

Making the Case for Play: Gathering the Evidence

Cole-Hamilton, Issy and Harrop, Andrew and Street, Cathy (2002).
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This detailed, thoughtful book stands alone but has a follow-on volume, *Making the Case for Play: Building Policies and Strategies for School-Aged Children*. Taken together, they offer an overview of the state of play and play policy in England as of 2001, as well as a method of approaching the subject for other countries. I confess to envy as I read the first volume—why don't we have this kind of information and information gathering on play in the U.S.?

The central government's Department of Culture Media and Sport funded the Children's Play Council (CPC) to undertake the study reported in *Gathering the Evidence*, reviewed here. The CPC and the New Policy Institute made four separate sub-studies and reports. The first, "Something Good and Fun," uses survey data from English children, youth, and parents to discuss and define play. The second, "The Value of Children's Play and Play Provision," surveys and summarizes the research on the play of school-aged children—mainly from British literature but includes some U.S. studies as well. "The Planning and Location of Play Provision in England" is the third report. It surveys government and other agencies to ascertain play policy and provision, including the kind and number of places available for children ages 5-16, both supervised and unsupervised, the amount of money spent per child, and the types of agencies and personnel involved. It includes four detailed case studies revealing wide variance by area. The fourth report, "The State of Play," surveys play professionals, for example, people who work with summer and after school activities in parks and adventure playgrounds, typically as planners and administrators.

Anyone concerned with children's play in a country that has signed on to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (that is, every country but the U.S. and Somalia) will appreciate what that document does for framing the discussion on play. Play is a given for children, so the discussion is about the details of its benefits and the policies necessary to support play.

"Something Good and Fun" reveals that children and parents both value active, physical play, especially in the outdoors—preferably in green spaces, although streets are certainly used. Fears of bullying, strangers, traffic, and dirty disorder limit children's ability to play outdoors as much as they and their parents wish. These findings corroborate those of *Last Child* in the

Woods, by Richard Louv, recently published in the U.S., which expresses concern about the bad effects of lost outdoor play areas.

"The Value of Children's Play and Play Provision" offers details of play's benefits for children based on a review of numerous recent studies some of which are on health (however, the link between a lack of play and childhood diabetes and obesity is not mentioned). Some of the newer research on brain activity during play is reported, but more up-to-date research should be sought elsewhere.

It is heartening to realize that the subject of play continues to attract scholars, in particular regarding subgroups such as minorities, children with disabilities, and girls. Involving children in planning for play spaces and activities is an increasingly frequent topic as well. Play is defined consistently throughout the book as something freely entered into, self-directed by children, and truly "something good and fun." This leaves out school-based play, except for break-times. Freely-chosen sports are still included in the definition.

By surveying what is being provided for children's play and also surveying the people who work to offer children more time and space for play, *Making the Case for Play* is able to take a fairly positive approach to the problem of children's access to play. It outlines the national, regional, and local structures and organizations with policies and responsibilities for children's play in the UK. In the U.S., schools often have policies that restricting children from the outdoors, even to the point of building schools without playgrounds, typically in the cause of making more time for academic activities. In the UK, like in the U.S., play spaces and access to them are lost to development, but *Making the Case for Play* shows support from the British central government for ameliorating the situation for the sake of children's development and long-term health. The U.S. central government is instead obsessed with test scores.

Making the Case for Play: Gathering the Evidence is an extremely useful book. By showing a structure for surveying play provision and policy, it offers researchers and policy-makers in other countries models for gathering comparable data and provides them with a handy solid summary of recent research. By speaking directly with the players and their parents, the authors were able to capture and present fresh, yet timeless observations about the essential value of play for children. Both public and research libraries ought to have this book.