



Adventurous Play in Britain

A summary of research findings

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1. Key facts about children's play in Britain

Children spend an average of 21 hours a week playing.

On average, children spent around 2.5 hours a week playing in nature.

As children get older they spend less time playing adventurously.

Girls spend less time playing adventurously than boys.

Children play most adventurously in natural spaces (trees, forests, woodland and/or grassy spaces).

Neither region nor location (urban/rural) are related to children's levels of adventurous play.

These key facts are taken from the British Children's Play Survey (BCPS)¹ which was conducted with parents of children aged 5-11 years in 2020.



Figure 1 shows the average number of hours children play for in a range of places. Children spend the most time playing at home or at other people's homes. Away from home, children spend more time playing in playgrounds than any other places.

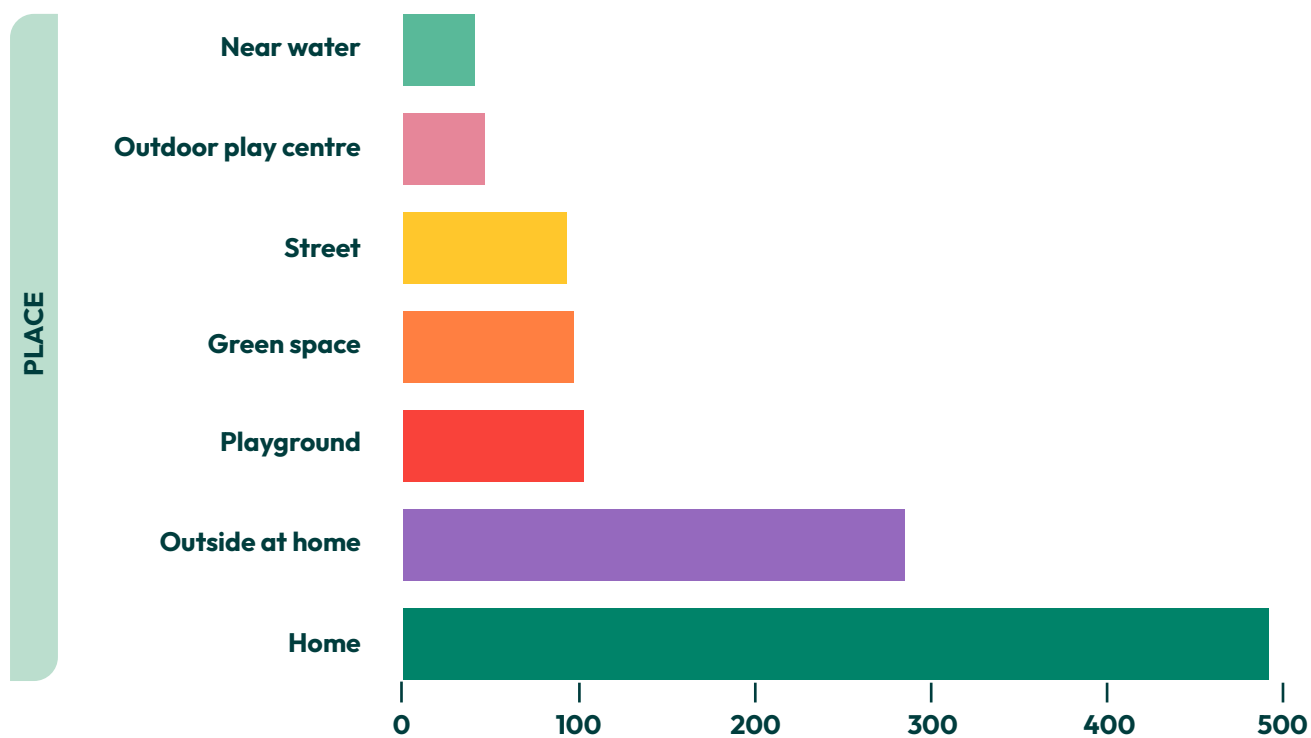


Figure 1. Average hours that children aged 5-11 living in Britain spent playing per year in a range of places.

2. Trends in play over time

Children are not allowed to play out alone until around age 11.

Their parents were allowed to play out alone when they were around age 9.

This means children now have two years without the freedom to explore and play that previous generations enjoyed.¹

Research conducted together with Play England² in partnership with Save the Children surveyed 1,000 adults, 1,000 children aged 6-16 and 1,000 parents of children aged 6-16 years. Figure 2 shows the percentage of adults who agreed with the statement 'I regularly played out in my street' with

respect to their own childhood. This shows a clear decline in the proportion of children using the street for play from the 1960s through to 2010. The figure also shows that only 27% of children surveyed said that they regularly played out in their street.

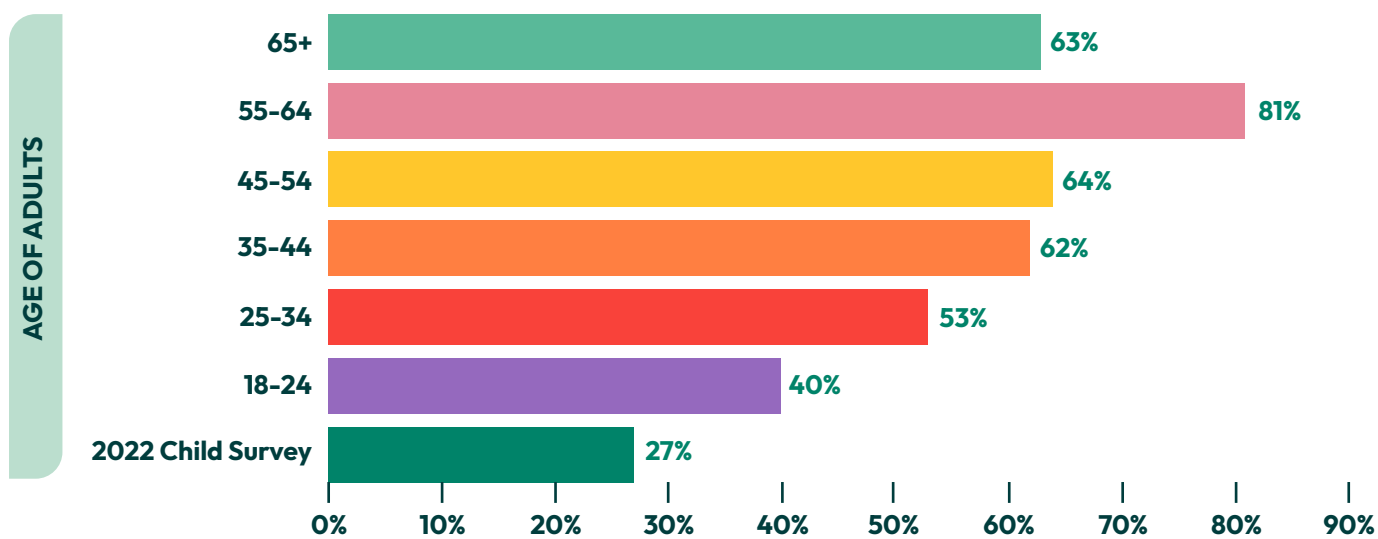


Figure 2. The percentage of adult survey respondents agreeing with the statement 'I regularly played out in my street' regarding their own childhood, presented by age group. The current percentage for the 2022 child survey is given for comparison purposes.



3. The role of parents and the wider environment

Within the BCPS¹ parents described things that helped them give their child opportunities for adventurous play and things that made it harder.

Whilst parent attitudes to risk are related to children’s time spent playing adventurously, lots of other factors affect children’s opportunities for adventurous play.³

Some of the key findings from this work are shown in Figure 3:

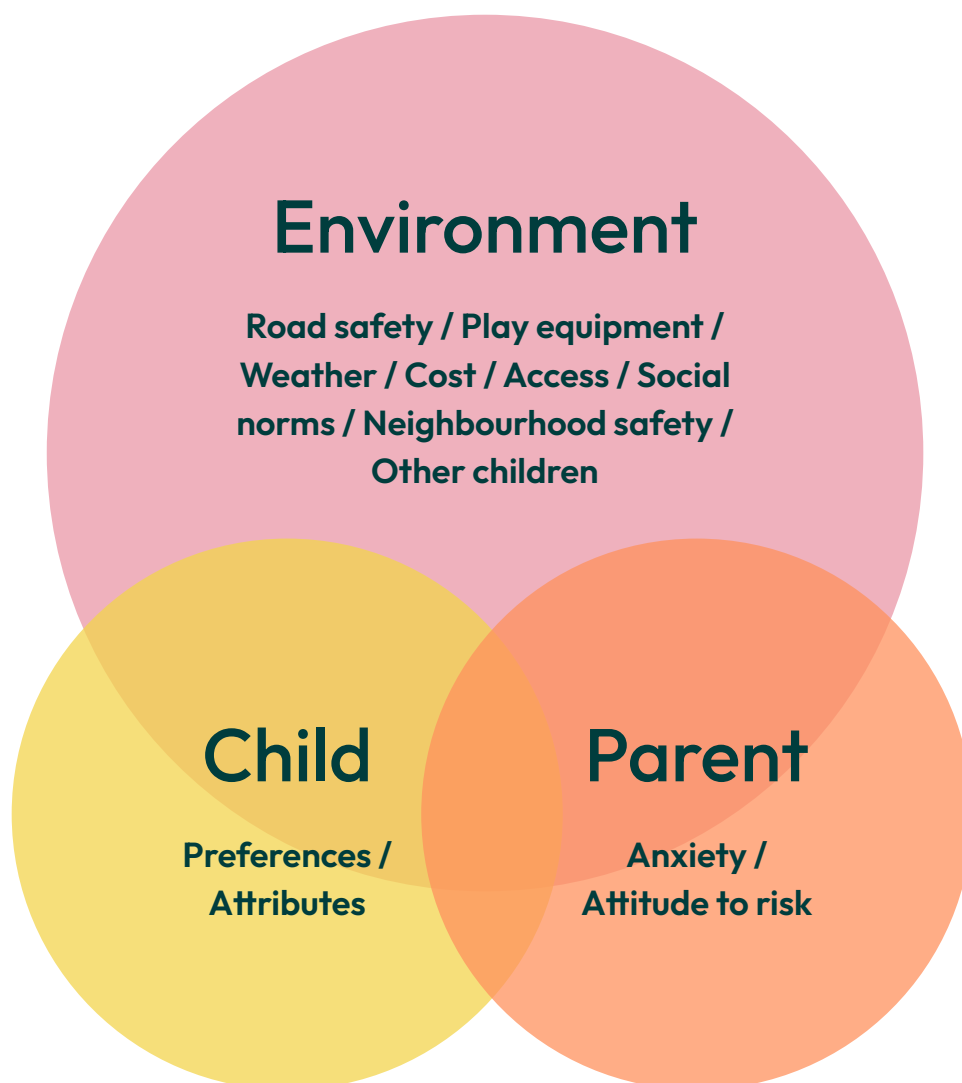
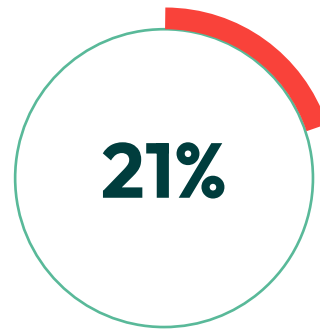


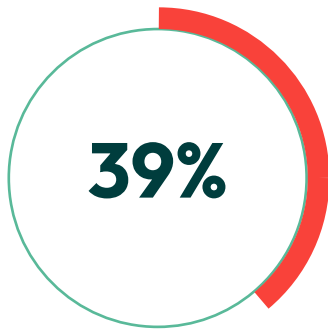
Figure 3. Factors that affect children’s opportunities for adventurous play. Children and parents are affected by their environment but also bring their own personal preferences and attributes.

Physical environment:

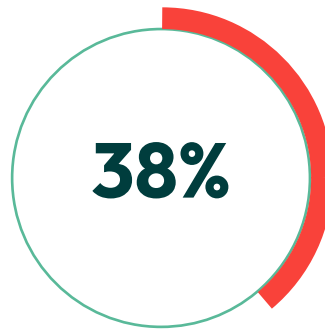
A report by RedRow Homes⁵ conducted in 2023 found that 21% of parents had considered moving to a cul-de-sac to give their child more opportunity for outdoor play. This demonstrates how the physical environment affects children's opportunities for play.



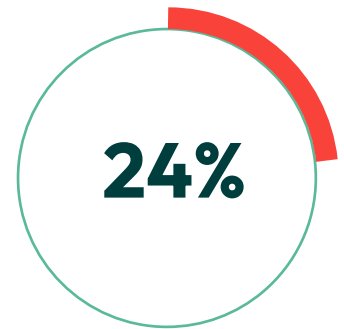
The social environment is also important:



39% of parents told us that where they live, adults tend to disapprove of children playing outside.²



Over one-third of parents told us that they worry about their child making a noise outside and it upsetting the neighbours.²



Almost one-quarter of children aged 6-16 years told us that they have been told to stop playing by neighbours.²



The most common factors that helped children's adventurous play were⁴:

- Believing that adventurous play is important for children
- A sense of safety
- Being able to supervise or know that someone else will
- A child who wants to play adventurously
- Having access to adventurous play areas



The most common factors that were barriers to children's adventurous play were⁴:

- Child not wanting to play adventurously
- Concern about safety
- A sense that society is not a safe place
- Roads
- Risk of injury

4. Adventurous play in schools

What do school staff think about adventurous play in schools?⁶

1. Perceptions of adventurous play are important; some people will have positive views and be supportive but other(s) will not.
2. Adventurous play requires staff to 'step back' and give children space to create their own play and explore risk-taking with sensitive supervision.
3. The environment has to be right in terms of physical space but also culturally having a shared understanding and support for this type of play.

4. Perceptions of children matter. If children are viewed as irresponsible and needing adult guidance to know how to play then adventurous play is unlikely to be possible. If children are viewed as being trustworthy and having their own understanding of how to play then this creates space for adventurous play.
5. External judgement is vital; schools need to feel supported and judged positively for providing these play opportunities. If they feel they will be judged negatively or that it goes against expectations and policy then they will be less likely to provide these opportunities.

What do parents think about adventurous play in schools?⁷


- Parents understand that adventurous play comes with risks but they can also identify the benefits of this type of play to children.
- Parents acknowledge the need to balance risk and benefit.



This is in keeping with the latest International Standard which provides guidance on how to use benefit and risk assessment as opposed to a traditional risk assessment where all risk should be minimised (see <https://www.iso.org/standard/80573.html>).



5. Adventurous play and mental health



Children who spend more time playing adventurously have fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁸

Children who spent more time playing adventurously in the year before the first Covid lockdown had a more positive mood during lockdown.⁸

Children who say that they regularly play out in their street have significantly higher levels of positive emotion.²

Adults who regularly played out on the street when they were children had significantly better mental health as adults.²



References

(All of the research covered in this report is available for free to everyone.)

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⁷ Nesbit, R. J., Harvey, K., Parveen, S., & Dodd, H. F. (2023). Adventurous play in schools: The parent perspective. *Children & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12747>

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Watch this space!

Our research group have more adventurous play research coming so keep in touch for updates on that. Plans include:

- A second BCPS in 2025
- A preschool BCPS with results coming soon
- Case study examples of changing play in schools
- Research on measures that can be used in future research around adventurous and risky play

Was this useful to you?

If you found this report useful and/or it will inform your work please let us know!!



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