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25% of 10-year-olds are never allowed to play on their own... so Ed Balls swings into action

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DAILY MAIL

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Rarely are government ministers glimpsed larking around in the playgrounds of inner-city Brixton.

And when Ed Balls and Andy Burnham took to the swings yesterday they sparked a row over the future of such play areas.

Mr Balls claimed town halls had made the facilities too tame in order to avoid costly lawsuits.

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Beaming from ear to ear, Ed Balls and Andy Burnham look thrilled to be on the swings

The Children's Secretary said litigation was unusual and children were left with ?boring? equipment.

But critics said Labour had failed to clamp down on the health and safety culture.

Rob Wheway, of the charity Fair Play for Children, said officials often went over the top in interpreting safety rules.

?People need to know they can make reasonable compromises,? he added.

Michael Gove, Tory children's spokesman, accused the Government of selling off school playing fields while at the same time trying to encourage youngsters to be more active.

Mr Balls and his Culture Secretary colleague were in South London to launch a £235million scheme to revamp playing areas.

Culture Secretary Mr Burnham, who at 38 is almost the youngest Cabinet member, is so fresh-faced you could almost believe he was still at school.

He and the 40-year-old Education Secretary clearly wanted to illustrate in person the need for children - and perhaps adults too - to have more playtime.

Perhaps it was also Mr Balls' attempt to temporarily forget a row over cash payments for school places.

He claimed last month that some schools were charging for "free" state schooling but it emerged yesterday that just six of 570 sample schools had illegally requested payments.

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Follow my leader? The Culture Secretary has a head start on his Cabinet colleague

The impromptu play session came as the Government admitted a quarter of all children between eight and 10 have never played outside without adult supervision.

Ministers are concerned that children now have fewer opportunities than ever to play outdoors thanks to over-zealous health and safety crackdowns and a "no ball games here" culture.

Mr Balls unveiled the figures today as he launched the consultation to create a blueprint to improve play areas.

Research has found that the average age at which children are allowed outside without adult

supervision has risen from around seven years in the 1960s and 70s to just over eight years now.

One in three parents will not even allow older children, aged eight to 17, to play outside the house or garden.

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Mr Balls later said councils were using concerns about being sued by litigious parents as an "easy excuse" for failing to provide exciting playgrounds and called for the "fear factor" to be restored.

He said: "There is a general lack of quality, supervised adventure play for eight to 13 year-olds.

"If you don't want to do something a bit risky, too often people say 'we can't do that because of health and safety'.

"It is the risk aversion in some cases which stops things happening which I want to tackle head on," he said.

"If people are looking for excuses not to do things, then fear of litigation is an easy excuse.

"But I think there are very few examples of children or parents taking action because of play facilities."

Despite his enthusiasm for the swings this morning, the Schools Secretary added:
"Personally, a dull and boring playground would be one which only has swings and a slide.

"Actually, what people like is things which go round and round. When you talk to children, what they like is things they can climb on."

The Government's consultation paper says: "We need to work together as a society to create popular attitudes that embrace children in public space and challenge inappropriate 'No Ball Games' cultures.

"This means adults being willing to share public space with children and understand that play can, at times, test boundaries."

A new "indicator" will encourage local authorities to make providing better play facilities a priority, Mr Balls said.

The planned play areas campaign includes a £225million drive over three years to revamp 3,500 playgrounds and create 30 new adventure playgrounds for eight to 13-year-olds.

These will have super-size climbing frames, assault courses and forts in a bid to lure the age group sometimes called "tweenagers" away from computer games and TV.

It is also intended to halt the growing trend towards obesity in children.

His remarks will be seen as an acceptance that youngsters are increasingly being brought up in a "cotton wool culture".

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Care-free and outside: Youngsters playing on a London street in the 1960s

But the announcement comes in a week when ministers were revealed to have approved the selloff of at least 187 school and community playing fields since Labour came to power in 1997.

This was despite a pledge that such amenities would be carefully protected.

The Children's Society, which is holding a major inquiry into the state of childhood, has warned that youngsters are missing out on forming crucial early friendships because they are

no longer meeting playmates outdoors.

Experts who gave evidence to the Childhood Inquiry stressed the importance of allowing children freedom to play and make friends.

It helped them "practise making and consolidating friendships and to deal with conflict".

Modern technology is seen as partly to blame, since listening to music players and playing computer games tend to be solitary pursuits.

Mr Balls is under pressure today after his claims over cash payments for school places were scotched.

Of the six schools who had illegally requested payments, five of these were Jewish-run and said they needed the cash for extra security and religious studies classes.

Shadow education secretary Michael Gove accused Mr Balls of victimising faith schools in a politically motivated attack.

He hit out at "cash-for-places" allegations, accusing Mr Balls of a "witch-hunt" to further his own career.

"I'm convinced that with more than one eye on a future Labour leadership bid, he is playing fast and loose with allegations which make the position of faith schools more exposed," Mr Gove said.

"He knows there is hostility towards faith schools from many Labour MPs, Labour rank-and-file and trade unions.

"The only conclusions we can draw is this is about politics - and faith schools are the victims."

And in a statement, the schools said that "at no stage were voluntary contributions taken into account when allocating places".

Publishing a list of schools breaking admissions rules yesterday, Mr Balls said that in total, one in six state schools was guilty of selecting pupils by the back door ? this included asking for details such as information about parents backgrounds, as well as cash payments.

He added that requesting payments during the admissions process was "morally wrong".

Beis Yaakov Primary, in Barnet, North London, had requested £895 per child per term.

Nearby Mathilda Marks-Kennedy Primary had asked for £670, he said.

St John's Church of England Primary, in Friern Barnet, told applicants they would be committing themselves to "an annual contribution towards maintenance for each child, either by filling in a standing order or making a once-yearly payment by cash or cheque".

Mr Balls said: "You are talking about thousands of parents whose decisions as to whether or not to apply to a school were affected by whether or not they could sign a form and pay a fee.

"I do not think it is consistent with free state education to sign commitments to pay hundreds of pounds per term."

Fiona Bulmer, Barnet's cabinet member for children's services, added: "The Government is trying to hide the failings of its own education policies by attacking good schools in Barnet and elsewhere in the country."

Mr Balls said 96 schools in the survey, which covered Manchester, Northamptonshire and the London Borough of Barnet, were breaching the statutory school admissions code.

Abuses included interviewing parents or children, taking into account children's behaviour at primary school when deciding whether to offer places, requesting information such whether parents were married and what jobs they had ? and requiring parents to have helped clean or arrange flowers at the local church.

Schools were also caught giving priority to children whose relatives had attended the school or the children of staff members.

Mr Balls said 29 schools had not complied with at least two requirements.

The three authorities had not been specifically targeted and the picture was likely to be similar elsewhere.

"The scale of non-compliance was significantly greater and the multiplicity of non-compliance than we or anybody else was expecting, and that was also true of the faith leaders."

Mr Balls also unveiled a crackdown on faith schools. Almost all the schools breaching the rules were voluntary-aided Church of England, Roman Catholic or Jewish schools.

The national admissions watchdog will have to report to ministers on all schools' policies.

Faith leaders have been given powers to complain about individual schools' admissions arrangements.

"The credibility of the education system and the role of faith schools in it depends on two things ? fair admissions and community cohesion," Mr Balls said.

"In the case of admissions it is clearly the case we need to strengthen the role of local authorities, governing bodies and faith leaders in order to deliver fair and clear admissions."

He stopped short of warning that faith schools would be stripped of their right to set admissions criteria but said the schools adjudicator would monitor future compliance.

Oona Stannard of the Catholic Education Service said there had been "no deliberate attempt to circumvent the Code, but there may have been errors of interpretation".