# Flintshire Play Memories 1910 - 2014

## An evaluation report overview: results and trends

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants who so kindly and honestly shared their childhood play memories. Thank you to members of the wider Flintshire Play Network for their assistance and support in helping us to undertake the Flintshire Play Memories campaign.

*'The right to play is the child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.'*

David Lloyd George (1925)

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## Background

The Flintshire Play Memories campaign was an in depth social history project to gather and record the memories of the residents of Flintshire regarding their own play experiences. The project ran from January 2011 until July 2014. It was designed and facilitated by the staff of the Flintshire County Council Play Development Team with support from numerous community organisations that form the wider Flintshire Play Network.

The project formed part of a larger regional project by the charity NEW Play, to gather evidence about the changes in children's ability to play that have occurred within living memory. It is widely accepted that in recent decades children's freedom to play has been restricted in a number of ways. Both the time and space available to children to play has been restricted, leading to some children experiencing a poverty of play opportunities. This has been recognised by the Welsh Government's Play Policy (2002):

*'the impact of modern society on children's lives has significantly restricted their opportunity to play freely and has resulted in a poverty of play opportunities in the general environment.'*

Welsh Government's Play Policy also highlights the critical importance of play to the wellbeing of all children and society in general:

*'play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it. Decision making at all levels of government should include a consideration of the impact of those decisions, on children's opportunities to play.'*

The decision to conduct the Play Memories campaign was taken as a result of Flintshire County Council's concern that the reduction in children's opportunities to play was having an impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of the child population. It was felt that gathering detailed evidence about the changing nature of children's ability to play freely, would afford the local authority a deeper understanding of the barriers that limit both the time and space available to children to play.

## Play Memories campaign overview

Flintshire County Council Play Development Team identified ten questions to ask residents. The questions were designed to enable respondents to think in depth about the nature of their childhood play experiences. The questions that they asked were:

1.  When did you play? (for example times, days, periods of the year)
2.  Describe the community you grew up in and the places where you played
3.  What types of things did you do whilst playing?
4.  Who did you play with?
5.  How do you feel now when you remember playing?
6.  What do you think playing did for you?
7.  Can you tell us if you ever hurt yourself whilst playing?
8.  Can you tell us if you ever got upset whilst playing?
9.  Can you tell us if you ever caused mischief whilst playing?
10. How do you think play has changed for children growing up today?

There were a number of groups who kindly helped with the dissemination of the questionnaire in a variety of ways. Some groups passed the questionnaires to their members and some held discussions groups to explore their memories before recording their own memories on the handout provided.

This evaluation report is an overview of the wider analysis and findings contained within the independent and more comprehensive *Flintshire Play Memories 1910-2014: Evaluation Report* conducted by Play Wales in early 2015. The report is available at: **www.flintshire.gov.uk/psa**

This booklet provides an overview of the responses provided by the residents of Flintshire who shared their personal memories of playing when they were children. It also highlights trends that emerged from the information gathered, as well as a number of observations and recommendations that will inform the way in which children's right to play could be supported in future across the county.

# Section 1 – Analysis of responses to questions

## 1. When did you play? (for example times, days, periods of the year)

It is clear from the responses to this question that children, regardless of when they were born, given the opportunity, play all year round and every day. In essence, provided that if children have time to choose what to do, they will play.

Some of the most popular responses given when children played included: everyday; all day; all year; holidays; school; weekends.

The memories of the older generations (between the 1920s and the 1950s in particular) made numerous references to the length of time that they played being significantly lengthy. The respondents offered numerous memories of being '*chucked*' or '*thrown*' out in the morning and told to return at a certain time or '*when it goes dark*', '*when the streetlights come on*'.

This type of reference isn't totally absent in more recent generations, but it would appear that they are less common from about the 1970s onwards.

*'We had a great deal of freedom … it was wartime … but we went out on our own but knew to report back frequently … parents worried about the bigger issues then! ... I feel children today don't have the freedom we had. Adults always have to be present.'*

*'We played from breakfast till tea time.'*

*'Mums used to think there was something wrong with you if you stayed in.'*

*'We used to be chucked out in the morning.'*

## 2. Describe the community you grew up in and the places where you played

The places where children play have also remained the same to some degree. Principally everywhere can be a play space to a child with a playful disposition. The main change that seems to have occurred is concern as to whether children have the permission to be able to play in spaces that are unsupervised by adults.

The campaign provides a wealth of evidence that children have always played in places that are not specifically designated for play, but that hasn't deterred them. In fact, from the memories of residents, being in such places appears to be part of the lure for many children.

What has changed seems to be the amount of accessible space within the public realm that children can freely use whilst unsupervised.

When reading the memories provided by participants about where they played when they were children, the diversity of settings named is striking. The list of places where children played is long. Local places, mostly outside, are a key feature of where children have played through the ages.

The local nature of children's play is evident across almost every response. Even if they have highlighted other places, spaces at or surrounding the family home is the overwhelming location where children have played throughout their childhoods.

*'Everywhere, anywhere at any time.'*

*'Often isolated places but never felt in any danger.'*

*'No one had cars so walked everywhere up into the hills as far as Treuddyn Down to the rivers.'*

*'Large tree at the top of the street where everyone used to meet.'*

### 3. What types of things did you do whilst playing?

This question received more depth in its responses than any of the others. The things that children did are far too numerous to list here, but as expected building dens, climbing trees, water fights, rope swings, making things such as mud pies and rose petal perfume were frequently mentioned in people's memories.

Engaging in make believe scenarios such as playing house, cowboys and Indians, pirates or dinosaurs were a consistent theme, and to some degree appear to follow trends in the cinema or television.

Modifying the environment in some way was also a persistent theme, such as dam building, digging holes and building sandcastles. Lighting fires and making traps also seemed to be widespread. Playful interaction with public open space was often discussed, for example not stepping on the cracks or grids on pavements, leapfrogging bollards or walking on walls. Games such as Hide and Seek, Tag/Tick, British Bulldogs, Hopscotch, Kerby and Skipping still seem to be popular.

The largest change in what children do when they play was related to the increased use of computers and 'screen time' in modern society. This was most often talked about as a negative issue, with many of the older generation in particular, thinking that this was the cause of a decline in children's outdoor play in modern society.

From the memories provided by the younger generations and contrary to what some of the older adults have perceived in their responses, children still appear to do the same sorts of things as they have always done when playing. They seek out uncertainty and play in their surrounding environment in a whole host of different and complex ways. One thing that is clearly evidenced is that the arrival of different technologies has added an additional range of stuff for children to play with.

One thing is certain - computers, televisions and smart phones aren't going anywhere anytime soon. The positive news is that when we ask children about what they would like to do in their spare time, they still highlight their desire to play in their neighbourhoods, with their friends.

*'I don't think that kids have the freedom we had. We had to be back by dark and beyond that we were left to our own devices. Now they have to have a phone with them and seem stifled by overly protective parents.*

*'Play nowadays appears to be less outdoors and more indoors. It appears that children and young people spend a lot of their free time engaged in interaction with modern technology.'*

## 4. Who did you play with?

The people that children choose to play with, has remained the same over time. Children predominantly play with their friends, and whoever is around them. From the memories provided, this tends to be siblings, cousins and neighbours.

Children very rarely cited playing with adults as being in their fondest memories of people they played with. Parents were largely absent from most people's most frequently recalled play memories. Most children's fondest play memories appear to be characterised by the absence of adults.

When children are given the opportunity to play in their own neighbourhoods, they meet and get to know other children and adults, building familiarity, trust and a community spirit. This helps parents to gain confidence to allow children to play out at other times of the year.

Giving children permission to play out close to their home and those of their friends helps them gain an understanding of the world they live in, as they learn to deal with situations outside the home, without being too far away from adults. This is an important step to gaining self-reliance and greater independence for going to the park, the local shop or walking to school, or other local places on their own.

## 5. How do you feel now when you remember playing?

The most striking thing about the responses to this question was the overwhelmingly positive feelings that all respondents recounted. Not one respondent gave a negative comment. The only time negative words were used was to describe their feelings towards children growing up now in modern society. For example:

*'How I wish I could spirit my grandchildren back to that time. Life was so simple and there was great pleasure in just being alive. There was no money around, no designer gear, but good and lasting friendships … the best of times even though it was wartime.'*

*'I think today's children have lost their freedom … sad.'*

From a public policy perspective this is great news as there are significant health benefits from people feeling happy and experiencing enjoyment.

## 6.  What do you think playing did for you?

All responses highlighted the many positive things that play and playing has done for them as human beings; the responses were particularly overwhelming in their diversity. There has been no change over time in the way respondents identified the many benefits that playing has provided them.

The diversity of answers offered by some respondents shows a reasonable understanding of the critical value of play in supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of humans.

The most frequently given answer was about the positive effect playing has on the development of social skills and emotional intelligence.

## 7.  Can you tell us if you ever hurt yourself whilst playing?

The overwhelming and consistent response was 'yes', almost everyone who responded hurt themselves whilst playing. The responses appear to have been the same regardless of when respondents were born.

There are many memories of minor injuries such as cuts, bumps, scrapes, bruises, nettle stings, a few stitches and even a few broken bones. Most of these appear to have occurred from falling off things or falling over.

## 8. Can you tell us if you ever got upset whilst playing?

The most overwhelming response, above all others was yes, children got upset when they played. By looking at the responses decade by decade no significant difference could be found between responses provided by different age groups.

Even though almost everyone stated that they got upset, they still had enduring positive memories of their play experiences.

Although our overwhelming drive as humans is to protect our children, there clearly needs to be a balanced approach, as overprotection can deprive our children of opportunities that are developmentally essential. This is often referred to as 'cotton wool culture'.

In reality we cannot just have positive experiences in life. Sometimes negative experiences offer us an opportunity to develop much needed coping mechanisms. Being upset affords us the opportunity to manage our primary emotions and it would appear from the responses provided, that playing provides many such opportunities.

*'Made friends. Fell out with friends. Found new friends …*
*I'm still here and it's all good. It prepared me for the realities*
*of life!'*

## 9. Can you tell us if you ever caused mischief whilst playing?

The majority of children get up to lots and lots of mischief when playing. There was no evidence that this has changed in any way over time. Respondents provided generous and honest accounts of what they have got up to over the decades.

*'Phoned Nana and told her she'd won £1,000. She believed us.'*

*'Locking kids in the old furnace, three inch thick metal doors – we all did it as a right of passage.'*

*'Jumping from carriage to carriage and getting off before you reached the bridge.'*

*'Knock door run/ginger.'*

*'Unhooked the railway carriages.'*

*'Tied a bin lid to the dog's tail.'*

*'Stuck a stone up someone's nose.'*

*'Winding up the grumpy neighbours.'*

There were also lots of references to a significant number of broken windows usually caused by stray balls and also lots and lots of scrumping.

So who was on the receiving end of the mischief? From the responses it would appear that it was mainly children's neighbours. There is also a trend of 'taking revenge' on people who were mean or grumpy towards them. Other people close to respondents also seemed to be the most likely to be the victims of the mischief – brothers, sisters, parents, cousins and even a dog.

It should also be noted that not everyone was mischievous. A significant number of people cited a number of reasons why they didn't, such as:

*'No – too many people in village watching.'*

*'I cannot remember causing mischief; too scared of my father to get into trouble.'*

## 10. How do you think play has changed for children growing up today?

From the memories provided by respondents the answer is mixed. The process of play itself has remained the same as it always has, but what is overwhelmingly clear from the evidence provided is that, in the opinion of the adults who have responded, they consistently felt that children's freedom to play has been increasingly eroded over time.

The reasons for this are complex and interrelated. The adults who responded highlighted on many occasions that something needs to be done to ensure the wellbeing of future generations.

Every generation seems to think very highly of their own play experiences regardless of whether they were born in 1910 or 2000. The games that the children play may have changed and the time for them to play may be harder to come by but when children play they still value it greatly.

Play culture is children's culture and just like culture in wider society, it is not static, it evolves over time. Is it better, worse or just different? One thing is clear – the emphasis at a policy level should be on ensuring the conditions are right for children to choose how they play and what they do when they play.

The way that respondents think that play has changed seems to be focused on a restriction of children's independent mobility. Respondents provided what they saw as a wide range of reasons that tended to be associated with fear of some kind.

*'I don't think people feel it's as safe these days to play out in their community. Children seem to travel much less away from their home to play. Children and young people seem to play a lot at home with technological games today unlike 20 – 25 years ago'.*

# Section 2:  Trends identified in the data

## Fear of strangers

The greatest fear for the adults questioned seems to be the fear of strangers. There is a worrying trend amongst adults who perceive that it is not safe for children to play out independently in modern society. The fear of strangers and abductions has increased over time. This seems to have been increasingly more prevalent from the 1970s onwards.

*'Not many children play out like we used to. There are a lot more "weirdos" about.'*

*'It's changed massively, children are warned against playing out because of prowling adults'.*

*'Can't go out in the dark now … have to be on guard because of perverts who are predatory and sick.'*

*'Parents worry that someone will snatch their children and do terrible things to them, therefore children are not allowed to wander and explore so freely'.*

Although parents are quite rightly concerned for the safety of their children outside of the home, the abduction rate of children, by adults not know to them, has not increased over the decades.

### Risk averse culture

The information provided from respondents indicates that adults are very concerned about an increase in what they perceive as the application of overzealous health and safety management. Their contention is that this is reducing the breadth of play types that children are able to take part in.

Interestingly, no respondents said that they were concerned about the risks of injury to children from playing. Everyone seemed to accept that minor injuries were part of playing and that a degree of risk is necessary to support children's development.

### Institutionalisation of childhood

Largely due to the economic drivers of modern society, children are spending an increasing amount of time in structured settings with professional adults and less time choosing their own behaviour.

*'More health and safety things, not much fun anymore.'*

*'It is now much more controlled and children can't take risks.'*

*'Obsession with safety! This hinders creativity and doesn't allow for exploration, cooperation, decision making etc, which is essential in an individual's development.'*

*'Children are in institutional activity from morning to night – school, after schools, clubs etc. rather than free outdoors.'*

*'Childcare arrangements mean children are not often at home.'*

*'Children are not allowed the freedom to explore and play today, by themselves. Everything seems to be structured.'*

It is this overstructuring and institutionalisation of children's lives that appears to be the single largest factor in reducing the amount of time that children have available to play.

## Technology

From the analysis of the responses, many respondents cited technology as playing a part in the changing face of children's play in some way. Most appear to perceive that technology is the cause of the problem.

There are different schools of thought on the role of technology in children's play. It is likely that the technology itself is not necessarily the problem. Rather it is part of a wider more complex issue relating to children's independence and whether children have the parental permission to play out unsupervised.

*'It is not a safe place to let children play too far from home and computer games and TV is playing a large part in their lives.'*

## Spaces

The memories of respondents, when collated, identified a perceived trend in the reduction of spaces available to children to play.

One thing that is explicit from the memories of respondents is the importance of informal spaces for children to access for playing. Adult designed spaces such as play areas were also highlighted as being important to children, as was staffed play provision. However, the most frequently highlighted spaces were consistently informal spaces.

*'There are more restrictions to outdoor playing and significant decrease in open spaces for play.'*

*'Less places to play in towns.'*

*'Not enough space in general.'*

*'Not many green spaces to go and play.'*

## Societal pressures and materialism

There was a trend in some of the memories provided relating to what respondents saw as the rise of materialism and pressures from society to 'keep up with the Jones'' that they perceived as impacting upon children's play behaviours.

While children can and will play anywhere and with almost anything, there are resources we can provide that can facilitate and encourage play. These needn't be expensive, in fact some of the most effective resources for play are 'loose parts'.

Loose parts can be anything that can be moved, changed, taken apart, used in different ways, and with no specific instructions. Examples include, sand, water, shells, fabric, buckets, boxes, rope, tyres, bottles, wood and scrap materials of all kinds.

*'When we were young there was never really a must have toy. Nowadays there is more pressure to have for example the latest Xbox or expensive scooter putting unnecessary strains on children and parents to keep up with others.'*

*'Children are far too adult orientated today. They are more concerned about what they have rather than what they can do.'*

*'Children now have sophistication or expensive games ... must have the latest or you are nobody.'*

**Traffic**

The amount of traffic on the roads and the dangers of cars in general has been a significant trend in responses.

There are more cars on the road than ever before and they do present a very real danger to children in particular.

*'Traffic has escalated, making your way across towns is harder.'*

*'Lot more traffic on roads. People frightened for their safety.'*

*'Streets not safe now.'*

*'There is too much traffic. Society has changed.'*

*'Parents worry about letting their children go out. More traffic on roads.'*

*'Fewer safe environments because of amount of traffic.'*

# Observations

Simply reminding adults of their own play experiences is enough to trigger a significant emotional response. This is a useful and necessary advocacy tool for supporting children's right to play. Therefore the act of delivering this Play Memories campaign has made a significant contribution to supporting children's play.

Adults acknowledge how important play, freedom and independent mobility were to them when they were growing up.

The majority of adults now view the world as unsafe for children to play independently and seek to 'protect' them by limiting their freedom to play unsupervised.

Adults acknowledge and are often saddened that children in modern society don't have the same freedom to play that they used to experience. What has emerged very clearly is that children's play, as a unique set of behaviours, doesn't appear to have changed at all.

However, what does appear to have changed significantly is the availability of time, space and permission for children to be able to play freely. This has meant that for some children, their opportunities to play have been greatly constrained and inevitably this will be impacting on their mental and physical wellbeing.

Some of the reasons that have curtailed children's freedom are very real, however some appear to be based upon misperceptions that are not uncommon within the general population at large.

The Play Memories campaign has demonstrated that there was a time when it was accepted that children, once they were old enough and confident enough to negotiate the outside world independently or with friends and siblings, played outside and ranged within their neighbourhood freely.

Playing contributes to the wellbeing and resilience of human beings – particularly young ones. Having welcoming places, enough time and the company of others to play with every day, is of great consequence to all children and young people – as adults we need to foster environments that support this.

# Tips for supporting children to play out confidently

We all have a responsibility to support and prepare our children to play out confidently in their community. Playing out benefits children as well as their parents, carers and the wider community. Supporting children to play out in their community contributes to creating a play-friendly and cohesive community. To encourage parents and carers and local communities to support children playing out confidently these top tips may help:

## 1. Prepare children to be road safe
Streets make up the major part of public space within communities. We can prepare children from an early age by telling them and showing them ways to keep themselves safe on and around roads.

## 2. Look to our own driving habits
Parents are often concerned about traffic when giving children permission to play out. As drivers, we can drive at safe speeds in the same way we would wish others to drive in the residential streets where our children play.

## 3. Help children get to know their neighbourhood
If we are less reliant on travelling by car ourselves in our local communities, children will get to know their local streets.

Walking to and from local facilities such as the shops, school and the park can help us identify solutions together with our children to keep themselves safe.

## 4. Be community friendly
We can get to know local people, neighbours and other families, and agree with each other to keep an eye out for children. This fosters a sense of a safe community, allowing more children to play out more, and to be safer doing so.

## 5. Trust children
We can make agreements with children on where and how long they go out to play. If they know their local area, their address and phone number, whom they can call on, and tell the time, it helps to make those arrangements.

## 6. Be realistic
Keeping our worries in perspective and knowing neighbours and local residents on which you can call if you have any concerns will help. The benefits of playing out far outweigh the risks.

## 7. Make a change
We can join with others locally to campaign for changes to our neighbourhood that may make our local areas places where children can play out confidently. We can promote the importance of playing out to other people within our neighbourhoods by word of mouth or holding community events and letting others know about them.

# Time, space and permission to play

Having access to time and space for every child to access their right to play is critical to the wellbeing of children and therefore society as a whole. As David Lloyd George pointed out in his inaugural speech to the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) in 1925:

*'We cannot infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of our citizens'.*

Collectively we have somehow infringed that right in a variety of complex and inter-related ways. Our challenge now must be to ensure that every child can access their basic right to play and reverse the negative trends that have emerged from the real and emotive memories that have been afforded to us from the minds and hearts of our community here in Flintshire.

For more information on how you can get involved and support children to play please visit:

**www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/LeisureAndTourism/Leisure-Services/Childrens-Play.aspx**

**www.playwales.org.uk**