

FAMILY

WHAT ADULTS LOST WHEN KIDS STOPPED PLAYING IN THE STREET

In many ways, a world built for cars has made life so much harder
for grown-ups.

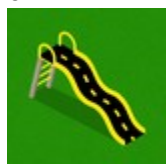
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IN THE SUMMER of 2009, Amy Rose and Alice Ferguson, two mothers living on Greville Road in Bristol, a midsize city in southwest England, found themselves in a strange predicament: They saw entirely too much of their kids. “We were going, like, *Why are they here?*” Rose told me. “*Why aren’t they outside?*” The friends decided to run an experiment. They applied to shut their quarter-mile road to traffic for two hours after school on a June afternoon—not for a party or an event but just to let the children who lived there play. Intentionally, they didn’t prepare games or activities, Rose told me, as it would have defeated the purpose of the inquiry: “With time, space, and permission, what happens?”

The results were breathtaking. The dozens of kids who showed up had no problem finding things to do. One little girl cycled up and down the street “3,000 times,” Rose recalled. “She was totally blissed out.” Suddenly, the modern approach to children’s play, in which parents shuttle their kids to playgrounds or other structured activities, seemed both needlessly extravagant and wholly insufficient. Kids didn’t need special equipment or lessons; they just needed to be less reliant on their time-strapped parents to get outside.

The experiment also produced some unexpected results. As children poured into the street, some ran into classmates, only just then realizing that they were neighbors. Soon it became clear to everyone present that

far more children were living on Greville Road than anyone had known. That session, and the many more it prompted, also became the means by which adult residents got to know one another, which led to another revelation for Ferguson and Rose: In numerous ways, a world built for cars has made life so much harder for adults.

The dominance of cars has turned children's play into work for parents, who are left coordinating and supervising their children's time and ferrying kids to playgrounds and play dates. But it has also deprived adults of something more profound. Over the years, as Rose and Ferguson have expanded their experiment to other parts of the United Kingdom, neighborhoods across the country have discovered that allowing kids to play out in the open has helped residents reclaim something they didn't know they were missing: the ability to connect with the people living closest to them.

MODERN FOLKS TEND to think that streets serve largely mobile purposes—getting cars from one place to another in swift, orderly fashion. But “prior to the automobile, streets had a ton of stationary functions,” Marcel Moran, a faculty fellow at New York University's Center for Urban Science and Progress, told me. Streets were where people sold wares and socialized. And particularly after the United States and Europe began to industrialize, streets were the primary location for the rising number of urban-dwelling children to play, according to Jon Winder, a historian and the author of *Designed for Play: Children's Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010*. This remained the case in the U.K. and the U.S. even after playgrounds became widespread in the early 20th century. Only when cars hit the streets in larger numbers did things begin to change. Society, Winder told me, began prioritizing “the movement and storage of motor vehicles over children and their playful behavior.”

In the U.S., the ousting of children from the street was initially met with fierce resistance, Peter Norton, an associate history professor at the

University of Virginia and the author of *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*, told me. In the 1920s, as pedestrian death tolls mounted, a number of American cities erected monuments to children killed in traffic, acknowledging their deaths as public losses the way we memorialize fallen soldiers. When cases involving these tragedies made their way to court, Norton said, judges routinely ruled that “a child has an absolute right to use the street, that it’s the responsibility of everyone else to watch out for the child. The parent does not have to be there.” He added that motorists who argued that they were not at fault, because the child had rushed out in front of them, were told, “That’s no excuse. You chose to operate a dangerous machine that gave you, the driver, the responsibility.”

Over time, however, deliberate efforts within the auto industry shifted the blame for traffic deaths to children and their parents. In the 1920s, the American Automobile Association dispensed free school-safety education materials aimed at teaching children that the road was not for them. Among other things, these curricula redefined the school-safety patrols run by older children tasked with escorting younger kids safely through the streets. Instead of walking into the street to stop traffic, kids were instructed to wait until there were no cars, then to cross. The message was that “if a child’s going to use the street at all, it’s only when there’s no cars,” Norton said. “This immediately became the excuse for raising speed limits.” By the 1940s, these curricula—still produced by AAA—cautioned children against even attempting to use streets at all. And it was hard to argue otherwise, Norton said, because the higher speed limits had in fact made roads quite dangerous.

The broader shift to a car-centric society only further undercut the notion that children have a place in or near the road, Norton told me. Suburbanization combined with school consolidation and court-ordered school busing meant that schools got farther apart, making it impractical for children to walk to them. In the 1980s, warnings about “stranger danger,” which intensified as news and crime shows stoked panic about

child abductions, no doubt played a role in further curtailing children's freedom—though stranger danger itself wasn't new, Norton noted. Parents of the past relied on a combination of people—shopkeepers, residents, adults sitting on front steps—to keep an eye out for the rare unsavory character who might harm their kids. “But eyes on the street in the U.S., outside of a few surviving communities, is almost gone,” Norton said. “Eyes behind a windshield are no substitute.”

ROSE AND FERGUSON'S PROJECT on Greville Road is of course not the first or only effort to reclaim the streets for children. In the U.K., play streets emerged roughly a century ago as a sort of compromise in the process of booting kids off the street. But after peaking in the 1960s, they largely dwindled out, to be revived only in the late 2000s. New York has had a play-streets program since 1914, and Philadelphia for more than half a century—and recently, the idea has been taken up in other U.S. cities. Chicago launched a play-streets program in 2012, followed by Los Angeles in 2015; an initiative in Portland, Oregon, hosted its first events in 2023.

In the U.K., Rose, Ferguson, and their friend Ingrid Skeels expanded their experiment in 2011 by founding Playing Out, an organization that has helped residents on more than 1,000 streets in dozens of cities across the country set up their own play sessions. These typically last for two hours and occur weekly, biweekly, or monthly. And yes, as with any other sort of play these days, the process takes work: Residents who'd like to set up a play street must get buy-in from neighbors, agree on dates, book road closures well in advance, and recruit stewards to stand guard at either end of the block. Organizers are also working against the headwinds of a society unaccustomed to children playing in the street. Even when blocks are officially closed to traffic, stewards often have to address drivers frustrated that they can't get through. Some residents ask why the kids can't just go to the park, and they worry about the noise or what will happen to their cars. When Jo Chesterman, a Bristol-based mother of two, first broached the idea of a play session on her street

several years ago, some neighbors, she told me, seemed to worry “it was maybe going to be like *Lord of the Flies*.”

But the street outside a child’s home is very different from a playground or a private yard. It’s a space that connects one home to another and is used by all residents, regardless of age or whether they have kids. On the street, Chesterman told me, kids learn how to find the homes of other children within walking distance. They also encounter children outside their own age group and a broader variety of adults. Rose’s daughter, Kaya, who just graduated from university but was 8 at the time of the inaugural play street, told me that mixing with younger kids afforded her opportunities to win the trust of their parents, which she otherwise wouldn’t have had, and that “feeling like the adults trusted us to look after their kids ... made us trust those adults as well.” For the adults, Chesterman said, play streets make it “easier to get to know everyone, rather than wait to bump into each other when you’re doing the recycling.”

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Surveys conducted by Alison Stenning, a professor of social and economic geography at Newcastle University who started studying the social impact of play streets after helping get one up and running in her own neighborhood, show that many play-street sessions manage to draw out nonparents as well. Sometimes, these connections lead to strong friendships. (Chesterman told me that on her street, plenty of play afternoons led to cozy social evenings with “far too much honey rum.”) But Stenning found that even where deep intimacy didn’t grow, neighbors did gain a more general “sense of knowing and being known”—which also has its value. Years ago, she told me, one rundown house at the end of her street, occupied by an older man and his sister, inspired rumors about who the two were and why their house looked so dilapidated. When the play streets started, the man occasionally emerged to watch the children and chat with the stewards stationed outside his

house. There was no major breakthrough or kumbaya moment, but these small interactions helped demystify a slightly odd and somewhat-feared presence on the street.

SOME OF THIS neighborly connection is likely the result of all the work and coordination involved in shutting a road to traffic. But it could also have something to do with the way children's play alters the feel of the street, giving adults permission to engage in the sort of socializing "we've otherwise policed out," Moran, of NYU, told me. Kids themselves function as a sort of "connective tissue for adults," Moran said. This is true in the simple sense that when kids meet one another, their parents naturally connect. But children are also "very good at breaking down the learned reserve between adults," Paul Tranter, an honorary associate professor at UNSW Canberra and the author of *Slow Cities: Conquering Our Speed Addiction for Health and Sustainability*, told me. Children's tendency to violate social boundaries—to stare a little too long, ask someone an overly forward question, or wander into someone else's yard—can nudge adults to reach across those boundaries too. It probably isn't a coincidence that playgrounds are one of the few places in America where striking up a conversation with a stranger is considered socially acceptable and even expected. By siloing play there, we may have inadvertently undercut children's capacity to bind us to one another.

In Chesterman's neighborhood, after about four years, street-play sessions had so radically transformed the culture that the need for formal road closures fell away. "The vibe of the street is that [people] expect to see kids playing," she said. But she suspects that this is possible largely because her road isn't a through street, so most of the people driving on it actually live there.

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Her experience points to the limitations of play streets: For all their community benefits, they aren't, in many places, sufficient to transform the way kids or adults use the street. On busier roads, play will always rely on a continuing rotation of people available to organize and steward formal closures. The sheer effort involved in coordinating them means that play streets sometimes fizzle out over time. Even on Greville Road, despite Rose and Ferguson's deep commitment, weekly after-school sessions have dwindled to monthly Saturday afternoons. And in communities where people lack the time and resources necessary for sustaining regular traffic closures, play streets don't happen at all.

This may be the ultimate finding of Rose and Ferguson's experiment: Truly restoring a culture of street play will require society to make much more far-reaching, permanent changes to the built environment. It's a daunting and perhaps impossible-sounding task. But it's one that would meaningfully improve the well-being of children, of parents, of every person on the street.