

Play for today

Sometime in the 1980s, the world of the UK child started to close in. Before that, they had been allowed out to find their own spaces, but fear of the outside world led parents to keep close tabs on children and map out their days in a series of organised, supervised activities.

In January this year, a long-term study by Michael Shayer, professor of applied psychology at King's College, University of London, found that, even compared with the 1990s, children's cognitive abilities are declining as part of a downward trend from the 1970s. What did the researchers posit as the reason? Lack of experiential play.

Similar findings came from the faculty of education at the University of Plymouth, where Dr Sue Rogers reported the results of a large study last year. They showed that, without time to play outside, children were being deprived of vital experiences with role-play and social development.

So what has this to do with gardens? Well, if children need to play and outdoor play is where they interact best with the world without



parental involvement, and if social attitudes won't allow them to roam, the only place left is the garden.

Even the smallest areas can become havens for children. Freddie Nuttall, her husband and two small children have redesigned their tiny outdoor space in the centre of London. The garden is only a few metres square and is accessed both from the basement kitchen and the raised ground-level sitting room. "The garden was on so many levels, with lots of stairs, it wasn't safe for the children to be let out," says Freddie.

The new design has simplified the garden, while toughened glass barriers protect the stairs and stairwell.

But the area isn't just for the children. "We wanted it to fit aesthetically with the rest of the house and it had to be low maintenance," she says. The overall effect is a minimalist garden with raised beds of black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*). The minimalism works for the parents, looks stylish and is easy to keep. It also works for the children as there's a central space for their toys, sandpits and paddling pools. After play, these can be hidden away in tasteful, built-in storage.

A useful addition is an Italian basalt table – the children sit round it and make their mess, climb on it and make it a stage, or play under it and make a den.

"Having the garden done has made a massive difference to living here. Before, I took the little one out into the garden maybe once or twice all summer, but now they are out there pottering about all the time, all through the year," says Freddie.

Rachel and Peter May have a little more space. They also have four children and were determined to entice them into the garden. It used to be dank, shady and overgrown. Somewhere under the mess was a fair-sized space but, sitting well below ground level, it was in danger of being dominated by the high surrounding walls. The steep, rickety steps down were not inviting for children. "But whatever we did," says Rachel, "I didn't want a garden completely given over to children. I wanted a place I could enjoy, too."



The compromise was made trickier by the age differences in her children: the oldest is a 10-year-old boy, the youngest a two-year-old girl.

The main part of the solution was to build a climbing frame leading from a wooden platform outside the back door into the depths of the garden. This is exciting and robust enough to keep the oldest boy entertained. "It's worked brilliantly," says Rachel. Even in the middle of winter the children are out there climbing."

Glass menagerie: Freddie Nuttall's garden (left, top and bottom) has a glass barrier around the outside staircase, so she can keep an eye on her two children from the house. Planting has been kept to a minimum (a screen of bamboo at the back) in order to maximise their space. Richard and Barbara Barker had their garden (above, top right) landscaped with grandchildren in mind. It includes a rill (above) and playful touches such as a small folly and zigzag wall (above, right)

Confining the big toy to one corner meant the rest of the garden could be given over to more grown-up needs – pretty flowers and a sunny sitting area. The daisy-like *Erigeron karvinskianus* spills over the sides of raised beds; roses and lavenders fill the air with scent; and clematis and the white potato vine, *Solanum laxum* 'Album', climb along the walls. But even in this part of the garden thought has been given to how children will use it.

There's no lawn, so the younger

children can ride their bikes and draw with chalks on the floor, and the raised beds and in-built seating mean there are loads of places for them to sit and talk. The new, wider stairs down to the garden also provide a place for the older children to sit and play. Even in a modest space like this there is room for espaliered pear and apple trees to grow on the walls, so the children get first-hand knowledge of how fruit develops and can pick it straight from the trees.

Richard and Barbara Barker have added all sorts of little touches for the grandchildren in their newly designed garden in Devon.

"There are lots of intimate areas for the children as well as the open lawns," says Richard. Just the little touch of putting undulations on one part of the lawn has proved a hit with the little ones who can run and roll down the slopes. At the bottom of the garden, a stream has been made more accessible with stepping stones so the children can look more



closely at any wildlife – though children playing in or near water requires adult supervision.

"Without being excessive we've done a few things, like put in spy holes at different heights and arrow slots in the wall around the stairs in the garden." There's also a small folly and an old structure has been remodelled as a tower.

There is an alchemy about outdoor play. Take three or four children who are bickering and annoying in the house, turf them outside and suddenly they will play co-operatively and imaginatively – they don't need much. Sue Rogers tells of observing a couple of two-year-olds sitting by a muddy pile of sand in the Gambia. "They had an empty packet and a sardine tin and were using the tin to fill the packet with sand. They were having a great time. This is what children do the world over."

WHAT TO PUT IN THE GARDEN

Dr Sue Rogers, of the faculty of education at the University of Plymouth, offers some ideas for garden play throughout childhood.

Pre-crawling Scents, wind chimes, mirrors, mobiles.

Crawling Sensory motor play. Balls, bricks.

12-18 months Vehicles, crayons, chalks, digging and wet sand.

18-24 months Start of imaginative play. A playhouse or a rug on the floor for a tea party.

Three-five years Imaginative role-play, especially in a collaborative way. Dens, boxes, pieces of canvas, wood.

Six-plus years Physically challenging play is important and children will want to establish rules in a social group. Sports and games, obstacle courses.

10-plus years At this age children need privacy and space to talk to each other and experiment with relationships. Alongside this is a continued need for more vigorous play such as ball games.

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