

**Speech delivered by Barney McNeany, Acting Commissioner at
NICCY at the Play Conference on Thursday 9th March 2006**



Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen and can I warmly welcome you all to this important event. It will, I hope, inform you, challenge you and, if all goes according to the organising committee's plans, plant some seeds which we hope will sprout and grow into the development of a strong Play strategy for Northern Ireland - **and** - provide much greater opportunities for children and young people to play.

Many of you will recognise, as Marlene has said, that I am not Nigel Williams, the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Nigel is, unfortunately, not



able to here with us today. However I know that he is very disappointed not to be able to address you this morning and he sends his best wishes for the day.

Play - and the creation of enhanced opportunities for children and young people to play and to access leisure facilities, is one of Nigel's core interests in his work as Commissioner and he is passionate about wanting to make improvements to the lives of children and young people through play and leisure.

It is well documented that play is important for social, physical, emotional, intellectual and creative development. It encourages independence, confidence and self esteem, helps develop social interaction, and life skills. Furthermore, there is much concern today about obesity in children, and associated health problems, relating to sedentary lifestyles, and play can help develop an active lifestyle.

Many of you will know that NICCY's principal aim is to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people. You may also know that Play and Leisure and the development of a play strategy for Northern Ireland are strategic priorities for the office of the Commissioner. More than 1800 responses to our 2004 - 2005 consultation on our strategic priorities confirmed NICCY's focus on Play. Many of the responses came directly from children and young people themselves. It will not be a surprise to learn that those children aged 3 to 8 that NIPPA helped us to consult in our work on our strategic priorities clearly identified play as a key factor in their lives.

But the issue of Play and access to leisure facilities covers the age spectrum from birth to early adulthood. A recent consultation by our colleague commissioner in Scotland – Kathleen Marshall – identified an overwhelming



response from children and young people about having nothing to do as their number one priority. I know from many discussions here in Northern Ireland that that is equally a frustration for our teenagers and young adults.

So NICCY has been working, in both our role as Ombudsman for children, helping individual children complaints about access to play to be resolved and in our role in advising Government on the adequacy of services to children and young people. In so doing we have identified the need for investment in Play, for levelling up provision in Northern Ireland to levels in England and for the need for the development of a Play Strategy.

That is why we called on Government to develop a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland and we were heartened when the previous Minister with responsibility for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister – John Spellar – set up the inter-departmental group on Play. I hope Lord Rooker, Mr Spellars’s successor in the OFMDFM role and our first Minister for Children – will outline how he sees the strategy rolling out over the short term. I am also very encouraged that OFMDFM will, on completion of the strategy work on Play for 0 11 years, will develop a similar and complementary approach to 11 to 18 year old.

The UK Government is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – our promises to children about their rights. Article 31 of the Convention recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts... and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities” .



So the partners to this conference are not alone in seeking to promote the right to Play.

That is why we; NICCY – Playboard, NIPPA and the Derry Children’s Commission – identified the need for this conference; to raise awareness of why a Play strategy for Northern Ireland is so important and to act as a platform for its development and inform departments and agencies of the need for Play. With this in mind I am encouraged to see representatives of Government Departments and agencies here today together with colleagues from local government and colleagues from the play sector.

NICCY has chaired the group which has worked hard to bring this conference to life today. It has been a real partnership, between NICCY, NIPPA – the Northern Ireland Pre-school playgroup association, Playboard and the Derry Children’s Commission. I would like to take the opportunity to thank my colleagues from these organisations who have helped shape the conference today and who have given generously of their expertise and time. I would also like to thank the NICCY staff, and particularly Pat Neeson, who have all worked really hard to make the conference a success and to Mark Mc Chrystal who whipped us all into shape to get here today.

This morning I also want to introduce you to a few cowboys. Not the sort that come around to fix your roof – badly – nor the sort that rise every morning at 4 a.m. to get the white stuff onto your cornflakes.

No, I want to introduce you to some real hard cussin, wrangling cow pokes from my early life:

Frankie Breen



Kevin Harte

Audy Murphy.

And me.

Now, depending on your age, you might recognise the name Audy Murphy; but unless you grew up, as I did, in rural South Armagh I doubt very much if you know either of the first two gentlemen, as they were my three to eleven year old playmates from forty years ago (I cringed as I wrote that great big number down in this speech).

Now for those of you not of this pearlescent era of the late fifties and sixties, Audy Murphy was an early hero of mine, found every Sunday afternoon or Saturday morning at the tuppenny flicks; a true son of the west who always rescued the damsel in distress, who fought seemingly overwhelming baddies, always doing the right thing and always winning out in the end, with the girl in his arms. Sometimes he even, to our loud disapproval and disgust, and not a little fascination, kissed them.

Audy's adventures allowed us to mimic and role play a universe of people outside our everyday existence. We were in charge, no adult directing the show. It allowed us to take turns at being the baddie or our hero Audy Murphy, to be the leader of the gang or the supporter, to be the sheriff doling out justice to the law-breaker. In adult psycho-social terms; role play - adopting dominance or submissive social types, developing planning and social skills; refining and honing our moral behaviour helping us to understand what was right from wrong.



It also involved, as I recall, a lot of running around in a lolling gait side slapping our left thigh to mimic the sound of the horse we were riding. It got us out of the house and into the street and the fields and the fresh air, to an extent which, when I look back, made us almost feral – the only time returning home to be fed.

Above all and everything else it was fun, or as we would have said then, deadly craic.

Looking back I realise that I was extremely lucky to grow in such a time, despite wider economic and social constraints placed upon us and our families.

Now before any of you think I am off on a nostalgia trip I want to let you know why I have given you a glimpse of my early years; I have told you about these years to get you to think about your own experiences of playing;

I want you to think about today's children and ask;

[Pause]

are they afforded the same opportunities we had?

My own rather anecdotal research, derived from talking to friends and colleagues and reviewing autobiographical sources from literature leads me to only one conclusion; that, whatever their background, rural or urban, well off or poor, people who were children in the decades up to the mid to around about the late eighties played mainly outside, in activities of self directed play.

It was with smiling faces that colleagues and friends recalled their childhood days and there were some interesting cultural and gender issues raised amongst this group over how they played, who and what with but there was a



clear message that their play days were different from the current generation of children in Northern Ireland today. I asked about what had been used for play. There was lots of fond memories of skipping ropes, swings attached to the lampposts in the street, the fields and nature, tents made from bed sheets spread across two chairs and the use of that most precious commodity of all in childhood – imagination.

Today's play is characterised, by adults anyway, as indoor pursuits with t.v., computer and console games, and dvds the common pursuits of youngsters.

This is seen as a shame by adults and there appears to be a widespread feeling that we have, as a society, lost something in the way children play today. And there appears to be some real evidence for this view. NICCY's research undertaken by Queen's University on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland quotes figures from the Child Health system based on examinations carried out on children entering Primary school which shows an alarming level of obesity; 19% of boys and a quarter of girls aged 4-5 were overweight

However I believe there are many factors at play here, forgive the pun. Parental fear and anxiety about their children's safety from sexual predation by adults, fear of crime more generally and of children's physical safety in a world now dominated by the motor vehicle are of at least the same importance as the availability of electronic alternatives to the outdoor based play of our own collective early years experience.

But what of the children themselves? What do they think?

Of the 620 submissions received by the QUB team in the Children's Rights Research on the issue of play, 412 children – that's 68% of the respondents-



related to being unable to access appropriate 'play' 'leisure' 'sport' or 'Youth Club' facilities.

The research is full of quotes taken directly from children identifying issues of safety, vandalism and a general lack of facilities for children to play. They address issues of poverty, rural isolation and the particular needs of children from ethnic minorities and those children with a disability - specific issues which require improvement. They also identify the impact of paramilitaries on play – controlling in some areas who can kick a football and when.

However one quote is a warning to us all:

[SLIDE]

“When I was in P5 the architects came and asked us what we wanted and we wrote down that we wanted a football pitch with lots of nets and astro turf and we were promised a big nature trail with a tree hut and a pond with fish and a climbing frame and a better football equipment. But as usual they didn't build it.....” (Boy aged 13)

That quotation reaffirms what we in NICCY find everyday in our experience of working with and for children and young people – they are not being listened to.

However some processes have made real attempts to engage with children and young people. Northern Ireland has adopted an outcomes focussed approach to planning for some children's' services. [SLIDE] These are statements of



Common Purpose, of aspiration and intent. And they are influenced by the Outcomes included in Every Child Matters – the Government’s policy statement on children and young people in England and Wales. Central to these outcomes; whether it is;

- enjoying and achieving;
- being healthy;
- staying safe

from Every Child Matters

or:

- All children are ready for learning and school.
- All children and young people enjoy and succeed during school years.
- All children and young people are involved in decisions that affect them.
- All children and young people make a positive contribution that is valued.
- All children and young people make a safe transition to adulthood
- From the Children Service plans

Play and leisure are integral to the achievement of these outcomes.

We look forward to the publication in the near future of the 10 year children’s strategy which will set out the Government’s policy position on Children in



Northern Ireland. Whatever outcome measurement is used in the strategy Play will be an essential element in securing achievement of positive outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The Children's strategy will set Government's high level agenda for children and young people over the next ten years, an ambitious undertaking in a period of such great change. With the changes being brought about in the area of Public Administration NICCY believes clarity about the responsibility for Play is even more crucial than at present. And there have been some noteworthy developments in the area of Play. Several Councils across Northern Ireland, not least Derry City Council, have made clear their commitment to Play and to the need for Children and Young People to have access to a range of age appropriate facilities. The Government's inter-departmental group under the auspices of the Children and Young Peoples Unit in OFMDFM has a clear role to bring forward a strategy for play.

This is a again a positive development and we hope that Lord Rooker, in his role as Children's Minister, can ensure that the previously fragmented situation that pertained up until his appointment - with a lack of clear responsibility for Play resting with any one Government department – is now on a solid footing and that we will begin to see some concrete developments in this important area of children's lives.. We know from our experiences of working with his office to date that he has the means and the determination to make a difference.

The announcements this past week on the additional resources for Children and Young People have demonstrated the current administration is putting its money where its mouth is and is listening to the needs of children and young people and to the many statutory, voluntary and community organizations and groups



who work with and for them. But much remains to be done and we hope today's conference begins a process of solid development in this area. This is particularly important as we face the single biggest change in the way our public services are delivered for more than 30 years.

In ending I commit NICCY's resources to continue to focus on Play as a priority area and I want to leave you all with a challenge to do likewise. I can assure you that NICCY will be continue to be watchful as we want to ensure that the pressure for an effective strategy is maintained

Thank you all and I hope you have a rewarding and fruitful day at this conference.

