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## Football pitches and Barbie dolls: young children's perceptions of their school playground

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## Social play

Most children discussed the social context of playground activities. Many of their comments reflected an implicit association between play and friendship; for example: 'I like playing It with my friends' (Y2 girl); and 'We're happy and I'm playing with my friends' (Y2 boy). Indeed, friendship groups presented both the main content and context of the represented playground activities. An illustrative example was provided by a girl in Y4:

I've drawn me and my friends. Well one of my friends is hula-hooping and she's really shocked that I've done a handstand, or cartwheel or whatever you want it to be for the first time ever and my other friend is clapping; she's ready to hug me while I'm still upside down.

Conversations with the children about their playgrounds were littered with references to friends. Some comments simply related enjoyment of certain types of activities with friends' enjoyment – 'Because I kind of like football ... And my friends do' (Y3 boy) – while others portrayed complex dances of interactions in which the game and roles taken within it became inextricably bound together:

It's a special game of It and someone was It, like Christian was first and we had to hide. If someone, if Christian gets out of the bench we have to run to the bench. After that, well Oliver was it and he saw Antonio there and he just came and punched him in the tummy. (Y2 boy)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the social context of playground activities meant that some children felt isolated and alone. Loneliness was the most frequently cited negative association with the playground, and there were no evident differences according to gender or age: 'I drew [sic] me how I was crying ... Because I want to play with someone and they said go away' (Y1 boy) and 'I'm drawing myself on the bench because I'm Lonely' (Y2 girl). The children in this study spoke about their upset at being 'left out' (Y3 boy), and of seeing their friends playing together, but without them:

I enjoy, without being lonely, I would like my friends to always play with me instead of being lonely because it makes me really upset when they don't play for the whole playground – and once, today, yeah? No, today before yesterday, I was sitting lonely for the whole morning playtime and then I didn't have a chance to play. (Y2 girl)

One aspect of social isolation that emerged during this study that has not figured significantly in many other studies is the enjoyment of being alone. A minority of children (boys and girls) said that they enjoyed solitude on some occasions, and expressed frustration at being forced to play with others. For example, when asked to describe her picture, one girl (Y1) said that she had drawn herself playing on her own. The interviewer (I) commented on the large smile sketched on her face:

I: Why are you happy?  
G: Because I'm on my own.

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I: Do you like playing by yourself Grace?

G: Yeah.

I: Do you like playing with friends sometimes? Which do you prefer?

G: Playing on my own.

The theme of fair play did not figure in the comments of the younger children (Y1 and Y2), but did emerge during conversations with older children. The failure of peers to follow rules, roles and conventions of play were often cited as reasons for games coming to an end or, at least, for becoming less enjoyable than they might otherwise have been. One boy spoke about the need for a referee or 'judge' as an arbitrator in the relatively complex games of the older children:

It's kind of bad because one time there was a ... because everyone was in a row. It happens every single day. See we don't have a judge who is going to actually do things for us and he's not going to help us. (Y3 boy)

Teaching assistants (TAs) were often called in to take on peace-keeping roles, but even then success was not guaranteed:

Also sometimes the TAs, sometimes the other children think that the TAs will forget its blah-blahs turn we can just get another turn by standing outside the gate and saying it's our turn. So they go to the gate and say it's their turn and then they get two or three goes in the week, which means that some classes don't get their turn. (Y4 girl)

### Physical activity play

The children were asked to draw themselves in the school playground. Not surprisingly, perhaps, almost all of them drew themselves engaging in some sort of activity (although there was no mention in the initial request for them to draw anything in particular). The most frequently drawn and discussed activities involved physical activity. These accounts are fairly representative:

I've drawn some hopscotch and I'm going to draw some people queuing up behind the tent because they're going to do it backwards because I can't just start here and draw all the people here so everyone's going to be there and in the sandbox people are digging and putting the sand into the buckets, but I didn't get to draw that ... So here is going to be me hula-hooping and then I'm going to have the sun here and I'm going to have two butterflies flying and then I'm going to have Thelma skipping and then when I go into the garden I'm going to draw collected plants and things that have fallen on the floor. (Y2 girl)

This one was holding a rope and it went around when it came to you, you jumped over it but these are all the people. This is Gary who's running away. He's going to jump over the rope when it came. (Y1 girl)

One fascinating conversation between one of the boys in Year 2 and one of the researchers suggests that physical activity, for him at least, was inextricably part of his conception of play:

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I: What do you like to do – very busy things or very quiet things in the playground?

S: Well very busy things in the playground but other than that it's normally sitting down reading a book or sitting down doing an experiment.

I: And you like both of those?

S: Yeah but they're not really playground activities.

I: Aren't they? S: On the playground it's normally running around.

The children's accounts of physical activity play generally took one of two forms: creative and locomotor play. The first type of play involved imagination and the creation of characters: 'Maybe spies or something, and policemen' (Y1 boy). In one discussion, two boys were asked who they liked to be when they were pretending:

M: Policemen.

T: Soldier, one two three four, one two three four.

M: Firemen.

Locomotor play was much more frequently cited, however, especially by the boys. Younger children talked about hula hoops, hopscotch and climbing frames. And children of all ages spoke about the joys of running and chasing, such as this Year 4 girl: 'And also I like the playground when some people are chasing after Pete the TA and then there's most of the playground free to just walk around'.

However, by far the most frequently discussed form of playground activity amongst this group of children was football:

Ok, I'm playing football. I scored a goal. When I finished football Oliver locked Christian in the door. I came back to play another game of football and then I scored another goal and then after that game of football we went to line up. (Y2 boy)

Approximately half of the boys in Years 2–4 drew and spoke about themselves playing football. We will return to the gendered character of football in the playground later in this report. At this point, we will simply point out that only one girl in our whole sample spoke about her involvement with football in a positive way: 'And we're having a good time, we're kicking a football' (Y3 girl), and this account was not within the context of an actual game.

Only a few children used 'fun' to explain their reasons for playing: 'I like skipping because it's fun' (Y1 girl), and only one other child spoke of values intrinsic to an activity when asked why they played such games: 'What I like about football is – I don't know – scoring goals' (Y2 boy). Everyone else spoke in rather instrumental ways about the benefits of activity.

Health was the dominant discourse underlying the children's rationales for playing physically active games. For example, these comments were representative of numerous other statements:

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Well it's because then we can take equipment outside and play sports so we can be healthy.  
(Y3 boy)

So not just running around, we can run, climb on things – cause climbing is a very exercises thing. Like if you climb high, if you go fast that will be very good because it's exercise thing.  
(Y3 girl)

Well it's a very special place for me cause [sic] I get to climb on it and it's a good exercise. Football is a good exercise as well, but you get hurt but in a climbing frame you don't because there's grass in it. (Y4 boy)

This 'health talk' was seen in terms of all aspects of playground activities:

I: What's so great about playing football on the playground?

E: It gives you exercise.

I: Right, and what's so good about that? Why is that important?

E: Because you can run faster and stuff.

A: I think it's fun. You get exercise. The good thing about exercise is that you're healthy. I mean you can really eat whatever you like if you're very well exercised because you wouldn't be fat ... Yeah, it just makes you really fit. Running around. Like climbing frame, it might make you fit but I think climbing frame is training for, like, climbing trees – survival but I just think football is so fit, and if some people actually really know what they're doing they'll understand. It's actually running around and it's hard. You get sweaty and they wear nothing because they're just used to it. They're just running around. (Y4 boys)

## Risk

We only recorded one reference that might be interpreted as bullying: 'And some people aren't very nice to them and once, I remember, John was playing a game and I forgot who it was, and somebody said John couldn't play and it hurt his feelings' (Y2 boy). It seemed to be the case that most children's references to the dangers of their playground were to either the nature of the space (e.g. it was concrete) and objects on it (e.g. like a climbing frame) or to fears of injury.

There were numerous stories of injuries resulting from falling on the floor, such as: 'And I don't like it when they hurt me. When someone hurts me ... if I trip over somewhere or someone hurts me' (Y1 boy):

J: That's just the concrete where we're playing it on.

I: What do you think about the concrete?

J: It's rough ... Sometimes we get over and ... ow!

I: And what does that mean?

J: That means we get hurt. (Y3 boys)

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The climbing frame, which appeared in many of the children's pictures of the playground, was seen by some as the source of greatest danger: 'And they get injured, they hurt your elbow. I fell off a climbing frame and broke my arm' (Y4 boy):

I don't really like the climbing frame because it's really crowded and they play lots of really weird and unsafe games and I never go on it and some things like when everyone's on – I've seen some people do this a few times – there's a bar, it's like here to the roof, which is pretty high and people just jump off it and they could get really hurt. (Y4 girl)

## Gender

Not all of the children reported being physically active all of the time. Both boys and girls spoke about quiet and still games, such as board games. However, there were a far greater number of girls who spoke about non-physically active games than boys. Only one boy drew a picture of a non-active game: 'I did draw a picture of me and my friends doing a puzzle' (Y1 boy), whereas many girls drew and talked about similar activities. Some of the girls spoke enthusiastically about the introduction of a new 'quiet area', away from the main play area: 'I like it at some parts it's quiet and you can sit down on the decking and read a book' (Y4 girl):

Well there is something new in the playground, like there is a quiet area over there and it has grass and you can read quietly or you can play chess and you can put a puzzle together. I think it's really nice to like to calm down and to play a ... game. (Y4 girl)

There was an overwhelming sense in the conversations with the children at this school that gender segregation and stereotyping was simply taken for granted. It is interesting, for example, that the only non-stereotypically male activity described positively by a boy was from a Year 1 pupil who had recently entered the UK, and his comments were received with astonishment by his peers:

I: What else do you like playing?

O: I like just walking.

I: Walking?

O: Or dancing.

T: Dancing?

I: You like dancing?

O: Yeah.

On the whole, there was a shared perception that boys and girls had different interests and played different types of games. During one conversation with a group of Year 1 girls, one child offered the view that 'there's not really girls' games and boys' games really because everyone can like everything'. Her peers responded by explaining the seemingly obvious differences between the two types of games:

L: Well the boys play basketball.

I: All the boys?

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A: Yeah and they play soccer, cricket.  
L: Soccer, we say football.  
I: And what do girls do then?  
L: Well they just play hula hoping and skipping.  
G [the girl who questioned the difference between girls' and boys' games]: No they don't.  
L: Well Mums and Dads, like that.  
G: You could put like role play or like a shop.  
A: Well we can build things in there like things we can go in and out of and play within the playground instead of having outside things like climbing frames.

A similarly clear division of activities was also upheld by a group of Year 2 boys:

O: Because it's quite a boy's game.  
I: Oh, are there boys' games and girls' games?  
A: No but the girls don't like to join boys' games they just like to do their own games like Catch.  
O: Well sometimes we play with the girls but sometimes not because we made our own games and sometimes they catch us.  
I: So if you play with girls do you play different games or do you play it?  
O: Different games.

A consequence of such a clean split between girls' and boys' activities was that when the genders did come into contact with each other on the playground, their presence was usually seen as an annoyance. Girls, in particular, complained about interference of boys:

When the boys are annoying you, you can rub your hands on the caterpillar [a plastic tube in the playground] and you can go shock them. (Y4 girl)

I'm going to draw three boys that are in Year 2 and they're spying on us and saying are you really – because that's what they do all the time and it's really annoying. (Y4 girl)

Some of the children drew playgrounds that they would like – ideal playgrounds. In almost all cases, pictures reflected the personal interests of the artist. However, a few children (mostly girls) exhibited awareness that not everyone shared their interests. However, here too the pictures reflected strict gender divisions:

And on the other side of the picture I've done some football – some children playing football because usually boys talk about football in our school. I just thought that it's not fair if only the girls have what they want, so I decided to put what girls want and boys want. (Y3 girl)

Yes, well I've done first a football pitch which I would like because the boys always like football so I've let them have one, but a fence so they wouldn't knock my friend and me – Harriet and me [sic], and there is [first aid] next to the football pitch so they don't have to

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walk really far away from it. Here's where I put a pond because I love fishing and I think I would put a little [first aid] where we are as well. (Y3 girl)

There was only one instance of boys speaking about the importance of meeting the needs of girls. In this case, however, their understanding of girls' interests seems rather less sophisticated!

A: And by the way, when we say that we want climbing frames it's not going to be fair if we are going to use up the space for a climbing frame because all our school is going to be doing is no sports, just lying down.

C: Yeah, but you have to do something for the girls.

I: That's interesting, but why can't the girls play football?

A: Exactly. E: We can get Barbie stuff for them.

I: So you are saying get a Barbie set for the girls.

E: Yes. A: Some girls don't like Barbies.

I: What do you think, can the girls play football?

A: Yeah, loads do.

I: Do girls play football?

C: Yeah, but then you need to have a game, like a girl's game because boys – they play most.

I: And why can't girls and boys play together then?

A: Because boys are better.

I: Because boys are better at football?

A: And we're stronger and every time a girl does a mistake we get a bit angry at them because they just muck up a chance and do their own goals.

I: Right, and what do you think Eric? That's an interesting point isn't it?

E: They don't even know what they're doing.

A: Yeah, they don't. They just maybe kick it out for a corner and then they kick it in the girls corner ... You can have girls football, but they train a lot.

I: They do train a lot. They train like the boys don't they, I guess?

C: Well, I'm quite rubbish at football.

A: You're not that rubbish Christian you're better than some of the girls. As well the girls have a straight leg and that's all they do. We curl.

I: The boys have more of a curl in it. Yeah, any other points? So we've got the idea of breaking up the playground space. We've got.

E: Because girls don't really get the idea of football.

I: No?

A: But we don't really get the idea of Barbies.

I: No?

E: Yes. It's just like football and Barbies. (Y4 boys)