

Families need adventure playgrounds, and cities need families ^[1]

Wandsworth council charging for the use of a playground is the thin end of what could be a very fat wedge

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EXCERPTS

The decision by London's Tory-led Wandsworth council to start charging users of Battersea Park Adventure Playground 2.50 pounds a visit at weekends is a PR disaster. Politicians, campaigners and commentators alike have attacked the move.

The full picture is complicated by a crucial fact that has been glossed over by many reports. The playground is not just any old play park. It is a staffed adventure playground with challenging structures, a dedicated building, an activity programme and a team of trained workers. It is not unreasonable to ask why and how such places should be funded, especially in the current economic climate.

Most adventure playgrounds emerged in the 60s, 70s and 80s through grassroots community action in desperately deprived areas. In London, about 80 have survived the battles of the Thatcher years and attacks from health and safety over-regulation. It is hard to convey their special qualities to those who have never visited them. Their dizzy, messy, low-tech architecture is at its best a glorious dreamscape inspired by the collective memories of past free-range childhoods. Add skilled playworkers and the result is a place where children can leave adult anxieties and inner city realities behind and, in the words of trainer Penny Wilson, "learn to live creatively".

Even the Tories have recognised the need for government action to support outdoor play. And we know that families in poor neighbourhoods lose out massively, with access to five times fewer green spaces than the more affluent. Adventure playgrounds are one practical, effective response. This is why they featured in Labour's 2007 Children's Plan, which earmarked funding for 30 new facilities in deprived areas.

The fact that the Battersea playground attracts families from across the social spectrum and from all parts of London only adds to its value, in a city that is becoming ever more economically segregated. On one visit with my daughter, I can still recall the way the regulars - kids from the local estates, many of whom would be left outside the gates if the charges were introduced - instantly took her under their wing and gave her a generous (if heart-stopping) guided tour of the aerial runways and climbing wall.

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Charging - described in the release as a "pilot" - is the thin end of what could be a very fat wedge. In the nearby Tory council of Westminster, according to London Play, the introduction of charges for supervised play services created an unsustainable business model that led ultimately to their collapse. Now some of the sites are no longer open for play. Adventure playgrounds are not subsidised visitor attractions, but valued community assets that counter the impact of urban poverty on families. And cities need families. As LSE academic and veteran anti-poverty campaigner Anne Power says, families are the litmus test of whether a city is really working.

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- reprinted from the Guardian

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