

CARE OR CONTROL?

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This exhibit directly addresses one of the fundamental questions facing social work throughout its history: what are the goals of our interventions, and why do we undertake them?

The two central images in the exhibit, both of them semi-animated, portray, firstly, small children aimlessly hanging about at the corner of Elizabeth St and Louisa; the second shows a larger group of children, neatly organized in a new playground.

Undoubtedly the advocates of the day, including JJ Kelso and those associated with Central Neighbourhood House, would want us to think of these pictures as a linear progression, before and after, moving forward from the unruly, unsafe street to the security of the playground.

But was this necessarily so?

Were the streets of the day really so dangerous to children? The photo in this exhibit of the young boys playing marbles, or cards, on the streetcar tracks, is one of my personal favourites. In spite of the approaching tram, they are going to finish their round, or their game. There is a clear sense that the streetcar can just wait until they are done. And that's probably what happened (unless, of course, the kids scattered at the last possible moment before impact).

Those young kids did not look particularly vulnerable to me, nor did they seem at risk of anything. They appeared to be at home in their environment, relaxed and comfortable playing on the tracks. Were they really in need of 'saving' by being moved to a playground where their gaming tendencies might be addressed by a well-meaning social worker?

Even in the first picture, at Elizabeth and Louisa, the kids do not seem particularly vulnerable. Kids were in the streets: that's what they did; those were the worlds they inhabited, places where, in their own terms, they felt comfortable and safe.

I am not old enough to remember the Ward. But I did grow up, in the immediate post-World War II period, living behind and above my father's small grocery store on College St. There was a lane behind the store, and that's where we hung out. It was unpaved and hence muddy at times, and occasionally we had to scatter in the face of an oncoming car or delivery truck. But it was our world. Concepts such as safety or danger were not on our radar. The laneways were where we played, because the streets by now were too dangerous, filled with too much traffic. But had anyone tried to round us up into a structured playground, we would undoubtedly have resisted: the lanes were our places, and if adults wanted playgrounds, let them use them!

Now, before I totally lose reality in my reminiscences, let me acknowledge that, objectively speaking, maybe the streets were not the best places for kids to play. Certainly the reformers saw the playgrounds as a step forward, and in some sense, they were right.

The playgrounds had equipment that kids loved to use and could not otherwise access; they had staff who could keep the peace between the differing groups and even introduce structured programming that had value. At their best the playgrounds could serve as cauldrons to mix and blend the kids – mostly recent immigrants – who came from very different places and had radically divergent life experiences. A child in a playground was unlikely to get hit by a car. And in winter he (or she) might even learn to skate on a maintained rink and grow up to play hockey professionally.

But still... but still... there was a price to pay for the safety, security and growth potential of the playgrounds. The freedom, the lack of authority, the power over their own lives that children found on the streets were all sacrificed (or at least seriously compromised) as they entered the playground. There were rules to follow, patterns and directives to guide their activities, perhaps even some learning to be done. I also feel I must ask whether the motives of the reformers were really so pure. Like social workers today, they were undoubtedly driven by a mixed agenda with varying goals, some genuinely admirable, some perhaps less so. Having studied this question for quite a while, I do believe the vast majority of the reformers had the best interests of the children at heart. They thought the children – and in the Ward these children were overwhelmingly poor and from immigrant families – inevitably would do better in the playgrounds than on the streets, and were more likely to successfully 'become Canadian' (whatever that might mean).

But then, how do we understand a newspaper headline like the one in this exhibit that talks of kids in groups as being dangerous and gang-like? Was this really the case? Were these really gangs that went out and mugged little old ladies on the streets? Were property values at risk because of marauding hordes of kids? I have no way of knowing, but I seriously doubt this was the case. I prefer to think that these alarmist newspaper headlines were merely a media strategy to draw the reader's interest. Just as the exhibit shows the selective use of photography to highlight what the author wants the reader to see, so too the written media could be manipulated to give a particular take on the world.

If it was necessary to use alarmist headlines, appealing to peoples' fears of gangs on the streets, to their self-interest in maintaining social order and stability – if it was necessary to go this route in order to attract public support for the development of playgrounds – then that was a price the reformers were willing to pay. The end, in this case, apparently justified the means...

Was it all worth it? Was the move 'from street to playground' an unambiguous step forward for society and social integration? That's hard to say. But what we can safely observe is that as the streets indeed became more dangerous, the 'rounding up' of kids into playground and other controlled environments perhaps became inevitable. My own daughter, who grew up in downtown Toronto not too far from the Ward, was certainly never allowed to play in the streets without adult supervision. We value the few playgrounds in our neighbourhood, and fight the neoliberal Neanderthals on City Council who think they are unnecessary and want to shut them down. Perhaps that's how progress works.