

A brief guide to using oral history for your play street

If you like the idea of tapping into the history of play on your street and using it to inspire children to get out and play there today, you may be interested in the process we used on the Play Streets Past and Present project. This brief guide explains how to collect and use 'oral history' on your street.



What is oral history?

Everyone has a story to tell which is unique to them; a story which reflects their personal experiences, perspectives, culture and identity. When we ask someone to tell us about their life, they are sharing their knowledge of the past. This kind of spoken history is called oral history.

Oral history enables us to preserve and record the past and everyday life through first hand or eye witness accounts. It allows us to capture aspects of life which are informal and unwritten and which would otherwise disappear without trace.

Oral history sessions usually take place between two people and are recorded. The conversation takes the form of an interview in which one person the interviewer, asks questions of the interviewee or narrator. Most oral history interviews follow a life history format: they start with childhood and work through the major events of a person's life, but

they may focus on particular aspects of the past and the interviewee's life. In our case we were focussing on childhood experiences and memories of play.

During the Play Streets Past and Present project we collected stories about childhood and play. The stories helped us to learn about different types of play in the past and engaged us with the real experience of participants in the project.

Oral history: step by step

If you are interested in collecting some oral histories for your own Play Street project here's a step by step guide to getting started.

1 Identify who you will interview

A starting point may be to contact people who you know in the street or make a flyer asking for people to share their stories.

2 Explain the purpose of the project and interview

Spend some time talking about the idea of the project and getting to know interviewees before recording them as this will put them at ease. Make sure you have discussed and explained the purpose of the interview with the interviewee in advance so that they know what to expect and how the interview could be used.

3 Prepare some questions

It helps to have a list of questions around the subject of play and childhood to ask your interviewee. Ask questions that are open-ended and will encourage the interviewee to talk. The questions are a framework to guide you with your interviews and need not be stuck to too rigidly.

4 Interview format and length

Most oral history Interviews follow a life history approach, ie they start with childhood and work through the major events of a person's life. These interviews tend to last one or two hours, or more depending on your interviewee. Sometimes it is not possible to delve deeply into a life story. If you want to focus on a particular theme or aspect of a person's life, make sure you first gather some basic information for example their name, date of birth, where they were born and how long they have lived in the area, leading up to your other questions.

5 Get some practice at interviewing

It is useful to practice interviewing in pairs or small groups beforehand to ensure that you are confident asking questions.

6 Prepare your equipment

If you are going to record the interview, make sure your equipment is working before the interview!

7 Location

Find somewhere quiet for the interview to take place, preferably where there will not be any interruptions or background noises.

General pointers

1. Start with more general background questions first.
2. Ask more probing questions later in the interview.
3. Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
4. Be aware of and sensitive to topics coming up during the interview which may provoke painful memories or responses
5. Limit interviews to about one or two hours in length, depending on the energy levels of you and your interviewee.
6. Thank them and send a follow up thank you note.

After the interview:

Sign a copyright release

It is always advisable to get the interviewee to sign a copyright release form. This makes it clear to the interviewee, how the interviews will be used, minimising the chances for misunderstanding.

Document your recordings

It is good practice to write up your interview when you have finished.

Keep your recordings safe

Make sure that you name the audio files so they can be easily located later. Keep a master copy of the recording and make a second, 'listening copy' so that the original does not get damaged or corrupted. Remember to back up digital files to hard disc drives.

Oral history is a historical discipline in its own right, with its own conventions, good practice and codes of ethics.

For more detailed information please go to the website of the Oral History Society.

<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>