

“But that’s just for little kids...”:

Meeting the needs of older children and adolescents in parks and playgrounds

Dr. Lisa Wood, Dr. Karen Martin, Dr. May Carter.

This paper presents preliminary findings from ‘Child’s Play’; a Western Australian study exploring child, adolescent, parent and stake-holder’s perspectives about parks, playgrounds and outdoor play spaces.

BACKGROUND

Older children and adolescents...

- **Are rarely consulted**

Older children and adolescents (teens and tweens) are often overlooked in typical park and playground design and infrastructure, and much of the literature and community consultation relating to park features and planning is ‘through adult eyes’.

- **Are often designed out**

Adolescents often feel unwelcome or under adult scrutiny in public places and parks - this includes measures such as the ‘designing out youth from public spaces’, removal of seating in areas in which young people may congregate or fencing/locking of playgrounds and parks.

- **Need spaces**

While the nature and terminology of ‘play’ may change as adolescence approaches, interactional and recreational spaces remain important for the mental and physical wellbeing of youth of all ages.

METHODS

- 7 focus groups
- 47 older children/ adolescents aged from 9 to 17 years

Older children/adolescents were asked...

1. what they did in their leisure time
2. where they went in their local neighbourhood
3. if and how often they used local parks/playgrounds
4. barriers and facilitators to using local parks/playgrounds
5. What they want from local parks /playgrounds, and what would encourage their use?



RESULTS

Barriers to using parks/playgrounds?

- ➔ Perception that the parks and playgrounds are not ‘for them’
- ➔ Negative perception of them by parents/adults
- ➔ Their own parents don’t allow it (fearful of strangers)
- ➔ Fearful other kids being aggressive/starting fights
- ➔ Told to leave by adults
- ➔ Cost of some activities (eg water slides)
- ➔ No suitable places or spaces for them to go
- ➔ Too busy (homework/study, work)
- ➔ Their own parents not trusting them to ‘do the right thing’

‘The thing is, what they see on the news, they think we’re all trouble-kids that we’re not mature enough you know. And a lot of teenagers they are becoming mature, it’s only a selected few that do that stuff.’

‘hang out at the local shops until we get kicked out – they kick you out because they think you’re shop lifting... even if you are not doing anything’

‘But you get told off for it. Like the last time me and my friends had a mud fight, we got like, mega-grilled.’

‘Playgrounds were fun, until I was nine’

‘My mum only just started letting us go down the road at 12 because mum was just scared that we’d get taken or bullied’

‘they have a lot more reason to worry about kids now days... Like when my mum was growing up everyone was just friendly, it was a lot safer of an environment. Now it’s getting more vicious.’

Leisure time activities and locations

Teens and tweens reported that generally there wasn’t a lot for them to do or places for them to go in their local area. They reported their regular activities included:

- Screen activities *
- Hanging out with friends*
- Sports and leisure (e.g. horse riding, motorbike)
- Going to friends houses in neighbourhood
- Homework
- Shopping centres, city centre
- Movies
- Skating (rollerblading)
- Beach

* Most commonly mentioned

‘There’s isn’t really much to do’

‘we just, you know, the city, beach, movies, shopping centre, just hang around’

‘I just want to get this across- This is Armadale [outer low SES suburb]. We have nothing. End of Story’

Teens and tweens want physically appropriate parks/playgrounds

Adventurous playgrounds and equipment that supports movement (e.g. flying foxes) ‘And one of those whirly things where you hold on, and run around...’
‘If you had a playground for more teenagers then it would be more fun, like, adventure’

Play equipment that is challenging and appropriate size them ‘like playgrounds that are for little kids, where they have all the spinny slides and stuff, and all the cool rock climbing walls and stuff...it would be good if they had that but in a teenage size.’
‘Hanging equipment’s always fun but they’re never tall enough for us.’

Suitable equipment in good condition ‘and they [basketball hoops] are really bad, like all rusty and stuff...’

Facilities such as drinking fountains and unlocked toilets Teen a) ‘More drinking fountains’, Teen b) ‘Yeah like working ones’
‘You want some good trees and that around, like shady’
‘big trees are fun because you can climb them and stuff, but we don’t get many big trees you can climb these days. They are all either big eucalyptus trees or the really thin ones that snap if you climb them’
‘I like the environmental sort of playgrounds. They’ve got like good environment, like, natural stuff. They’re quite good to hang out.’

Natural elements like water, trees, grass ‘having benches and stuff around the main playground so parents can watch their kids and stuff and then its good to have basketball courts and stuff, just on the other side so you have a bit of variety.’

Variety ‘they had this big blow up thing that people could run and jump on thing, like a big blow up castle thing.’;

Sense of fun and adventure ‘you still want to have enough room so if someone’s having a picnic you can still play footy and stuff without having to worry about hitting them.’

Enough space ‘The really good parks which I’ve been to... are the ones with really big green areas in between the playground areas.’

Appropriate location of spaces/courts/facilities ‘If it’s too near the road... you can’t like, play catch and stuff ‘cause you miss it and it’ll go on the road and you’ll probably get squashed’;

Teens and tweens want socially appropriate spaces

Want to be able to go outdoors ‘That’s the whole point of going to parks really, is to be really active otherwise you just stay at home and watch TV.’

Identifiable spaces for teens/tweens ‘I reckon what they should do for the skate park, they should have an age limit, because it just gets annoying when little kids are riding there.’

Spaces to ‘get away’, where they can’t be seen ‘You don’t want it like in the middle of heaps of places because it makes it because mainly the only reason I go to parks is to get away from people.’

Spaces for hanging out ‘walls we can sit on’

Some natural risk ‘I think you just have to experience and learn, ok, falling off from this height hurts too much. Otherwise you just never know, and you get into even more trouble if your not exposed to it when your little: ‘Like the monkey bars they wanted to ban them a couple of years ago ... I can see the point, people could fall and break their wrists but if you are not strengthening your wrists by playing on the playground then your wrists are going to be weaker and not useful at all’

Creative strategies to reduce perceived youth problems ‘I think you should have places with big walls...where people are free, to tag graffiti all you want, because then they just go there and graffiti rather than doing everywhere around.’

Implications: what can be done?

Consider needs of older children /adolescents in planning and redesigning local parks/playgrounds

Plan parks and playgrounds in full consultation with older children/adolescents

Promote unstructured outside leisure to older children /adolescents

Consider and address safety concerns of older children/adolescents in open spaces

Provide higher quality and well maintained courts/spaces/ and equipment/facilities

Develop and promote organised activities in parks in consultation with local older children/adolescents

