

Where Do The Children Play?

About The Film

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Where Do the Children Play? is a one-hour documentary for public television that examines how restrictive patterns of sprawl, congestion, and endless suburban development across America are impacting children's mental and physical health and development.

Using the adage that children represent 20 percent of the world's population but 100 percent of its future, the film opens by examining differences between growing up today, with all its inherent obstacles and temptations, and childhood as it was lived 50 years ago.

To understand today's children more acutely, the film team first visited Beaver Island where there are no McDonald's, Burger Kings, Targets or Walmarts. There, children congregate by bike in the downtown area to play. All 85 students in grades one to twelve attend the only school on the island. Most use the computer as a tool for homework, but not for communication. And while they miss a lot of what their counterparts have on the mainland, Beaver Island children are keenly aware of nature and its importance to their lives and their well-being.

Second, the film looked at suburbs today, which have the greatest problems. Explosive growth patterns, massive highways, distant malls, create an isolated environment lacking in sidewalks or places to ride bikes, walk or play. Children tend to be driven indoors to computers and television for recreation, and then driven to a mall or a friend's house by parents. Suburban kids, those ironically with the most opportunity in some areas, suffer the greatest health and psychological problems.

Third, the film team visited the city, which produced the greatest surprises as a place for children: for those not raised in crushing poverty, it still works. And surprisingly well. Despite obstacles and the media stereotypes, old neighborhoods function better than many suburbs, with parks and schools and a sense of community in which parents of different backgrounds often watch out for the safety of children, as they did generations ago when these places were built.

Finally, the film examines the impact of the media and stranger-danger television stories. But it also looks at the role of parents themselves, specifically to the over-programmed child of professionals who run their child's life as if it were a business.

The making of the film began in 2001 with the work of Dr. Elizabeth Goodenough on *Secret Spaces of Childhood* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), which the producers developed into an idea for a film.

Critical seed funding in 2002 from the president's office at University of Michigan kept the development stages afloat and was important in assuring our major funders that this work would get done if they also contributed.

