

THE SPACE RACE

The removal of statutory protection for school playgrounds and playing fields is a development that should be of deep concern to us all, argues Juno Hollyhock

During the winter children all over the country disappear for months on end.

It's dark when they leave home for school and then dark again by the time they return home. Although some of them have access to the natural environment at weekends and in school holidays this reduces greatly if they live in high-rise blocks of flats with no gardens and only limited safe, accessible outdoor space.

During these months it is essential for their health and wellbeing that they can get outside during the school day. Indeed it is also essential for their learning – any teacher dreads the afternoon after a 'wet' lunchtime when learners have been confined to their classrooms. Concentration drops, disruptive behaviour increases and teaching becomes policing.

However, at a time when children are outdoors less than ever before, school grounds are becoming more vulnerable. Last October, statutory premises regulations relating to the amount of outside space that a school must provide were significantly reduced.

The revised regulations now read:

- Suitable outdoor space must be provided in order to enable—
 - (a) physical education to be provided to pupils in accordance with the school curriculum; and
 - (b) pupils to play outside.

Although new guidance will exist to inform the criteria for 'suitable' this will be guidance only and will not be legally binding. Nowhere will it say that the outdoor space must be provided on the school site, or be of any particular size, configuration or standard.

The removal of statutory protection of outdoor playing fields is a loss for future generations who could be taught in schools that have been built without playgrounds or playing fields at all (in order to address the difficulties that some free schools are having in finalising their premises arrangements, it was announced recently that there would be no requirement for new ones to have access to immediately adjacent space). It also brings huge risk to existing school playing fields and school grounds, as this is the only remaining regulatory requirement against which applications for the disposal of school playing fields will be assessed to ensure they retain sufficient provision.

There is plenty of evidence that shows that the provision of good quality, diverse and appropriately designed school grounds brings



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rich rewards in most areas of a child's physical and emotional health, environmental awareness, well being and educational achievement.

This argument seems to be falling on deaf ears, however – so let's look instead at what might happen if we don't manage to protect these spaces:

- Incidences of common childhood diseases such as colds and respiratory conditions will increase as germs circulate around unhealthy environments with little access to fresh air. More worryingly, some of the conditions of old such as rickets caused by a lack of vitamin D will begin to creep faster into our hospitals and surgeries.
- Teaching and learning will suffer as children will not be able to concentrate so well, they will be fidgety through lack of opportunity to get outside and run around in break and lunch times.
- Children will grow up unused to the concept of spending time outside as part of every day life. They will begin to replicate the indoor life at home.
- Mental health and social interaction will deteriorate as social networking is done in isolation hunkered over social media pages rather than out and about with friends.
- Obesity will continue to render our children immobile, exhausted, unhappy and susceptible to a wide range of associated medical conditions.
- Behaviour will worsen as children spend more time engaging in aggressive gaming activities on-line and through computers loosening the link between what is real and what is fantasy. Ultimately this will lead to deep and sinister change in the way that children growing up perceive and interact with the world around them.

Whilst off site visits are an excellent way to embed and enrich learning experiences, you cannot walk a whole school of children to the local park for a 15-minute break time. We must not ignore the deep and significant changes that a lack of outdoor space around our schools will create in the next generation.

It is time for schools to take charge of their outdoor spaces and to demand the right for every child to access the natural environment – through their timetabling, their staff development, their concerted and deliberate protection of their own school grounds, their commitment to delivering aspects of the whole curriculum outdoors... and their ongoing reinforcement of the message that we must not become an indoor society.

