

CANTERBURY SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS PROJECT SEMINAR
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THE IMPACT OF TRANSPORT POLICY ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT:
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The purpose of my contribution to today's conference is to place on the agenda an aspect of children's maturation into coping adults which to date has been largely overlooked. It is aimed at revealing how policies and practices in the transport and related spheres have had damaging effects on children. I conclude with an outline of a strategy intended to return to children the wide range of opportunities that they need for their development outside the home which previous generations of children enjoyed.

Some years ago, the government transport minister at the time referred to the extent of car ownership as a barometer of freedom. What does that barometer show for children? Over the last 30 years at least, owing to a concern for their safety, this has been steadily diminished by parental restrictions imposed on their being out and about on their own. More and more of them are escorted on their leisure and school journeys - and up to an ever-later age in their childhood. This may well be having a detrimental effect on their social and emotional development as well as, more obviously, on their physical development. It is as if a malign dictator intent on harming society by picking on its most vulnerable and important members was achieving his ends by promoting activities which make the environment unsafe for children to be out on their own; encouraging parents and their children not only to be aware of the dangers but to make them feel that they are more at risk than they are in practice; and depriving them of opportunities for improving their health and acquiring these coping skills.

THE LOSS OF CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENCE

When comparison is made with the lifestyle of previous generations of children, it would seem to be a cause for concern that such a high proportion of parents should feel it necessary to escort their children - nearly all able-bodied - and to chauffeur them increasingly in cars, with the result that they learn little from exposure to the outside natural and man-made world: our research has recorded that whilst 80 per cent of 7 and 8 year olds went to school on their own in the early 1970s, less than one in ten were doing so two decades later (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1991).

We also recorded that, whilst most children own a bicycle, few are allowed to use it as a means of transport. This seems regrettable since, given safe provision for it, it is the ideal means not only for their independent mobility but also for promoting their fitness and health (British Medical Association, 1992; Hillman, 1993a). The effect of this restriction is all the more unfortunate in terms of the size of the world accessible to children with a bicycle since, compared with walking, it has the potential of extending a person's geographical catchment 10 to 15-fold.

Clearly, a considerable latent demand for cycling exists, and this is borne out by the evidence from the East Kent survey regarding children's high ownership of bicycles but their very low use of them, even for the school journey. Yet, at one Suffolk school where safe facilities for cycling do exist, 60 per cent of its children cycle to school and, in Denmark, most children, even at the age of five, do so (Danish Ministry of Transport, 1993).

PARENTAL FEARS

The reasons given by parents for the restrictions they impose on their children's independent mobility reflect a growing anxiety. Increasingly, the outside world is seen as a place where children are likely to be injured by a motor vehicle or harmed by a bully or stranger. The instinctive wish of parents to avoid their children being exposed to risk has been translated into them taking away from children their freedom – for adults it would be called a right - to get around on their own. That freedom has been replaced by their time being more and more under adult supervision and structured by adults, with a rising and worrying proportion of children's waking hours being spent indoors in front of the TV or in playing computer games. This is a sad commentary on this social change of the last few decades in that its effects have largely gone unnoticed and that fear is its inspiration.

Parents' concerns regarding the risks of road injury to their children if on their own are justified. Analysis of transport statistics on the volume and speed of traffic reveals that in the last 20 years car traffic has almost doubled and that of lorries has increased by a half. And surveys show that vehicle speeds have risen too: over two in three car drivers and one in two lorry drivers now exceed the 30mph limit. Vulnerable road users such as children are also affected by the so-called 'improved' performance of motor vehicles enabling drivers to accelerate to ever higher speeds in fewer seconds. That then requires them to exercise greater vigilance to avoid being knocked down.

Department of Transport road casualty statistics during these 20 years record 200,000 children having been fatally or seriously injured in this country, mainly through no fault of their own - unless normal carelessness in child behaviour is to be treated as blameworthy. Nearly two-thirds of these injuries have been caused when they were walking or cycling. The figures reflect children's particular dependence on walking for their independent travel and thus their disproportionate risk of injury owing to the particular vulnerability of pedestrians when hit by a motor vehicle. The statistics on road injuries also reveal a significantly higher rate among young teenagers compared with younger children, and among older teenagers compared with younger teenagers. This is partly due to changes in the time of exposure to traffic danger and to the use of forms of travel associated with higher speeds and therefore greater risk of injury when a collision does take place.

The higher rates also reflect the years of experience of acquiring road skills during childhood. For instance, in previous generations, children were far more likely to have acquired them when cycling on relatively safe roads. These could then apply at an older age. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RSPA) has published a Code of Practice recommending a minimum age of ten for children to cycle on public roads. It is thought that, at a younger age, they run the risk of it being beyond their competence to manage riding a cycle whilst at the same time coping with the prevailing traffic conditions.

The other source of parents' fears is far less justified by the evidence. It stems from a concern that their children may be assaulted or molested by strangers - or murdered. A study in the London Borough of Camden found that 90 per cent of parents are 'very' or 'quite worried' about the possible abduction or molestation of their children, and 60 per cent about the risk of them being bullied (DiGuisseppi and Roberts, 1997). Recent MORI polls have recorded that 40 per cent of 5-11 year old children are not allowed to play outside their homes and that 85 per cent of the population think that the risk of being a victim of crime has

isen in the last ten years, three in ten saying that, as a means of crime protection, they always use a car rather than go by public transport or on foot.

This risk needs to be put in perspective. An extremely small number of the 12 million children in the UK are murdered by strangers. It is far more common for them to be murdered by a person known to them. Indeed, it could be wryly observed that far more are killed by strangers behind the steering wheel of a motor vehicle than are killed by strangers on foot. However, excessive media coverage exaggerates their incidence and thus the degree of risk.. For instance, as a result of one unaccompanied child mistakenly alighting from a coach at an earlier stop, and therefore not being on the coach to be met at his destination, an alarm was raised and the local police force called in to investigate the disappearance of the child. This led to National Express making a ruling that no child under the age of 16 years is allowed to travel unaccompanied on its coaches.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

The circumscription of the lives of children, with growing prohibitions on their independent activity outside the home, is of course well-intentioned. But its effect has damaged children in ways additional to their loss of freedom. A growing body of research suggests that children's fitness is declining and that their obesity is increasing. This is in large part attributable to the fact that they walk and cycle far less (Armstrong and MacManus, 1994): National Travel Survey data over the last 20 years show annual mileages on foot and cycle among those of school age declining by over 25 and 40 per cent respectively (Department of Transport, 1994). The latest of these surveys shows that over 90 per cent of 5-10 year olds and three-quarters of 11-15 year olds live within three miles of their school, but only one per cent and nine per cent respectively travel by cycle which, as noted earlier, is an ideal means of keeping fit, and has the further distinct advantage that it can be tied in so readily to the daily routine.

It is a disturbing reflection on the limited public and political perceptions of children's needs that the link between their loss of independent mobility and their declining fitness has gone largely unnoticed over the last few decades in the attempt both to accommodate the growth of car-based patterns of activity - which makes the outdoor environment so unsafe that parents do not allow children out on their own - and then to protect them from the consequent dangers (Hillman, 1993b). It is salutary to note too that when children do obtain the parental 'licence' to travel on their own, there are fewer outdoor public spaces for their social and recreational activity owing to the appropriation of streets for traffic and parking. Moreover, the quality of these spaces has declined sharply not only because of the dangers posed by motor vehicles but also the fouling of the air from exhaust pipes and the interference with comfortable communication induced by vehicle engine noise.

Greater confinement to the home and more of their journeys being made by car are factors which are, of course, associated with children's increasingly sedentary lifestyle. That does not bode well for their future health for it is unrealistic to think that PE and games on school days only - that is half the days of the year - can compensate for the loss of the medically recommended minimum of a daily dose of 20 to 30 minutes' physical exercise of some sort or another. We may have a time bomb on our hands which will explode in 20 or 30 years as the incidence of heart disease could rise sharply owing to the insufficiency of daily exercise during the critical years of childhood.

MENTAL HEALTH

The damage of confinement is not limited to curbing children's physical development. It also has other closely-linked adverse consequences. The effect of steadily and almost insidiously diminishing children's access to a safe environment in parents' narrow but understandable pursuit of aiming to protect them from harm may be incurring psychological costs. These are fairly intangible and therefore difficult to measure. However, a recent Mental Health Foundation survey recorded one in five children suffering from some degree of mental stress, some of which is likely to be attributable to confinement to the home with relationships with adults limited to one or two parents.

Though the outdoor environment contains within it experience, learning opportunities and stimuli that are crucial to children's understanding of the real world, it is now out of bounds to them until they reach an increasingly advanced age in their childhood. Whilst they do not enjoy similar levels of security to the home in the local neighbourhood, and the reassurance stemming from that, it does provide another learning environment which can contribute to their maturation, namely opportunities for giving rein to instinctive desires not only to enlarge their geographical boundaries and develop their physical and practical skills but also their social and emotional skills – and build on all of these.

In this neighbourhood, they can do so, gaining experience from making their own decisions without adult supervision, learning how to act responsibly and how to assess the motives of those they do not know. They can have adventures in what are to them relatively dangerous situations, be mischievous, set just-attainable challenges that give pleasure from meeting them, take risks, be adventurous and make mistakes and suffer the consequences, gain self-esteem and self-confidence by being successful, reliable and punctual, and contribute to family and community life by shopping, visiting or running errands. These are all basic elements of growing up best acquired through exposure in daily life situations when on their own and at an earlier, rather than a later age. The 'information' they gain in the process can then be placed in the 'memory bank' to call upon when making decisions in more demanding situations, such as when faced with a bully.

It is worth recalling that, when accompanied by an older person such as a parent, a child's instinct is to leave decisions to that person in the same way that, when abroad, we tend to leave conversation in a foreign language if we can to someone fluent in that language - but, in that way, lose the opportunity of improving our language skills through practice. Indeed, the local neighbourhood - just outside the home for young children, and further and further afield as they grow older - represents a unique locus for relating knowledge, information and social behaviour learned at school and in the home to real life situations - unsupervised.

There is a further psychological dimension to be added to the damaging effects of limiting children's exposure to the outside world unless they are accompanied by an adult. Not allowing them out on their own takes some of the excitement and adventure out of children's lives - witness the thrill they enjoy when first allowed to do things on their own. It is interesting to note from experiments on primates that damage to the development of their social behaviour by depriving them of the rough and tumble of their early years cannot be restored: survival rises with the extent of experience of risk taking.

Children's detention in their homes inculcates in their impressionable minds a grossly misleading perception of the world outside as hostile – a world in which we, as experienced

and responsible adults, consider that people one does not know could well be up to no good and that their locality may contain within it elements of danger to which they should not be exposed.

Increasingly, one can observe urban children being dropped off so that they can make the last few yards on their way to school, hurrying and, in some instances, looking only straight ahead. The impression one gains from this behaviour is that they have had the message of stranger/danger very effectively instilled in them. Indeed, a Guardian article last year recommended parents to tell their children to avoid eye contact with strangers.

The apparently worthy initiatives of the Walking Bus for children on their way to school – as if going through a minefield, Safe Houses where children are told they can find help if they feel threatened, the ParentWatch schemes in which parents volunteer to supervise parks and play areas, and the Stranger/Danger campaigns such as that of Kidscape which advises parents to tell their children to Yell, Run and Tell if approached by a stranger, all contribute to a siege mentality in children's minds. The effect of all of them is to promote paranoia among parents that they are not acting responsibly unless they are always with their children outside the home and to make them feel irresponsible if they are unable to do so or to delegate someone to act in their place. For all these reasons, we should be somewhat wary about assuming that children's views are a reliable source of information unless these are interpreted from the perspective of the limits of their experience and possibly an exaggerated concern about risk reflecting the influence of their parents' over-protective instincts.

As a direct consequence of this form of indoctrination we, the strangers, are less inclined to engage in conversation with children we do not know – a perfectly healthy instinct - lest our motives be misconstrued. It also has the insidious effect of relieving us of our societal responsibilities for keeping an eye on other people's children and intervening when we judge it necessary. It all runs counter to promoting confidence-building in children and generating desirable behaviour such as conviviality within the community.

One of the few aspects of children's lives outside school that has received attention during the last few years has stemmed from a concern about more and more children being escorted to and from school, albeit that its origins appear to lie in the contribution that this has been making to road congestion, particularly in the morning rush hour. This has led to some initiatives, such as the Safe Routes to School projects, aimed at reversing this trend. Laudable though these are, they reflect the conventional but false view that children's lives are, in the main, school-oriented and thus that the proper response to the greater danger to which children are now exposed from traffic lies in making the school journey safer. It is as if the school journey is the only one requiring a safe environment in which to travel, overlooking the fact that children make many more journeys to destinations in their free time than they do to and from school and that 90 per cent of their fatalities occur on these other journeys (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1991).

WHY NOT SAFE ROUTES FOR CHILDREN?

The exercise of parental choice with regard to the school that their child attends is another policy initiative which appears both desirable and democratic. On the face of it, it runs with the tide of extending personal freedoms as it enables parents to advance their children's academic prospects. However, it usually leads to the selection of a more distant school, making chauffeuring by car rather than independent travel on foot or cycle a more likely

outcome. This harms the health of people along the route then taken twice daily as it adds to the noise, pollution and danger from traffic (Whitelegg, Gatrell, and Naumann, 1993). It also results in the loss of a place in the chosen school for a child living nearby who may then have to travel further as a consequence.

Dependence on car travel also tends to limit participation in extra-curricular activity. Friendship patterns are more likely to be geographically-spread and to be more formally arranged - a very different character to the more spontaneous ones that can thrive when children are free to casually drop in on each other. In addition, it promotes the culture of self-interest in that parents are encouraged to seek the safest means for their children to get to and from their destinations - not just for school (the ordinary car if the Range Rover cannot be afforded) - without regard to the effects of that decision on the safety of other children and other road users as these vehicles are so dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists.

Most recently, a policy change instituted by the Home Office under last year's Crime and Disorder Act (Home Office, 1998) can have the effect, where it is introduced, of limiting children's quality of life still further. Owing to the problems of criminal activity among some young children in some urban areas, local authorities have been given powers to impose a ban on those under the age of ten being out of doors, unsupervised in a public place, from as early as 9pm. That may be an appropriate penalty but only for particular 'offending' children.

However, the restriction on how they spend their time out of doors can have a range of undesirable outcomes: first and foremost, it takes away from children a basic right by imposing a blanket limit on all members of this group in society because some of its members commit crimes. Adults would almost certainly oppose such legislation, other than if it were introduced as a wartime curfew or in the face of extreme incidents of terrorist activity. Second, such a ban inculcates a view that responsible parents do not allow their children out of sight. Third, and allied to this, it effectively requires parents in the areas in which the ban is imposed to enforce it. Otherwise the police and social services will come to their homes to require them to do so or to take the necessary measures to make the ban effective.

Such legislation reflects a view running counter to the progressive approach of giving children more and more licence as they grow older. It is surely for parents to decide at what age their children can be out and about on their own in the evening.

A REMEDIAL STRATEGY

What form would a strategy take to create an environment in which children can enjoy both freedom and the benefit to their physical and mental health from being able to spend more time on their own outside the home? Four components could be suggested:

At the transport level, the attractions of motorised travel generally need to be reduced, environmental standards raised, and cycling and walking given pride of place in the transport hierarchy through the creation of safe networks for them so that they are no longer seen as dangerous (Hillman and Cleary, 1992). The East Kent surveys not only show the high levels of cycle ownership among children but the extent to which children would wish to use them as a form of transport. Moreover, a significant proportion of the children in the survey have

indicated that they would like to improve their fitness and, as noted earlier, the bicycle is an ideal means for them to do so.

Other measures, such as traffic calming, are called for, with traffic only minimally intruding: a recent study has shown that, after such measures were introduced, 50 per cent more children were allowed to go to school on their own. Much lower speed limits – say 15 to 20mph–must be adopted and enforced. A more equitable balance also needs to be struck between teaching children skills to cope with traffic danger to minimise their risk of injury on the roads through changes which reflect the fact that just because they are likely to be more careless and inexperienced, they are not necessarily culpable in an increasingly dangerous traffic environment which is not of their making.

At the planning level, schools need to be encouraged to adopt a catchment policy favouring children living locally; at the same time, the adoption of longer distance patterns of travel for all purposes should be discouraged, and local activity promoted both to reduce the need for motorised travel, repopulate the streets with people on foot, and improve the amenity of the pedestrian environment to reflect the fact that the street also has a social function. Far more could be done to enable children to ‘reclaim the streets’ as a locus for their outdoor activity (Tranter and Doyle, 1996).

At the institutional level, considerable scope exists for central and local government to demonstrate that they are truly committed to improving children’s quality of life outside the home. At present, there is a lack of interaction across professional and departmental boundaries, particularly those of health, social services, education, sport, transport and environment, with the result that, for instance, giving primacy to cycling and walking in transport policy is not seen as a unique means of realising many common public policy objectives, especially those of health. Rather than the blanket ban on all children being out and unsupervised after 9pm, the limited resources available to police and social services may well be deployed in liaising with the parent(s) of children who have been causing trouble. And, given the close link between proximity and levels of participation in leisure activities (Hillman and Whalley, 1977), far more recognition needs to be given to local provision –smaller, more numerous and therefore more easily accessible facilities rather than larger, better equipped ones which are then more likely to require motorised travel to reach them.

Most importantly, at the level of cultural values and public attitudes, the conventional view about children’s rights to a relatively safe environment needs to be reviewed and a reappraisal made of their claim to it and of its role in terms of their development. Taking away these rights needs perhaps to be seen as a form of abuse. Perceptions of car use as being anti-social –after all, 85 per cent of pedestrian deaths and serious injuries on the roads result from collision with a car - need to be heightened. In this regard, as teachers often act as role models for schoolchildren, schools, as well as local authorities could adopt green commuter plans, the effect of which would be to encourage their staff to use alternatives to the car to get to work.

Attitudes to the nurturing of community life need to be promoted, for instance, by explicitly planning to enable more of children’s time to be spent free of overt adult supervision. Social interaction between children and adults should be encouraged so that children learn and gain confidence from communicating with strangers and do not treat them as potential molesters. And we - the ‘strangers’ - should see one of our public duties as keeping an eye on other

people's children, creating a climate of confidence as they do far more on the Continent by intervening where behaviour appears to be verging on the dangerous or too anti-social. Claire Rayner recently quoted an African proverb that it takes a whole village to rear a child. Finally, owing to the paranoia and fear that they can inculcate, the media must act more responsibly so that the incidence of the rare instances of child murder and molestation is not exaggerated in the public mind through over-reporting.

CONCLUSIONS

In our wish to do the best for our children we have unwittingly cast them in the role of second-class citizens through an oversight of the role of their personal autonomy in the outdoor world. One could draw an analogy here between the battery-reared childhood of today and our own relatively free-range childhoods. The situation is far more serious than I think is realised: remarkably, society – central and local government, the educational system and, we ourselves – have all connived as active agents in the process of infringing children's civil liberties and, in the process, have damaged their physical, social and emotional development. Sadly, the age at which most children are allowed to get around on their own has been steadily raised.

We need to rethink policy for our children so that it embraces the full spectrum of their lives, including its quality, its coverage of their activity in the evenings, at weekends and during holidays, and the role that this activity plays in the maturation process. At the heart of the problem lie two complementary aspects which reflect society's careless attitude to children.

The first is the relentless pursuit of minimising even the slightest risk of them being harmed. It has led to taking away the rights of literally millions of children to a safe environment outside the home. Some argue that children today are better-off: they have far more access to people and places – albeit, in the company of a parent or under other adult supervision - than we did as children. However, insofar as this is true, it has had the effect of requiring a condoning of the conventional practice of withdrawing children from danger rather than withdrawing danger from children. We have ignored the effects of this practice on children's development. Indeed, it could be argued that, through this oversight, we have been breeding a generation of 'battery-reared' as compared with our generation of 'free-range' children, with all the generalised implications such an analogy has for their health and quality of life.

The second is that formal education in school, important though that is, is seen to be so significant to children's learning that other less formal environments in which children are able to practice practical, physical and social skills can be largely ignored. These skills needed for the transition from the limited capabilities of childhood to the widely embracing competence and prospective independence of adulthood are by no means solely gained in school. The home is of course where many are acquired through interaction with parents, siblings and the extended family during the period of over three-quarters of their waking hours (holidays included) spent outside school, but the area in which they live has the potential for serving as the informal locus for their maturation as responsible, fit and healthy members of society.

It is widely acknowledged that the quality of a school's environment has a considerable influence on children's academic attainment (National Commission on Education, 1995). It stands to reason that the quality of the out-of-school environment, particularly in terms of its

safety, and the street as a milieu for social and recreational activity, should also be seen as relevant to children's attainment in this complementary sphere of their development. As they grow older, they should have the freedom to plan, put into practice and gain experience from acting on their own ideas without overt adult supervision.

Children are individuals whose inalienable rights are of no less value than those of adults. Now that we have evidence of the deleterious effects of growing restrictions on their independence outside the home, it is difficult to believe that a civilised society will not wish to reverse the process which has brought that about.

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