

# Back gardens and friends: the impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents use of, and access to, outdoor spaces

**Carol Barron\* and Mary-Jane Emmett**

School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health, Dublin City University, Ireland,  
D09 NR58

*First received: 02 December 2020*

*Accepted for publication: 18 December 2020*

## Introduction

Children are not the face of this pandemic, however its wide-ranging effects risk being catastrophic to children and adolescents, with long lasting consequences (UNICEF 2020). In March 2020, the lives and normal daily routines of children and adolescents were totally disrupted with the closure of childcare facilities, schools, playgrounds, after school activities and sports clubs. This was compounded with social restrictions on *who* they could play with and *where* they could play. Children's access to, and lived experience in, the outdoors was severely and abruptly curtailed. Loss of access to familiar spaces for playing and 'hanging out' with friends is especially detrimental to children and adolescents (Barron, 2020). This loss is accompanied by new dangers, such as contracting or transmitting the corona virus, with the implication that outdoor play becomes hazardous.

The practice of restricting children and adolescents from the private and public realm is not new, nor unique to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Urban historian, Sanford Gaster, described the restriction of children's recreation within one neighborhood in New York City (Gaster, 1991). He found that, in the generations between 1915 and 1975, children in this neighborhood used constantly decreasing numbers of places within the neighborhood, met growing numbers of physical barriers to place use, experienced more direct control of places they might use, and participated more frequently in paid supervised activities. Similar findings have been systematically repeated internationally (Low, 2006; Muñoz, 2009; Kilkelly, 2015). Over the past century and a half, there has been a gradual, long-term shift in the 'spaces of childhood', from outdoors to indoors, from woods, fields and streets, to back and front gardens, bedrooms and commercial and other formal play sites (Skelton and Valentine, 1998; Burke, 2005).

---

\* Corresponding Author: carol.barron@dcu.ie

Children's play does not occur in a vacuum; it happens 'somewhere' in a physical, social and cultural context. In an Irish context, we know that outdoor play is highly linked to the presence of friends nearby (Downey *et al.*, 2007; Kilkelly, 2015; Barron, 2017). Playing outdoors is seen as a normal part of a 'proper childhood' (Layard and Dunn, 2009) and beneficial for children's development (social, emotional physical) and their physical and mental health (Brussoni *et al.*, 2015) with recreation or leisure being acknowledged as an important field for adolescents' personal development (Larson, 2000).

All children and adolescents have the right to play and recreation. This has been enshrined for over thirty years in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) under Article 31. They also have the right under Article 12 to have their opinions and views taken into account on any issue that affects them. Therefore, to identify the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on children and adolescents' play, their access to, and use of outdoor spaces, and their friendship groups, we launched an online survey, following ethical approval, in late May for two weeks during Phase 1 of the easing of restrictions in Ireland. In total 1,476 participants completed the online survey; 214 were children (10-18 years) and 1,262 were parents, predominantly mothers, who answered about their children (aged 4-13). The survey generated a good geographical representation. We had respondents from all 26 counties, with Dublin (37.36%), Kildare (14.57%), Cork (7.6%) having the highest response rate. Analysis of the data is ongoing, but some preliminary analyses provide interesting insights into Irish children's lives during this unique period of time and we will discuss the multiple role and functions of the humble back garden for children's outdoor play and activity in this short paper.

## Findings

Ireland is a nation of house owners rather than apartments. 86.5% of all survey respondents live in a house and 99.3% of them have access to outdoor space for playing and hanging out. The top three most common outdoor spaces that children use and have access to are back gardens (26.6%), front gardens (20.1%) and communal green areas (14.18%). It is noticeable that the outdoor play spaces are in very close geographical proximity to the home. Almost 7 out of 10 respondents with a front or back garden say they have fixed play equipment. This number decreased as the children got chronologically older. Only 4.9% of respondents live in an apartment and 69.8% have access to outdoor space for playing and hanging out. Clearly children and adolescents living in apartments were more severely affected in relation to the availability of outdoor play and hanging out spaces and places.

### **Back Gardens**

The majority of the children's responses to the question 'Tell us about the best idea you had for playing outside your home' focused on the back garden which mirrors the spaces they had available for their play and recreation needs during the lockdown (see Figure 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** Urban Back Garden



**Figure 2.** Rural back garden

This ranged from normal outdoor activities “camping in the garden” (Girl, 12 Yrs., Carlow), to socializing with siblings “play[ing] catch in my garden with my sister” (Girl 12 Yrs., Waterford) to undertaking normal daily activities “set a table in the garden to do homework, art and eat outside” (Girl 14 Yrs., Dublin) to taking up new hobbies “I think gardening is fun” (Boy, 12 Yrs., Wicklow). Equally the absence of a back garden seriously detracted from children’s ability to play and socialize outdoors “I do not have a back garden. It has been harder for me to spend as much time outside” (Girl 14 Yrs., Dublin). Adolescents came up with creative ideas to socialize with their friends whilst maintaining the social distancing rules “I took a computer screen outside on a table and connected it to a laptop and speaker out in the front garden. My sister and I sit beside each other, and my best friend and her sister sit 2 meters away and we can have a movie night” (Girl, 17 Yrs., Dublin). Parents also adapted the back garden to meet education needs of their children “I made a home school in the garden shed, to at least try keep my child’s academics ability” (Mother, Kilkenny).

### ***Exclusion from public spaces and places***

When asked the question ‘What is the most difficult thing about playing outside as you used to?’, the social restrictions placed upon children and adolescents where they could not engage with their friends was the dominant theme expressed by children, adolescents and their parents. “I cannot see my friends to play anymore” (Girl 10 Yrs., Waterford), it also impacted on the play activities that children could and could not engage in such as; “You can’t play chasing games like tag or capture the flag and I just think sometimes it’s the odd squeeze of a hand or a pat on the back or a hug that really makes you feel loved by a friend so in ways, not being able to congratulate or support someone after something

they did in a game or said when your just sitting down chatting on a bench makes playing really hard". (Girl 13 Yrs., Dublin). Friends serve as a strong motivator for children and adolescents to occupy outdoor spaces.

## Conclusion

This short paper only briefly addresses a small section of the study's research findings that impact on children and adolescents use of outdoor space during the lockdown period of COVID-19 and it is hoped that a more detailed and wider discussion will be forthcoming. The humble, ordinary, mundane back garden was portrayed by children, adolescents and parents as a classroom, playground, socializing space, garden and allotment, sports pitch, family play space, hobby room, exercise space and eating area. Being a nation of house dwellers was very beneficial to Irish children enabling them to occupy this space and maintain a limited presence in the outdoors. As playing outdoors is strongly associated with the presence of friends, the social restrictions, which forbid social contact with others severely impacted children's ability to play with their friends. This in turn decreased their outdoor play and ability to 'hang out' beyond the garden. Both children and their parents identified the lack of physical contact with friends, which predominantly occurs in outdoor spaces as the most difficult aspect of the social restrictions. It is of notice that children and adolescents missed the element of physical contact that comes with playing such as hugging, 'high fiving and pats on the back'. Historically, there was recognition that most environments are still designed to reflect only adult values and their perception of children's spatial desires and needs when it is taken into account. However recent decades have shown a significant interest in children and adolescents' share in ownership and decision making regarding public spaces, but this is still a contested field (Freeman and Tranter, 2011). Children and adolescents are significant consumers of the humble back garden; we suggest that their voice, experience and opinion should be involved in decision making moving forward in relation to best practice for housing development plans.

## References

- Barron, C., 2017.** *Play and Recreation Needs of Children and Young People Growing Up in Co. Kildare, Ireland.* Dublin: DCU.
- Barron, C. and Emmett, M.J., 2020.** *Report on the Impact of COVID-19 on children's play and friendships in the Dublin City Council area.* Dublin: DCU.
- Brussoni, M.R., Gibbons, C., Gray, T., Ishikawa, E.B.H., Sandseter, A., Bienenstock, G., Chabot, G., Fuselli, P., Herrington, S., Janssen, I., Pickett, W., Power, M., Stanger, N., Sampson, M. and Tremblay, M.S., 2015.** What is the Relationship Between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, 6423–54, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph120606423>.
- Burke, C., 2005.** 'Play in focus'. Children researching their own spaces and places for play. *Children, Youth and Environment*, 15(1), 27-53.
- Downey, S., Hayes, N. and O'Neill, B., 2007.** *Play and technology for children aged 4-12.* Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children.
- Freeman, C. and Tranter, P., 2011.** *Children and their Urban Environment: Changing Worlds.* London: Earthscan.

- Gaster, S., 1991.** Urban Children's Access to their Neighborhood: Changes over Three Generations, *Environment and Behavior*, 23(1): 70–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916591231004>.
- Kilkelly, U., 2015.** *Children and the Outdoors: Contact with the outdoors and natural heritage among Children aged 5 to 12: Current trends, benefits, barriers and research requirements.* Kilkenny: Heritage Council.
- Larson, R. W., 2000.** Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170–83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.170>.
- Layard R and Dunn J., 2009.** *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive age.* The Children's Society. London: Penguin.
- Low, S.M., 2006.** The erosion of public space and the public realm: paranoia, surveillance and the privatization in New York City. *City and Society. Journal of the Society for Urban Anthropology*, 18(1), 43-49, <https://doi.org/10.1525/city.2006.18.1.43>.
- Muñoz, S.A., 2009.** *Children in the Outdoors A literature review.* Forres: Sustainable Development Research Centre.
- Rasmussen, K., 2004.** Places for children – children's places. *Childhood*, 11, 155-73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568204043053>.
- Skelton, T. and Valentine, G., 1998.** *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures.* London: Routledge.
- UNICEF, 2020.** *COVID-19 and Children.* Last accessed on Nov 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/covid-19-and-children/>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989.** *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).* Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

