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Child Development Just Outside the Front Door: Neighbourhood Play Project

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Abstract

This project examines the nature of contemporary childhood with a focus on changing rates of play in Queensland's urban neighbourhoods. The Neighbourhood Play Project is a pilot project funded by the Queensland Government Department of Sport & Recreation. The purpose of the project was to examine and record the prevalence of local children's existing play networks in urban Queensland neighbourhoods and to quantify their influence on children's physical activity and outdoor play levels. The recorded decline of Queensland children's activity levels and physical literacy over the last 30 years – and its direct negative correlation with children's increasing screen usage over the same time period (Active Healthy Kids Australia (2016) – necessitated a focused study on the possible causes of these changes to Queensland childhood. At the outset of the project it was hypothesised that supporting the creation and growth of local play networks would see a corresponding growth in the healthy play habits and physical activity of the children immediately involved in the project, and subsequently of other children living in the local area. A collaborative approach was employed whereby the playwork practitioners leading the project facilitated the creation and development of local neighbourhood play networks. Additionally, they talked with parents about their understanding of and engagement with neighbourhood play at the outset and throughout the project.

Keywords: Childhood; Neighbourhood Play; Community; Active; Screen time; Physical literacy

Introduction

Outdoor play in the local neighbourhood was a critical backdrop of the formative years of urban children (Verberne, 2014; Gray, 2013). It was a source of independence, offering opportunities to discover identity and healthy childhood development through the social and physical challenges which typically arise through independent outdoor social play. However, Nature Play Queensland (Nature Play QLD) was alerted by its members that children in South East Queensland do not have neighbourhoods they can independently access for play. This was described as an area of significant concern for parents, who are concerned that the health of their children is being compromised and that their children are experiencing different, less free, childhoods than their own. At the same time, participating parents felt paralysed by fear and distrust and constrained by significant internal and external barriers to neighbourhood play.

The Neighbourhood Play project was conceived and led by Nature Play Queensland playwork practitioners. These practitioners have witnessed the growing shift away from independent outdoor play in their work in Queensland communities. The Nature Play QLD playwork practitioners have become increasingly aware of the varied detrimental effects the lack of play has on child development and life-long health, as evidenced in a study by Dankiw, Tsiros, Baldock & Kumar (2020). Do today's children in Queensland have access to free outdoor play in their local neighbourhoods? If so, what are the factors supporting neighbourhood play? If not, what are the barriers impeding neighbourhood play, and do children even need access to free outdoor play in their neighbourhoods anymore?

Evaluating the Project

The playwork practitioners leading the project facilitated the creation and development of local neighbourhood play networks. Playworkers collected information about the project using individual interviews and focus groups, and carried out observations during neighbourhood play sessions, workshops and events. Their interaction with parents was both information giving and data collection simultaneously, as they discussed understanding of and engagement with neighbourhood play at the outset and throughout the project. Information was collected using video. Information about the activities of the children was mainly observational, although some direct questions were asked of the

children to include their experiences, opinions, and perceptions. The interviews were conducted by a Nature Play QLD playworker and an independent videographer. Parents gave written consent and children gave verbal consent for the interviews recorded during the project.

Participants

Two neighbourhoods in South East Queensland, Australia were chosen based on expert advice on the prevalence of emerging issues for children in lower income areas (Queensland Council of Social Service, 2013). The choice of two neighbourhood locations with differing demographics increased the diversity of parents and children available for inclusion in the project. This was to offer the opportunity to compare and contrast differing behaviours between the neighbourhoods and explore emerging themes across the two settings and demographics.

The Neighbourhood Play Project collated information from 239 participants including 149 parents, 79 children and 9 professionals who worked in services related to children's lives. At Rangeview Estate - 18 adults and 23 children and at the Riverbank Estate - 16 adults and 22 children were involved. The number of people consistently involved fluctuated with each visit of the playwork practitioners to each of the neighbourhoods being examined. A high proportion of the adult (parental) respondents were female, including the respondents of each of the central families. Child respondents were equally mixed in gender. One focus family was selected out of this group from each of the neighbourhoods studied to give greater insight into that neighbourhood's existing play networks, opportunities for play and play obstructions.

Initial contact with both neighbourhoods was made using information leaflets letterbox dropped to over 500 households. These leaflets advised local residents of the project, its purpose, duration and their potential involvement. We invited residents in each of the two main neighbourhoods to a local forum where the project would be explained in more detail and the opportunity would be given to residents to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their neighbourhood in providing opportunities for play. Residents planning to attend the forum were directed to an online registration portal to allow attendance numbers to be collated before the event.

Table 1: The Play Project Protocols

1. Hold a Neighbourhood Play Forum in each of the two central areas. After explaining the structure and purpose of the project, invite interested local families to participate in the study as community participants or as volunteers to potentially be selected as the central family for that local neighbourhood.
2. Recruit and support two focus families in two separate neighbourhoods over a six-month period to connect local children and activate their neighbourhoods as a place for children to play freely outdoors with other local children. Every family who registered their interest at each forum was contacted to learn more about their family context and long term availability before making the final selection of focus families.
3. Conduct entry interviews with the parents of the two focus families to gain insight into their perspectives at the outset of the project on their local neighbourhood, their comfort level with outdoor play, and their perspectives on the threats and opportunities in their children's lives – both in relation to the local neighbourhood and more broadly.
4. Find potential local play friends for the children of the two focus families participating in the project.
5. Explore each local neighbourhood with its focus family to find out where local children live and discover through preliminary observations approximately how many children live in each neighbourhood based on the following signs of children: actual children, trampolines, play equipment, kids' toys, bikes, scooters, children's shoes outside residences, child car seats in cars and children's clothes visible on clotheslines.
6. Assist focus children in creating their own database of potential friends living in the local area.

7. Hold a local park play day at each neighbourhood to introduce local families to outdoor play and gather information on existing attitudes towards outdoor play in each neighbourhood from attending families.
8. Create and distribute invitations to the local park play day to participate in the children's database. Letterbox drop invitations during peak play times (after school and during school holidays) to increase chances of encountering more local children who could be spoken to and added to the database.
9. Support both focus families to organise their park play event by supplying a schedule, promotional flier, promotions to local Facebook groups and create and promote a Facebook event for each neighbourhood's park play event.

In conjunction with the recruitment and gathering of families, information sessions and a series of sequentially developmental workshops, Neighbourhood Play Workshops were also presented to residents of each focus neighbourhood.

Table 2: Workshops themes

Meet the locals: Adults and children attending the workshop are introduced to each other. Adults are given time to get to know each other better and the children to start playing together. Then the workshop plan is introduced and parents and children are given the opportunity to provide input and agree to the project process, to increase participants' sense of investment and likelihood of ongoing involvement in the project. This consultation included parents giving permission for their children to explore the neighbourhood with the playwork practitioners managing the project. In addition, conduct group and one-on-one interview with attending parents and children to test emerging neighbourhood play themes of parental concerns about excessive screen and indoor time and the risks of outdoor play, and to gain any additional insights.

Explore the neighbourhood: On foot, and without parents, children led the playwork practitioners to each of their homes and explored the neighbourhood along the way. Children start to learn how to find each other by visiting each other's homes and to discover more about their neighbourhood while walking from house-to-house around the neighbourhood.

Explore further: On a separate day, using bikes and scooters, the playwork practitioners and participating children explored each local neighbourhood (without parents), discovering more wild places and parks the children previously didn't know existed. The children involved in the project practiced road-rules, explored self-regulation, self-risk management, risky play and learning how to negotiate varying physical abilities and skills.

Celebrate and what next? To conclude the workshops and facilitated engagement, celebration events were held in each neighbourhood. At each event, evaluative exit interviews were conducted with the focus adults and children, unpacking significant learning and personal changes to values, attitudes and behaviour, as well as planning for the future.

At the end of each workshop practitioners asked for participants' reflections. A reflection process took place after each child-led exploration, with participating parents and children focusing on what they took away from the experience. Participating parents were led by the playwork practitioners in planning how they would continue local outdoor play into the future, and children were asked to describe their ideal neighbourhoods.

In each of the neighbourhoods the participants were also encouraged to connect with other professionals. Within each identified community, the playworkers consulted with local health-related child and family associations, local schools, local government associations, neighbourhood centres and other existing groups and organisations which work directly with the local community to collate

evidence of existing community activation level, local impediments to play and existing community concerns and goals related to local play opportunities. This advice was to investigate why neighbourhoods are important for children and to glean a more in-depth understanding of the dominant emerging themes associated with decline of neighbourhood play; fear, distrust, social isolation, social anxiety, decline of children's freedom, decline of a sense of community in neighbourhoods, stigma and housing design (Gray, 2011). Further input was sought from these professionals to provoke ideas and conversations between parents and playworkers.

Limitations

Despite multiple attempts to involve at least 20% the children of each neighbourhood in the project, fewer than 5% of the children in each neighbourhood participated in the project. No specific reasons were confirmed as to why the other children living in the area did not participate. More focussed investigations could examine the barriers to outdoor play in each local community. Similarly, only a few parents in each neighbourhood were willing to take part. Most of the participating parents were only involved in the project sporadically. The playwork practitioners were not able to clarify the hurdles preventing these parents from being more regularly involved throughout the project. Feedback from participating parents suggested that the ongoing time commitment was a factor which prevented greater participation.

Over the four neighbourhood play sessions, more parents permitted their children to take part in the later sessions – perhaps due to word of mouth from the initial participants or a growth in confidence in the project and the managing playwork practitioners. The participating children developed intrinsic interest in, and motivation for, the neighbourhood play sessions. Increasing the number of these neighbourhood play sessions could strengthen this intrinsic value and the connections between the participating children and could also establish a new routine of outdoor play for groups of local children (Goldfeld, Villanueva, Lee, Robinson, Moriarty, Peel, Tanton, Giles-Corti, Woolcock, Brinkman & Katz, 2018).

Participating children did not expect to have a neighbourhood as a play resource, or to have access to

local play friends. Understanding why the participating children are content to not have a neighbourhood for play or access to local friends needs further examination.

Findings

Ideas from all participants were examined at different phases of the project. The findings from the beginning, during and end of the project are tabulated in Figure 2.

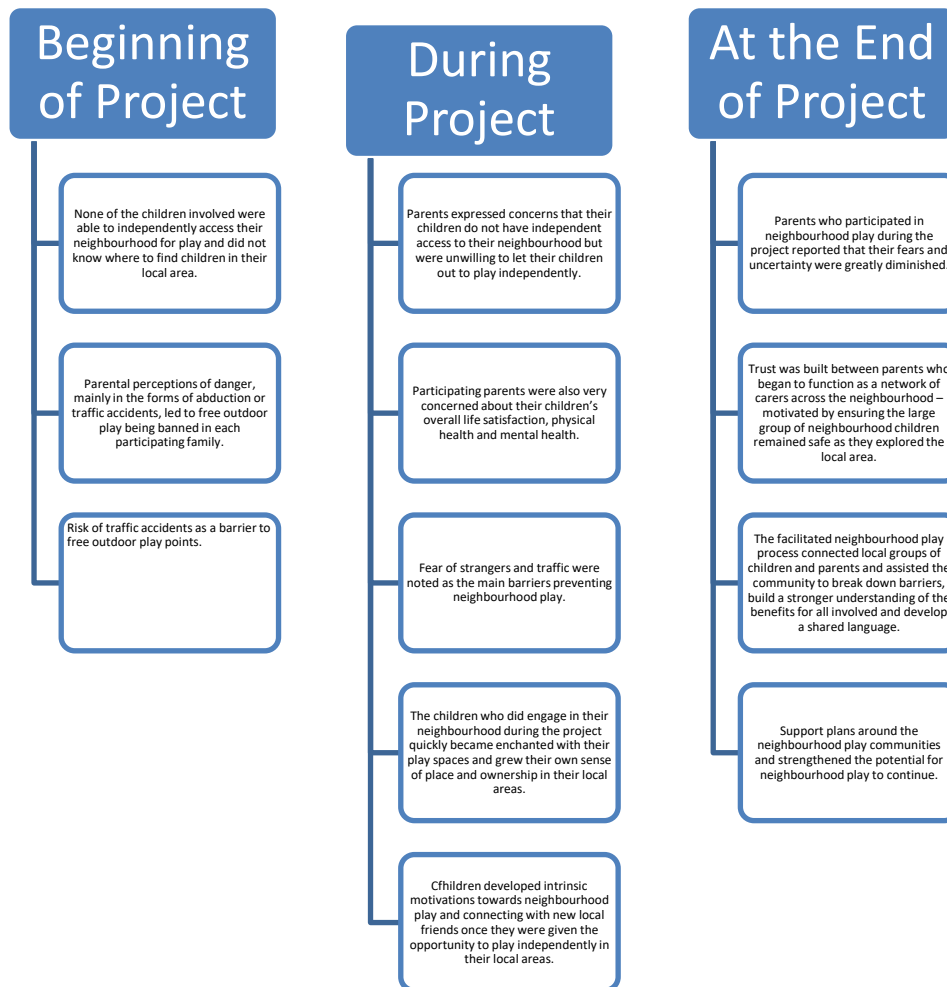


Figure 2: Key ideas expressed at each of the phases of the project

The information collected during the project gave insights into many aspects of the project. The playwork practitioners grouped the ideas into four areas – see Figure 3.

Moser: Neighbourhood Play Project



Figure 3: Themes from the information collected

Reflecting on the Project

Key steps in the neighbourhood play process have been unpacked to draw attention to specific learnings from each stage of the journey. This assisted in gaining an understanding of the process taken to better support more local outdoor play. Increasing children's daily physical and social activity and physical literacy is likely to improve their trajectory and overall quality of life (Herrington & Brussoni, 2015). Furthermore, increasing neighbourhood play is likely to increase social cohesion and reduce the risks associated with social isolation for all who live within the local area (Kapasi, 2006). The children involved in this project showed no internal value for the neighbourhood as a play resource at the outset of the project. The lack of intrinsic motivation for neighbourhood play is likely to negatively impact children's intrinsic motivation for outdoor play in general, along with their interest and confidence, in physical activity. It can be hypothesised that this lack of intrinsic motivation for outdoor free play is due to today's Queensland children not having observed older children engaging in outdoor free play as an activity younger children aspire to when it is observable in their surrounding environment (Brussoni et al, 2015).

Physical activity was never noted as a motivator of children to engage in neighbourhood play. However, while playing out in the neighbourhood during this project children were constantly moving and engaged in physically challenging forms of activity, such as running, jumping, climbing, and chasing. The children were predominantly playing at the outer edge of their skills and 'comfort bubbles' while seeking out the next opportunity to grow their skills. Climbing higher, riding faster, setting more challenges for themselves and exploring new spaces were common themes observed in the children's play during this project. This suggests that if children are given the space and independence for outdoor play and they can connect with other children that they will improve their physical literacy, becoming more physically active, able and confident. Interestingly, based on the findings during this project, it appears that if local neighbourhood play opportunities are not created then children will not seek them out.

Parents expressed concern about their children not having a neighbourhood to connect with local children for play. This concern mostly related to their child's reduced opportunities for socio-emotional development. Parental concerns centred largely around their child's loneliness and social isolation.

Concern for children's physical health was noted. However, the immediate lack, as expressed by parents, was more focused on children's social skill development, their child's capacity to make and sustain friendships and the opportunities for their children to practice, test and master relationship skills. Parents viewed neighbourhood play as a regular and accessible avenue for their child's social skill development.

Parents expressed concern that backyards were lacking the capacity to cater for their child's social outdoor play (not enough space for multiple children to play in for extended periods of time) or to satisfy the desired level of developmentally appropriate challenge and mastery levels of middle to older children. Garage doors, built within the structure of houses with large roller doors to the driveway and an internal door to house, were also noted by participants as reducing incidental contact opportunities between residents. Residents can alight their cars without seeing or being seen by neighbours, therefore reinforcing social fragmentation and isolation. The difficulty of having 'time' for neighbourhood play was mentioned by parents who felt that there are multiple activities competing for attention in family life. Most parents said that children were banned from exploring the neighbourhood unaccompanied by a parent. All parents involved in this study were fearful that their child would be abducted or hurt if permitted to play out in the neighbourhood with other kids if no adults are present. Parents perceived all people who they didn't know as potential threats to their children. This parental fear is projected onto children who don't seem to perceive a reduction in the quality of their lives.

Across this project no child was noted as unsatisfied or protesting their reduced space for play and local connection. Nor were children noted as asking for or demanding neighbourhood play. Children appeared to accept that locally they are not permitted beyond their home unless supervised by adults. The children in this study accepted this restriction as their parents keeping them safe and secure. A comment repeated over the project was "you just don't know who is out there". Several children interviewed indicated that they were fearful and distrusting of the outside world and were being raised with the message that, when outside, they are in constant danger and that everyone they don't know is a threat to their safety.

Over the course of this project children and parents reduced their social fears and barriers, built trust

and relationships, got to know their neighbourhoods, learnt how to navigate around their neighbourhoods, learnt where to find local friends and explored the spaces of high play value. This process resulted in a positive experience for the local area. This positive experience seemed to not only contradict the dominant fear-based neighbourhood narrative, it also overruled it. This newly established positive neighbourhood narrative seemed to be completely adopted by the participating children. While participating adults appeared to accept the new neighbourhood narrative, they also seemed to accept that they were in a building phase towards adopting this new narrative and that more work was required to make this new narrative stronger and more resilient. New local relationships were fostered, common ground was being built and ongoing communication channels established. These neighbourhoods developed a stronger position to grow the neighbourhood play capital of their areas and secure neighbourhood play for future generations of local children.

Children discussed fun, friends, freedom and new challenges experienced in the neighbourhood play. Three main responses from the children were noted at the end of each neighbourhood play session. They described either the excitement and anticipation of the next play session, disappointment related to the play session ending or seemingly contented children who had had all their play needs satisfied.

Further research

A deeper understanding of the level of physical activity on average achieved while engaged in neighbourhood play is required. While children were observed as highly active during the neighbourhood play sessions, understanding the heart rate levels, number of steps reached, number of calories burnt, and the impact of neighbourhood play activity on diet choices of children would provide a stronger awareness of the role of neighbourhood play in supporting children to achieve and sustain physical health. To conclusively understand the long-term impacts of neighbourhood play on children's health and wellbeing would require an extensive longitudinal research project examining all the areas of child development across an extensive time frame. Consideration could be given to the importance of urban and suburban infrastructure in improving the physical and mental health of Queensland's youngest generations (Make Time 2 Play, 2013). Cul-de-sacs, foot bridges, speed limits and shifting the ownership of smaller residential streets from cars to foot traffic by diverting through-traffic would all

make significant changes to parental perception of risk (Ryan, Hosking, Wilkinson-Meyers, & Ameratunga, 2018; Tremblay et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The Neighbourhood Play Project adopted a collaborative approach to discover common themes between the responses shared by the participants about neighbourhood play. The process investigated what was happening in neighbourhoods for children and their families. The social trend of the removal of children from the neighbourhood by parents has resulted in an extensive disconnection between local children. Children are generally not permitted to go out of their homes independently, nor do they know how or where to find other local children and are not familiar with any spaces within their neighbourhood. This disconnection increases the time children spend in sedentary activities, i.e. immersed in screens. It also results in reducing young people's capacity and motivation to be physically and socially active.

Parents expressed concern for their children's social-emotional wellbeing and long-term mental health during the Neighbourhood Play Project, reporting fears their children were socially isolated in their local neighbourhood area and possibly lonely. The project found that when children connect locally for play, the parents also connect, which reduces social stigma, mistrust and fear, increases social cohesion and establishes an informal network of local parents keeping an eye out for the local children regularly playing outside together. It was observed that this has a positive effect on children's capacity for regular play with local friends as the parent's collaboration increased. Parental fear, widespread social distrust, neighbourhood stigma and traffic concerns were indicated as the most significant barriers to neighbourhood play. Housing design was also noted as a barrier; small backyards reduce the capacity of this space to be a play resource and electric garage doors reduce residents incidental contact with neighbours. Parents indicated that this reinforced social fragmentation and social isolation. Overall, the project identified neighbourhood play as a source of regular additional physical activity and improved physical literacy for the children involved.

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