

'Stranger danger' drive harms kids

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Children choose to stay indoors watching TV and playing computer games because they are terrified of the world outside, fresh research reveals.

In a high-profile launch this week, Education Secretary Charles Clarke will announce the findings which disclose that young children carry a daily expectation of being kidnapped by a stranger, sexually abused by a paedophile or becoming a victim of terrorism.

'We are not just failing to give children the opportunities to explore the real world,' said Di McNeish, director of policy and research at Barnardo's, which carried out the study with the Green Alliance, 'but are actively dissuading them by making them over-anxious about their external environment.'

The survey of more than 1,000 children aged 10 and 11 reveals that the choice to remain indoors is being made because of an increasingly unrealistic assessment by children and their parents of the risks of the outside world.

'Parents and families are more worried by these issues - out of all proportion to the reality of the risks they are exposed to,' said Eileen Hayes, the NSPCC parenting adviser, who interviewed more than 200 parents for the forthcoming Parent and Child 2004 conference.

'I have been hearing the same story again and again,' she said. 'It is terribly sad: we want to protect our youngsters, but the side-effect has been that the children are becoming too scared to step outside their front door.'

'It is leading to a poverty of opportunity for today's youngsters, creating scared children who will grow into timid adults,' she said. 'They are not getting the chance to develop the independence they need to become fully grown-up adults able successfully and boldly to navigate the real world.'

Carole Easton, chief executive of the charity ChildLine, believes governments and local authorities must also take responsibility for failing to provide enough safe, easily accessible areas where children can roam.

'We have created a very child-unfriendly social environment outside the home,' she said. 'Few communities have accessible play spaces and even fewer of those spaces are supervised by adults.'

Green space accessible to children continues to be sold off, according to figures from the National Playing Fields Association, which shows a steady rise in the number of applications to build on playing fields from 625 in 1999-2000 to 1,325 in 2002-03.

Simultaneously, the number of children walking to school or playing unsupervised is steadily falling: in 1989, 62 per cent of primary aged children walked to school. A decade later it was only 54 per cent.

Pressures on the curriculum, school budgets and fears of litigation over accidents are also discouraging learning outside the classroom. The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers is urging its members to avoid school trips because of a 20 per cent rise in insurance premiums to indemnify schools against compensation claims.

'Given the extremely limited options available to children who want to play outside, it is hardly surprising they turn to computers and TV for excitement,' said McNeish. 'If they can't play out, what else are they supposed to do?'

The survey found that danger was the first thing children mentioned when talking about being outside, citing a fear of strangers as reasons for not playing outside, believing they faced a high risk of being kidnapped, murdered or sexually attacked.

'Children tell us it is frightening on the street or they're told by their parents not to go outside,' said Cherry Farrow, of the Green Alliance. 'They believe the outside is dangerous because of drug dealers and that they might get kidnapped.'

Terrorism featured as a significant fear for children, especially those in urban environments who seemed unable to differentiate between media coverage of terrorist attacks and reality.

'Children find it very hard to separate out what is really dangerous to them: they see issues talked about on TV and assume the dangers of the wider world are right outside their front door,' McNeish said.

'These fears are compounded by the anxieties of parents, who, as well as having realistic fears about the dangers their children face in their external environment, also have completely unrealistic fears based around modern folk tales of the likelihood that their children will fall victim to stranger danger.'

Their other fears included bullying and road traffic. Many children gave examples of accidents or near-accidents they had experienced as pedestrians and cyclists, and spoke of the fear of becoming lost, which was compounded by the dangers they believed they faced from strangers.