

Prioritising children in street design isn't just vital for them – it is key to making places that work for everyone, argues **Alice Ferguson**

# Reclaiming streets for children

**Seventeen years ago, a group of us parents were feeling deeply concerned about children's loss of everyday freedom. Over just one generation, outdoor play had gone from an everyday, informal thing that happened on our streets, estates and around the neighbourhood, to something far more contained, organised and adult supervised. Children were no longer walking or cycling independently from the age of eight or nine, as we had done. And this loss of everyday outdoor freedom was clearly having a huge, unrecognised impact on children's health and wellbeing – especially for those who were not being compensated with paid-for, or driven-to, activities.**

We decided to take action, starting with the very simple resident-led 'temporary play street' idea. Then, through Playing Out CIC (community interest company), we supported this model to spread across the UK and internationally, enabling tens of thousands of children to play out on their doorstep and acting as a catalyst for wider change around children and streets.

On the platform of this grassroots movement, we also campaigned for local and national policy change to address the environmental barriers to children's doorstep play, independent mobility and everyday freedom, including the 'no ball games' culture, lack of playable doorstep space and traffic danger. Through all this, one hard truth has dominated: children's freedom had been sacrificed to cars.

### Designing out children

Our aspirations for child-friendly streets are perfectly articulated in Colin Ward's book *The Child in the City* (1978):

*'I don't want a childhood city, I want a city where the children live in the same world I do ... If the claim of children to share the city is admitted, the whole environment has to be designed and shaped with their needs in mind.'*

Children are rarely considered in decision-making around streets, transport policy and planning. However, they are arguably the group most impacted by these decisions, now and in the future. An adult-centric approach to designing our streets and neighbourhoods has, over decades, had the unintended effect of damaging children's health, taking their lives, and limiting their freedom, largely because of an excessive focus on the car. Those facing the worst inequalities have been impacted the most. By contrast, a child-centred approach to transport policy and planning could help transform streets and neighbourhoods into healthy, pleasant, safe, and equitable places for everyone.

Enrique Peñalosa, the former Mayor of Bogotá in Colombia, famously said, 'Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for everyone.' The same is true of roads and streets. Child-friendly streets are also pedestrian-friendly, cycle-friendly, older-people- and disability-friendly; they are equitable and inclusive. They are sustainable streets, active streets, community streets, Healthy Streets,<sup>1</sup> Living Streets,<sup>2</sup> Vision Zero<sup>3</sup> streets. In other words, they are the streets we all need.

## Cars, streets and people

### Why children must come first

The same is not true in reverse; adult-focused cycling strategies, for example, often don't work well for children – prioritising speed, efficiency and purposeful journeys over creating safe, child-friendly doorstep space and neighbourhoods. It's fair to say that children and their needs have been all but ignored within transport policy and planning to date. This blind spot means that even forward-thinking strategies can result in roads, streets and public transport systems that continue to exclude children.

Childhood expert Tim Gill and I recently published a paper that makes the case for this new approach: *Streets for play, streets for freedom: How a child lens would transform transport policy*.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that a child lens is useful and necessary, both from a pragmatic and an ethical point of view, expanding on the following 'ten good reasons':

1. children's health is in crisis, and enabling their everyday mobility and spatial freedom is a significant part of the solution: the foundation for a happy, healthy childhood;
2. children are the group most impacted by the way our streets and cities are planned;
3. due to equalities law<sup>5</sup> and cultural norms, children are the group least considered by decision-makers;
4. for children, independent mobility equals active travel (walking and wheeling);<sup>6</sup>
5. child-friendly streets are also adult-friendly streets, but the same is not true in reverse;
6. children have specific needs and rights that are often not considered or met by a universalist approach to streets;
7. a child lens supports many other policy drivers, such as climate, clean air, public health, social equity, inclusion;
8. a focus on children could help to build consensus and calm the 'culture war' around streets, leading to more rapid and lasting change;
9. children have been asking for change for decades; and
10. children should be seen and heard in streets and communities.



⏪ Organised 'play street' sessions offer a rare chance for children to enjoy playing out without fear of traffic

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## A matter of life and death

The paper also raises the hard fact of child road death. Worldwide, 75,000 child pedestrians and cyclists (aged 0-19 years) are killed by motorists each year.<sup>7</sup> Statistics like this can be difficult to process or put into context. Road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death for children and adolescents,<sup>8</sup> exceeding deaths from cancer, drowning or malaria.<sup>9</sup> This in itself is enough reason to prioritise children.

No one planned for huge numbers of children to be killed by cars. No one set out to create places that lead children to live isolated, indoor, sedentary lives. Equally, no one disputes that children's lives are precious, nor that playing outdoors, socialising with friends, and getting around on foot, on wheels and by bike are part and parcel of a healthy and happy childhood. Despite this, streets and neighbourhoods continue to favour cars and drivers over children. Car-centric mindsets (or 'motonormativity') are so deeply embedded, widely accepted and interconnected that they are hard to question or change. They will not be fixed by isolated schemes, tweaking design guidance or increased traffic enforcement. A more fundamental paradigm shift is needed.

### Creating the streets we all need

Children's everyday freedoms overlap with many different policy/interest areas: active travel, road safety, public health, physical activity, children's rights, climate, clean air, equalities, child development, planning, housing, urban design, play, parenting, community activism. Yet even when the topic is considered within each of these areas it tends to be done in isolation.

We now need to join up the dots, see the bigger picture, and build a powerful, collective focus on children and streets. A 'child lens' has the power to transform children's lives, shift the status quo and create the streets we all need for the future.

**Alice Ferguson** co-founded and co-led Playing Out until its planned closure in March 2026. Her work includes research, writing, policy work, campaigning and international speaking on children's rights and freedom. All views expressed are personal. For further information, visit [www.playingout.net](http://www.playingout.net) and [www.linkedin.com/in/alice-ferguson-65812844/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/alice-ferguson-65812844/)

### Notes

- 1 See the Healthy Streets website, at [healthystreets.com](http://healthystreets.com)
- 2 See the Living Streets website, at [livingstreets.org.uk](http://livingstreets.org.uk)
- 3 See the Vision Zero website, at <https://visionzeronetwork.org>
- 4 Read the report at <https://playingout.net/files/research/childlensdigital.pdf>
- 5 Bizarrely, the *Equality Act 2010* excludes children (under 18s) from being a protected group under the 'age' characteristic, except within employment. See <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/128903/pdf/>
- 6 'Wheeling' in this context describes the use of small, non-motorised wheeled devices to travel; it includes children scooting and skating, as well as pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility aids
- 7 *Protecting Young Lives*. UNICEF, Feb. 2025. [www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214\\_ProtectingYoungLives\\_FullReport-FINAL.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/167696/file/250214_ProtectingYoungLives_FullReport-FINAL.pdf) (an estimated 181,000 children are killed on roads each year – 38% pedestrians 4% cyclists)
- 8 *Global status report on road safety*. World Health Organization, 2023. [www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/safety-and-mobility/global-status-report-on-road-safety-2023](http://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/safety-and-mobility/global-status-report-on-road-safety-2023)
- 9 'Causes of death in children aged 5 to 14, World, 2023'. Webpage. Our World in Data, 2023. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/causes-of-death-in-5-14-year-olds>