



On the pavement outside my front gate is a giant chalk princess, flanked by two lopsided hopscotch pitches and a gallery of indistinguishable squiggles. The artists? The children in my street.

This summer, for the first time in 20 years, the pavement has become a playground again. There have been water fights, hide and seek, hula-hooping and teas eaten outside on the front wall.

Until two months ago, the children on our street knew each other's names, but that was about it. Now they are a little gang. When the doorbell rings unexpectedly during the day, it is as likely to be eight-year-old Sophie from four doors up, as the window cleaner.

I know! Shock horror! It's like stepping back in time.

It wasn't always thus. My next-door neighbour, Nadia Derboghossian, and her brother Edward grew up in my street in the 1960s. She says: "When we were children we played out every night till teatime. On our bikes, having races, throwing a tennis ball.

Sometimes we got into trouble, but it was great fun. It's lovely to see the children out there again." During our street parties for the Royal Wedding and Diamond Jubilee I had flashbacks to my own childhood and felt buoyed by watching the children marauding freely.

So after chatting with other neighbours, I decided to encourage our children to play out the front.

Cate Cijffers, who is mother to Molly, five, and Flo, three, says: "I used to play outside when I was growing up and wanted my girls to do the same. It gets them in the fresh air and gives them a sense of freedom. It is also a great way of getting to know your neighbours."

It was not until listening to Radio 4 Woman's Hour that I realised we were unwittingly part of a social movement and that across the country scores of other parents were doing likewise.

There are even websites that encourage street play.

Travel across the North Sea to Scandinavia and it is a different ball game. In 2010, I swapped lives with a Danish family for a week and was amazed by the freedom that the children there had.

For example, it is spectacularly unremarkable to play in the street. Drivers give way and there are constantly used wooden Wendy houses, sand pits and picnic tables on the road. Yes, you read that correctly. The road. It used to be like that here - OK, without the Wendy houses and picnic tables - so what changed?

Chris Gittins, from Streets Alive, a group promoting street sociability, believes it is because life is more insular and less local.

He says: "Our research has shown the more cars there are, the less people know each other. And the less people know each other, the less happy parents are to let their children roam free. We don't all go to school locally, shop locally or go to church locally. We don't

know our neighbours and so there is less collective responsibility for children."

The death of street play is a subject that author Simon Parsons explores in his forthcoming book, *Be Careful What You Wish For*.

He points the finger at "stranger danger". He says: "The number of children killed by a stranger is tiny, but we obsess about it when you're actually more likely to win the lottery. It's hard to maintain context, but this is why parents are reluctant to let their children outdoors any more. Fear." He believes that effectively removing children from public space is detrimental to both their development and society's. He says: "It creates mistrust. If the only children you hear about are the ones in the newspapers that are misbehaving, you think all young people are like that. Then there is fear and alienation between generations."

Traffic, not paedophiles, is my concern. According to urban planner Garry Hall from *TransForm Places*, since the 1960s there has been a land-grab, with roads now the preserve of drivers. He would like us to follow the Netherlands' example where there are playgrounds on traffic islands. Nuts?

Well, maybe. According to research by motoring organisation the AA, fewer children are killed or seriously injured by vehicles in the UK than over there.

Gittins says it is impractical to change the physical structure of our environment, so we should focus on changing our social habits.

Back to my street. The children don't play on the actual road. It is a 30m long dead-end, but cars still hurtle by and the children are happy enough on the pavement. Garden walls become benches, pavement cracks tennis nets and trees hiding places.

It is exactly what I did in the 1980s, seven miles further west into London suburbia. We had alleys behind our house that were brilliant

for playing in. Now they are sky-high with weeds. This makes me properly sad.

Cars aside, my biggest concern was annoying the neighbours. Google "children playing in the street" and up pop a number of stories of councils who have banned it.

Most nights in an opposite corner of London, my sister Claire loosely chaperones about 12 young children, including her own, as they play on her estate. This is much to the chagrin of some older residents.

She says: "Although generally we get on with the neighbours, children playing in the street is a sticking point. They don't like the noise and many are hugely proud car owners and feel the roads belong to cars not kids."

Clearly, it has to be well-managed and I am lucky to have a fabulous street. One of summer's high points was sitting on my front wall with three neighbours, none of whom have young children, drinking white wine in the early evening sunshine as my two made themselves giddy running up and down. Street play is easy and on your doorstep. The only effort involved is opening your front door and shoos your children out. I do supervise, either sitting on the front wall or in the bay window with half an eye on my daughters, half an eye on a book.

The benefits of playing outdoors are well-documented. Even more so post-Olympics, when the lack of school playing fields is in the news again. It encourages children to be active, gets them off the computer and helps them develop friendships.

Gittins says: "Kids need to hang out with each other. They need play to be physical. They need to run around. They need the chance to be kids."

A study of 14,000 children by Bristol University found that regular outdoor play at eight or nine years old halves the chance of being short-sighted.

It is also emotionally healthy for children to have a life outside of school. In class they may be Billy-No-Mates, but they can reinvent themselves on home turf.

At the moment our street play is informal and fledging, but I hope it grows with our children.

This year the summer holiday has seemed less long and there have been mercifully fewer exclamations of: "Mum, I'm bored."