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News: Parents ban their children from playing outside

A new report claims that stranger danger and fears over road safety mean that our children are imprisoned in the home. Cavan Scott reports.

The great outdoors is greatly out of bounds for our children according to a new survey by Natural England. The figures show that we have raised a generation of "cotton-wool kids", with less than 10 percent having the freedom to play in our countryside, woodland and heath. This compares to the 40 percent of adults who claim they played in wild spaces when they were young. The reason? Parents are too scared to let kids out of their sight.

The survey of 1,150 adults and 502 children discovered that 62 percent of children play within the confines of the home rather than outdoors and over 80 percent admitted that they are fully supervised during rare play in natural areas.

The majority of parents - 85 percent - revealed that they would love their children to engage in unsupervised wild play, but the fear of strangers and road safety meant that such activity was out of the question. The children themselves long for such freedom, with 81 percent saying that they would like to play outside. Nearly a quarter, however, are worried to be out alone.

"Children are being denied the fundamental sense of independence and freedom in nature that their parents enjoyed," said Poul Christensen, acting chair for Natural England. "Whether through pond dipping or tree climbing, nature-based activities can play an important role in the educational and social development of children. The natural environment is there to be explored by children. It is their right. The memories they collect inspire them to pass on a healthy environment for future generations."

In response to the survey, Natural England has launched the One Million Children Outdoors programme that aims to encourage children to visit such environments as farms and nature reserves.

"It's a chilling message," said new *Springwatch* presenter Chris Packham at the launch of the survey in the Natural History Museum's wildlife garden. "We've imprisoned generations of young people, denying them an incredibly enriching environment. The long-term impact is that we are breeding naturalists who have learnt their trade in a library. It's a very sterile place to learn. While some skills are learnt in a classroom, others only come from being knee deep in mud and elbow deep in frogspawn. It is these early years of inspiration that set in motion a lifetime passion. If people haven't had the chance to engage with wildlife in their local communities, how can you expect them to fight for it when it's under threat?"

BBC broadcaster and author of the family outdoor guide *The Bumper Book of Nature*, Stephen Moss said: "Concerns over child safety are understandable, but if children can't get out there and explore the natural world, we run the risk of raising a generation of cotton-wool kids whose experiences are defined by websites and computer games.

"What is really tragic is that when I talk about playing in local gravel pits, of fishing for tiddlers and playing conkers, my childhood sounds really special, like something out of an Enid Blyton novel. It wasn't. Every child lived like this. It was called playing. It's a word we don't really understand any more."



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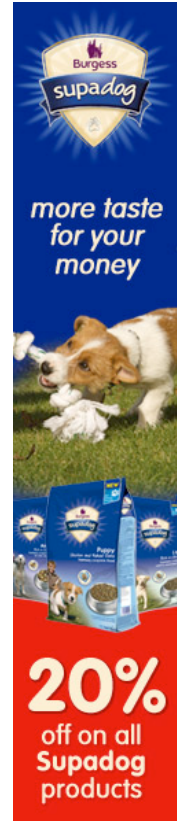
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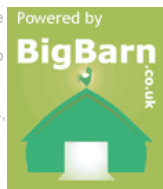
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