

# **Children in the City: Reclaiming the Street<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Comment on This Article**

### **Abstract**

*During recent decades, in many cities, important changes in home and neighborhood environments have significantly impacted the play and peer interactions of children. Many urban streets and public spaces have become inhospitable to children. However, parents continue to value outdoor play and access to nature as important to their children's health and development. Against the background of a re-emerging interest among families and city governments to create child-friendly urban environments, this paper examines social and physical characteristics of such environments, based on research conducted in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It concludes that planners and designers need to support the efforts of families to re-claim the street as an important area for urban livability for children.*

**Keywords:** *woonerf, home zone, traffic calming, child-friendly cities, home range, the Netherlands*

Children playing outdoors should be a matter of course. Reality, however, often is different, even in the Netherlands with its long tradition of child-friendly playgrounds (Lefaivre and de Roode 2001) and child-friendly streets, the so-called *woonerven* (Appleyard 1980; Ben Joseph 1995; Muhlrad 2000; see also the paper by Gill elsewhere in this issue). In recent decades, the time-space behavior of Dutch children has changed considerably (Bouw and Karsten 2004). First, their play has shifted from outdoors to indoors. Whereas in the 1950s children's play meant playing outside, today many more play activities happen inside the home. At home, Dutch children play not only in their own bedrooms. They negotiate a much more democratized use of other spaces inside the dwelling, transforming hallways and living rooms into play areas. The emergence of a category of indoor children—who hardly ever go outside to play—is new in Dutch history (Karsten 2005).

Second, whereas children's freedom at home has grown, their freedom outdoors has greatly decreased. Children's daily territory—the places where children travel independently—has shrunk precipitously. Risotto and Giuliani (2006) review work suggesting that the loss of local experience for children has reduced opportunities for environmental learning and competence. For example, neighborhood parks that children used to visit on their own have become less accessible and changed character. Many parents now consider parks to be too dangerous for children to explore without adult supervision. As a result, many parks have lost their function as a children's domain.

The greatly increased involvement of parents in accompanying their children has resulted in a third major change: the large expansion of children's daily activity space. Today, Dutch children under the age of 12 travel nearly 17 kilometers a day of which nearly 14 kilometers are by car, and thus supervised (CBS 2003; elsewhere in this issue, Witlox and Tindemans report very similar distances for youth in Ghent, Belgium). Children's mobility patterns today are quite similar to those of "ordinary modern adults:" they live their lives island-hopping through the city and beyond. Depending on their socio-economic and ethnic background, some children travel to their sports and music classes, while others visit the mosque or the homes of family members. This archipelagic spatial activity pattern makes it difficult for today's children to form an integrated image of the city. Paradoxically, children's travel under escort to disconnected places has greatly expanded their activity space at the same time that the spatial range of their independent activities in their neighborhood has greatly diminished.

Local variations notwithstanding, in most cities children have lost outdoor space, as urban public spaces have become less usable and less accessible to them and streets have been transformed from spaces where children were a matter of course into adult-oriented spaces where children are only tolerated under certain conditions (cf. Loukaitou-Sideris 2003). In this regard, large cities in the Netherlands follow the trends observed in other countries (see, e.g., Chawla 2002; Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Christensen and O'Brien 2003).

The suitability of the local environment for outdoor play is an important consideration in parents' decisions whether to stay in the city or to move to a suburb.<sup>2</sup> Studies of residential mobility have often observed a perception of congruence between traditional suburban environments and a "familism" lifestyle

(e.g., Bell 1958; Michelson 1979). But what about families in urban environments? Do cities hinder children's healthy development?

In spite of a prevailing anti-urban bias and residential preference surveys showing suburban environments to be the chosen places to raise children, families still make up a large part of the urban population in many cities. In Amsterdam there are more than 100,000 children under 12, and about one-third of all households are families with children (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek 2006). Many families simply do not have much choice; they cannot afford to leave the city. However, others can leave, but they want to stay. In the Netherlands, after many years of steady suburbanization of the middle classes, today there is a small counter-movement of families who want to stay in or move back to the city. Whether by choice or constraint, both types of households seek to (re)claim the city as a place for children to grow up. How do they deal with the challenges of urban living and raising children? Do these families not (or no longer) share the common belief that playing outdoors is good for the well being of children? Do they treat their children differently? Do they try to improve conditions for playing outdoors? Research on these questions is scarce.

In this research note, we summarize research more fully reported elsewhere (Bouw and Karsten 2005; Karsten et al. 2006). We first briefly consider urban parents' views on playing outdoors. We then discuss their thoughts on spatial and social aspects of cities that better accommodate daily family life, in particular children's outdoor play. Their responses show that the lowest geographical scale—the street—is an important area of contestation for urban livability.

## Research Background

Empirical evidence for this paper comes from various case studies on urban housing and family life in several neighborhoods in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the two biggest cities of the Netherlands. For the present purpose, we draw on 79 interviews with parents from different ethnic and social class backgrounds, including single-parent households. All of them have at least one child under 16.<sup>3</sup> Their neighborhoods include various types of pre- and post-World War II urban environments.

## The Importance of Outdoor Play

Parents in the Netherlands strongly believe that playing outdoors is important for their children's healthy development (SCP 2005). Urban families are no exception. The parents we interviewed had diverse reasons to favor the city as a place to live: low-cost housing, proximity to work, friendly neighbors, and dislike of suburbs, among others. Although stated reasons to live in the city generally did not focus specifically on children, this is not to say that these parents were not concerned about their children's needs. They were convinced of the positive benefits of playing outdoors:

*Playing outside is very important. They have to go out, that's what I notice, they need fresh air.*

- father, Museumkwartier, Amsterdam

All parents emphasized what they saw as a direct relationship between good health and playing outdoors. Often they referred to their own childhood and recalled their own enjoyable memories of outdoor play, regardless of whether they grew up in a city or elsewhere. They want to give their children the same positive outdoor experiences that they had themselves.

Louv's (2005) best-selling book, *The Last Child in the Woods*, introduces the term "nature-deficit disorder," reflecting an importance attached to the outdoors that also underlies the "No Child Left Inside" campaign initiated by the State of Connecticut in the U.S. (<http://www.nochildleftinside.org/>). Many parents in our study shared this concern:

*We were always playing outdoors. That was normal at that time. We used to play a lot in the bushes, breaking branches and constructing bows and arrows. That isn't allowed anymore.*

- man who grew up in Nieuwendam

Other parents likewise emphasized children's loss of access to nature, in particular middle-class parents like this mother:

*I grew up in a village near the forest. That was terrific! I went to school alone, from my sixth [year] on, but my son cannot go anywhere 'til his twelfth.*

- mother, Museumkwartier, Amsterdam

It is particularly these middle-class parents, who can easily afford to buy a house outside the city, who struggle with guilt feelings that prompt them to seek other places where their children can play. This mother bought a plot of land on the outskirts of Amsterdam where the family goes as often as possible.

Immigrant parents added another dimension to the notion of healthy development: they want their children to meet children of Dutch origin while playing outside. They see benefits in terms of enculturation and enhanced social capital. Not all streets support these goals, as this Turkish father living in Bankastraat told us:

*I want my children to play with Dutch children. But I never see Dutch children in this street. It would be good for their Dutch, but I only know Turkish people living here.*

In the Bankastraat in Amsterdam there are 60 children under 12, but among them is only one child, a baby, with a Dutch background. The absence of Dutch families in his street makes this father speculate about moving to a different neighborhood.

The parents we interviewed were very much aware of their children's needs. They all told us that they do what they can in the interest of their children, although not all of them have the same resources. Some can afford a house in a better neighborhood, while others escort their children to alternative play places that are farther away, but most urban families have no option but to stay where they are. There are thus starkly different realities that accompany the same shared positive discourse about playing outdoors.

Regardless of their commitment to city life, the parents we interviewed in Amsterdam and Rotterdam shared a desire for a safe and attractive place for their children to play within easy reach of the home. Indeed, many Dutch children tend to play in their own garden and in front of their own house (SCP 2005) (Figures 1 through 3).

**Figures 1-3. Play environments near home, Delft, the Netherlands**









**Figure 4. Integrating green spaces and safe paths for walking and biking in a neighborhood in the Netherlands**



### **Dynamics: Changing Physical Conditions**

What does the ideal “childstreet” look like? It has physical and social components, both of which are important. The physical aspects include green neighborhood spaces, traffic-calmed streets and play space.

Parents associate green spaces and elements of nature with neighborhoods that are welcoming and friendly and see them as important to their children’s health. Of course, in many cities access to nature is difficult, as this Rotterdam mother complains:

*...there are just too many bricks, actually, no tree to be seen. Like in this street, there are only trees on one side of the street, and barely bigger than branches. It’s just buildings here...!*

She lives in a newly built, centrally located neighborhood whose construction took a long time. In the meantime, residents organized actions to obtain trees and play equipment. Their residential protests were successful: the district council planted two big trees and installed some play equipment, a small but much-appreciated achievement (cf., Figure 5).

**Figure 5. A street re-claimed and “greened” by its residents in Delft, the Netherlands**



The “turving over” of The Methleys, a street bordering the inner city of Leeds, England, stands out as a well-publicized attempt by its residents to similarly (re)claim their street (Figures 6 through 8), followed by the subsequent introduction of home zone features.<sup>4</sup>

The desire for traffic-calmed streets means that families do not want to live in through streets with a high traffic volume and many anonymous passersby. Some parents in our study had moved onto a busy street long ago, before they had children. Today, they look at this same street with different eyes. Having children changed their outlook, and they began to advocate for traffic calming measures. The “founding fathers and mothers” of several traffic mitigation groups offered comments such as:

*We are active Rotterdam residents, in particular in our own neighborhood. We organized a little festival and we are members of the neighborhood traffic group. We are mainly concerned about speeding and too many cars. The traffic makes a lot of noise as well. The houses here are sometimes really shaking on their foundations. We succeeded in getting a lowering of the maximum speed. Now it is a 30 kilometer [per hour] street.*



Play space is the third physical condition that urban families see as an important part of child-friendly streets. Parents want access to playgrounds for their children, but in addition they emphasize the need for a broader range of spaces that are not exclusively meant for child play: roof terraces, courtyard gardens, the sidewalk in front of the home. These—often collective—spaces have in common that they enable parents to continue with their own activities while letting their children play. Design and site planning can thus support modern parenthood by providing opportunities that accommodate the need to combine daily responsibilities of work and child care.

**Figures 6-8. The “turfing over” of The Methleys, Leeds, Britain**





In the Amsterdam Museumkwartier neighborhood, relatively affluent parents had a modest wish: widening the sidewalk by just one foot would make it much more usable (Figure 9). They wrote letters to the local district, but so far, without results.

**Figure 9. Sidewalk in the Museumkwartier, Amsterdam**

In Rotterdam's Stadstuinen neighborhood, parents decided to create open back gardens and a closed back path which enables small children to go safely from one garden to the other:

*The path behind our house is really fantastic. In collaboration with the neighbors we created a closed back path which enables the children to explore this inner block fully. There are many other children to play with. We don't have to look after them all the time. The children can walk into the gardens of all our neighbors. During the summer they go from one wading pool to another!*

Not all neighbors (can) organize themselves. One mother complained about her family's small garden and her wish to live in a more neighborly way:

*It is a pity, I think, that we do have a nice garden but not a collective inner courtyard where children can play freely. I would like to create a village, but that would not be very practical in a city. As a mother you*



*could also benefit from that, you wouldn't need to go with them and sit at the edge of the playground, turning blue from cold. I would be willing to give up a part of our garden to share with neighbors.*

But this family has neighbors without children, a common situation in big cities with a minority of families. Many parents see the small number of children living close by as a highly regrettable disadvantage of city life. In earlier work, we found that children with few peers of their own age in their neighborhood, complained much more often about not having friends and being lonely than did their counterparts living in neighborhoods with more peers nearby (van Vliet--1981). There is, in other words, a highly significant relationship between certain objective characteristics of children's local environment (access to other children) and their subjective experiences of that environment (feeling lonesome).

### **Dynamics: Creating a Social Network**

A supportive physical environment is a necessary but insufficient condition for children's outdoor play. Most importantly, children need other children with whom they can play. Outdoor play is essentially social play, so when there is no one else playing outdoors, children are less likely to go out. This situation is problematic in streets with very few children, or with very few children in the same age category. Children are the most important factor in the occurrence of outdoor play. Parents realize this:

*That's what we think of as very important: other residents with children living in this street. Trees (8 years old) is our only child, so it is very nice that we know many other families living here. Because of the children, we get into contact with other families. It also creates some sort of social control, not very much, but enough. Here in this street, they all know our daughter, and when a child starts crying, we all know where he lives. Then we take him home; that's what all neighbors do here.*

It takes an urban village to raise a child (cf. Gans 1967). Although conflicts sometimes occur, urban families know they need other families for emotional support, social control and many practical reasons. Yet, trusting neighborly relationships are often difficult to establish. Trust is most easily developed in populations that are (perceived to be) homogeneous (Gans 1961)—"people like us." However, the main characteristic of city life is its tremendous diversity. Urban families vary enormously and, notwithstanding patterns of segregation, residents of widely different social and ethnic backgrounds often live close together. In this regard, it is often differences of class that seem more difficult to bridge than ethnic differences, as this middle-class Moroccan immigrant mother explains:

*There is hardly any freedom for my children to play outdoors. They rarely go outside. They are real indoor children....My children don't feel at ease with everyone shouting to each other. The children around here are not nice.*

She lives in a block with a nice courtyard garden, but she forbids her children to play with children of her mainly lower-class Moroccan neighbors. Instead she

talks enthusiastically about her family's friendships with some Dutch families at the new school that her children attend:

*This new school is much nicer. We didn't have many contacts at their former school. Dutch people think that immigrants have a lot of contact among themselves, but that is not the case. Now my children attend a mixed school with different ethnic backgrounds, including Dutch children. That makes a big difference. They go out to play with various children from school and they—in turn—come here to play. Immediately—from the first day—my son was invited to play with a schoolmate. And now we know that family rather well.*

It is difficult to influence the social dynamics that cause parents to let their children play only with children from families that they know to be "suitable." Families themselves want to establish the social networks that best serve their interests and needs. Earlier generations of parents were supported by a wide range of people: neighbors, shopkeepers, family members and even the police. They all kept an eye on the children in the street and parents generally trusted them to reprimand children, if necessary. Parents today have become much more isolated in their role as their children's supervisor. There is a need for urban planning that acknowledges this change and puts in place supports to counteract this isolation.

## **Challenges**

A key challenge facing families in cities today is the lack of understanding and recognition by planners of the importance of the local scale in the everyday lives of children and their parents. Our research in Amsterdam and Rotterdam shows that it is at the street level that families want to reclaim space to meet their children's need for places to play and socialize (Figure 10) (see also Engwicht 1999; <http://www.lesstraffic.com/Programs/SR/SR.htm>). This does not mean that the neighborhood level is not important. It is, particularly for older children, but it must be complemented by attractive, child-friendly spaces at the street level. Towards this end, planners need to develop approaches that support the actions that children and their parents are already undertaking.

**Figure 10. A street re-claimed by families, Delft, the Netherlands**

Residents blocked off this street to protest traffic burdens. Their action won concessions that enabled them to re-claim it for children's play and neighborly interactions.

Factors that are seen as promoting the development of cities are often seen as undermining the development of children. Such thinking in terms of binary oppositions has long dominated social science and urban planning. However, dualistic ways of thinking are counterproductive because the dichotomies that they produce do not bring new insights and stand in the way of innovative, synergistic solutions. Children have always constituted a significant part of the urban population and still do so today. It does not help children to construct their well-being in opposition to urban environments. Instead, in order to develop child-friendly streets, we have to deconstruct such polarities and find ways of integrating seemingly conflicting concepts such as Child and City, Care and Career, Nature and Built Environment, Private and Public. This integration is a worthy challenge for urban planners and designers. Meeting this challenge will require an operationalization of principles embodied in the **U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child** into local actions. Inevitably, this means working closely with children and their parents, who have already started to reclaim their streets.



## Endnotes

1. Lia Karsten presented a first draft of this paper at the Childstreet2005 conference held in Delft, the Netherlands in August 2005. See <http://www.urban.nl/childstreet2005/>.
2. Another important consideration, related to the location and quality of schools, is not a subject in this paper.
3. Responses from children are the subject of other presentations of this research (Bouw and Karsten 2005; Karsten et al. 2006).
4. For a discussion of home zones, see [http://www.heads.demon.co.uk/home\\_zones.html](http://www.heads.demon.co.uk/home_zones.html), <http://www.homezones.org/homeZUKMethleys.html>, and the **paper by Tim Gill in this issue.**

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**Willem van Vliet--** is a mental laborer with undefined skills. He has a Ph.D. in Sociology (University of Toronto), etc., etc. He became immersed in children's environments and housing problems by birth, below sea level in an aporphyrogenic bunker in the postwar shortage-ridden Netherlands. A.K.A. El Capitán, he is in possession of an uncertified but authentic and persistent lunatic streak, evinced, inter alia, by his editing of the Encyclopedia of Housing and a growing stockpile of more and less odd ends. After coming to the University of Colorado, he has retained an abiding interest in heather morning glory and rock gardening.

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