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Clarity needed on children being outside during Covid-19

Alice posted this in **Children's play, health and wellbeing** on 20/04/2020 **Share**

Children need outdoor exercise and sunlight for their health and wellbeing right now, just like everyone else – if not more so, as they are still growing and developing. And (as every parent knows) if children don't get to 'let off steam' daily, they're far harder to cope with indoors, especially in a sma space with no garden. A report published today by Alison Stenning and Wendy Russell argues that children's main way of getting exercise is through outdoor play and this is important through the lockdown.

What lockdown means for children

We're fortunate in the UK, compared to Spain, where the lockdown currently includes an absolute ban o children being outside for any reason. There, 70% of families live in apartments, many without even a balcony, meaning that millions of children have not even had any sunlight for 5 weeks. The **serious effec of this on children's physical and mental health** is starting to be seen, and it is being raised as a human rights issue.

But, even though that is not officially the case here, the absence of any explicit messages from the UK government supporting children's need to get exercise outdoors means that parents, local authorities, th police and the general public are all uncertain about what's allowed. This is now having a real impact, especially for families living in flats with no private outdoor space.

On the positive side, as "cycling" is explicitly allowed, some families – those who own bikes – are taking advantage of the relatively empty streets to take their children out cycling or even to **teach them to ride bike for the first time**. Some are letting them play out on the street as their daily exercise, carefully keeping 2m apart from others. Others are going for a short family kick-about in their local park. But, without wanting to generalise too much, this may be those who feel more confident about interpreting th "rules", are less afraid of authority or being judged by others; or live where there is more public space available.

We're hearing that many other parents believe it is not allowed or safe to let their children outside at all. Many are scared, both of the virus itself and of being "told off" by authorities, judged by others, or even fined.

Children largely absent from Government guidelines and messaging

There's good reason for this confusion. The messages from government to date have barely mentioned children being outside. The "*reasonable excuses*" to leave home (food shopping, work and exercise) an the specific examples of exercise repeatedly given (**running, walking, cycling**) all seem geared towards fit, able-bodied, lone adults, rather than children or family groups.

Worryingly, this has now all been re-emphasised in **new guidelines for police**, which bizarrely allow for "yoga" outside but don't mention children at all. Although officially you can take exercise "*alone, or with*

members of your household, these messages still leave important questions unanswered and too much scope for misunderstanding. A key question is around the inclusion of play.

Play IS exercise

Playing actively outdoors is one of the main ways that children get exercise. **As this new report states**, they don't tend to go jogging, or in fact do anything that involves moving in a straight line at a consistent speed. They're far more likely to want to run around in circles, kick or throw a ball, play a game, climb on wall. If a parent stops or sits down whilst their toddler is running around in the park, are they breaking th rules? For older children and teenagers, is skateboarding considered a permitted form of exercise? Or does it look too much like "fun"?

And this maybe hits another part of the problem: play does look like fun, and that doesn't fit with the seriousness of the guidelines. But for children, play IS serious. It's the main way they get physical activity learn and – particularly important right now – cope with things. Perhaps the fact that UK policy and decision-making generally still doesn't acknowledge the importance of play for children is one reason fo the confusion that is unfolding right now.

How lack of guidance is translating on the ground

The absence of clarity from government means that some councils and police have interpreted the rules to mean that only lone adults exercising in a serious and obvious way are permitted to use parks and other public spaces. They are promoting this in their signage and social media and then enforcing it. Ou local council in Bristol was quick to respond when we pointed out that their park signs only allowed for "individual exercise" – they added the words "or family" (see photo).

But other councils have used **vans with megaphones** to disperse anyone not seen to be "exercising". W have also heard stories of sibling groups playing out together on their estate or in front gardens being admonished and sent indoors by police. And the general public is also absorbing the idea that only adul forms of exercise are ok.

On the other hand, the lack of clear guidance related to children and play may mean that in some place children are playing out in a way that does not respect social distancing rules and a fair sharing of space We have had several emails recently from people anxious and uncertain how to respond to seeing some children playing out in the street with siblings, whilst other families are keeping their children indoors.

The end result of all this is confusion and many children suffering unnecessarily by being kept indoors al day, every day, when they could be getting some fresh air and exercise safely outdoors – and parents ar suffering too.

What needs to happen?

Much as we all love the ever-upbeat **Joe Wicks** – "the nation's PE teacher" – the reality is that not all children want to do a formal exercise class and many others either won't have the physical space indoor or access to the internet. The bottom line is that if adults need to get exercise outdoors, then so do children, in the more playful way that is natural to them.

We therefore urge the government to clarify that children playing outside, alone or with members of thei

household, for reasonable periods of time and under the normal social distancing rules, in parks, streets or other public spaces is a "permitted activity", important for their health and wellbeing.

Alongside clear guidance, children also need safe space to be able to get outside near home, so we and others are also calling for government and local authorities to look at how to **make streets safer for everyone** to use during this crisis.

Sign our petition for safer streets!

#SaferStreetsSaveLives

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