Child’s Play

Exploration of the factors that encourage play in neighbourhood parks and playgrounds

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BACKGROUND

This project evolved out of concerns about children’s sedentary lifestyles, diminishing backyards as outdoor play spaces, and the growing tendency towards ‘plastic fantastic’ playgrounds that sometimes lack opportunities for imaginative free form play and contact with nature. The study is exploring child, parent and stakeholder perspectives on ‘what makes good spaces to play’, and seeks to address voids in the literature relating to opportunities and barriers to play within parks and playgrounds.

Play is a vital part of children’s physical, social and emotional development, but the ways that we live, relate to each other, consume and travel in modern society have encroached on children’s play time and play space. Urban sprawl, ‘stranger danger’ fears, car dependency, diminishing backyards and shifting patterns of housing, work, school and leisure have altered traditional notions of childhood freedom and activity. This trend runs counter to growing evidence of the importance of physical activity and play, contact with nature and time outdoors. For young people, parks and playgrounds are not just the conventional place to play, but can also provide a place to socialise, be physically active, explore, have contact with nature, escape from indoors, or just be free from the encumbrances of an increasingly adult world.

There is very little Australian research or documented consultation regarding young people’s perspectives on playgrounds and outdoor play spaces. A Victorian inquiry into sustainable urban design noted that it is rare for young people to be consulted about the design of public open space1, and internationally there is a similar dearth of research and consultation with young people with the exception of the UK, where a national play strategy was instigated in 20072.

METHODS

This study seeks to address voids in the literature and understanding of opportunities for children to play, from the perspective of Australian parents, children and those involved in the design and provision of parks and playgrounds. The research is designed to be applicable in the ‘real world’ and aims to provide practical information on issues associated with policy and practice related to the design and use of children’s play spaces.

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The Child’s Play study has five phases:

1) Review of literature – identification of gaps in research and play space guidelines.
2) Discussion groups research with a) parents b) children (preschool, primary ages and teens) relating to use, needs and preferences for outdoor play.
3) In-depth interviews with stakeholders (involved in park and playground planning and may include local government, developers and landscape architects).
4) Development of user-friendly guidelines for creating play spaces within urban parks, based on results of literature review, discussion groups and stakeholder consultation.
5) Dissemination of research findings to stakeholders and through targeted releases such as reports, journal articles, conference presentations and workshops.

The project had initial seed funding from a UWA Research Development Grant, and then has been funded by a Healthway starter grant.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Data collection for this project has been completed and analysis underway. In total 15 focus groups were held with children and 2 with parents. Preferences for nature, parental fear as a barrier to park usage and creative play, and the need to cater better to older children in parks and playgrounds continue to be recurring themes. Discussions have also been held with policy makers, planners and designers to better define good play spaces, and evidence-based guidelines are being drawn up to reflect children’s and parent’s wants.

Two papers reporting the Child’s Play study results have been accepted for presentation at the International Play Association conference in Wales in July, and another at the Open Spaces conference to be held in Edinborough late June.

The Kings Park and Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority has now commissioned two pieces of related research from the Child’s Play research team: The first entailed focus groups with children and parents about nature and play and to get feedback on the new ‘Naturescape’ area at Kings Park that will open later in 2011. The second component of the Naturescape research will involve an observational trial of how children react to and use the new Naturescape area.

The Child’s Play project continues to strike a chord with media as well as practitioners and policy makers. A number of schools for examples have indicated that they have used information and evidence provided by CBEH to create more nature based play areas at their schools and the researchers were invited to meet with senior staff from the Department of Education to discuss the importance of more natural based play areas in early learning centres and schools. The researchers have also been collaborating with a number of local councils relating to parks and playgrounds.

For more information on the Child’s Play project please contact Dr Lisa Wood or Dr Karen Martin at the Centre for Built Environment and Health at lisa.wood@uwa.edu.au or karen.martin@uwa.edu.au