
OUTDOOR PLAY

A recent report from the National Consumer Council highlighted the fact that TV is a central focus in many households, particularly at meal times.

This hugely diminishes the opportunities for conversation and social interaction, apart from the exposure of the children to powerful marketing. There is no doubt that the constant bombardment from advertising encourages children to plead for 'must have' products. The expectation of children from an early age is to have the latest technology in their bedroom to supply them with endless entertainment.

Parents say 'at least I know they are in their own room', but the question still needs to be posed: 'Are children missing out by being cocooned in their homes at the expense of being able to experience unstructured play?'

With the current concerns about children's safety, the easiest option is to 'guard' children all the time. However, children need to play and that play should include spontaneous and creative activities with other children, preferably outdoors.

Play is not an optional extra, but a fundamental requirement of children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. There are so many benefits for children, not least of which is sorting out differences with friends, learning how to take 'safe risks' and making their own judgements. These learning opportunities through play cannot be replicated in other settings. As parents we need to consider carefully how we can ensure that children gain play experiences, otherwise there is a real risk that our children will be denied a fundamental element of growing up.

Q

We have a lovely park nearby. My children are 9 and 10 and growing into mini couch-potatoes! It is difficult for me to let them out of my sight, but at the same time I know they should be able to play with their friends.

A

You raise a concern that will resonate with many parents, which is trying to find the balance between over-restricting the children and letting them out safely.

Try joining with other parents so that together you can share taking the children to the park. As your children have been used to being in the house, you may need to use a lot of encouragement to get them outside. It is worth persisting as they need the exercise and the sort of stimulation gained by playing imaginatively with other children. When they play outside, set down limits on where they can go and get them to check back with you frequently. It may seem a bit unnerving for you at first but if you can ensure that the children keep to the rules and they enjoy themselves it will all be worthwhile.

