



# THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

## The public/private distinction in children's theorizing of risk and safety

**JENI HARDEN**  
University of Stirling

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Mailing address:  
Jeni Harden  
Department of Applied Social Science,  
University of Stirling,  
Stirling FK9 4LA, UK  
[email: j.a.harden@stir.ac.uk]

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This article explores children's theorizing around risk and safety in relation to the public/private distinction. While there has been considerable debate within sociology over the different meanings and applications of the public/private dichotomy, little consideration has been given to the ways in which children construct their lives around this distinction. In this article it is argued that children reflexively construct their landscapes of risk and safety around concepts of private, local and public. While the private sphere of the home was described by the children in terms of safety and security, they expressed concerns about their vulnerability in public life. The children's accounts also define an intermediate sphere between private and public – the local sphere – which was identified in terms of proximity to the home and familiarity with places and people.

### Introduction

Recent sociological work has explored risk as a social construction (Giddens, 1991). It is argued that lay theorizing around risk must be socially situated and contextualized with regards to public discourses and the socioeconomic structures which shape our lives (Green, 1997; Scott et al., 1998). There are several ways in which this is pertinent to the discussion of children and risk. First, public discourses on children and risk are framed by contemporary western ideas about childhood (Jackson and Scott, 1999). Childhood is constructed as a time of innocence, vulnerability and dependence (Jenks, 1996). Second, the discussion of risks to children selectively focuses on particular risks (Roberts et al., 1995). Third, in such discourses the risks that children face are located principally in the public sphere rather than the private sphere of the family.

Recent campaigns by children's organizations have sought to draw

attention to the risks children face with regard to domestic violence within the family, yet much public discourse around children continues to focus on risks located in public life. In addition, there tends to be a focus on particular types of risks to children. Considerable media attention is given to cases of child abduction, drug deaths among children and bullying, with less interest being shown about accidents to children in the home. It is argued that this is reflected in parents' own concerns for the safety of their children. It has been estimated that 'stranger danger' was the greatest fear for 98 percent of parents, yet between 1984 and 1994 fewer than six children under 14 were killed by strangers each year in the UK (Moran et al., 1997). This can be contrasted with approximately 600 per year who die in accidents in the home (Harker and Moore, 1996).

Children's participation in public life is perceived to entail specific risks and as a result it is argued this participation is to be controlled and limited by adults. The protection of children involves regulating their participation in public life – where they go, with whom, for how long, for what purpose. In this respect the protection of children is also a source of control over children (Valentine, 1997a). Limits to the scope of children's autonomy, by parents and through legislation, are closely connected to the idea of children as a social group being immature, naive, vulnerable and a danger to themselves (Pilcher, 1996). Yet distinctions are also made concerning children's perceived ability to manage risks and between children in terms of age. For example, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) gives guidelines on the ages when children can be allowed degrees of autonomy: for example, it is noted that children at 8 years old are too young to walk to school (*The Observer, Life* section, 10 March 1996).

In this article, children's own constructions of risk and safety in their everyday lives are explored in relation to the public/private dichotomy. While there has been considerable discussion within feminist research concerning the implications of the public/private distinction for women (Gamarnikow, 1983), less is known about the implications for children or indeed the ways in which children themselves construct their lives around this distinction.

The article first presents the background to the study from which the data presented are drawn. Second, key issues in debates over the public/private distinction within sociology and the pertinence of these issues for the discussion of children and risk are outlined. These issues are then explored further in relation to the data from interviews with children. The children were reflexive in their conceptualizations of risk in public life and did not simply accept official discourses on children and risk. It is argued that children construct their landscapes of risk and safety around concepts of private, local and public. It is shown that while the private sphere of the home was described in terms of safety and security, the children expressed concerns about their vulnerability in public life. The children's accounts also defined

an intermediate sphere between private and public – the local sphere – which was identified in terms of proximity to the home and familiarity with places and people.

## **Background to the study**

This article is based on data from a study exploring the ways in which children and parents deal with risk, safety and danger. The focus of the study is on risk and risk anxiety generally and its consequences for children's everyday lives, and specifically on the sexualization of risk in relation to children. In the interviews a topic guide was used, exploring children's everyday fears and concerns, children's attitudes to the boundaries set by parents, children's strategies for managing risks and negotiating parental boundaries. Various task-based work was also developed, including, sentence completion, spider diagrams and grouping exercises.

Individual interviews with 51 children from 30 families were carried out. Of the 51 children, 34 were aged between 9 and 113,<sup>1</sup> and were at primary school when interviewed. To explore the embeddedness of risk within households, where possible, an older sibling was also interviewed: 17 of the children were aged 12–15<sup>2</sup> and at secondary school when interviewed. Across both age groups there are equal numbers of girls and boys.

The sample was generated from one school in an urban area and four schools in rural areas in Scotland, in order to explore the spatial distribution of risk between urban and rural locations (Valentine, 1997b). Using schools to generate the sample enabled the researchers to interview children who potentially shared common networks and local knowledges. The children in this study are from predominantly upper working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds and all but two of the children are white, reflecting the ethnic composition of the areas studied.

While it is recognized that children are not a homogeneous social group and that their experiences and attitudes vary, the focus of this article is not to draw a systematic comparison based on structural differences. Rather, it is noted when significant points of difference were raised between the children, based on age, gender and location.

## **The public/private distinction and risk**

The distinction between public and private has been used by sociologists in many different ways and contexts. Distinctions are drawn between the public and private in terms of: state administration/market economy; collective/individual interests; family/market economy. As Weintraub notes, 'the public/private distinction . . . is not unitary but protean. It comprises not a single paired opposition but a complex family of them, neither mutually reducible nor wholly unrelated' (Weintraub, 1995: 284). Moreover, the way

in which such concepts are used can vary. Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (1999) note the different usages between the identification of the public and private with distinct physical spaces and their identification with particular social practices and experiences. As Slater (1998) notes, the 'public and private are seen as different realms of experience and value, spatially and temporally, separated and epitomised by different sorts of people and roles' (Slater, 1998: 144).

The extent to which there is a sharp distinction between the public and private has also been called into question. New forms of work, for example free-lancing, have blurred the distinction between the public sphere of the workplace and the private sphere of the home (Slater, 1998). As Beck notes:

The private sphere is not what it appears to be: a sphere separated from the environment. It is the *outside turned inside and made private, of conditions and decisions* made elsewhere, in the television networks, the education system, in firms, or the labour market, or in the transportation system, with general disregard of their private biographical consequences. (Beck, 1992: 133)

It has been argued that there is an intermediate sphere between the public and the private. Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (1999) point to the 'sociable' as a sphere of support between the state and the individual, giving the example of friendships. Similarly, Hunter (1995) argues that between the public and the private there is a 'parochial social order' which refers to the communal and the local.

The public/private distinction is central to the theorizing of risk both in terms of physical spaces and modes of experience. First, Goffman argues that there is an increasing vulnerability associated with public life. (Goffman, 1971: 385). Goffman developed the concept of *Umwelt* to refer to 'the sphere around the individual within which potential sources of alarm are found' (Goffman, 1971: 297). Goffman primarily conceptualizes *Umwelt* in spatial terms. Indeed, he refers to the 'critical distance' around the individual from which alarm can be felt (Goffman, 1971: 299). He notes the structures of *Umwelt*, the aspects of our everyday life which can cause alarm – the furnished frame relating to security associated with internal, enclosed spaces; lurk lines and access points to refer to spatial points of vulnerability; and the social net to refer to our concerns about other people, in public spaces (Goffman, 1971: 335–7).

Second, discussions of risk and risk anxiety have centred on individuality and collectivity. Giddens has argued that while anxieties about risk may be shaped by public discussions, it is as individuals that we cope with these uncertainties. Central to this is the individual reflexive monitoring of risk.

The point . . . is not that day to day life is inherently more risky than was the case in prior eras. It is rather that, in conditions of modernity, for lay actors as well as for experts in specific fields, thinking in terms of risk and risk assessment is a more or less ever-present exercise, of a partly imponderable character. (Giddens, 1991: 123–4)

Nevertheless the significance placed on individual reflexivity in understanding risk and risk anxiety has been criticized. Furlong and Cartmel argue that while individualization is both a real and a rhetorical feature of late modernity, it is constrained by countervailing pressures towards standardization, and individual decisions take place within the context of 'a society characterised by interdependency' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 113). Moreover, it is possible to question, in relation to children, whether all individuals are regarded as being equally reflexive. Public debates on risk rarely include children's own opinions. Rather, risks to children are defined and managed by adults on children's behalf. It appears as though the element of choice, responsibility and reflexivity accredited to adults in relation to risk is denied to children.

### **Understanding children's theorizing of risk and safety**

The data from this study show that children's *Umwelten* are complex and contingent on many different but interrelated factors involving space, time, people and behaviour. A common thread running through these different structures is the externalization of risk and the association made between public life, children and risk. The ways in which children define particular spaces and their experiences of them in terms of risk and safety are explored further in the following sections. In doing so, the extent to which children are engaged in the reflexive monitoring of risk is also addressed.

#### *The home as a safe haven*

The idealization of the private sphere of the home has been a central feature of modernity (Slater, 1998). A key element of this has been the segregation of children and childhood into the private sphere: the home is seen as the appropriate place for children to be raised, facilitating their physical and moral protection from the outside world. This is reflected in children's construction of risk and safety. Hood et al. (1996) explored the negotiations between children and parents around issues of risk and safety in the home and found that both children and parents tended to externalize risk, that is risk was located as occurring outside the home. In our study, very few of the children interviewed spontaneously mentioned risks in the home. Indeed, many of them specified their family and their home as safe. For example, in the sentence completion exercises one girl wrote: 'I feel safe when I'm sitting in my house at night by the fire with my family' (Jill, 10); an image which portrays the feelings associated with security which the home is seen to represent.

The private physical space of the home was an important element in its association with safety. Goffman argues that 'walls ceiling and floor tend to establish outside limits to a surround, the assumption being that these barriers are stout enough to keep out potential matters for alarm. They establish

an “inside” and an “outside” ’ (Goffman, 1971: 334). The physical space of the home therefore enables control over who occupies and enters that space.

This control can, however, be displaced through certain ‘access points’ (Goffman, 1971: 336). While the children tended to describe the home in terms of safety, they also showed concern that this safety could be breached.

Me and Caroline have been, come through in our pyjamas on a Saturday morning and watched TV. We couldn’t be bothered to get dressed and mum’s just gone round to the food shop round the corner. We just feel so unsafe. You don’t answer the door. You just sit there and anytime there’s a little bit of movement on the gravel like a bird or something then uh oh! (Christine, 12)

From the children’s accounts it seemed that often these feelings of insecurity were felt most keenly at night, as one boy described: ‘Well for some reason I only get scared at night when I always feel that someone’s gonna break in at night and like kill you or whatever. Just sort of like trash your house or something’ (Will, 11).

The displacement of the safety and security the children associated with being at home reflected their belief that people within the home were known – family and friends – and so were safe. One boy explained that he felt safe in his house because: ‘there’s nobody weird around’ (Owen, 10). While it has been argued that we often try to ‘escape’ from the routine, the known and expected paths of our everyday lives (Cohen and Taylor, 1992), the known and the familiar is also associated with safety. In the private sphere of the home children know everyone around them and how they behave, and they know the location, either their home or their friends’ homes. However, as Cheal (1991) argues, the very privacy and closed space of the home and family that these children associated with safety can also serve to hide domestic violence (Cheal, 1991: 82). While for many children the realities of home life are very different than the image reported here, the children in this study constructed their risk landscapes around their own experiences of safety. If homes were risky and unsafe, they chose not to disclose this in the interviews.

While the actual physical space of the home could be breached by the public sphere, perhaps the most obvious way in which the outside world penetrates the private sphere is through the media, in particular television. There has been considerable ongoing academic and public discussion over the impact that watching ‘inappropriate’ material on television can have on children (Buckingham, 1994). This discourse of risk featured in the children’s accounts. Watching programmes that contained violence was described as being dangerous for children’s development. One boy noted that such programmes: ‘might give the children nightmares, and that might develop them into being quite nasty when they grow up as well’ (Lewis, 10).

The children distinguished between different ages of children in terms of their ability to handle swearing or violence on television without being influenced by it (Kelley et al., 1999):

Well 12 you don't get scared very easily. And 9 and 10 you just like have nightmares for months if you see something like someone being shot or aliens coming out of someone's head. I'm like 'oh no'. You can't get to sleep. (Caroline, 10)

The older children often contrasted themselves with their younger sibling:

But film it's not true, it's make believe. But now I'm older, I can tell what's true and what's just, what's not, so it's actually not that bad. But, Jill just thinks everything that's on telly . . . she thinks, oh that's what everybody does, and that's why she's like, why can't I do this? (Janet, 15)

However, the children's accounts did not simply reproduce the developmentalism inherent in this discourse. Rather, the children constructed their own discourses of risk based on the personality traits of the child. The children referred to such characteristics as being sensible, mature or responsible, in many instances as a key factor in their risk assessments. As a result, distinctions were often drawn between what was regarded as being risky for children in general, and what was regarded by a child as personally risky: 'I wouldn't do it because I'm quite, I'm more sensible to do, I wouldn't go out and take drugs because someone on TV did it. I suppose some people do' (Jill, 10).

In judging what was appropriate for children to watch, they also distinguished between violent and sexual content. Many of them pointed out that swearing and violence was part of their everyday lives, but sex was not. One boy was asked which he saw as being worse for children to see:

They may have horror, they may have bad language but I couldn't watch anything with heavy sexual and nudity in it. Like that's getting a bit over the top. Well, I mean, what's the fun in seeing two people strip and have sex? I'd rather watch 5 minutes of horror than watch an hour of that. (Tim, 13)

Children defined risks from television in relation to what is relevant to their lives. They distinguished themselves from other children in terms of age and character and distinguished between different forms of risk in terms of their own experiences.

The discussion of children's attitudes towards risk from television illustrates the way in which the public sphere can intrude on the private sphere of the home. As Hood et al. note, 'the boundaries of the private and public are thus crossed inwards; outside dangers come into the home and have to be controlled, managed and generally interacted with' (Hood et al., 1996: 106). Despite this recognition of public risks in the private sphere, the children's accounts showed that overwhelmingly they associated the private sphere of the home with safety. In addition to being located in the public sphere, risks were seen to exist 'outside', as opposed to 'inside' the home.

### *Between public and private: the local sphere*

In contrast to the home, public spaces were frequently defined by the children in terms of risk. However, the children distinguished between their

neighbourhoods and those beyond the boundary of their street/village/network of friends' homes. By doing so, the children described an intermediate 'local' sphere between the public and the private. It is in this sphere that the children, of all ages, tended to spend most of their time and as a result they developed both a familiarity and knowledge of the places and people.

In part the local referred to areas within close proximity to the home: 'Cos it's really a little place so wherever I go . . . I don't have to go very far to see my friends' (Sheryl, 9). In some respects the children's construction of risk and safety was contingent upon the distance from their homes:

Cos the further away you are, like there's a lot more things could happen to you like on the way. . . . But if you're local, just around this estate and you get hurt you can just go along to your house. But if you're far away you might not know many people. (Neil, 13)

But the local also referred to the people occupying this intermediate sphere. Hunter describes the intermediate sphere between public and private as 'qualitatively distinct from the public order. It is not a world of citizen strangers' (Hunter, 1995: 216). This was reflected in the comments of one girl about her mother's concerns for her safety: 'Well she doesn't worry as much cos she knows that I can look after myself in a way in this area cos I know lots of people around' (Pam, 10). This was most noticeable in relation to the children from rural areas, where the village was perceived in some respects as an extended family or community with people watching out for each other: 'It's like, well, you never know what's happening down in the city and that. Like in the countryside they could all sort of keep an eye on him, but not in the city' (Steve, 11). However, one girl also described how such watchfulness could also be restrictive:

Especially working in the shop and my mum works in the village and everybody knows who you are. So if I'm seen walking down the street with somebody who's smoking it will go back to my mum that I've been smoking and I'm not. (Sally, 15)

Nevertheless, the local sphere was not associated with the same level of safety as the private sphere of the home. There were always certain local areas described by the children as risky: 'Well the railway's not as safe as the park cos sometimes weird people go up there' (Liam, 10). Moreover, the local sphere was not physically bounded in the same way and consequently was more open to exposure to risks from the public sphere. The safety associated with local areas, such as parks, was therefore contingent for the children. Particular incidents could alter the children's perceptions of a local area. This was clear from a story told by several of the children from one area, about a man who was said to have been interfering with children in their local park:

If it was Green Park you would need to go with an adult. . . . Cos a boy in my school got put upside down and his trousers pulled down. . . . So I'm not allowed to go there without an adult now till they catch him. (Jim, 9)



The safety of this park was also described by the younger children as being contingent on the time of day. While the play area was full of children in the daytime, it was occupied by teenagers at night: 'Cos like all the teenagers and that, they all go to drink down there and take drugs and that' (Steve, 11). This changed the nature of the area from the children's perspective from a safe to a risky area.

The children's risk landscapes constructed a local sphere based on proximity to the home, and familiarity with and knowledge of the surroundings and people, within which there were feelings of relative safety. This was contrasted with their attitudes towards the public sphere.

### *Children and risk in public life*

Images of childhood as a time of vulnerability, dependence and incompetence were influential in shaping the children's identities in public life. The children described feelings of vulnerability in public life, in relation to their concerns about unfamiliar spaces and people.

Many of the children described their fears of being lost. This was most apparent when the younger children described the possibilities of going into the city centre with friends for the first time. Often an enclosed out of town shopping centre was described as a stepping stone towards this. Though it may have been expected that the urban children would have expressed more confidence in this matter, being used to living in the city, they in fact expressed the same concerns as the rural children. It appears therefore that children's experiences were firmly situated in the private and local spheres and moving outside these was both challenging and frightening.

The older children, who tended to have greater access to public life, discussed the ways in which they assessed public spaces in terms of risk and safety. One boy described how he defined a particular area as risky: 'Broken glass everywhere, you generally get the idea of a place, I suppose spray painted walls all over' (Peter, 13). Often the physical features associated with risky spaces were based on class differences. For example, the visual images of what was a risky area, tended to be associated with particular forms of housing:

You look down a street and you can see that you might not want to go down there and it's just by the way it's set out, maybe housing estates and you think it looks a bit rough. So I don't go into places like that because you're asking for it as far as I'm concerned. (Paul, 14)

Most notably, the children expressed concerns about the people around them in public life. Public space is formed by the bodies within it (Sennett, 1994: 370) and in the children's accounts it seems that public life is dangerous because of the people, the bodies, within it. We exist in a social world often surrounded by other people. To be able to function, we have to trust that these other people have no intention of harming us (Goffman, 1971: 384). Yet trust is often portrayed as a dangerous trait for children because they are

regarded as an inherently vulnerable group (Jackson and Scott, 1999). Indeed, given the emphasis in child safety education on strangers, it is no surprise that the children were wary of others in public spaces. One boy spoke about what scared him: 'Other people and everything that I don't know . . . when I'm walking down the road some people just look at you and you think "what's he looking at me for?" and everything' (Drew, 10).

Despite often being surrounded by others, being with known people was often referred to by the children as a form of protection and as an essential form of risk management. One girl discussing the risk of sexual attacks noted that:

In fact nearly all the kids that have happened, they're always like alone, or there's just a very few of them. I mean if we're going to a disco there'll be a big gang of us and we won't take chances by going up in twos and threes. (Kerry, 13)

Valentine (1997a) found that girls in particular were given a sense of confidence and invulnerability through the support of their friends. However, this study found that both boys and girls noted the risks of 'being alone' in public space. The reasons for their concerns varied – while for boys support from friends may have been in case of fights, for girls it was seen as a protection against sexual attack.

Children are taught who to trust and who not to, in particular through 'stranger danger' education. As part of the study this education was analysed and it was found that it tends to reinforce the public/private dichotomy in relation to risk – strangers are those who hang about parks, drive by streets where children play, lurk outside school gates. Strangers, by definition, occupy public not private spaces. Indeed, many of the children expressed concerns that as children, they were vulnerable to being 'taken away' by strangers.

Well a child's more likely to be picked up by a stranger than an adult because . . . an adult's not going to come along and pick up another adult and say 'hey you're coming with me'. (Rebecca, 11)

Through such forms of safety education, children are given standardized knowledge with which to cope in public life. While the children repeated the official discourse on strangers in their accounts, for example 'don't talk to strangers', it was evident in the interviews that many also interpreted this discourse in their own way. Many of the children presented their own assessment of particular situations involving 'strangers'. They were aware that 'strangers' refer to almost everyone in public life and as such the 'don't speak to strangers' rule was experienced as interactionally problematic:

Like people in the shop, they're strangers and you maybe have to ask them something. You are a stranger to other people as well and you could ask someone for directions and they could think the same thing about you. (Amanda, 11)

If I saw someone that was in trouble, like he'd fallen out of a wheelchair . . .

then I'd stop and help him. But I wouldn't stop and help a guy try and pump up his car tyre or clean his car. (Peter, 13)

Though children are told not to trust strangers, they are also told about 'safe strangers'<sup>3</sup> and thus that the dangers are contingent. The children's accounts indicate that they clearly made judgements about strangers based on criteria including: their appearance; their gender; their manner and actions; the type of questions they asked; and their relative vulnerability.

Furthermore, it is evident from the interviews that while many of the children expressed concerns about 'strangers', it was often older children or teenagers, rather than adult strangers, who were reported as being a source of risk:

Adults have got more sense. Teenagers just go around with knives and drugs and smash things. (Caroline, 10)

Young people, you know 15-year-olds hassling you about stuff, I think they're the kind of people you ought to be worried about . . . if you saw two, like 15- or 16-year-olds, you know, walking down the road I'd feel more worried than two 45-year-olds. (Darren, 15)

Children of all ages in the study, spoke about teenagers in parks taking drugs, drinking too much and hanging about. Teenagers are perhaps more likely than younger children to challenge the adult monopoly on using public space (Percy-Smith, 1998) and their presence was perceived to be threatening by the children. One girl described how she felt on the bus in the presence of teenagers:

Me and Rebecca were like sitting on the same seat, and we were just like this because they were, they were like all drunk in the back singing and everything, and it was really scary. You were scared to talk or something. (Rosemary, 10)

The older children, teenagers themselves, had mixed feelings about this issue. While they, like the younger children expressed concerns about their peers, they also discussed their experiences, as teenagers, in being seen by others, as a source of threat:

I think of myself as a pretty safe person, it's just the impression, you know, big, I'm a teenager. It's just, it's a stereotyping thing, people sort of seeing me and saying, oh he's bad, he's a teenager and he could be up to anything. (Darren, 15)

The children's description of their vulnerability and consequent lack of trust towards strangers – both adults and children – related to their perceptions and experiences of their own bodies in public space. Public space is designed primarily for adults, as a result of which children's physical size makes their participation in public life more difficult. This in turn reinforces the sense that public space is adult space. Indeed many of the younger children described themselves as being at risk in public spaces because of their physical size:

Cos like an adult, if you've got an adult with you, because they've got more chance of fighting a person cos they're big. As long as you've got about seven of your friends that makes up the same as an adult. (Tom, 12)

Some of the children also described physical differences between boys and girls which made girls appear to be more vulnerable: 'Girls are physically weaker than boys. And boys, women generally don't approach boys, and boys are a bit, wary' (Rebecca, 11). Specific risks were also sometimes seen as gendered. One boy speaking about sexual risk explained why he was not concerned about this:

I don't think it really worries me . . . girls probably get a bit more worried about it. You're like, OK with men, unless they fancy boys. But like women are hardly going to go out looking for teenage boys or whatever. It's more likely to be men looking for attractive girls. (John, 13)

While the children were very aware of their physicality in public spaces they also discussed their vulnerability in relation to their lack of knowledge and/or experience. The children tended to describe themselves as less knowledgeable and so less competent in public life than adults:

Cos sometimes your parents are, they might seem a bit unfair on you, but they're usually right. Like they might tell you that you shouldn't go and do something and then you, then you should probably do that cos they're usually right because they know. Cos they're usually like older, so I suppose they know more about it. (Josie, 12)

The children seemed to make a direct connection between knowledge and risk management. As such, different forms of knowledge on risks were seen as age appropriate.

Well we've not been taught about it yet because you get drugs talk in high school. You get all the kiddie things in primary and in high school you get all the drugs. . . . Cos you could get younger children to get it. But older children are more sensible so they won't do it. . . . Cos they get all the sensible things, like what to do in a fire and that. We just get projects like Vikings. (Jim, 9)

Therefore from some of the children's accounts, it seemed that to some extent knowledge replaced the need for experiential learning. This relates to the correlation children drew between risk and the unknown and its correlation with risk and danger. However, as Goffman argues, everyday life is not lived in a state of constant alarm, but rather, that we learn to sense alarm and how to cope. We do 'not so much come to know the world around' us as we 'become experienced and practised in coping with it' (Goffman, 1971: 294). Yet, the extent to which children engage in this process of becoming 'experienced and practised' in coping with public life is structured by their subordinate position in adult-child relations.

## Limits on children's participation in public life

Cahill argues that, 'the familiar tale of childhood's history in Western societies is a story of the sequestering of the young for what increasing numbers of their elders came to see as the young's own good' (Cahill, 1990: 392). Indeed, public space has come to be defined as adult space in which children are either seen as being at risk, or as being a source of risk (Valentine, 1996). Children's participation in public space is controlled and limited in several ways. First, there are formal, often legal, restrictions on where children are allowed to go. The most extreme example of this is the interest being shown in Britain by the government and the police in the use of curfews for children in the US (Drakeford and Butler, 1998). A curfew for children under 16 was implemented for a trial period between October 1997 and April 1998, in Hamilton, Scotland, thereby legally restricting children's access to public space. Commenting on the curfew in Hamilton, a police superintendent said:

This is not a case of the heavy hand of the law coming in. It is a case of alerting people to the dangers that children face. Children are at risk from drug dealers and paedophiles and people in some areas complain that they are threatened and harassed by youngsters. The initiative is child safety and the good of the entire community and we dare not lose sight of that. (*The Observer*, 12 April 1998)

Second, there are parental restrictions on children's participation in and access to public life (Hood et al., 1996). Parents' boundaries limit children's experiences, in terms of the who, what, where, when and why of children's participation in public life. Often such restrictions are based on assumptions about children's lack of competencies in managing risks and so protecting themselves. While this assumption has been challenged (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1997), children's presumed lack of competence is nevertheless influential in shaping parental restrictions on their participation in public life (Valentine, 1997a). For example, road safety advice given in Leeds noted that:

Children of ALL ages are immature, impulsive, unpredictable, lacking in skill and experience, not able to judge speed and distance, not always doing what they're told. . . . However sensible your child may seem, even at 15 he or she is still a child. (Hillman et al., 1990)

Third, there are restrictions on children's behaviour in public spaces. It is expected that young children will be accompanied by adults, so much so that children who are alone are often asked by adults where their parents are (Cahill, 1990). Teenagers are perhaps the group most often criticized for their behaviour in public space, most notably 'hanging around' is perceived as a threat to social order (Cahill, 1990). Finally, many public amenities are geared towards adults' use in terms of their physical size, for example, the height of public telephones (Cahill, 1990).

Nevertheless, children do not simply accept the restrictions on their participation in public life. Some of the children were critical of formal

restrictions: 'Cos we're small and we're not allowed to go into the shops without an adult, it's quite annoying. You must be accompanied by an adult inside most shops. . . . It's a bit boring' (Holly, 10). Others complained about the limits that their smaller physical size imposed on their participation:

I like movies, the only thing I hate about it, there's only two things I don't like about the movies, it's the seat, it's the people. I mean if they're tall, I mean I'm primary six and I'm quite small, I'm quite small for my class and if there's usually an adult with a young person, they usually get in my way and I usually have to move seat. (Lewis, 10)

Furthermore, there were many strategies the children employed for subverting both legal and parental restrictions. One 12-year-old girl described her strategy for gaining entrance to a film for which 15 was the minimum age:

I'm quite small and I'm not, I don't really look 15. So my friends just said, what you just have to do, just put on quite a lot of make up and act like you're 15 and when you go in, like when you're going past the people just pretend to bend down like you've dropped something and they'll think you're just bending down. . . . I was asking my friend 'how do you act 15?' And they say 'well you just, you don't laugh a lot, like when someone says something you just don't spend the whole time laughing. You don't bite your nails', cos I always bite my nails. . . . I was just trying to walk in and I was trying to walk as tall as I could cos sometimes people think that if you're taller you look older . . . I was wearing like big high heels and trying to look taller. (Josie, 12)

Similarly, the children were active in their negotiation of boundaries with their parents. There were many different strategies that the children employed in either direct or indirect forms of negotiation: lying; withholding information from parents; breaking rules; collusion with friends or siblings to deceive parents; persistence in asking parents; being moody with parents; earning the right to go out by demonstrating responsibility; playing parents off against each other.

While there were few differences between the children with respect to the strategies used, the issues addressed were often different. For example, while Jill (10) described breaking the rules, by watching a programme on television in her room when she had been told not to, Sally (15) described drinking alcohol with her friends. Furthermore, the older children may be more practised in the art of negotiation with their parents:

Cos I used to suck up at first and do everything but then I'd realized that they really knew that. So now I just say fine if they want to do it fine. And then I ask again and I don't go all angry . . . and then in the end they do say that I can do it. (Sally, 15)

Such strategies not only demonstrated children's understandings of the family and their place within it, but also demonstrated competence in the assessment and management of certain risks. However, Kelley et al. (1997) found that children were more likely to object to parental restrictions on their activities when the connection between such restrictions and protection was not

apparent. This was also evident in our study. In many cases children described parental and legal restrictions as being 'for their own good': 'We've got a good mum. She's over-protective but it's better to have a mum that worries about you a lot than one that lets you run wild and get in trouble' (Peter, 13).

Moreover, the negotiation process between children and parents was limited by children's own perceived limits to their participation in public life:

I always say to myself, even before I bother asking my mum, it's a bit stupid. Like if I wanted to go to Edinburgh in the middle of the night, I know myself I probably wouldn't want to go if I thought about the danger and stuff. (John, 13)

Therefore, while the children expected there to be some negotiation with their parents, they also expected their parents to protect them by limiting their access to and participation in public space.

## Conclusion

Children's theorizing around risk, safety and danger can be situated within the public/private distinction. Children defined physical locations according to safety and risk. They distinguished between the safety of the private 'inside' sphere of the home and the risky nature of the 'outside' – the local neighbourhood and wider public spaces. The children also described their relations with others in these locations. Most notably, the children expressed concerns about their participation in public life in terms of threats from other people. In particular, this reflected the lack of trust which Giddens (1991) argues is being eroded, as a result of which risk anxiety has become a feature of everyday life.

While the children did therefore seem to reflect public discourses on children and risk, they were also reflexive in their conceptualizations of risk. They did not simply accept official discourses on children and risk. Rather they constructed their own identities within public space, based on their own experiences. In addition, the children negotiated both parental and legal limits placed on their participation in public life. In this respect the children demonstrated their competence in risk assessment and management.

However, the extent to which children engage in the individual reflexive monitoring of risk must be contextualized. First, the extent and nature of children's participation in public life is structured, in the same way as adults by class, gender and so on. For example, social class can determine the extent to which children are exposed to the risk of ill health or accidents (Roberts et al., 1995). Second, children's individualized landscapes of risk occur within the context of discourses on child safety and risk, for example safety education in schools. These standardized discourses present an image of the child at risk which shape their 'individual' risk assessment. Third,

children's lives are standardized by their subordinate position in relation to adults (Hood-Williams, 1990). While Büchner et al. (1994) argue that children's lives are now increasingly individualized, as a result of their earlier acquisition of independence, parental perceptions of risk are still influential in shaping children's everyday lives (Hood et al., 1996). Therefore, though children reflexively constructed and monitored risk and safety, this must be located within the wider context of the social relations which form children's everyday lives.

## Notes

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1. This age group is referred to in this article as the younger children.
2. This age group is referred to in this article as the older children.
3. Children are advised that 'safe strangers' are police officers, shop keepers and ladies with children.

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