

Parents are often persuaded to buy computers and associated software for their children to assist with educational tasks, but research suggests that children actually spend most of their time playing games not associated with education and learning (Kerawalla and Crook...
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Equally, while media technologies are attractive for children, and parents support this by buying televisions and games machines, there are increasing concerns and ‘moral panics’ about the health risks associated with watching television and playing games. The contradictions and confusions are compounded by conflicting results from studies into the harm or benefits of playing games.

Buckingham (2000) notes that the arguments presented about children’s relationship with new media technology tend to adopt either/or positions, seeing it as either harmful or beneficial. Both positions take up deterministic and essentialist stances that fail to acknowledge the lived experiences of the children and the ways in which they ‘do’ technology. Many studies have highlighted the harmful impact of playing violent computer games, with increased levels of violence and aggression and decreases in academic and positive social behaviour (Gentile and others 2004). Similarly, playing video games and watching television are implicated in children’s increasing sedentary lifestyle and associated health problems (Clements 2004). Jordan and others’ (2006) study suggests that the amount of time children spend in front of the screen is an important predictor of cognitive, behavioural and physical outcomes, including bullying, attention, school performance and weight. This has led to a recommendation in the US that children should spend no more than two hours per day watching television. Whilst more and more parents are placing a television set in their children’s bedrooms, parents’ attitudes towards this rising phenomenon are mixed. Jordan and others’ study suggests that any recommendations about television use are unlikely to be supported by parents who indicate that they: use television as a safe and affordable distraction for children; demonstrate personal heavy television viewing patterns themselves; feel that children’s free time should be theirs to do as they please; and believe that the television plays a significant role in the day-to-day routines of the household.

Studies such as Clements’ (2004) interviews with parents about their children's play patterns clearly implicates the rise in television watching and games playing with a general trend of sedentary and home-based play. Clements suggests that this has profound effects on children; they are overly passive, the development of perceptual abilities may suffer and they become isolated from their peer groups.

Yet other studies would suggest exactly the opposite. For example, Schott and Hodgetts (2006) note that online and offline game practices enable children and young people to

‘... children value a diversity of spaces to support their everyday play lives, including indoor and outdoor space.’
establish strong peer communities. Playing computer games can become the basis for face-to-face discussions and play. Children who cannot participate in this may be excluded through not being able to contribute to the cultural references established in children's everyday talk. Equally, children's game playing can become a rich social event as children offer suggestions and prompts, and share 'tricks' and 'cheats'; such forms add to children's 'repertoire of collective activities' (Schott and Hodgetts 2006: 312).

Boyce (2007) comments that the relationships between sedentary behaviour and health cannot be explained by using single markers of inactivity, such as television viewing or video/computer game use. Few studies examine whether media use replaces time spent outdoors playing, and where research exists, only a weak relationship is proposed.

From another perspective, Buckingham (2006) criticises the prevailing psychological perspectives in research into media use and highlights the importance of exploring children's perspectives and analysing their interactions with media, on their own terms. This process:

... draws attention to children's competence as media users – their 'media literacy' – and the ways in which media use is embedded in the contexts and relationships of everyday life. However, it also recognises that children's dealings with media are framed by the operations of the media industries, and by the constraints exerted by textual meanings: children are by no means simply free to make their own meanings in any way they choose. (Buckingham 2006: 44)

Summary
Mayhew and others (2004) in their review of the experience of childhood in the UK note the heterogeneous nature of children's lives: children are subject to a range of unique socio-economic, cultural, geographical and demographic factors. Yet children are not passive in this process; they are resilient and creative 'in dealing with the problems and difficulties they encounter: there is a sense that children are adept at “finding ways round things”, and this is very much in line with the notion of children as active agents' [Mayhew and others 2004: 450].

Blinkert (2004) outlines the importance of viewing local neighbourhoods as 'action spaces', a territory close to home which has a number of key features: accessibility, safety, flexibility and opportunity for interaction with other children. The research highlighted at this stage suggests that children value a diversity of spaces to support their everyday play lives, including indoor and outdoor space. The use of ethnographic methods to capture children's play lives portrays a complex picture of children's relationships with each other, adults and spaces within their local neighbourhoods. Understanding these patterns can help adults appreciate how best to design spaces to support children's play, or indeed to acknowledge the existence of such patterns and do little other than protect children's right to participate within their local environments.

Woolley (2006) notes that current trends and policy initiatives suggest an increasing emphasis from some quarters on improving children's opportunity to play in open spaces, citing the example of the work by the Children's Play Council. Evidence from recent research is feeding into policy and funding opportunities for play through the Big Lottery Fund. Woolley suggests that, if results from research and funding are used wisely and creatively, there is an opportunity during the forthcoming years to provide exciting and challenging play opportunities for children and young people in their immediate environments.

Ward's (1978) study of the child in the city suggests that some children can successfully negotiate their way through this complex landscape, finding and creating time and places to play and 'unfolding' as individuals; but other children never 'get a foot on the ladder' and are isolated and alienated from their neighbourhoods. The next section explores some of the issues that may be affecting children's opportunity to play out.
Constraints on children’s play

Children’s play is a heterogeneous form of behaviour that is expressed in diverse spatial contexts. While children will play anywhere, features in the contemporary environment have a significant impact on many children’s ability to find time and places to play. There is no universal pattern and there are significant variations in children’s spatial lives.

A number of studies (Morrow 2004; Thomas and Hocking 2003; Unicef 2007) raise serious questions about children’s quality of life, not as a measure of economic and material wealth but as a ‘balanced combination of complementary states in four core areas’ (Thomas and Hocking 2003: 10) namely:

- individual standard of living
- shared resources
- happiness and emotional well-being
- trust and inclusion.

Thomas and Hocking’s analysis of children’s well-being against these indicators shows that the current response to supporting children is fragmented and confusing:

The combined impact of this fragmentation is to foster deep contradictions and inconsistencies in children’s lives and to neglect certain aspects of their quality of life. Children doing paid work is frowned upon, yet British children complete 35 million test papers every year. Corporations spend millions of pounds researching and perfecting the child appeal of products, while families struggle with both time and money. Parents are increasingly fearful of allowing their children to be unsupervised in public, but obesity goes effectively unchecked. (Thomas and Hocking 2003: 12)

These contradictions and inconsistencies are evident in the ways in which children experience their daily lives and in their relationships with others in the physical environments in which they live. This section will explore some of these contradictions and pressures.

Environmental stress

Evans’ (2004) review of research into the effects of acute and chronic environmental stress highlights the cumulative effect of poor environments for children living in poverty. Family stresses, housing conditions and poorer social networks do not support playing, nor does the outdoor physical environment:

Poor children reside in more polluted, unhealthy environments. They breathe air and drink water that are more polluted. Their households are more crowded, noisier, and more physically deteriorated, and they contain more safety hazards. Low-income neighbourhoods are more dangerous, have poorer services, and are more physically deteriorated. The neighbourhoods where poor children live are more hazardous (e.g., greater traffic volume, more crime, less playground safety) and less likely to contain elements of nature. (Evans 2004: 88)

Hubbs-Tait and others’ (2005) review of the research on the effect of neurotoxicants (such as lead, mercury and cadmium), micronutrients and social environments on children’s development shows that toxicants have a negative impact on social and cognitive development, including play behaviours. Their review of animal-based research suggests that the detrimental effects of neurotoxins can be reversed by environmental enrichment. Exposure to such toxicants is higher for children living in poorer neighbourhoods. In some instances this can be compensated through adult facilitation of playing.

The culture of fear and risk aversion

Hillman (2006) notes that, while children’s material worlds have improved, there is a downside, citing contributing factors of a car-based culture and the precautions to limit the risk of
injury that are a reflection of a ‘culture of fear’ and risk aversion. The UK has one of the lowest rates of child accidents in the industrialised world. This has been achieved partly through the advances in health and safety legislation but perhaps more significantly by placing the responsibility for keeping children accident free on parents (Penn 2005). Thus, for example, road traffic presents a considerable risk to children and protection against road accidents is seen as the responsibility of parents rather than a societal issue; little is done to control traffic and restrict car use.

Compared with their parents, and even more so with their grandparents, children’s lives today are much more circumscribed. The Child Accident Prevention Trust (CAPT) (2002: 2) reports:

Risky activity, and risk taking itself, is recognised as an essential part of growing up. Parents must balance their natural desire to protect their children with the knowledge that their children must be allowed to grow through experiencing the outside world. There is evidence that parents have become increasingly restrictive when it comes to unsupervised play and transport to and from school. Such strategies may help reduce the immediate risk of injury to children and young people in the short term. But there is growing concern that there might be long-term costs to a generation of children that have had less opportunity to experience the world, make mistakes – and learn by them.

Furedi (2002) asserts that we now live in a time when risk is seen as something to avoid at all costs. The word has negative connotations; if there is a risk, it must be unhealthy and we should do everything possible to remove this. We have lost sight of the fact that there might be such a thing as a good risk. Avoidance, prevention, removal, management and assessment are all positive actions that arise from this fear of risk. Furedi (2002: 1) says:

Safety has become the fundamental value of our times. Passions that were once devoted to a struggle to change the world (or to keep it the same) are now invested in trying to ensure that we are safe. The label ‘safe’ gives new meaning to a wide range of human activities that are meant to merit our automatic approval.

Many parents still have positive childhood memories of playing outdoors and recognise the value of such experiences for their own children (Clements 2004; Jenkins 2006). Karsten and van Vliet’s (2006b) research in the Netherlands notes that all parents value the relationship between their children's good health and playing outdoors. Often the adults recall their own enjoyable memories of outdoor play and want to give their children similar positive outdoor play experiences. The combination of societal fear and personal aspiration for their children creates a ‘parent paradox’ between what parents wish for their children and what they feel they should be doing to protect them (The Children's Society 2007).

Thomas and Hocking (2003), in their analysis of childhood in the UK, examine the significant impact that risk aversion has on children’s lives, particularly where there is a growing privatisation of childhood in which the responsibility for looking after children clearly lies with the family, with an associated reduction in any form of community responsibility for children. Parents are susceptible to media warnings about the safety of children outside the home (Valentine 2004). Alongside this, the increasing privatisation of parenthood places a great emphasis on parents making judgements about risk and leads to a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about the outside world. This emotional response, alongside a lack of trust in the community, leads to an emotive disposition towards increasing regulation of children's activity (Jenkins 2006).

Research by Veitch and others (2006) in Australia notes the significant influence that parents have on children's ability to play out. Parents’ issues about the safety of their children playing in places other than their own yard were mostly influenced by concerns about strangers, teenagers/gangs, and road traffic en route to the place of play. These safety concerns seemed to limit the number of places available for children to play.

A study by The Children's Society (2007) notes that parental anxiety about children playing out unsupervised denies today's children the freedom to spend time with friends that they
once enjoyed themselves. When asked the best age for children to be allowed out with friends unsupervised most respondents (43 per cent) said aged 14 or over, despite the fact that most of them had been allowed out without an adult at the much younger age of 10 or under. Respondents over the age of 60 went even further, with 22 per cent saying children should be over 16 before going out alone.

Jenkins’ (2006) research with families in South Wales explores the nature of parental concerns over their children’s safety and notes the ways in which parents actively attempt to balance the competing sets of cultural orientations regarding the health and well-being of their children. It should be noted that the sample chosen by Jenkins was based on children who had visited accident and emergency units at hospital as a result of injuries that occurred while ‘playing out’, and as such there is evidence of the existence of quite sophisticated and dynamic negotiation processes already in place within the family. Research indicates that children adopt a wide range of strategies to reassure parents of their competence to negotiate their immediate environments independently (Harden 2000; Valentine 2004). Jenkins’ (2006) study highlights the ways in which parents continually seek to modulate their strong emotional fears about children being outside with lay knowledge based on the principle ‘you can’t wrap children up in cotton wool’.

This phrase encapsulates two key features:

1. It recognises the fact that exposure to a certain level of adversity is inevitable; safety cannot be guaranteed in any situation and ‘accidents will happen’.

2. A second feature acknowledges that it is ‘morally wrong to protect children from all forms of adversity as this is detrimental to their physical and social development’ (Jenkins 2006: 385).

Gill (2007b: 76) suggests that there is a need to shift from a philosophy of protection towards a philosophy of resilience; a need to take a proportionate view of risks of harm and of ‘minor public offences and skirmishes involving children’ (Gill 2007b: 82). In balancing the fears with an acceptance of the importance for children to play out, parents report using a variety of techniques based upon giving freedom while putting into place strategies designed to reduce the risk of misadventures occurring. Backett-Milburn and Harden’s (2004) detailed family case studies also highlight the complex and dynamic ways in which families construct and negotiate risk and safety. Their research concludes that, while each case study family developed a ‘bottom line’ for establishing boundaries and expectations to manage risk and maintain safety, many risk-related issues had to be discussed and renegotiated on a regular basis.

Jenkins’ (2006) research suggests that children and young people show a serious response to the fears and guidance from parents but adopt a variety of techniques to demonstrate their competence in being able to deal with these. Common strategies include avoiding particular people and places where they might be, having a mobile phone, having a plan of action to deal with possible situations and going around in groups (CAPT 2002; Valentine 2004). What this suggests is that the children selected in Jenkins study were ‘effectively equipped with an arsenal of negotiation techniques in order to gain greater access to the outside world’ (Jenkins 2006: 391).

As well as parents being anxious about their children playing out, there is evidence that children themselves now see the outdoors as a dangerous place. O’Brien and others (2000) note that about one third of the children interviewed in their study expressed anxiety about unsafe places in their neighbourhood and slightly more were worried about unknown youths and adults. Similarly, research by Thomas and Thompson (2004) indicates that children place a high priority on assessing danger as they move around in the outdoors. Wells’ (2005) research with children aged 9 and 10 years from a primary school in a predominantly working class and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in London notes the ways in which children construct the notion of ‘stranger’. Following on from high profile campaigns and initiatives about ‘stranger-danger’, the majority of children interviewed expressed an understanding of strangers as all those people who were not formally incorporated into their social networks. This broad concept of stranger, ‘a figure who is not simply unknown but also dangerous, renders public space as a space saturated with uncertainty and even terror’ (Wells 2005: 505).
**Children in the public realm**

Vanderbeck and Dunkley (2004), in their introduction to a series of articles on exclusion and inclusion of young people, acknowledge that children are excluded from full participation in activities and spaces both through the legal frameworks and everyday practices that reinforce the natural authority of adults. They seek to clarify the use of the phrase ‘social exclusion’, shifting this from a codeword for poverty to a broader understanding, citing the work of Duffy (1995):

>Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but also the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political, and cultural life, and, in some characterisations, alienation and distance from the mainstream society. (Duffy 1995: 5; cited in Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2004: 178)

From this perspective, Vanderbeck and Dunkley identify a number of areas from which children are excluded, through the regulation of young people in consumption and other public space, restrictions on independent mobility and the imposition of age-based curfews (see Collins and Kearns 2001).

The work of Valentine (2004) provides a comprehensive review of the current issues affecting children’s use of outdoor (public) spaces, ranging from parental concerns about children’s safety in public spaces, discourses on child rearing practices, children’s competence and ability to contest parental and public controls and expectations, and the changing nature of children’s access to public space.

A considerable amount of research over the past decade indicates that children’s opportunity to range independently in many industrialised societies has significantly diminished (Kytta 2004; Karsten and Van Vliet 2006a; Spilsbury 2005; Hillman 2006; Rissotto and Giuliani 2006). Karsten (2005), using oral history, statistical and archive research, detects a new form of childhood that is evidenced through a decrease in playing outdoors and an increase in adult supervision. Rissotto and Giuliani (2006) note that research carried out over the last two decades in several European countries, the US and Australia clearly indicates a sharp decline in children’s independent mobility. Veitch and others (2006) in their study of children’s play sites in Australia conclude that the opportunities for children’s independent mobility and free play may be limited for many children. They find the results alarming, ‘as active free play is quite likely to be an important component of children’s overall physical activity’ (Veitch and others 2005: 9).

‘...children’s opportunity to range independently in many industrialised societies has significantly diminished.’
Kytta’s (2004) research in Finland and Belarus provides a framework for appreciating the covariance of children’s independent mobility with the actualisation of affordances within an environment. She suggests that there are three ‘fields of action’ that determine whether affordances are actualised through activity:

- the field of promoted action, where socially approved actions are prescribed across place, time and manner
- the field of constrained action, where actions are restricted either through the barrenness of the environment, or through being deemed socially unacceptable
- overlapping these two and in the space in between them is the field of free action, where children can actualise affordances, which includes actions that are both promoted (physically and socially) and socially constrained. Affordances that are socially constrained may be actualised both by chance (through independent discovery) and deliberately. This is what is sometimes understood to be anti-social behaviour.

In their play, children often move from one field of action to another, and they are also likely to try and enlarge the field of free action (Kytta 2004).

Prezza and Pacilli (2007) explore the relationship between Italian children’s autonomous mobility and play, and perceptions about crime and loss of community. The authors cite research which shows that the reduction of children’s opportunity to experience unsupervised play in public places is a feature across many countries in Europe. While for children living in poor and degraded neighbourhoods this might present a positive support to children’s health, for those living in low risk areas the restriction of opportunities for unmediated play and mobility may have negative developmental consequences. Rissotto and Giuliani (2006) suggest that the restriction on mobility has an adverse effect on the development of spatial skills; children are denied the opportunity to develop skills of wayfaring and associated problem solving techniques. Children are also denied the opportunity to acquire sensorimotor information about their local places necessary to integrate internal and external spatial information. A number of research studies suggest that restricting children’s mobility might also have a harmful impact on children’s health (Mackett and Paskins 2004; Alton 2007; Hillman 2006).

In addition, Prezza and Pacilli (2007), through undertaking research with adolescents using a number of key instruments to explore ranging behaviours, sense of community and isolation, suggest that the more children are confined to their homes, the less opportunity they have to access community social resources and to establish strong friendships. This also becomes a self-reinforcing process: children need other children with whom they can play, and outdoor play is essentially social play. As more children remain indoors, there are fewer children playing out and so children are less likely to go out to find their friends (Karsten and van Vliet 2006). Prezza and Pacilli’s study notes the importance of children and young people developing relationships with adults who are beyond the family and live in their neighbourhood. The findings suggest that these forms of neighbourhood relations have positive outcomes for the well-being of children. Their research notes that more ‘autonomy and play in public areas during childhood influences more intense neighbourhood relations, a strong sense of community and less fear of crime and, in turn, these later variables consequently reduce feelings of loneliness during adolescence’ (Prezza and Pacilli 2007: 165).

Timperio and others’ (2005) Australian study concludes that parental perceptions of the local neighbourhood may influence the extent to which children use the environmental resources and so reap associated health benefits. Their research, while finding no evidence between perceptions of the neighbourhood and weight status among 6- to 7-year-olds, does indicate that perceptions of traffic on local streets and concerns about road safety may be indirect influences on overweight and obesity among 10- to 12-year-old children through making parents anxious about letting children play out independently.

Studies of children’s play patterns discussed in the previous section suggest that there may be a discrepancy between some of the research studies and public opinion about children’s
outdoor play and what children actually do in their local environments. This finds a parallel with an oft-stated public expression that children don’t know how to play any more. A closer examination of children’s movement and use of their local environments suggests a more complex picture (Ross 2004; Thompson and Philo 2004; Armitage 2004; Burke 2005). Armitage’s (2004) study clearly illustrates that children interviewed report few restrictions placed on their opportunity to play out. Similarly Burke (2005) notes that children’s photographs and descriptions of their use of the local neighbourhood appear to defy conventional public opinion. Burke suggests that, in spite of the many barriers presented in the adult designed environment, children’s play patterns probably closely resemble those of previous generations. Ross’ (2004) detailed study of children’s play also establishes a picture of children being able to negotiate their way around their local spaces. Ross notes that many of the parents interviewed place a high priority on children’s independent use of the local neighbourhood, and this has significant consequences:

… not only for children’s play experiences, but also for their social relationships. In their use of the local area children encountered and built ties with each other and with adults living and working in the area. These informal contacts are important in creating a sense of security and allowing children to feel part of a place … Most children conveyed strong attachments to their local area, naming and describing many favourite places, relating a definite sense of belonging and an ability to make their own space. (Ross 2004: 3)

These contrasting studies perhaps indicate the complexity of this issue and the fact that children do actively negotiate their way through their local spaces. As Veitch and others (2006) note from studying children’s activity patterns in Australia, children’s motivation and opportunity to play out will be influenced by their friendship groups, the ability to access attractive and local spaces for play, parental perceptions of the safety and desirability of children playing out, gender and cultural factors and the local social policy. O’Brien and others’ (2000) study with 10- to 14-year-olds in London and a nearby New Town observes that many of the children appear to ‘make do’ in finding time and space in their everyday lives. Only a small minority in the study lead highly restricted lives, for example only four per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds and one per cent of 13- to 14-year-olds report not being allowed to play outside without adult supervision. In contrast to this, 23 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds express a high degree of freedom in playing out, walking to school unaccompanied and being left at home on their own.

Yet, this is by no means an even pattern of access to the outdoors. As O’Brien and others (2000) comment, locality, gender and ethnicity are key influences in children’s freedom to move around their neighbourhoods:

In general girls and children from minority ethnic communities appeared to be more restricted in their use of urban space. Boys had greater freedom to roam and play out more independently than girls at both the primary and secondary levels. For instance, the proportions of 10/11 year old boys who could play out alone in inner London, outer London and Newtown were 84%, 87% and 93% in comparison to 67%, 75% and 82% of girls respectively, (O’Brien and others 2000: 5)

The results from detailed studies of children’s access to the outdoors demonstrate the importance of seeking children’s own views and use patterns of their environments because they are ‘first, diverse and not unitary and, second, challenge deterministic accounts of young people as automatically excluded from public space’ (Nairn and others 2003: 37). From this perspective we may see that children’s and young people’s use of public space is a fragmented and ambiguous relationship which can sometimes be inclusive and sometimes exclusive, and shifts over time and different spaces. As Elsley (2004) comments, understanding the heterogenous nature of children’s relationship to public space must be a prerequisite for those involved in planning and policy-making.

Children in rural areas

While most of the research into children’s use of their local environments focuses on urban
areas, there are equally worrying trends in rural communities. As Matthews and Tucker (2006) comment, the notion of a 'rural idyll' persists as a common picture of living in the countryside. Yet recent research into the lives of children living in rural areas questions this traditional perspective. (Matthews and others 2000; Panelli 2002; Tillberg Mattsson 2002; Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2003; Giddings and Yarwood 2005). These studies highlight the constant struggles of children and young people to achieve the 'rural dream'. Rye (2006) comments that for many young people the positive aspects of a rural life co-exist with more negative perceptions of the 'rural dull', represented through expressions of boredom, a state of being non-modern and lack of opportunities.

Matthews and Tucker (2006), in their studies in Northamptonshire, comment on the confrontation, contradiction and frustration felt by children and young people in their daily transactions within rural communities.

Smith and Barker's (2001) study of children's play in rural areas concludes that there are severe restrictions on children's independent mobility. Children's opportunities to play are limited through the geographical distance between friends, the privatisation of rural land and adult concerns over children's unsupervised use of public space (Giddings and Yarwood 2005). Tillberg Mattsson (2002) notes from research in Sweden that children in the countryside had less independent mobility than children living in towns. Beach (2003) also notes the decline in children's play experiences in a rural setting in the US, attributing this to key factors such as loss of common areas for play, reduction in pathways and shortcuts, and changing school patterns. Matthews and Tucker's (2006) summary of their investigations into young teenagers lives in a rural area in Northamptonshire notes:

... far from being pastoral paradises many rural villages are desolate places for young people, characterised more often by spatialities that exclude, marginalise and persecute ... typically what emerge in their narratives are feelings of frustration, alienation and anger that play up the negative psychic and emotional aspects of their rural experience. (Matthews and Tucker 2006: 172)
Institutionalisation of childhood

A significant change to children’s daily activity patterns can be found in the increasing colonisation of children’s lives (Thomas and Hocking 2003; Rasmussen 2004). The prevailing fears for children’s safety lead adults to seek to ensure children are supervised at all times. Ginsberg (2007) comments that parents receive messages from a range of sources which clearly imply that good parenting is about developing educational skills and aptitudes from the earliest ages. This pressure leads parents to organise a range of out-of-school and out-of-home structured activities.

What used to be the children’s leisure time has been transformed into organised time dedicated to different activities outside the home that are rigidly planned and usually incur some financial costs (Tonucci 2005). This increasingly structured pattern to some children’s lives means that children’s time for their own autonomous play is reduced; yet it is this very feature that is significant about children’s play:

Ultimately, colonisation reduces the child’s opportunities to control his or her own relationship with time and space. It is not just an issue of parents taking direct control over individual children, but also of other forces in the wider society exerting greater influence, intruding more directly into childhood experience.

(Thomas and Hocking 2003: 23)

Tonucci’s (2005) review of children’s opportunity to play out in Italy declares that play is a welfare parameter for urban life. His study highlights that play means ‘losing time’; or losing oneself in time and encountering the world in an ‘exciting relationship, full of mystery, risk, adventure’ (Tonucci 2005: 186). Yet the current supervision of children lowers the opportunity for children’s independent access to their immediate environments. Tonucci claims that children need free time without adult imposed agendas. Alongside this, children need a ‘spring to walk towards’, an exploration or search across an unlimited space and not one that is bounded, impoverished or designed specifically for playing.

Tillberg Mattsson’s (2002) study of children’s (in)dependent mobility in rural areas of Sweden notes the present day norm of parental desires that children are engaged in purposeful and organised activities:

Organised leisure activities are supposed to constitute a more suitable setting for the creative development of the individual child’s talents than unsupervised play in the streets. (Tillberg Mattsson 2002: 444)

‘... in the past, out-of-school time was children’s own time, now it is filled with extra-curricular access, sports and art lessons …’
Similarly, Childress’ (2004) study of teenagers’ use of public space in the US comments on the increasing ‘quasi-voluntary’ nature of young people’s activities: whereas in the past, out-of-school time was children’s own time, now it is filled with extra-curricular classes, sports and art lessons which are perceived as more constructive and safer by parents and other adults (Childress 2004: 202). In reviewing the generational change in children’s outdoor play in New York, Wridt (2004) notes the general decline of children’s access to public spaces. Key contributory factors to this pattern include the lack of investment in the public parks and the increasing privatisation of and commercialisation of play activities.

As Zeiher (2003: 66), exploring children’s daily experiences in Berlin, notes:

> In our cities, children play ball games in sports clubs rather than on the streets and climb playground apparatus rather than trees. Where urban areas are formed by functional differentiation, particular opportunities for and constraints on the actions of individuals are spatially fixed in specialised centres.

Zeiher’s study of children’s mobility in Berlin highlights the increasing location of children’s places (planned and designed places specifically for children) as ‘islands’ scattered through the fabric of the city. Zeiher explores how each child develops an ‘individual temporalised life space’, a unique pattern of activity undertaken by the children in different locations. Similarly, Karsten and van Vliet (2006b) refer to the ways in which children are engaged in ‘island-hopping’ as they travel from one institution to another in their free time.

This pattern results in ‘insularisation’, with children spending their time in planned institutes and places, places that are increasingly organised around speciality, leaving little time for playing in the immediate local area. Even if there was time, the chances are that there would be few children to play with because of their engagement in the structured child-specific institutions. This institutionalisation of children also restricts their access to natural, open space; they are sheltered, fenced in and generally kept away from the elements.

Rasmussen’s (2004) analysis of children’s daily lives in Denmark shows how children move between three basic sites that represent corners of an institutionalised triangle. Thus, children move between the home, school and after-school facility. Each of these spaces is:

> … to a high degree designed and designated by adults as ‘places for children’. The places are institutionalised to the extent that architects and planners intend them to be ‘special’ places for children; children spend an increasing amount of time in them; they put children into contact with ‘professional’ adults – the pedagogues, social workers, teachers and psychologists who staff these institutions.

In terms of children’s play, there is concern about the serious pressures on children’s free play time (Ginsberg 2007). Christensen (2002) comments on the temporal regulation of children’s lives and their lack of ability to have a say over their use of time. She highlights the tension between children’s constructs and use of time and adult ideas about what children should be doing with their time. Christensen’s study of children in an urban and a rural setting in the north of England highlights the problems encountered by children in determining their use of time. Christensen notes that ‘everyday’ time for children is busy, and children’s own use of time is threatened by the many plans and commitments made on their behalf by others. Christensen goes on to give extracts of comments from children about the difficulties of ‘own’ time:

> ‘I’d like to have more own time but I can’t really. Because like on Mondays or Tuesdays we have to go over to one of my mum’s friend’s houses …Then I go and do my homework for an hour and then I’ll go and speak to my dad and then I’ll watch a bit of TV and then I like to do reading and play games and do drawings and stuff like that. But I can’t really, ’cos my day’s too packed’ (Caroline). (Christensen 2002: 86)

Melman and others (2007), drawing on research by Doherty and Clarkson (2002) suggest that in the US the past 20 years has seen a decline of twelve hours per week in children’s free time, including a 25 per cent decrease in play and a 50 per cent decrease in outdoor activities.
Citing the example of ‘over-scheduling’ as parents feel increasingly pressured to ensure their children achieve at school, Ginsberg (2007) indicates that some children are reacting to this with increasing signs of anxiety and stress. Melman and others (2007), in their study of adolescents and participation in planned activities in the US, cites research which suggests that many adolescents may be juggling the various, and often competing, demands to participate in adult-structured activities, social clubs, expectations about academic achievement and pressure from parents about contributing to the regular household maintenance. While participation in a moderate amount of extra-curricular planned activities is seen as beneficial and enjoyable, the summary of their research indicates that the greater the amount of time students reported participating in activities, the higher the self-reported levels of anxiety. The authors acknowledge that the picture of participation patterns is complex, but their findings lead them to raise the question:

... are we stifling children and youth's creativity and self-motivation by involving them in so many structured activities, usually under the direction and control of an adult? .... Only time will tell if there will be long-term effects on the social, emotional, and behavioral functioning of these individuals in adulthood but the results of this study suggest that overscheduling is an area of possible concern that needs to be examined in greater depth. (Melman and others 2007: 26)

Conflicting space use

Percy-Smith's (2002) research into children's and young people's views and use of the local environment highlights some key concerns expressed by the children:

Inappropriate recreational provision: Much of the planned recreational provision was of poor quality and limited function for children and young people. The research notes that supporting children's environmental needs is not simply providing single use and token opportunities but providing a network of spaces 'in which young people are free to engage in a range of activities and place uses according to their own values, needs and creative potential' (Percy-Smith 2002: 63).

Limited options for meeting up and hanging out with friends: Children express dissatisfaction with the restrictions on their use of open and public space and the conflicts that arise when this space is contested. Percy-Smith comments that younger children have access to a range of support networks, such as after-school clubs, playgroups, parents and toddler groups. But as children grow older and can move about independently then this network is no longer appropriate and the children and young people are viewed in a different way, what they described as ‘getting grief’. This ‘grief’ was perceived as being told off for behaviours that the young people felt were normal and reasonable, but which adults perceived as socially unacceptable. Percy-Smith records the sense of alienation many young people felt within their local communities arising from their exclusion from much of the public realm and the intolerance shown by adults.

Of the children and young people interviewed in the study, nine out of ten stated that they preferred to be outside if they could, recognising this as a place of freedom. The local provision for this age group was generally seen to be irrelevant to their needs, or had a reputation that made the place unattractive. Given this, the children and young people tended to meet on the street.

Several studies discuss the conflict between children's and adults' value of space, noting that the adult desire for safety, order and visibility contrasts markedly with a child's desire for disorder; cover and loose materials (Rasmussen 2004; Thompson and Philo 2004; Ross 2004; Hart 2002). Pyle (2002) explores the nature and value attributed to open ground in urban areas. To adults, this space may be seen as ‘waste ground’ or a ‘vacant lot’ and, as such, needs to be reclaimed and developed. For most children these sites represent anything but a vacant space. As Pyle comments, they are the spaces where children can imagine, carry out their adventures, construct dens, create intimate space, search for bugs and so on.

Hart (2002) makes the point that children wish to explore a wider range of settings and have experiences beyond what playgrounds offer. Yet the adult assumption of how children use place often fails to see beyond the provision of specific places and the design for specific activities.
Chapter 4: Children’s play patterns

A number of studies highlight the mismatch between an adult construct of children’s play spaces and what children value and prefer to do in their own time (Rasmussen 2004; Worpole 2003; Hart 2002; Thompson and Philo 2004; Armitage 2004; Frost 2006). Rasmussen (2004) comments that adult planners of children’s space have forgotten what their own childhood play lives were like. He notes that children, as social and cultural actors, create places that are symbolic and physical in the corners of adult-planned spaces, and calls attention to:

... the interfaces between adults’ understanding of what one can and should do in a place for children and children’s understanding of this matter. From the different understandings of place that emerge ... one could ask if adults become less tolerant and accepting vis-à-vis children’s places as they encapsulate and design places for children? (Rasmussen 2004: 171)

Hart’s (2002) study of planning for play in New York reveals that the history of designing children’s play spaces represents an expressed need to contain children, to keep them off the streets, safe from traffic and unsavoury influences. This drive to remove children from these perceived places of danger represents both a fear for and a fear of children, and bears little relationship to children’s preferences – a trend that children have tended to resist. Tellingly Hart (2002: 138) notes:

To this day all over the world, the major rationale that politicians use for play and recreation programmes is that they prevent violence and crime among children and youth. Not surprisingly, government funding often comes after rioting occurs.

Hart’s exploration of the current state of planned play spaces notes the limitations that playgrounds may impose on children’s potential range of play behaviours, substituting a narrow range of physical movements – running, jumping, climbing, swinging – for the more diverse and spontaneous forms of play that children display in more open, natural environments. Adult designed playgrounds also tend to isolate children from the daily life of their neighbourhoods, often through ‘fencing’ in children in discrete sites. As Armitage’s (2004) study notes, the one thing that children tend to avoid when making decisions about their play spaces is fenced in areas; ‘they simply don’t like them, and will often actively remove fencing – sometimes to gain easier access, sometimes to make easier escape’ (Armitage 2004: 189). What is needed, argues Hart (2004: 135), is ‘not more segregated playgrounds, but a greater attempt to make
neighbourhoods safe and welcoming for children, responding to their own preferences for free play close to home.’

Warpole’s (2003) study of children’s play outdoors largely concurs with Hart’s analysis. Citing the results from The Children’s Society and Children’s Play Council 2002 survey, Warpole notes that the majority of the 500 children surveyed described their local parks and playgrounds as ‘boring’.

Furthermore, 45% said they were not allowed to play with water; 36% not allowed to climb trees; 27% not allowed to play on climbing equipment and 23% disallowed from riding bikes or playing on skateboards. (Warpole 2003: 3)

Warpole (2003) highlights the dissatisfaction children feel with what they are offered in terms of their play spaces and notes that increasing preoccupation with risk and fear has served to diminish the quality of play provision. Frost (2006) also explores this from a US perspective, noting that litigation and threats of litigation have made a significant impact on playground design and led to standardised and approved playground equipment. The selection of uninspiring equipment is wasteful and expensive, becomes quickly redundant in terms of play value and ignores many important forms of children’s play needs (Frost 2006). Blinkert’s (2004) research in Germany demonstrates that children use traditional playgrounds for a very short period of time.

It is not just children who express dissatisfaction with the provision of local play spaces. Veitch and others’ (2006) research in Australia notes that approximately half of the parents interviewed raised concerns about the playground equipment, with the most common complaint being that the design of play equipment was largely aimed at younger children, and that older children found the parks boring. This had an impact on families with more than one child, as parents reported they would only go to the park if all children were happy to do so.

Barraclough and others (2004) report on developing play spaces in New Deal for Communities (NDC) projects found that there was a legacy of poor quality children’s play spaces in the NDC areas; indeed some localities did not have any play areas at all. Where play spaces did exist, residents stated that ‘they were generally poorly-maintained, often vandalised, in poor locations, contained old and inadequate play equipment and did not meet the needs of children and younger people of different ages and abilities’ (Barraclough and others 2004: 6).

In looking at children’s play needs, Warpole (2003: 3) acknowledges that children need access to good quality public space and defines this as:

That continuous network of pavements, streets, amenity land, parks, playing fields, town squares, forecourts and curtilages (e.g. railway station forecourts, or retail car parks) and other paved open spaces which children and young people use in the course of their daily lives, and which makes up that familiar territory of place and attachment so often beloved in the literature of nostalgia in every generation.

‘... increasing preoccupation with risk and fear has served to diminish the quality of play provision.’
What is evident from the review of the research literature is the tension between adult designed spaces for children and what children actually value. As Armitage (2004) suggests, this is not to say that playgrounds are not important places, but the current focus for safe and adult accompanied use denies many children the rich experiences that such spaces could potentially offer. Research indicates that children, where possible, use the available space within their local neighbourhoods to meet their ever-changing play needs. But this might not sit comfortably with adult perceptions of what children should be doing in their free time:

When [children] have the choice they spend it outdoors in their local neighbourhoods in the places that are right for them, doing the things that are right for them and their friends. But what turns out to be the right place for them is often the wrong place for adults. This produces conflict between what children do and what adults feel they should do and in such conflicts children invariably lose. (Armitage 2004: 190)

**School playgrounds**

School playgrounds have been traditionally associated with children’s play experiences. Thomson (2005) questions the assumption of school playgrounds affording children a degree of autonomy for their play. Her research concludes with an assertion that school playgrounds are spaces that are designed by adults to contain children and that each playground examined in her study had clear prescriptions about their use. These prescriptions create tensions for children who have to be constantly alert in their play for fear of stepping over the boundaries. She notes:

Adults and agencies delimit the activities of, and the access in the playground. Through their control of children’s games and play in this space, they explicitly and implicitly use the space to mould children’s behaviour, to teach them what is acceptable and what is deviant … Their slightest aberrant movements are supervised and disciplined. (Thomson 2005: 76)

Armitage (2005: 536) suggests that the nature of school playtime is currently an area of concern for adults connected with schools. There is a feeling ‘that what children do during these self-directed periods between lessons has changed for the worse in recent times’. The chief issue appears to be around a reported increase in rough play and an apparent increase in aggressive and violent behaviour. The response to this situation is often to reduce playtime at school, or even remove it altogether. Armitage notes that it has been estimated that the amount of time given to playtime and lunchtime in primary schools may have reduced by as much as half since 1971. Jarrett and Duckett-Hedgebeth (2003), noting a similar pattern in the US, suggest the increasing trend to reduce the amount of recess time in school is likely to have a harmful impact on the acknowledged benefits as discussed earlier in this section. Armitage (2005) also comments that adults often express concern that ‘children don’t know how to play any more’, and this stance has given rise to a number of schools intervening in play time to teach children traditional games. Penn (2005) suggests that despite all the contemporary pressures, children still have their own strong play cultures.

This, again, suggests concern over the apparent purposelessness of children’s use of this time. However, as Armitage notes, to most adults involved in schools, what actually occurs during school playtime is probably a mystery to them:

What children play at playtimes in the primary schools of England and Wales today has a historical explanation in a number of different ways: despite some changes in detail, children today play much the same games at playtime as school children have done for at least two hundred years, if not more; further, not only do today’s children play similar games to those of their predecessors but they play these games in similar places. In fact, many of the games that modern children play at older-designed schools may be being played in exactly the same place as their predecessors played them. (Armitage 2005: 553)
Rasmussen's study of children's environmental experiences in Denmark reviews the significance and value of school playgrounds in children's photographs. Returning to the theme of children's places and places for children, Rasmussen notes that, in general, school playgrounds represent the latter in their design and execution. Children do seek to construct their own meaningful places (citing examples of certain playthings, the caretaker's cellar, a bird's nest in the bushes) but often these are sanctioned by adult rules and prohibitions: 'You are not allowed to go in the bushes'.

Children's play in school playgrounds is also explored from a practice perspective in Chapter 5.

Concluding remarks

Chawla's (2002) comparative analysis of children's sense of place from different communities across the world notes that expressions of happiness are a reflection of children feeling that they have strong and valued roles within the local community, a sense of connectedness, space to play and meet with friends and an interesting and vibrant street life. These social advantages appear to outweigh standard economic indicators. Several of the studies took place in areas that were considerably less affluent than those studied in Australia, England and the US. Yet it is these latter studies where children expressed the highest levels of alienation. Chawla feels that the prevailing global free market, marked by rising levels of disposable income and rising consumption of material goods is not an appropriate model for considering children's development in urban spaces, pointing to the congruence that exists between:

... the values expressed by children in the Growing Up in Cities [a UNESCO Project] and the models of sustainable development that stress a fair provision of the basic needs for everyone; beyond this level of general health and welfare for all, there must be a focus on improving the social, cultural and environmental quality of life rather than increasing material consumption. (Chawla 2002: 231)

Woolley (2006) asserts that the New Labour commitment to reduce child poverty is radical in intention. But the warning is that it may not be sufficient to remove children from economic poverty, children also need to be removed from 'the poverty of not being able to experience good quality public open spaces in their daily environment' (Woolley 2006: 57).

Returning to the framing of the notion of well-being, children place great emphasis on their ability to play out with their friends in their immediate local neighbourhoods. Failure to support this will impact on children's subjective assessment of well-being, as perhaps evidenced by Percy-Smith's (2002) study and the recent report from Unicef [2007]. Evans and Pinnock (2007), in their review of the impact of the Children's Fund, note the apparent tension between, on the one hand, the individual targeting of children and measuring outcomes against gaining the skills and capabilities needed to become an adult, and on the other the value and benefits that children participating the Children's Fund projects express, such as 'having fun' and making new friends in play and leisure activities that were not previously available in their local environments. Clearly children's focus is on their current subjective well-being and quality of life, highlighting the need for services to create spaces within neighbourhoods and communities for the active enjoyment of the period of childhood.

Currently, as Blinkert (2004: 100) acknowledges, children 'more and more are living in an environment that is dangerous or boring, or often both'. They are often restricted or excluded from public space and placed in 'caretaking' spaces, and look to the 'fictions and simulations of computer games' for their adventures, what Blinkert refers to as a sort of 'dramatised childhood'.

Moss and Petrie's (2002) argument for the need for a more critical perspective on approaches to children's services provides a framework for looking at the current and potential future provision of children's spaces. The authors call for a new paradigm for envisioning children and childhood that moves away from instrumental and controlling approaches of children's services to one of providing children's spaces:
… for provocation and confrontation, dissensus and indocility, complexity and diversity, uncertainty and ambivalence. For adults and children they are places where meanings are kept open. (Moss and Petrie 2002: 110)

Such an approach sees a shift from a narrow development of purposeful places for children, usually single purpose, to a much wider appreciation of children as members of a local community and a recognition of their needs for a wide range of spaces; from ‘lightly structured space for children’s outdoor, unsupervised play, to the more structured institutions encountered by children in their daily lives’ (Moss and Petrie 2002: 177).

… there is scope for many innovations, in particular making far more use of outdoor environments to support outdoor play and play provisions. Here we are envisaging more physical spaces for children, but recognising that physical spaces are also social spaces – the location of social practices and relationships – and can be discursive spaces also. (Moss and Petrie 2002: 179)

This provides a bridge into the next section of this review, where we consider the current level and effectiveness of provision made for children’s play.