

# Children's views on social distancing and playing on an adventure playground

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**Abstract:** Adventure playgrounds have provided an important play environment for children in the United Kingdom (UK) since the 1940s. Twenty-five children ages from 4 to 13 were asked how they would play if social distancing was introduced on their adventure playground. Using Piagetian classification as a framework, responses from children in the pre-operational stage were compliant, whilst in the operational stage, children were compliant but explained how they would adapt their play. For the formal operational stage, the responses were confrontational. The importance of obtaining children's views challenges the original 'blanket' policy guidance within the UK on social distancing for all children in outdoor environments including an adventure playground and considering how children play when with their peers is more social play.

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## Introduction

Adventure playgrounds are play spaces for children that emerged after the second world war (Newstead, 2019) The idea of the adventure playground, or as it was originally called junk playground, was from architect Carl Theodor Sørensen (1893-1979) where the first junk playground opened in Denmark in 1943 at Emdrup Weg near Copenhagen (Bengtsson, 1972). The idea of junk playgrounds was brought from Denmark to the UK by Lady Allen of Hurtwood (Hurtwood, 1968), where the name changed to adventure playgrounds.

In 1940 Lady Allen of Hurtwood, supported by the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), now called Fields in Trust (FiT) supported the development of adventure playgrounds in the UK. The first adventure playground recorded was in Mordon (Evening News, 1947) followed by a pilot project being set up in 1948 in Camberwell, London (Kovlosky, 2008; Sutherland, 2014). From these first adventure playgrounds, more permanent adventure playgrounds developed in the 1950s in Crawley, Grimsby, and Liverpool (Cranwell, 2003), and this spread to Bristol, Manchester, Birmingham, and other areas in the Midlands, Sheffield, Newcastle, Cardiff, and Edinburgh (Chilton, 2018). However, Chilton's (2003) account of adventure playgrounds in the last 40 years indicates a decrease in the numbers across the UK due to factors such as health and safety requirements and adult-related agendas such as the need for increased childcare, and educational attainment.

Play has an important role in children's health and development where Whitebread et. al. (2012) identifies five types of play: physical play; play with objects; symbolic play; pretence/socio-dramatic play and games with rules. These five types of play reflect the Piaget (1962) classification of play of Practice Play (linked to the sensorimotor stage); Symbolic Play (linked to the pre-operational and operational stage) and Games with Rules (linked to the concrete operational stage). The wide age range and developmental stages of the children have to be considered in the analysis of the data. Piagetian (1962) theory outlines the different cognitive developmental stages as a stage-like process that still has its critics (Feldman, 2004), particularly as initial observations undertaken by Piaget were on their children. However, there are

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general characteristics of children's play that do reflect the age and stage of development (Garner & Bergen, 2006), and this provided a framework for analysis considering the potential level and quality of the response between children aged 4 years and over 11 years of age.

The adventure playground provides a unique space for children across a wide age range between 5 and 15 years (King, 2021a) to be able to engage in all the five types of play identified by Whitebread and colleagues (2012). This would include climbing and running (physical play), using tools such as hammer and nails to make dens (play with objects), acting out roles (pretence/socio-dramatic play), use the resources in any way they want (symbolic play) or play sports (games with rules). Chilton (2018) provides an overview on the types of play children engage in on an adventure playground and how this type of setting can support children's development.

The last estimated numbers of adventure playgrounds in England was around 180 (Play England (PE), 2011), although this number has decreased with recent closures of adventure playground. There are two adventure playgrounds in Wales and one in Scotland. Adventure playgrounds provide a play environment for children and young people, from as young as 4 and up to 17 years. Adventure playgrounds provide a unique play space for such a wide age range for children and young people to be in the same environment. As well as the UK, there are still adventure playgrounds, for example, in the United States (Almon & Keeler, 2018) and in Japan (Kinoshita, & Woolley, 2015) that provide a space for children and young people to play often in built-up urban environments. Shier (1984) provides a revised description of a typical adventure playground in the UK as:

...an area fenced off and set aside for children. Within its boundary's children can play freely, in their own way, in their own time. But what is special about an Adventure Playground is that here (and increasingly in contemporary urban society, only here) children can build and shape the environment according to their own creative vision (p. 3).

Adventure playgrounds provide a unique environment where children have ownership of the space (PE, 2017) where they are free to come and go, within what is termed in the UK as an 'open access policy'. Adventure playgrounds provide a wide range of play opportunities such as den building using tools such as hammers, large structures for children to climb and jump from, a fire pit to both keep warm and cook, small and large movable objects, now often categorized as loose parts (Nicholson, 1971) which may include tyres and ropes, or just the open space to play traditional games in the UK such as hide 'n' seek or tag (chase). Some adventure playgrounds may also have access to indoor space where more art and craft-based opportunities of play may occur.

The adventure playground thus serves a wide age range of children and young people to engage and direct a variety of play opportunities. Although adventure playgrounds are not set up for educational attainment (Chilton, 2003), the diverse nature of this type of play provision will support children's development at different stages. For example, for children aged 4 and 5 years the use of objects becomes more functional (Garner & Bergen, 2006) with an increase in fine and gross motor skills (Johnson, 2006) and can be easily observed in den making where wooden structures are built using hammer and nails. Construction and outdoor play have benefits for cognitive learning in areas of math and science (Trawick-Smith et al., 2017). For older children, the play often becomes more complete concerning physical play and social play (Lee Manning, 2006). Although Whitebread and colleagues (2012) refer to socio-dramatic play as one of their five types of play, Hughes's (2002) taxonomy of 16 play types defines social play where "experiences in which the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended" (p. 33). This can be observed with children and young people climbing higher structures and leaping and somersaulting onto large crash mats, or where the fire pit is being prepared, lit and food being cooked which becomes a very socially-based play opportunity. Ward (1961) considered the adventure playground as:

...a free-society in miniature, with the same tensions and ever-changing harmonies, the same diversity and spontaneity, the same unformed growth of co-operation and release of individual qualities and communal sense, which lie dormant in a society devoted to competition and acquisitiveness (p.201).

Adventure playgrounds often run after school (from 3 pm onwards in the UK) Monday to Friday, during the weekends, and during the day in the school holidays (King, 2021a). It is not uncommon for adventure playgrounds during the evening to have up to 60 children use the provision or during the holidays over 200, although not all at the same time concerning the open access policy of children being able to come and go as they please. Open access refers to children and young people free to enter and leave the adventure playground of their own volition (Welsh Government (WG), 2014). In addition to providing a space to play, adventure playgrounds have also developed other provisional services by acting as a food bank (King, 2021b) and providing a base for children and young people engaged in the alternative curriculum (King, 2020). The alternative curriculum is where school-aged children are not following the national educational curriculum and may spend part of their education outside of the school.

In March 2020, the UK went into lockdown as a response to the increasing spread of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) which occurs “through contact (via larger droplets and aerosols), and longer-range transmission via aerosols, especially in conditions where ventilation is poor” (Alwan et. al., 2020, p.1). This resulted in all child-related provisions (schools, parks, adventure playgrounds, etc.) being faced with instant closure, and all play-related activities ceased and staff, not all, but most were furloughed (King, 2021a). Where adventure playgrounds were able to run some kind of provision, this continued to be community-based by increasing or developing food bank services or providing a more mobile service delivering resources to children’s houses (King, 2020).

The March 2020 lockdown in the United Kingdom lasted for 3 months, and when adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020 restrictions about hygiene and social distancing were still in place (UK Government, 2020a; 2020b). However, there was no consistent approach throughout the UK of the “2 meters or 1 meter with risk mitigations (where 2 meters is not viable) are acceptable” (UK Government, 2020a) being applied to all ages (UK Government, 2020b). Whilst England kept the 2-meter distance for all ages, there was leeway put in place for children under the age of 11 years in Northern Ireland (NIDirect, 2020), Scotland (Scottish Government (SG), 2020), and Wales (WG, 2020a; 2020b). Guidance on how adventure playgrounds could operate post-lockdown was developed by London Play (2020) where:

Social distancing measures should be observed by anyone present who does not need to be in closer contact with the family group – maintaining a 2m physical distance where possible” and “limit the duration of playground stays to an hour at a time (p. 1).

The guidelines produced by London Play indicated parents and carers stay with the children (which would be included in the numbers allowed) where ‘bubbles’ of groups would have 1-hour time slots. With adventure playgrounds re-opening across the UK, the guidance by London Play reflected the UK Guidance in England where social distancing of at least 1m in England for all children was encouraged. In Scotland and Wales, the respective Governments provided guidance where social distancing for children under the age of 12 was relaxed (e.g. WG, 2020). However, for older children and young people, the social distancing of 1-2 m still applied, as with the adventure playground staff.

### **Significance and Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study was to obtain a child’s perspective on social distancing and play. The significance of the study was measures were being introduced on how children should play in relation to social distancing, however children’s views were not included, or considered when play-based settings were to re-open. For example, play is a social activity, for example, pretend play is common with 5-year-olds, chase games with 8-year-olds, and just ‘hanging out’ with 15 years, all involve close contact. Adventure playgrounds have a wide age range of 5-15 years using the provision. This poses the question of how to socially distance children 12 years and older and who are playing with those 11 years and younger. How possible is it to implement social distancing in children’s play?

In the Isle of Man, lockdown finished earlier, and social distancing was abandoned on 15th June (Isle of Man Government (IoMG), 2020a; 2020b). Concerning the adventure playground provision, this meant with necessary hygiene precautions in place (concerning the cleaning of equipment, sanitising hands, etc.) there was no limit to the number attending, no bookable system put in place and the children and young

people who used the provision could play in the way they did as before, not in 'bubbles' or designated age groups.

Children and young people were thus able to return to their unique play environment, not having to worry about playing in close physical contact with both other children and the staff. This provided a unique context to ask children and young people a hypothetical question on how they would be able to play once they were back on their adventure playground if social distancing had to be implemented? The benefit of the hypothetical question is children and young people could respond without these measures being imposed on them, thus responses were based on their anticipated experience, rather than direct experience. This study was undertaken after the first lockdown in March 2020 was relaxed, although in the UK there has been another two lockdowns and one further lockdown in the Isle of Man.

### Method

Research with children requires different considerations when compared to adults. This consideration requires what Punch (2002) refers to as using "research-friendly or 'person-friendly techniques'" (p. 337). The views of children on their play and social distancing on their adventure playground were collected when the provision reopened on 15th June 2020.

This study provides a historical perspective in one period of time from the end of the first lockdown in March 2020 to re-opening in June 2020 where the study was undertaken. The research study undertaken was granted ethical approval from the ethics committee of the College of Human and Health Science at Swansea University.

### Research Design

The research design used video to interview children who attended their adventure playground between the 13th and 23rd July 2020 after the first March 2020 Lockdown had finished in the Isle of Man. Interviews were undertaken using a 'vox pop' approach commonly used in journalism (Beckers, 2019). This involves short interviews that are video recorded (Beckers, 2019). This approach makes the data collection method more playful and less intrusive to children and young people in their play and makes the 'interview' process very informal. As children were returning after a period of lockdown, the interviews did not want to take up too much of their time playing on the adventure playground. Interviews were undertaken between the 13th and the 23rd of July 2020, one month after the adventure playground reopened in June 2020 after the March 2020 lockdown.

Children and young people were recruited from the adventure playground with no social distancing restrictions by an advert put up at the adventure playground explaining the study. The children and young people who were interested in taking part had a signed consent form completed by their parent or carer, as well as it being stressed any participation was voluntary and would be anonymous. Whilst the children and young people were playing, one of the adventure playground staff members went around with a video camera to undertake the short 'vox pop' interviews. The agreed procedure was set out where the purpose of the study would be explained to the child and clarification they were happy to participant. The researcher collecting the data used the same four questions below and all videos recorded were consistent with this approach. It was stressed to all the children any participation was voluntary and would be anonymous and they did not have to answer any of the four questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is it like being back on the adventure playground?
3. What things do you do on the adventure playground?
4. How would you play if you had to stay 2m apart?

The questions were specific to children who attend the adventure playground and were developed with a member of staff. This considers addressing the aspect of credibility (Shenton, 2004). The questions were broad and open and did not have any COVID-19 or lockdown-specific questions as the focus of the study was on social distancing and play. The impact of COVID-19 can vary from individual to individual

and to keep with the focus of returning to the adventure playground, children were not asking questions that could specifically related to their health and well-being. However, safeguarding procedures were put in place if any responses from the children and young people reflected any concern or distress as a result of COVID-19 or lockdown, and relevant parties would be informed. Although this did not occur, it was important to consider the safeguarding of research participants.

Although issues of ‘bias’ and ‘coercion’ always need to be considered in research, the video data were collected by a member of staff could raise issues of bias. However, it was not possible to interview the children and young people by an independent researcher as travel to and from the Isle of Man was prohibited. Other methods of data collection such as recording interviews through platforms like Zoom® were considered but would have been too intrusive as this would have required participants to leave their chosen play activity and be led to a laptop or computer. The use of Zoom for interviews also relies on consistent connectivity. The use of recording the videos on a mobile device worked well. Interviews lasted between 35 seconds to 3.03 minutes and were short enough not to disrupt any children’s play more than was needed. Most interviews were done individually, although most had other children and young people around playing, or in three instances, this was done individually but in a group of two or three children. The use of video recording allowed analysis of non-verbal language, location on the adventure playground, and is a naturalistic study, the noise and activities taking place in the background provided a snapshot of how the adventure playground was running with no social distancing needed.

Interviews were all undertaken outside in a range of places including a picnic bench, wheelchair, dens, slides, rope swings, and standing in the grass area of the adventure playground. One interview was undertaken in the indoor space where children also play and socialize. Some participants were holding objects such as hammers so although interrupted in their chosen play, the children and young people were able to return to it relatively quickly.

**Participants**

The chosen sampling method of inviting children to take part who were already using the adventure playground used voluntary non-probability sampling. However, when children were taking part, this resulted in other children being interested reflecting snowballing sampling in addition. In total twenty-five children and young people took part in the study aged from 4 years up to 13 years.

**Table 1.** Participants’ characteristic

	2-6 years	7-10 years	11+ years
Girls	1 (4 years) 2 (5 year)	2 (8 years)	6 (11 years) 2 (12 years)
Boys	2 (5 years) (6 years)	1 (7 years) 3 (8 years) 1 (9 years) 1 (10 years)	3 (11 years) 1 (13 years)

**Analysis**

The Piagetian framework provided enabled a content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) to be undertaken. This enabled responses from the children to be coded (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) within the Piagetian framework. The Piagetian framework had three headings: pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational. This was all used to develop a framework to analyse the response and consider the age and developmental state of the children. This is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Analysis framework on Piagetian classification

Piagetian Play (1962)	Pre-operational 2 to 6 years	Concrete Operational 7 to 10 years	Formal Operational 11+ years
	Children are figurative or perception-oriented and play is symbolic and uses creative imagination	Children are capable of thinking logically, but always with a basis in concrete or material things and includes construction games	Children are capable of abstract reasoning

The framework enabled the coding of data to consider how each participant's play preferences and responses reflect their potential age and development. This included both verbal responses transcribed directly to what the children were saying as well as the non-verbal responses. Transcription involved transcribing by hand each interview. This involved watching and re-watching each video. With the interviews being video recorded, non-verbal responses can be considered as "Video offers an open invitation to the researcher to look beyond the spoken word and find meaning from other dimensions of participant activity" (Ramsey et. al., 2016, p. 3) explained as "recursive transcription" (p. 3) where non-verbal responses in conjunction with the spoken (verbal) narrative can include:

nonverbal, semiotic fields of interest as: gesture and pointing, gaze and attention, body position and movement, touch, tone and inflection, facial expression, and engagement with material objects (Ramsey et. al., 2016, p. 3)

The data collected by the adventure playground staff member was analysed by a second member of the research team who did not know the children. This enabled a separation of data collection and analysis to reduce bias and consider credibility (Shenton, 2004) of the process. When the data was analysed, this was sent back to the staff member to check for accuracy and the confirmability of the results (Shenton, 2004). The aspects of credibility and confirmability relate to trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The responses were discussed between the researcher collecting the data and the second researcher analysing the interviews. It was agreed the use of Piagetian classification reflected the responses, and the content analysis enabled capturing the views of the children.

### Findings

Table 3 shows the content analysis using the Piagetian framework to group responses from the different age groups. The Piagetian framework used reflects three of the four stages and these are linked to two of Piaget's classification of play of symbolic play and games with rules. As the questions focused on how children use the adventure playground, the responses were more detailed with the older children, reflecting more cognitive thinking of their responses. This is considered when discussing the results below.

**Table 3.** Responses within Piagetian classification

	<b>Pre-operational (2-6)</b>	<b>Concrete Operational (7-10 years)</b>	<b>Formal Operational (11+ years)</b>
<b>Return to Adventure Playground</b>	Good (2)	Fun (6) Weird (2) Good (2) Best Awesome Amazing Great	Fun (8) Good (4) Okay Amazing Happy enjoying Cool
<b>Types of Play</b>	Slides (2) Swings Teddies	Build (5) Play on slides (3) Break stuff (2) Explore (2) Food	Building stuff (9) Play with other people (5) Food (4) Slides (3) Swings
<b>Social Distancing</b>	Line up and take turns (2)	Bring in Nerf guns to play with Only play with people you know Build standing apart Not come in Play carefully Wear masks	Would not be here (3) Would not do it (2) Difficult to implement (2)
<b>Non-Verbal</b>	Smiles	Smiles and gestures	Smiles and more elaborate gestures

When returning to the adventure playground, all the children felt positive with the words fun and good being used the most. For the children 11+ years, their responses were accompanied by elaborate gestures such as giving a thumbs up. The content analysis is discussed about each of the three age groups.

#### Pre-Operational (2-6) Years

When asked what it was like to return to the adventure playground, single-word answers of "Good"

accompanied by a smile were consistent. When asked how they like to play on the adventure playground, a specific object was stated such as swings and slides. The responses on how they would play if they had to stay 2 m apart, it was clear there was an understanding of the distance, and the replies could be described as 'compliant' where the child demonstrated how turn-taking could be undertaken by queueing as illustrated in this response:

"I would stand here, and they would be over there and then I would go on the slide and then they would go on the slide" (Girl aged 4 years)

### **Concrete Operational (7-10 years)**

As with the pre-operational responses, when asked what it was like to be back on the adventure playground, single-word answers of "Fun" and "Good" with a smile, where one child said:

"Really fun, I haven't been here for a whole 3 months and I was sad I could not come" (Boy, aged 7 years)

The types of play included both object play (slides and swings) but also construction play of building dens, forts. This was evident where the children being interviewed had a hammer in their hands whilst answering the questions the responses were more detailed:

"I like jumping off over there \*points to the play storage container\*, like having the food here. Have fun with my friends, build and digging" (Boy aged 10 years)

When asked how they would be playing if they had to remain 2m apart, the responses would be described as 'compliant and adaptive' where again acceptance of 2m was reflected in their responses, however, the children would go into more detail on how they would adapt their play to maintain a distance:

"I would build, but \*uses stretched out arm to illustrate\* one person would be on one side of the building and other person would be on the other side of the building" (Girl aged 8 years)

### **Formal Operational (11+ years)**

The responses on what it was like to return to the adventure playground were also single words such as 'good' and 'fun' and the use of smiles, however, these words were accompanied with distinct gestures such as a 'thumbs up' and exaggerated hand and arm movements:

"FUN \*wide smile and stretching out their arms\* (Girl a, aged 11 years)

The type of play included both objects (swings and slides) and construction (den building) but also specified the social aspect of meeting friends. There was also more emphasis in the answers using head movements and pointing to where the various activities take place:

"I like hammering, cooking food, starting the fire, helping people out and I like playing" (Girl b, aged 11 years)

When asked how they would play if social distancing had to be adhered to, there was a distinct 'confrontation' in their responses from defiance (not do it) to would not come to the adventure playground. The responses included very clear gestures of shaking heads from side to side, shrugging of shoulders, and widening of eyes or curling of lips:

"I wouldn't be able to do that, it would be really stressful \*shakes head from side to side\* (Girl, aged 12 years)

One response around the issues of playing and social distancing was encapsulated in the response below:

"It would probably feel weird, because you're supposed to help people like, say you're helping someone hammer, you need to hold the nail, but you can't do that social distancing so it's going to be pretty tricky" (Boy, aged 11 years)

What was evident from the video interviews was the snapshot of what happens in the adventure playground to support children's and young people's play. Some of the participants were using the play resources whilst being interviewed, such as hammers or sitting on a slide or swing. For some of the interviews, particularly the 7-10-year age range, there was a playful interchange as often other children would do things like stand behind the interviewee and do 'bunny ears' or when pointing to an activity they like doing, children are making dens, jumping off structures or sitting around chatting. This playful

interchange also included the interviewer who also had 'bunny ears' made behind them, having their hat stolen or children playing with their hair. This was all off-camera but mentioned by the children being interviewed.

When summarizing the results, it was evident all the children were pleased to be back on the adventure playground to engage in their chosen play. The chosen favourite way children played on the adventure playground did reflect the Piaget classification and types of play where pre-operational (4-6 years) were more object play focused. For the operational stage (7-10 years) this involved more construction whilst for the formal operational (11+ years) the responses from the children had more emphasis on the social aspect of play. When asked about social distancing (keeping 2m apart when playing), pre-operational children were more compliant, operational children were adaptive and formal operational were confrontational.

The results will be discussed concerning the unique environment adventure playground provide in meeting the play needs of a wide range of children and consider how applying social distancing, particularly to the formal operational age range of 11+ years may need reconsidering in light of their social needs and expectations.

## Discussion

When adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020 in the UK, social distancing regulations were placed on all children in England (UK Government, 2020b) and for children aged 12 years or over in years in Northern Ireland (NIDirect, 2020), Scotland (SG, 2020) and Wales (WG, 2020). The restrictions imposed on social distancing and children's play were asked to children and young people who returned to their adventure playground with no social distancing restrictions in place. This provided a unique study where children and young people could hypothesise how they would play if 2m apart, rather than it being imposed and having to do so. The study also provides an important historical context of playwork during the Covid-19 pandemic.

When children were asked about their play and social distancing using a Piaget (1962) developmental classification indicated children's understanding of the world differs between the pre-operational (4-6 years), operational (7-10 years), and formal operational (11+years) stages where children at the pre-operational and operational differ on how they play and respond to questions compared to children in the formal operational stage. Although critics of Piagetian theory exists (Feldman, 2005), the use of pre-operational, and formal operational did provide a framework where the responses on how they play, and how they would play 2m apart did reflect this Piagetian classification. Pre-operational children were more focused on object play, operational children with physical play and formal operational children preferred more social type focused play. A consideration of social play and social interaction reflects Vygotsky's (1978) view of the importance of play in children's development and how this will differ in respect to the different Piagetian stages. For example, for the formal operational (11 years and older) the social aspect may take more priority than what and how children play. For the pre-operational, children will play socially, but the object being played or the activity undertaken may take more priority. The variety of what happens in any play space indicates why adventure playgrounds are important as they do provide varied play spaces for play to meet children's developmental and social needs across a wide age range.

This varied play environment indicates how children's understanding and acceptance of social distancing would be different as indicated in this study where children in the pre-operational stage were more compliant, operational children adaptive and formal operational confrontational about keeping 2m apart when playing. The 'blanket approach' of the social distancing policies of 1m to 2m for children in England (UK Government, 2020a) would have been met differently by the children in this study dependent on their age. Where in Scotland (SG, 2020) and Wales (WG, 2020a; 2020b) the 2m social distancing only applied to those over 12 years, children within the formal operational stage in this study would have either not attended the adventure playground or ignored the 2m rule. For older children, the



adventure playground would become a less attractive place to meet friends, and thus not be able to use their play environment. Where restrictions were lifted for children under the age of 12 years, this study indicated they would be more compliant in maintaining the 2m rule, although if this was put into practice, this may not be the case when children are playing.

The importance of considering children and young people's views on social distancing and play reflects the wider issue of how play is important and the role of adventure playgrounds in providing space to play. During the March 2020 lockdown, and when adventure playgrounds re-opened, fears expressed in the UK in relation to a reduction to outdoor space have "endangered child health and widened pre-existing disparities" (Editorial, 2020, p. 1). Guan et. al. (2020) stated children "obtain their daily physical activity" (p. 416) through a range of activities including active play. However, how children and young people play the stipulation of social distancing makes interaction with friends in outdoor activities problematic especially in spaces such as adventure playgrounds where children engage in many physical types of play.

Children in this study across the age range clearly expressed their pleasure in being back on the adventure playground, and with no social distancing, this did not restrict numbers or the type of play that engaged in before the March lockdown. Children returning to their adventure playgrounds in July 2020 in the UK social distancing was put in place. However, numbers were reduced and where children did attend, social distancing was difficult to maintain, whatever the age of the child (King, 2021b). As with the views of the children in this study, there had to be some compliance, where for some children they were placed in 'bubbles' and some adaptation of both resources provided and the types of play that was still possible for children to engage in (King, 2021b). However, the enforcement of social distancing became harder to enforce particularly for the older-aged child (King, 2021b). The views of the children from this current study where social distancing was hypothesized reflected what happened with children and young people in adventure playgrounds with limited numbers and social distancing measures that were put in place. This indicates the importance of consulting with children concerning policies that have an impact on their dedicated play space.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

There are limitations to this study that are acknowledged. Firstly, children were asked questions by the adults in the adventure playground which could have influenced or biased their responses. As children were asked during their play, and only lasting between 50 seconds and 3 minutes, this did not take up too much of their time and the responses reflected the enjoyment that could be ascertained in the play activities in the background and the noise of children playing. The responses were reliable and not coerced by the interviewer. The sample of 25 children, although fairly small, was a good sample size for the number of children registered and using the adventure playground, especially as it had only been running for 2 months before the March lockdown.

The third limitation of this study is the children left lockdown earlier in the Isle of Man and with no social distancing compared to England for example. Since the lockdown, when the study was undertaken only one case of COVID-19 on the Isle of Man had been reported and so the views of the children may not represent those who have returned to their adventure playground with social distancing requirements put in place. This would be a relevant follow-up study with children to see if social distancing had been implemented on their adventure playground and what impact did it have on their play.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided a unique opportunity to listen to children's voices on their experience of returning to their play environment after a period of lockdown, and not having to worry about social distancing only hypothesis about it. The study shows how important play is to children and that careful consideration has to be put in place concerning how play environments, designated specifically for children, need to consider their views on social distancing, particularly older children the opportunity to

meet friends and socialise may be impeded if restrictions are put in place.

From this study, children of all ages enjoy and needed the adventure playground post lockdown. For the older child, aged 11 years or over, this social distancing would be 'ignored'. If this is the case, then it has to be considered where will children meet and congregate? At least on specific play provisions for children, such as adventure playgrounds if children are meeting their friends and being able to play outside, it would be easier to track and trace if there are any COVID-19 related infections. Government policy and guidelines need to consider that children do not always diverge into two groups of primary (under 12 years) and secondary (12 years to 18 years), and careful consideration of the risk and benefits of adventure playgrounds as a safe space, away from vulnerable adults that may be more important than before when considering children's health, wellbeing, and development.

## Declarations

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