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RIGHTS

ipa international play association
promoting the child's right to play



play and innovation

An Innovative Municipal Framework for Citywide Playability in Regensburg, Germany

Co-designing Play in Lebanon

Reclaiming Children's Right to Re-design Everyday Spaces

Supporting Outdoor Play for Children with Disabilities through the SPROUT-able Project

2,400 Blue Bricks, No Rules: A Field Report from Seoul, South Korea

ABOUT IPA AND HOW YOU CAN JOIN

The International Play Association (IPA) is a dynamic, cross-sectoral, membership-based international non-governmental organization founded in 1961. It has members in almost 50 countries and branches in 19 countries. It has active groups throughout the world and enthusiastically welcomes new members and new energy!

IPA is at the forefront of developing a global understanding and increased visibility of the child's right to play (article 31, UNCRC) as a fundamental human right. In 2013, IPA reached a significant milestone with its leading role in crafting the General Comment (GC) on article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). GC #17 deepens our understanding of article 31 as a whole, and especially of play as a child right.

IPA recognises that the well-being of children is a global issue, and that opportunity for play is an important element of well-being. Play is children's natural behaviour and their healthy development is dependent upon sufficient time and opportunity to play.

IPA is an interdisciplinary organisation that brings together people from all professions who work for and with children. For over fifty years, national groups have initiated various projects promoting the child's right to play.

IPA's worldwide network promotes the importance of play in child development, provides a vehicle for interdisciplinary exchange and action, and brings a child's perspective to policy development throughout the world.

IPA welcomes you, or your organisation, to join its international network and participate in its campaign to promote the value of play around the world. You can contact IPA through your national representative listed on our website.

Visit ipaworld.org, or email the IPA Membership Officer at membership@ipaworld.org.



Nature-based play





Construction play



Fantasy play



Socio-dramatic Play



Locomotor Play



Imaginative Play



Symbolic Play



Deep Play

Magazine design by Safia Zahid
Play Types illustrations by Safia Zahid
Cover and back cover photo: CatalyticAction

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Children themselves are some of our greatest innovators. Give them a little time, space and freedom, and they will show us what is possible. Our job as adults, playworkers, planners and advocates is to make room for that, to remove the barriers, and to trust in their capacity.

Children today are growing up in a world shaped by crowded cities, busy timetables, screens, climate pressures, conflict and displacement, and a growing fear of risk. These barriers are real, and they are not going away on their own. If we want every child to enjoy their right to play under Article 31, we need to keep finding new and better ways to make it happen.

Innovation in play is not about shiny equipment or expensive new programs. Some of the most powerful ideas I have seen around the world cost very little. A street closed for an afternoon so children can reclaim it. A school playground opened up after hours. Loose parts gathered from a local market. A refugee camp where volunteers build a space for play out of whatever is at hand. What these ideas share is not money, but people who care.

Children themselves are some of our greatest innovators. Give them a little time, space and freedom, and they will show us what is possible. Our job as adults, playworkers, planners and advocates is to make room for that, to remove the barriers, and to trust in their capacity.

That is why community and culture sit at the heart of real innovation. The best solutions are not designed in an office and handed down. They grow from the ground up, shaped by the children, families, elders, and neighbours who understand what play looks like in their own setting. Culture tells us how children play, where they gather, what games are passed down, and what a community values. When we listen to that, our solutions fit.

In this edition of PlayRights you will find inspiring examples of this kind of thinking from across our network. Please know that these are only a small slice of the creativity and courage happening in our play community every day. Every branch, every member and every play champion is adding something to this story, often quietly and without recognition. I hope these pages spark ideas and conversations you can take back to your own communities.

On a personal note, this is my last edition as President of IPA World. It has been one of the great privileges of my life to serve in this role. I have been moved, time and again, by your passion, your generosity and your refusal to give up on children's right to play, even in the hardest of circumstances. From grassroots projects to global advocacy, you have shown what a determined community can achieve together.

Thank you for your support, your friendship and your inspiring work. Thank you to our Board, our branch leaders and everyone who has given their time so freely. I leave this role with enormous pride in what we have built together and great confidence in the future of IPA.

The work is never finished, and that is what makes it so exciting. Let us keep listening to children, keep learning from each other's cultures, and keep finding new ways to open the door to play.

Signing off one last time with warmth and gratitude!

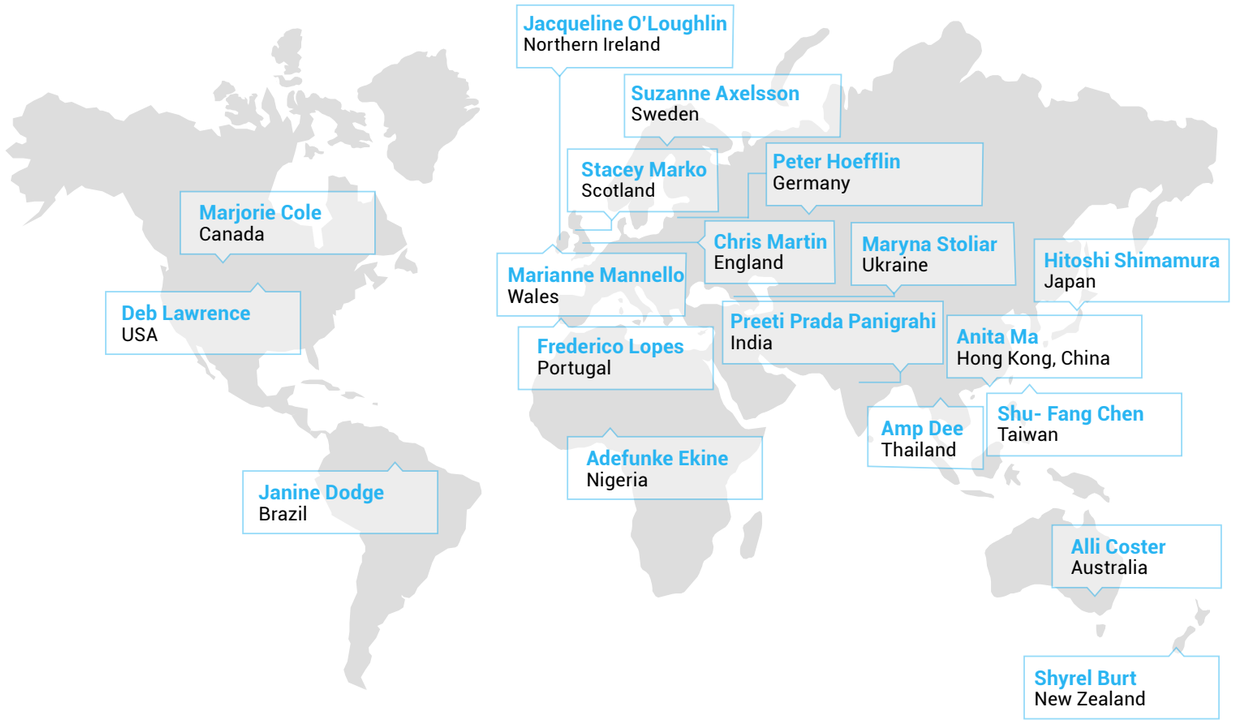
Yours Playfully, always,



Yours Playfully

Robyn Monro Miller AM
President
Play Rights, IPA World

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In a world where children's play is increasingly scheduled, supervised and instrumentalised, this volume is offered as both evidence and invitation. Evidence that innovation in play is achievable—in war-affected neighbourhoods, city halls, forests and public plazas—when adults commit to creating conditions rather than prescribing outcomes.



Twenty years ago, when I began my PhD fieldwork in Nizamuddin Basti, a low-income urban village in Delhi with no designated playground, I found an archive of spontaneous spatial innovation. A five-year-old used a tilted wooden hand-cart as a slide. Eleven-year-old Badshah built shelters from sticks on a contested lot where, as he told me, "no one stops us." Jyoti and her friends made ovens—and even televisions—out of clay. Materially poor, these children were, in their play, the richest children in the world: rich in loose parts, in liminal spaces no one had claimed, and in the freedom to remake them.

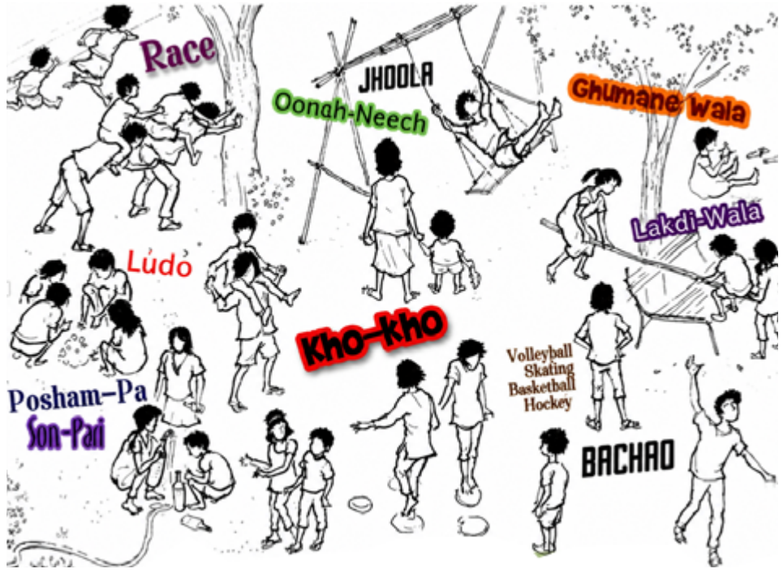
That memory stayed with me as we edited this volume. Our call for papers asked authors to hold two meanings of innovation together: environments deliberately shaped through policy, planning and design, and the everyday creative practices through which children remake the worlds around them. This volume shows that the most consequential work happens where the two meet.

The five contributions approach this meeting point from different directions. The first two articles show how room for children's innovation can be secured at very different scales—in the everyday workings of a city government and in neighbourhoods shaped by crisis. In Regensburg, Germany, Anna Schledorn and I examine the Masterplan for Play, a self-imposed municipal framework that has set citywide standards for playability since 2010 and has survived successive changes of government—a dual innovation that embeds play across municipal planning while enabling children to become co-creators and evaluators of their city. Joana Dabaj and her colleagues at CatalyticAction take us to Lebanon, where children have lived through displacement, economic collapse, a port explosion and war. Across five co-designed projects, they show that innovation begins with what children already do: stairs become slides, streets become football pitches, and vacant lots become places to meet.

Aaron Bradbury's position paper provides the volume's conceptual spine. He argues that innovation in early childhood is relational, and that protecting the right to play means protecting children's right to re-design their everyday worlds. Two field reports bring this argument to ground. At Forest Explorers in Ontario, Maeghan James and colleagues in the SPROUT-able project combine adaptive equipment, a clothing library and footage from children's own GoPro cameras to make outdoor play accessible to children with disabilities. And on a newly reopened plaza in central Seoul, Yeonjae Lee scattered 2,400 blue bricks under a single sign—"No Rules, Only You"—and watched 205 children and adults build, connect and knock down a village of their own making.

Read together, these contributions offer four deeper lessons. The first is that innovation is relational before it is material. What mattered was not a novel object but a new relationship—between children and the adults who listen to them, between strangers on a plaza, between caregivers on either side of a former front line in Tripoli. Children appear throughout as builders, co-designers and evaluators, not end users.

The second is that children's innovations remain fleeting unless institutions make room for them. Regensburg's Masterplan endures because it draws on cross-sectoral budgets and is woven into by-laws and development contracts. CatalyticAction's return to the Ibtasem playground a decade after building it—and its decision to dismantle and reassemble it elsewhere as Syrian families return home—reflects a similar commitment to time. Institutions that demand predetermined outcomes can stifle innovation before it begins.



Innovative Play using loose parts and affordances of the environment in an informal settlement in Delhi. Project: Play@Khirkee, by Sudeshna Chatterjee 2011. Illustration: Siddhartha Mitra.

Seoul's city government twice rejected Lee's application, asking her to specify expected outcomes, and Bradbury warns that outcome-driven early years systems narrow the uncertainty from which children's inventiveness grows.

The third is that innovation in play is tested hardest at the margins. A preschooler at Forest Explorers who found balance difficult chose a manageable route through uneven terrain; children in Karantina mapped their neighbourhood's dangers before helping to reimagine it. As the children of Nizamuddin taught me two decades ago, children facing displacement, disability or scarcity are not waiting to be innovated for—they are already innovating. Our task as adults is to notice that inventiveness, build on it, and leave environments open enough for children to keep reshaping them.

The fourth is methodological. GoPro footage caught a child quietly wishing for friends to play with, a wish adults might easily have missed; young citizen scientists in El Mina gathered the evidence that reshaped their waterfront. Seeing play from children's own vantage point is itself an act of recognition.

In a world where children's play is increasingly scheduled, supervised and instrumentalised, this volume is offered as both evidence and invitation. Evidence that innovation in play is achievable—in war-affected neighbourhoods, city halls, forests and public plazas—when adults commit to creating conditions rather than prescribing outcomes. And an invitation, in the spirit of General Comment No. 17, to plan and resource environments in which children can exercise their right to play on their own terms: to design with rather than for, to recognise the innovation children already bring, and to make room for it in our institutions. I hope these pages travel with you to the IPA Triennial Conference in Christchurch and well beyond.

Sudeshna Chatterjee
Editor-in-Chief
Play Rights, IPA World

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Dr. Sudeshna Chatterjee (Editor-in-Chief)

Sudeshna has extensive experience as a globally recognised urban practitioner, researcher, and published author. She focuses on enabling inclusive, resilient and child-friendly cities and communities and advocating for including child and youth perspectives in urban policies, planning and urbanisation processes. Sudeshna has led IPA's Access to Play in Crisis research in six countries and was elected to the IPA World Board in 2017. She is the Programme Director (research) for Sustainable Cities and Transport at the World Resources Institute (WRI) India



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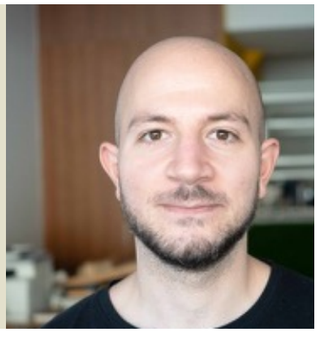


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MASTERPLANNING FOR PLAY

An Innovative Municipal Framework for Citywide Playability in Regensburg, Germany

Anna Schledorn and Sudeshna Chatterjee

This article examines Regensburg's Masterplan for Play, a self-imposed municipal planning framework that sets citywide standards for play and child-friendly development and guides urban planning processes across the city in support of children's right to play. The article argues that the Masterplan constitutes a dual innovation: an institutional planning innovation that embeds minimum quality standards for playability within municipal planning practice, and an enabling framework through which children themselves become co-creators and evaluators of their urban environment.

Photo credit: All photos by City of Regensburg unless otherwise mentioned.

In cities around the world, children's opportunities for play in public spaces are under sustained pressure. Streets once alive with unsupervised play have increasingly been dominated by traffic; vacant lots that served as informal adventure spaces have been built upon; and children's presence in urban decision-making remains limited or tokenistic.

The result is a progressive erosion of what the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013), in its General Comment No. 17, recognised as every child's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, and cultural and artistic life. The General Comment places an explicit responsibility on public authorities to plan and resource environments that enable play, yet few cities have translated this obligation into systematic planning practice.

Against this backdrop, the city of Regensburg in eastern Bavaria, Germany, offers a particularly advanced example of municipal innovation. With a current population of approximately 179,000, including some 23,600 residents under the age of eighteen, Regensburg has developed a citywide Masterplan for Play that integrates play and child-friendly development standards into urban planning processes. Unlike time-bound strategic plans or isolated playground upgrades, the Masterplan for Play serves as



a long-term, cross-sectoral framework within municipal planning practice that guides urban development, infrastructure, and public space projects towards minimum standards of playability. It also emphasises meaningful participation by children and young people, ensuring that their voices are heard in a structured way so that children themselves become co-creators and evaluators of their urban environment (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

This article argues that Regensburg's approach represents a dual innovation. It is, first, an institutional innovation —an administrative and governance architecture that embeds play across all sectors of city government and formalises and prioritises children's spatial rights within planning processes, safeguarding them from short-term political change.





A key factor in Regensburg's success: it ensures that play is not an optional add-on to be bargained away in the face of competing priorities but a non-negotiable dimension of urban quality.

Children in Regensburg enjoy a degree of spatial freedom — the ability to move safely and independently across the city, to encounter diverse people and environments, to be cared for by responsive public institutions — that is increasingly rare in contemporary urban settings.

It is, second, an enabling innovation — a framework that creates the conditions for children to engage with, co-create, and reimagine their environments through their own agency. Together, these two dimensions offer a model for how cities can move play from the margins of planning to the centre of city-making, enhancing urban quality for families and children.

What Makes the Masterplan for Play an Innovation?

To appreciate the significance of Regensburg's Masterplan for Play, one needs to understand what it is not. Most municipal initiatives for children's play take the form of strategic plans—policy documents with defined lifespans, ring-fenced budgets, and review cycles that depend on continued political will. Such plans are valuable but inherently fragile; a change of government, a fiscal contraction, or a shift in political priorities can stall or reverse their achievements. Other interventions are narrower still: one-off playground refurbishments, isolated traffic-calming measures, or pilot projects in individual neighbourhoods. These approaches treat play provision as a sectoral amenity rather than a cross-cutting urban quality, leaving children's spatial needs dependent on the goodwill of administrations.

Regensburg's innovation lies in having overcome both limitations. The approach dates to the 1990s, when Germany experienced a pronounced demographic shift characterised by a declining proportion of children in the population. Regensburg's political leaders recognised that a genuinely child-friendly city could attract young families and improve the city's economic competitiveness. This strategic calculation catalysed a series of institutional reforms. In 2007, the city council passed formal guidelines for a child- and family-friendly city (City of Regensburg, n.d.). In 2008, these guidelines were further elaborated in the integrated concept 'Family-Friendly Regensburg', which identified the implementation of a Masterplan for Play (Spielleitplanung) as a key strategic measure. This marked the beginning of a systematic, citywide approach to integrating play and child-friendly development into urban planning processes, which culminated in the city's first Masterplan for Play in 2010. In 2012, Regensburg joined the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), and in 2014 it became the first Bavarian municipality to be awarded the 'Child-Friendly Municipalities' seal by UNICEF Germany and the German Children's Fund (Kinderfreundliche Kommunen, 2018).

The institutional architecture underpinning the Masterplan is decisive. The Department of Municipal Youth Work has been formally placed in charge of child- and family-friendly agendas across the city administration. A professional social worker, designated as the 'youth welfare planner', participates in all relevant planning processes whenever projects may affect children, young people, or families. This social worker safeguards children's rights in planning decisions and coordinates the city's involvement in the Child Friendly Cities Initiative. Crucially, because the Masterplan draws on cross-sectoral budgets of the city council rather than on a single departmental allocation, it is self-sustaining. It does not depend on a time-limited political programme, and it has survived transitions of government—a quality that distinguishes it sharply from comparable efforts elsewhere (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024).

Importantly, the Masterplan for Play is not in itself a statutory planning instrument. Recommendatory planning of this kind complements formal urban planning, shaping complex developments in a flexible, collaborative, and forward-looking manner. Although the Masterplan for Play is a non-statutory guiding instrument established by the municipality, its standards are operationalised and, in part, made binding through statutory planning instruments and contractual mechanisms by which the city commits to specific quality standards and procedures for child-friendly planning. Its effectiveness lies in the progressive integration of these standards into formal planning instruments and implementation mechanisms. These include statutory land-use planning; urban development contracts; municipal by-laws such as the





BOX-1

Examples of Regensburg's technical standards for play spaces in public and private developments

- **Minimum size:** public playgrounds must be at least 500 m² in size.
- **Quantity:** new developments must provide at least 12 m² of public green space and 1.5 m² of playground space per inhabitant.
- **Independent use:** playgrounds should be accessible to children on their own and usable without adult supervision from around the age of six.
- **Proximity:** playgrounds should be within 400 m walking distance for children under 10, and within 1,000 m for teenagers.

These standards apply to all new local development plans that designate new or additional residential use within the urban area, and to amendments and additions to existing plans that do so (City of Regensburg, 2019).

- **Private play spaces:** residential buildings with more than five flats are required to provide private play spaces, as regulated by the municipal playground by-law (City of Regensburg, 2025).
- **Youth centres:** in addition, the city provides a network of youth centres across all districts, with outdoor spaces for play and sport.

When children in Regensburg are invited to envision play spaces, the city invests the time and resources necessary to realise their visions rather than defaulting to standard commercial catalogue equipment.

playground by-law (Spielplatzsatzung), which regulates private play spaces in residential buildings (City of Regensburg, 2025); and policy frameworks such as the open space development concept (Freiraumentwicklungskonzept; City of Regensburg, 2021) and the Regensburg building land model (Baulandmodell), which sets green space requirements for new residential development (City of Regensburg, 2019). In this way, the Masterplan serves as a guiding framework that shapes binding planning decisions without itself being a legally codified instrument.

Planning Instruments and Standards: The Architecture of Citywide Playability

The Masterplan translates its objectives into a set of technical and spatial standards (see Box 1), which draw on multiple sources and have been further specified through subsequent planning instruments.

The technical backbone of these standards draws on DIN 18034-1:2020-10, the German national standard for playgrounds and outdoor play areas, as well as the European safety standard EN 1176. DIN 18034 provides guidance for the planning, construction, and maintenance of play spaces, incorporating current knowledge from planning practice and play pedagogy, including recommendations on space requirements. Regensburg applies and adapts these standards not only in new planning but also when renovating existing spaces. In line with DIN 18034, the approach recognises the value of manageable and calculable risk in play environments — an orientation consistent with the growing international consensus that managed risk is essential to children's healthy development (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). The city currently maintains approximately 188 playgrounds and opens, on average, one new playground each year.

Complementing the quantitative standards is the Spielleitplanung methodology—an approach to urban planning based on the structured participation of children and young people—which is used by the Regensburg administration to analyse neighbourhoods in detail (City of Regensburg, 2013). To support the development of a child-friendly public realm across the city, the city uses a range of participatory methods to map, evaluate, and conceptualise public spaces together with children. From the third year of primary school onwards, children participate in surveys and mapping exercises to assess the spatial quality of their local environments. Groups of eight to ten children conduct neighbourhood walking audits, accompanied by city officials, social workers, and planners. Children overlay their findings on land-use and form-based maps to evaluate access to play, spatial barriers, independent mobility, and the overall playability of their neighbourhoods. The resulting data are not merely consultative; they are systematically integrated into planning processes and inform subsequent decisions (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

The Masterplan has generated district-level masterplans of considerable ambition. In the historic city centre, which had long lacked dedicated playgrounds, the approach has produced 'play points'—small-scale play interventions co-designed with children—in pedestrianised streets and public squares, embedding playful interaction in the everyday fabric of a heritage townscape.





In the south-east district, a socially diverse area with a comparatively high proportion of migrant and lower-income residents alongside long-established middle-class populations, children's mapping revealed both physical and social forms of marginalisation associated with railway lines and wide arterial roads that sever parts of the neighbourhood from the rest of the city. Their diagnoses informed a long-term masterplan for new playgrounds and play spaces co-designed with children. The Brixen Park redevelopment created a new neighbourhood by transforming approximately 400 hectares of former army barracks land illustrating how the principles and results of the Masterplan for Play are integrated into formal planning processes. The new neighbourhood integrates high- and low-income housing, private play spaces within apartment blocks, and a large public park with play spaces for all ages, all planned through wide-ranging child participation. This example demonstrates how playability can be embedded in large-scale urban development projects, not just in designated recreation areas.

A third district masterplan has since been completed, and the city plans to extend the process to further districts.

Children as Co-innovators: From Planning to Co-creation

As Chawla and van Vliet (2017) point out, children's right to the city means not only individual access to urban resources such as transport, healthcare, and education, and to places such as schools, play spaces, and cultural venues, but also children's ability to actively shape urban decision-making.

Regensburg's Masterplan enacts a paradigm shift in the relationship between children and the planning system. Rather than treating children as passive beneficiaries of adult-designed amenities, the Masterplan recognises children as active agents whose spatial knowledge, imaginative capacities, and diagnostic acuity drive the planning process. This orientation reflects a capabilities-based understanding of childhood (Frediani et al., 2014; Sen, 1999) in which the purpose of planning is not merely to provide facilities but to expand children's real freedoms to live well in their city.

The results of this orientation are tangible. When children in Regensburg are invited to envision play spaces, the city invests the time and resources necessary to realise their visions rather than defaulting to standard commercial catalogue equipment. The 'Magic Castle', a play structure designed with children and built by a playground contractor for the city, exemplifies this commitment. The outcome is not only a higher-quality play space but a re-enchantment of public space through design that is irreducibly local, imaginative, and responsive to the desires of its youngest users (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

The play points co-designed by children in the historic city centre now punctuate pedestrianised streets and mixed-use public spaces. These interventions demonstrate that play need not be confined to bounded, mono-functional playgrounds; it can be woven into the texture of everyday urban life, enriching shared spaces for all generations.
In the south-east district, the Spielleitplanung methodology enabled children from a marginalised neighbourhood to articulate the spatial injustices they experienced daily — the railway lines that cut through their neighbourhood, the wide roads that endangered their journeys, the lack of welcoming public spaces. Their diagnoses were taken seriously by planners and became the evidential basis for a long-term programme of spatial repair. This process exemplifies what Low and Iveson (2016) describe as procedural and recognition justice: the right not only to be consulted but to have one's knowledge and experience shape substantive planning outcomes.

The 'emergency island' initiative adds a further dimension of social innovation. Staff in local businesses along key walking routes are trained to assist children travelling independently to school, creating a network of trusted adults that supports children's autonomous mobility without recourse to surveillance or restriction. This initiative, adopted as part of the broader Masterplan frame-



work, illustrates how a comprehensive approach to play generates benefits that radiate well beyond the playground — into road safety, community cohesion, and children's sense of belonging in public space.

Taken together, these and many other practices establish children as young as six as spatial evaluators and co-designers, through neighbourhood walks that assess play spaces and through playground planning. The Spielleitplanung does not merely collect children's opinions; it cultivates a civic culture in which children learn to observe, analyse, and intervene in the production of their environment. In doing so, it prepares young people to become what Chatterjee and Dutta (2024) describe as self-determined, responsible, and socially capable citizens — an outcome that extends the value of the Masterplan far beyond the domain of play into the broader project of democratic urban life.

From Niche to Mainstream: Achieving Systemic Transformation

A recent global review of urban transformations for children's health identified Regensburg's Masterplan for Play as one of only two initiatives worldwide — alongside Thailand's Green and Healthy Community Program — that have succeeded in creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of urban transformation at a large population scale with clear funding pathways through formal systems (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024). This finding underscores the exceptional character of Regensburg's achievement. Where most child-friendly city programmes remain dependent on project funding, political champions, or international agency support, Regensburg has embedded children's spatial needs so deeply in the institutional fabric of city

Regensburg's Masterplan for Play represents a significant planning innovation with wider international relevance. As an institutional innovation, it embeds children's right to play within the structures of urban planning, creating a self-sustaining system that is resilient to political change and capable of continuous renewal.

government that the approach has become, in effect, the normal way planning is done. International recognition has reinforced this institutionalisation. In Germany, the Child Friendly Cities Initiative is implemented through the association Kinderfreundliche Kommunen (Child-Friendly Municipalities), which was established by UNICEF Germany and the German Children's Fund (Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk). Within this framework, Regensburg was among the first municipalities in Germany to be designated a 'permanent' child-friendly municipality — a status that remains rare. In response, the city council passed 'Standards for maintaining the Child-Friendly Municipality seal' in autumn 2022, further codifying the city's commitment and ensuring that the Masterplan's standards are not merely maintained but continuously renewed (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

The outcomes of more than a decade of implementation are substantial. Streets have been made safer through traffic calming and additional road safety measures, play streets have been created in new developments, and car-free zones in the city centre have been strengthened. Parks and playgrounds co-designed with children have proliferated. Vacant land and the riverbank have been made or kept accessible for play. The city provides spaces for sport, adventure play, a self-build playground, and a children's and youth farm with animals. Youth and family centres operate in all neighbourhoods. In areas with fewer playgrounds, primary school grounds are, wherever possible, opened to the community after school hours, at weekends, and during the holidays (Chatterjee, 2023; Chatterjee et al., 2025).

These physical transformations support a broader achievement: the enhancement of children's capabilities and the advancement of spatial justice. Children in Regensburg enjoy a degree of spatial freedom — the ability to move safely and independently across the city, to encounter diverse people and environments, to be cared for by responsive public institutions — that is increasingly rare in contemporary urban settings. The Masterplan for Play upholds all five forms of spatial justice identified by Low and Iveson (2016): distributive justice through equitable access to play across all districts; recognition justice through the formal acknowledgement of children's spatial needs; encounter and interactional justice through public spaces designed for intergenerational contact; care and repair justice through ongoing maintenance and renewal of play infrastructure; and procedural justice through









Photo credit: Anna Schledorn

children's direct participation in planning decisions. The strong connection between play and children's health and wellbeing — physical, cognitive, social, and emotional — means that these spatial achievements translate directly into developmental outcomes, positioning play as being as essential to children's lives as clean air, nutritious food, and adequate sleep (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024).

Lessons for Other Cities

What can other cities learn from Regensburg? The first and most fundamental lesson is the transformative potential of systematically incorporating children's play into urban planning processes. A strategic plan, however ambitious, remains a statement of intent. Lasting impact requires that such considerations are consistently embedded in planning procedures, administrative practices, and implementation mechanisms. In Regensburg, this is achieved by linking play-related standards and participatory processes to existing planning instruments and decision-making procedures, and by establishing a dedicated youth welfare planner responsible for ensuring that children's needs and child-friendly planning principles are consistently considered across relevant planning processes. In this way, the Masterplan for Play reduces the dependence of children's needs on short-term political priorities and integrates them more systematically into planning practice. This is a key factor in Regensburg's success: it ensures that play is not an optional add-on to be bargained away in the face of competing priorities but a non-negotiable dimension of urban quality (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

The second lesson concerns the role of dedicated institutional capacity. The youth welfare planner in Regensburg is not a charismatic individual whose departure would collapse the system; the position is institutionally embedded within the planning administration, supported through cross-sectoral budgets and backed by formal political commitment at the city council level. Any city that is serious about systematically integrating children's play into planning processes must create equivalent institutional capacity — a designated officer or office with the authority and resources to participate in relevant planning processes, the professional expertise to interpret children's needs, and the institutional legitimacy required to represent children's interests within planning decision-making (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

The third lesson is that the approach is, in principle, replicable. Regensburg is not a wealthy global capital but a mid-sized Bavarian city. Its innovations depend not on exceptional resources but on political will, institutional design, and the consistent application of clearly defined standards. Any city that has committed to the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative — and there are now thousands worldwide (UNICEF, 2018) — possesses the normative foundation on which a comparable, context-specific framework for integrating children's play into planning processes could be built. The challenge is to move from aspiration to consistent implementation, from programme to embedded planning practice, and from consultation to genuine co-production with children. Regensburg demonstrates that this transition is not only possible but can be sustained over time.

Conclusion

Regensburg's Masterplan for Play represents a significant planning innovation with wider international relevance. As an institutional innovation, it embeds children's right to play within the structures of urban planning, creating a self-sustaining system that is resilient to political change and capable of continuous renewal (World Health Organization et al., 2025). As an enabling innovation, it creates the conditions in which children themselves become co-creators, diagnosticians, and advocates for a playable city — exercising agency that enriches both the quality of public space and democratic life.

The dual character of this innovation — a structured, municipality-wide commitment and bottom-up child participation — is not contradictory but mutually reinforcing: the institutional framework ensures that children's needs are consistently considered in planning processes, and children's participation ensures that the resulting spaces are responsive, imaginative, and just.

For cities seeking to honour their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to build environments in which all children can thrive, Regensburg offers a compelling and adaptable example. The imperative now is to move masterplanning for play from a remarkable exception to a global norm — to recognise that a city planned for its children is, ultimately, a city planned for everyone.



Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Authors' Note: *The research undertaken for this paper is the original work of the authors, informed by their previous work for UNICEF, UN-Habitat, and WHO on the Guide to creating urban public SPACES for children (World Health Organization et al., 2025). This paper builds on insights from that guidance and on three papers by one or both authors, published in the International Journal of Play (Chatterjee et al., 2025), Cities & Health (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024), and Children, Youth and Environments (Chatterjee, 2023).*

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Co-designing Play in Lebanon: Innovating with Children Across Contexts of Displacement and Crisis

Joana Dabaj, Riccardo Luca Conti, Sara Maassarani, Hady Naal and Giulia Galli

In a country where children have lived through displacement, economic collapse, a port explosion and war within a single childhood, CatalyticAction begins with what children already do in everyday spaces. Across their co-designed projects in Lebanon, innovation lies not simply in what is built, but in rethinking how play is enabled: who shapes play spaces, where play can happen, and how these spaces are cared for, adapted and sustained over time.



Ibtasem playground (2015) Photo credit: CatalyticAction

Introduction

In contexts of displacement and crisis, children's access to play is often overlooked, despite being a fundamental right and a critical component of children's wellbeing and healthy development. Play is essential for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, while also supporting their resilience and ability to cope with adversity (UNICEF, 2024). In Lebanon, overlapping crises – including protracted displacement, economic collapse, the Beirut port explosion, and more recently the escalation of war since late 2023 – have profoundly affected children's everyday environments, limiting opportunities for safe, inclusive, and meaningful play.

CatalyticAction is an organisation dedicated to designing and building inclusive public spaces through participatory design processes that place children and communities at the centre of decision-making. This approach is grounded in the understanding that public spaces are not merely physical environments, but places that foster social interaction, safety, inclusion, and a sense of belonging (UN-Habitat, 2016).

This field report reflects on a series of projects implemented across Lebanon, exploring how co-designed play interventions support children's wellbeing, foster social cohesion, and contribute to urban recovery. Drawing on experiences from the Bekaa Valley, Beirut and Tripoli, it demonstrates how play can act as both a spatial and social tool, enabling children to develop a sense of ownership over their environments, strengthen relationships with their communities, express their needs, and navigate complex realities.



Karantina Makani, Photo credit: Mauricio Yazbek

Children Living in Contexts of Displacement and Multiple Crises

Lebanon hosts one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita globally and, following the escalation of conflict since late 2023, has also experienced one of the highest levels of internal displacement relative to its population (USA for UNHCR, 2026). As a result, many children are growing up in conditions shaped by displacement, poverty, and prolonged instability. These long-standing challenges have been compounded by successive crises, including the catastrophic Beirut port explosion in 2020, which caused widespread destruction, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and left lasting psychological, social, and spatial impacts on communities (World Bank, 2020). More recently, renewed conflict has further disrupted children's lives, increasing displacement and reducing access to safe spaces and essential services (USA for UNHCR, 2026).

Through play, children reinterpret their surroundings and create meaning within disrupted environments. It enables them to build relationships, develop confidence, negotiate risks, and foster a sense of belonging within their communities.

Children in these contexts often have limited access to safe, child-friendly spaces. Public spaces are scarce, inaccessible, poorly maintained, or perceived as unsafe, while streets are frequently dominated by traffic, congestion, and social tensions. As observed in the Karantina neighbourhood of Beirut, where CatalyticAction has implemented a series of participatory public space projects since 2020, children often appropriate (ongoing observation since 2020). – including streets, parking areas, and vacant plots – for play, navigating risks as part of their everyday lives.

Living in contexts of repeated crises affects not only children's physical safety but also their emotional wellbeing, social relationships, and healthy development. Exposure to uncertainty, violence, and disrupted environments shapes how children experience their neighbourhoods, perceive safety, and interact with others (UNICEF, 2021).

In this context, play becomes far more than a developmental need. It offers children opportunities to cope with adversity, express themselves, strengthen social connections, and regain a sense of agency and normality amidst uncertainty (UNICEF, 2021).

The Importance of Play

Play is a fundamental right, enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). In contexts of displacement and crisis, its role becomes even more essential. Beyond supporting children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, play provides opportunities to



Vendome stairs, Photo credit: Ahmad Shinder



Mauj, Photo credit: Youssef Itani



Karantina public park, Photo credit: Youssef Itani



Karantina public park, Photo credit: Toufic Metri

process experiences, cope with adversity, rebuild routines, and strengthen resilience (Rigon et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2024).

Through play, children reinterpret their surroundings and create meaning within disrupted environments. It enables them to build relationships, develop confidence, negotiate risks, and foster a sense of belonging within their communities.

Importantly, play is not limited to formal playgrounds. As Rasmussen (2004) argues, children do not simply occupy spaces designed for them; they actively transform everyday environments into their own places through play and imagination. In Lebanon, stairs become slides, streets become football pitches, and vacant lots become places to meet, play, and socialise. These everyday reinterpretations challenge conventional ideas of where and how play happens, providing a starting point for CatalyticAction's innovation in design.

Recognising children's capacity to shape and reinterpret their environments, CatalyticAction approaches play not simply as the provision of playgrounds or recreational infrastructure, but as a social and spatial practice embedded in children's everyday lives. This understanding underpins the organisation's participatory approach, in which children are recognised not only as users of public space, but as knowledgeable contributors to its design, activation, and long-term stewardship.

CatalyticAction's Context-Sensitive Approach and Innovation

In this work, innovation extends beyond the design of new play spaces or equipment to how play environments are conceived, created and sustained in contexts of crisis. It can be understood along three interconnected lines. The first is who shapes them: children contribute their knowledge, experience and ideas throughout the process, rather than being treated as end users. The second is where play happens: rather than limiting play to fenced playgrounds, projects recognise and build on the everyday spaces children already appropriate through play – from stairs and streets to waterfronts and other shared public spaces. The third is time: spaces are revisited, adapted and expanded as needs and conditions change, rather than treated as finished at handover. Across these dimensions, innovation begins with paying close attention to children's existing spatial practices, imagination and agency, and creating environments that enable them to continue shaping how and where they play.

CatalyticAction's work is grounded in participatory design processes that position children as active contributors to shaping their environments. Using tools such as drawing, storytelling, mapping, model-making, and full-scale prototyping, children contribute their knowledge, experiences, and ideas, which become the foundation for co-designing context-specific interventions.

Rather than focusing solely on the final physical intervention, the approach places equal value on the design process itself. Children are involved throughout the project – from exploring and analysing their neighbourhoods, to generating ideas, testing solutions, and, where possible, participating in construction and activation. This enables them to develop practical skills, build confidence, and experience that their ideas can influence real change within their communities (Rigon et al., 2021).

Working in contexts of displacement and recurring crises requires flexibility and continuous adaptation. Projects rarely follow a linear process. Instead, interventions are designed to respond to evolving needs, changing security conditions, limited resources, institutional constraints, and shifting community priorities. Solutions range from permanent public space improvements to temporary activations and small-scale interventions, allowing projects to remain responsive while maintaining meaningful participation.

Participation also extends beyond children. Parents, caregivers, local organisations, schools, municipalities, and community leaders are engaged throughout the process, recognising that children's ability to participate depends on the support and trust of the wider community. Bringing together participants from different genders, nationalities, generations, and socio-economic backgrounds

Using tools such as drawing, storytelling, mapping, model-making, and full-scale prototyping, children contribute their knowledge, experiences, and ideas, which become the foundation for co-designing context-specific interventions.



Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Photo credit: CatalyticAction

creates opportunities for dialogue, strengthens relationships between children and their communities, and contributes to collective recovery by fostering more inclusive, resilient, and socially cohesive public spaces.

Co-designed Play Interventions with Children Affected by Displacement

Across Lebanon, CatalyticAction's projects demonstrate how play can become a catalyst for much more than recreation. Through participatory design, play has been used to improve public spaces, strengthen social cohesion, support urban recovery, and create opportunities for dialogue across communities affected by displacement and conflict.

a. Ibtasem Playground, Bekaa

When Ibtasem playground was first developed in 2015, many refugee children in the Bekaa Valley were living in protracted displacement, with limited access to safe and stimulating play environments. The playground was co-designed with children living in informal tented settlements and attending a local informal education centre (CatalyticAction, 2015).

Through participatory workshops, children used drawing, collage-making, and storytelling to imagine the playground they wanted. Rather than asking children what equipment they preferred, facilitators encouraged them to reflect on how they wanted to play, interact and spend time together. Their ideas consistently emphasised colour, collective play, opportunities for movement, and spaces where children of different ages could gather.



Placemaking for Peacebuilding. Photo credit: CatalyticAction

Children participated throughout the process, from early design activities to the construction of the playground itself. This transformed the project from simply delivering a playground into a collective learning experience, where children experienced that their ideas could shape real change.

As one five-year-old participant explained:
"I am here to build the playground with you, so when I go back to Syria, I can build one myself."

Teachers and facilitators observed increased collaboration, confidence and engagement among children throughout the process. Beyond providing a much-needed place to play, the project demonstrated how involving children in creating their own environments can nurture agency, creativity and hope in contexts where opportunities to influence their surroundings are often limited.

In 2025, ten years after it was first built, CatalyticAction returned to rehabilitate the playground, repairing and adapting the space for a new generation of children (CatalyticAction, 2025). In 2026, the context shifted again. As many Syrian families returned to Syria and the needs of the school changed, the playground began to be carefully dismantled, with its components intended to be reassembled in a new location where they could continue to support children's play. Rather than marking the end of the project, this latest transition reflects an approach in which play infrastructure can respond to changing patterns of displacement and community needs over time.

INNOVATION LENS: *Here, innovation lies in participation, adaptability and time: children from informal tented settlements were active contributors to the playground's design and construction rather than recipients of a finished space, while its rehabilitation a decade later, and its subsequent dismantling for reuse elsewhere, show how the playground is a living space that can be cared for, adapted and relocated as communities and circumstances change.*

b. Karantina Public Space Network, Beirut

Following the Beirut port explosion, CatalyticAction worked alongside children, families and local organisations to support neighbourhood recovery through play and public space interventions in Karantina.

Through the Kan Ya Makan programme (CatalyticAction, 2020–2023), 358 young people participated in 192 activities alongside more than 700 community members. Children explored their neighbourhood through storytelling, mapping, walks and model-making, identifying concerns including safety, pollution, inaccessible streets and the lack of places to gather and play.

These ideas informed the rehabilitation of the public park (CatalyticAction, 2020), introducing new play opportunities such as a large slide, a snake swing and the playhouse Beit Byoot, alongside rehabilitation of surrounding streets and pocket areas.

Equally important was the process itself. Activities including collective construction, neighbourhood walks, street parades and public events created opportunities for Lebanese and Syrian children and their caregivers to spend time together, gradually strengthening relationships across



Karantina public park, Photo credit: CatalyticAction

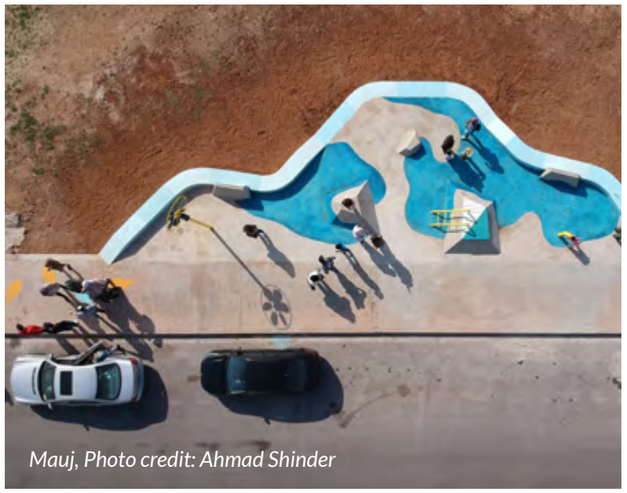
communities. As one young participant reflected:
"We are trying to work hard to make things around us better, so that when we grow up, we can be proud of what we were able to do."

The project demonstrated that rebuilding public space after a disaster is not only about repairing physical damage, but also about rebuilding trust, strengthening social ties and supporting collective recovery.

INNOVATION LENS: *In Karantina, innovation lies in approaching play at the scale of the neighbourhood rather than a standalone playground. Children's knowledge and experience of their surroundings informed a network connecting the public park, streets and pocket spaces, while play-based activities became part of the process of rebuilding relationships and supporting collective recovery after the port explosion.*



Mauj, Photo credit: Ahmad Shinder



Mauj, Photo credit: Ahmad Shinder



Vendome stairs, Photo credit: Ahmad Shinder

c. Mauj Public Space, North Lebanon

Mauj transformed a neglected section of El Mina's waterfront into an accessible public space where children, families and the wider community could meet, play and spend time together (CatalyticAction, 2022b). Located on one of the city's most frequently used public spaces, the project responded to a clear lack of child-friendly and inclusive infrastructure despite the corniche's importance as a daily destination.

The project was developed through a participatory process involving young citizen scientists in research, design, activation and long-term monitoring (CatalyticAction, 2022b). Through observations, interviews and mapping, they documented how different groups used the waterfront and identified gaps including the shortage of seating, limited accessibility for wheel-chair users and few opportunities for children's play.

These findings informed a co-designed intervention comprising three public space stations inspired by the movement of the sea. Rather than introducing a conventional playground, the project integrated playful elements directly into the public realm, encouraging climbing, balancing, exploration and social interaction while remaining welcoming to users of all ages.

Following its completion, Mauj became a shared destination used simultaneously by children, young people, older adults and families. In 2025, the intervention was expanded and rehabilitated in response to continued community use, demonstrating the value of long-term engagement and ongoing adaptation rather than viewing public space projects as completed once construction ends.

INNOVATION LENS: *At Mauj, innovation lies in both method and spatial form: young citizen scientists generated the evidence about how the waterfront was used and helped translate this knowledge into design, while open-ended elements for climbing and balancing were woven into a shared waterfront rather than separated within a conventional fenced playground. Its subsequent expansion and rehabilitation also demonstrate how the intervention has continued to adapt in response to use over time.*



Mauj Public Space, Photo credit: Youssef Itani

d. Vendome Public Stairs, Beirut

In dense neighbourhoods where open public space is scarce, everyday infrastructure can become an important place for play. The Vendome Public Stairs project explored how a heavily used staircase could be reimagined as a playful and social public space (CatalyticAction, 2022a).

Young people participated in a series of co-design workshops using drawing and digital tools, including Minecraft, to test different design ideas. Their proposals informed the integration of seating, shaded resting areas and playful elements such as speaking pipes, rolling spheres and a slide embedded within the stairway. Beyond improving accessibility and comfort, the intervention sought to revive the stairs' historic role as a social meeting place, transforming a route of movement into a destination for interaction. Thousands of residents use the

In dense neighbourhoods where open public space is scarce, everyday infrastructure can become an important place for play. The Vendome Public Stairs project explored how a heavily used staircase could be reimagined as a playful and social public space.



Placemaking for Peacebuilding, Tripoli. Photo credit: CatalyticAction

stairs every day, making small design interventions capable of influencing everyday urban life at a significant scale.

Integrating play into existing city infrastructure also generated important conversations with local authorities regarding safety, maintenance and regulation. The project demonstrated that embedding play within everyday urban environments is both possible and valuable, while highlighting the importance of dialogue between communities and municipalities throughout the design process.

INNOVATION LENS: *At Vendome, innovation lies in embedding play within everyday urban infrastructure that children already use for play. Minecraft enabled young people to prototype and communicate their ideas, while the project opened a new dialogue with local authorities on how safety, maintenance and regulation can accommodate play within the public realm.*

e. Placemaking for Peacebuilding, North Lebanon

In Tripoli, CatalyticAction explored how participatory placemaking and play could contribute to peacebuilding in neighbourhoods historically divided by conflict. Working along the former demarcation line between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, the project placed women caregivers at the centre of the design process, recognising that their daily care responsibilities strongly influenced children's access to public space (CatalyticAction, 2024–2025).

Women caregivers used participatory workshops, neighbourhood walks, and collective reflection to discuss how conflict, insecurity, and caregiving responsibilities shaped their everyday access to public space. Caring for children emerged as one of the main reasons women used public spaces, but also as one of the key barriers limiting where they could go, how long they could stay, and whether they felt safe. These insights informed the design of shared public spaces that responded simultaneously to women's needs and to children's opportunities for play. Play became an important entry point for placemaking and peacebuilding. By creating spaces where women could accompany their children, meet other caregivers, and spend time across neighbourhood divides, the project fostered new opportunities for dialogue and interaction. Rather than treating play as an activity exclusively for children, the project recognised it as a catalyst for strengthening social connections, supporting women's participation in public life, and contributing to collective recovery and trust-building.

INNOVATION LENS: *Here, innovation lies in approaching children's access to play through the experiences of women caregivers. By designing with caregivers and creating shared spaces for play along a former demarcation line, the project used everyday caregiving and play as entry points for encounter, interaction and relationship-building across historically divided neighbourhoods.*

Conclusion

The projects presented in this field report demonstrate the transformative potential of play in contexts of displacement and multiple crises. Through participatory design processes, children are not only provided with opportunities to play, but are recognised as active contributors to shaping the spaces, relationships, and communities around them.

CatalyticAction's work highlights the importance of context-sensitive, inclusive, and adaptable approaches that respond to children's lived realities while remaining flexible to rapidly changing humanitarian and urban conditions. Whether through permanent public space improvements, temporary activations, or the reimagining of everyday urban infrastructure, co-designed play interventions can support healthy child development, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to urban and collective recovery.

Read through the lens of innovation, these projects show that innovation lies not only in what is designed, but in how, where and over what period of time play environments are shaped. It emerges through relationships among children, caregivers, communities, practitioners and local authorities; through recognising the potential for play within everyday urban spaces; and through processes that allow interventions to be revisited and adapted as circumstances change. In contexts where needs and conditions shift rapidly, this capacity to co-design, adapt and return may be the most transferable lesson for practitioners working in humanitarian and fragile urban contexts.

Ultimately, these projects challenge conventional approaches to planning and design that position children as passive beneficiaries. Instead, they demonstrate that when children are meaningfully involved in shaping their environments – and when families, caregivers, and communities are engaged alongside them – play becomes far more than recreation. It becomes a catalyst for innovation, participation, resilience, and the creation of more inclusive, just, and child-friendly cities.

All activities involving young people were carried out with informed consent from participants and their legal guardians, as appropriate.Verbal and written consent was obtained in accordance with CatalyticAction's procedures, including for taking photographs, recording participants' voices and using these materials in publications.

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PLAY AS RELATIONAL INNOVATION:
Reclaiming Children's Right to Re-design Everyday Spaces

Aaron Bradbury

When a cardboard box becomes a spaceship or a stick becomes a story, children are innovating. Drawing on play studies, children's geographies and Article 31 of the UNCRC, Aaron Bradbury argues that innovation in early childhood is relational – enacted by children as they reshape spaces, materials and relationships through play – and that protecting the right to play means protecting children's right to re-design their everyday worlds.

Questioning Dominant Notions of Innovation

Innovation has become a dominant aspiration within early childhood education policy and practice, yet it is rarely understood as something children themselves enact through play. Instead, innovation is commonly framed through technological advancement, curriculum reform, or system-level change, positioned as something designed by adults and implemented for children. Within these narratives, young children are seldom recognised as innovators in their own right, and play is frequently reduced to a vehicle for achieving predetermined developmental or educational outcomes rather than being valued as a generative process through which new possibilities emerge.

This position paper challenges these assumptions by arguing that they fundamentally misrepresent both innovation and play. It proposes that innovation in early childhood should be understood as relational, situated and emergent rather than technical, scalable or outcome-driven. From this perspective, children's play is not preparatory or peripheral but a primary site through which innovation is enacted in everyday life. Through play, children transform spaces, repurpose materials, negotiate relationships and create new meanings that reshape both their environments and their experiences. In this sense, innovation is not something that is delivered to children but something that emerges through their ongoing interactions with people, places and materials.

This relational understanding builds on an emerging body of scholarship within play studies, children's geographies and new materialist perspectives that emphasises children's intra-actions with environments, materials and others as central to meaning-making and becoming (Lester, 2020; Rautio, 2014). The concept of relational innovation extends this work by positioning children's everyday play as a distinctive form of innovation that is enacted through these relationships rather than imposed through externally designed reforms.

Reframing innovation in this way has significant implications for children's rights, particularly the right to play articulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Although the UNCRC has been critiqued for reflecting predominantly Global North and individualised understandings of childhood, this paper adopts a relational interpretation of Article 31 that foregrounds children's participation through relationships, shared meaning-making and their capacity to influence the worlds they inhabit. Contemporary scholarship similarly argues that realising children's right to play depends not only on access to play opportunities but also on children's autonomy, participation and influence over the spaces they occupy (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021; Lott, 2025). When play is constrained, instrumentalised or tightly regulated, children's opportunities to act as innovators within their own worlds are diminished.



A cardboard box becomes a spaceship through shared imagination.

This paper therefore positions children's play as a form of relational innovation and argues that recognising and protecting children's right to play also requires recognising their right to reshape everyday spaces, relationships and possibilities through play itself.

Rethinking Innovation in Early Childhood

Dominant accounts of innovation continue to privilege novelty, visibility and measurable impact. Within contemporary policy contexts, innovation is frequently presented as something that can be implemented, evaluated and replicated, reflecting broader neoliberal logics of accountability, performativity and improvement (Ball, 2016). In early childhood education, this has contributed to an emphasis on curriculum reform, assessment and school readiness agendas that value predictability, standardisation and compliance over uncertainty, exploration and emergence.

Such framings sit uneasily alongside contemporary understandings of children's learning as relational, embodied and context dependent. Learning in early childhood does not unfold in linear or universally predictable ways; rather, it emerges through children's interactions with people, materials, places and experiences. Increasingly, scholarship within play studies and children's geographies has highlighted these relational dimensions, demonstrating that children's knowledge and identities are co-constructed through ongoing intra-actions with both human and more-than-human worlds (Horton & Kraftl, 2018; Lester, 2020; Rautio, 2014). Innovation, viewed from this perspective, cannot be understood as a discrete product or intervention but as something that emerges through relationships themselves.

This paper therefore advances the concept of relational innovation as a more appropriate lens for understanding innovation in early childhood. Relational innovation describes the new meanings, possibilities and ways of being that emerge as children engage with others, negotiate ideas, transform materials and re-imagine spaces through play. It is situated within particular moments rather than designed in advance, unfolding through curiosity, uncertainty,



Children collaborate, negotiate and test ideas together.



Loose parts invite possibilities and are transformed in play.



Through play, children shape both their worlds and themselves.

experimentation and shared meaning-making. Unlike dominant conceptions of innovation that seek measurable outcomes or scalable solutions, relational innovation is valuable because of what it enables children to become in the present, not simply because of what it prepares them to achieve in the future.

Understanding innovation in this way also challenges long-held assumptions about where expertise resides and whose actions are recognised as meaningful change. Rather than locating innovation primarily within policy reform, curriculum design or adult intervention, relational innovation invites us to recognise children's everyday play as a legitimate site of knowledge creation, creativity and democratic participation. Innovation is therefore not something adults deliver to children; it is something children continually enact as they interpret, negotiate and reshape their worlds through play.

Play as Relational Innovation

Play has long resisted singular definition, reflecting its complexity, diversity and situated nature (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Rather than viewing play as a discrete activity or developmental tool, contemporary scholarship increasingly understands it as a relational process through which children create meaning with others, materials and environments (Arnott, 2024; Vartiainen et al., 2024). This paper extends that argument by proposing that play is best understood not simply as an activity, but as a mode of being in the world, a way of encountering uncertainty, exploring possibilities and generating new relationships. It is through this mode that relational innovation becomes possible.

Understanding play as a mode shifts attention away from questions of what children are learning towards how children engage with the world. In play, children imagine alternative possibilities, negotiate ideas, test boundaries, reinterpret materials and respond creatively to the unexpected. These processes are not incidental to innovation; they are innovation itself. Through play, children continually create new meanings, new relationships and new possibilities that could not have been predetermined by adults.

Relational innovation therefore emerges through children's participation in playful encounters rather than through externally imposed objectives. It is evident when a cardboard box becomes a spaceship through collective imagination, when loose parts are transformed into entirely new creations, or when a familiar outdoor space is reinterpreted as a landscape for exploration, storytelling or adventure. In one study of outdoor early learning environments, children demonstrated this capacity by repeatedly adapting natural and open-ended spaces in ways that extended play beyond the intentions of adults, revealing that the innovative potential of environments lies not in their design alone but in how children creatively interpret and negotiate them (Ramsden et al., 2026). Innovation, in these moments, is relational, emerging through children's interactions with one another, with materials and with place.

Rights-based scholarship further strengthens this position. Contemporary interpretations of Article 31 emphasise that children's right to play cannot be realised simply through the provision of designated play opportunities; it also depends upon children's freedom to exercise choice, agency and influence within the environments they inhabit (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021; Lott, 2025). When adults over-direct play or narrow its possibilities through predetermined outcomes, they do more than limit children's enjoyment – they diminish children's opportunities to participate as innovators within their own lives.

The concept of affordances provides an important theoretical lens through which to understand this process. Affordances refer to the action possibilities that environments offer and that individuals perceive and take up in context (Gibson, 1979). Children display remarkable sensitivity to these possibilities, identifying opportunities for play that often remain invisible to adults. As Heft (1988) and Kyttä (2004) argue, children's engagement with environments depends not simply on what spaces contain but on what those spaces invite children to do. Relational innovation therefore emerges not from carefully designed resources alone but from children's capacity to recognise, reinterpret and transform the affordances available to them through play.

Early childhood environments are often carefully designed by adults with particular pedagogical intentions in mind. However, children rarely encounter these environments exactly as intended. Through play, they continually reinterpret, negotiate and re-design both physical and social spaces, transforming them in ways that reflect their own interests, relationships and shared meanings. In doing so, children do not simply occupy environments; they actively participate in producing them.

Research on children's spatial practices highlights the significance of loosely regulated and 'in-between' spaces as places where agency, imagination and creativity can flourish (Rasmussen, 2004). Such spaces are valuable precisely because they resist fixed purposes, allowing children to invent new possibilities through exploration and collaboration. Contemporary research on outdoor play similarly demonstrates that the quality of children's play depends less upon the provision of particular equipment and more upon environments that invite movement, interpretation, negotiation and change (Ramsden et al., 2026). These findings reinforce the argument that innovation resides not within the environment itself, but within children's relational engagement with it.

The Theory of Loose Parts (Nicholson, 1971) further strengthens this understanding. Open-ended materials become meaningful not because of their inherent properties but because children continually assign new purposes, negotiate shared understandings and transform them through play. A stick becomes a fishing rod, a magic wand or the framework of a den; a collection of stones becomes currency, ingredients for an imaginary feast or treasured artefacts within an unfolding narrative. The significance lies not in the objects themselves but in the relational processes through which children collectively create meaning around them.

Viewing play as the continual re-design of everyday space therefore challenges static conceptions of learning environments. Rather than being seen as completed pedagogical products designed by adults, environments are better understood as completed pedagogical products designed by adults, they are better understood as dynamic, living spaces that are continually reshaped through children's participation. This reflects participatory understandings of children's rights, recognising children not simply as users of environments but as active contributors to their ongoing creation (Lansdown, 2005; United Nations, 1989). Protecting children's right to play therefore also means protecting their right to influence, reinterpret and re-imagine the everyday spaces in which their lives unfold.

Constraints on Relational Innovation

Despite the centrality of relational innovation to children's play, many contemporary early childhood contexts constrain the very conditions that enable it to flourish. Increasingly, accountability regimes, performative cultures and school readiness discourses privilege predictability, efficiency and measurable outcomes over exploration, uncertainty and emergence. Within such systems, play is frequently structured, time-limited or redirected towards predetermined curricular objectives, reducing opportunities for children to exercise agency and shape their own experiences (Biesta, 2015).



Familiar spaces are re-imagined as places for stories and connection.

Howard and McInnes (2021) illustrate the tensions practitioners experience as they seek to support children's agency, wellbeing and playfulness within outcome-driven systems. Their work demonstrates that play often becomes a site of everyday negotiation, where practitioners continually balance institutional expectations with children's needs for autonomy, creativity and meaningful relationships. These tensions should not be understood as shortcomings of individual educators but as consequences of wider policy and structural conditions that shape what is valued within early childhood education.

Viewing play as relational innovation reframes these tensions in important ways. If innovation is understood as something that emerges through children's participation, relationships and encounters with people, materials and places, then practices that over-direct or instrumentalise play do more than restrict children's choices – they constrain children's capacity to innovate. When children's opportunities to imagine, negotiate, experiment and reinterpret their environments are diminished, innovation becomes something designed for children rather than enacted by them.

This argument also has important democratic implications. As Bradbury (2024) argues, play represents one of the last spaces within early childhood where children are able to negotiate meaning, exercise agency and participate in the shared construction of their social worlds. Through play, children make decisions, resolve disagreements, test ideas and explore alternative possibilities with others. These are not peripheral experiences but fundamental expressions of democratic participation. Restricting opportunities for open-ended play therefore limits not only relational innovation but also children's opportunities to participate meaningfully in the everyday life of their communities.

Recognising these constraints requires more than encouraging practitioners to provide additional play opportunities. It demands critical engagement with the policy, accountability and cultural narratives that continue to position play primarily as preparation for future outcomes rather than recognising it as a fundamental right and a present expression of children's creativity, participation and innovation. Protecting relational innovation therefore requires protecting the conditions in which children can play freely, collaboratively and with genuine influence over the worlds they inhabit.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Play as a Right to Innovate

This position paper has argued that children's play should be recognised as a form of relational innovation, enacted through everyday acts of re-designing spaces, materials and relationships. Such innovation is emergent, embodied and situated, yet it remains largely invisible within dominant discourses that continue to equate innovation with adult-led reform, measurable outcomes and technological advancement. Reframing innovation in relational terms challenges these assumptions by recognising children not as passive recipients of innovation, but as active participants in creating new possibilities through play.

Recognising play as relational innovation has significant implications for children's rights and for early childhood education. It affirms children as competent social actors whose ideas, relationships and everyday encounters shape both their own experiences and the environments they inhabit. For practitioners and setting leaders, this requires creating the conditions in which children can genuinely influence their play through time, trust, flexible environments and open-ended resources. Even within increasingly accountable systems, educators retain the professional responsibility to protect children's opportunities to explore uncertainty, negotiate meaning and re-imagine the everyday spaces around them.

The implications extend beyond early childhood education. Wherever children's opportunities for freely chosen play are constrained, whether in schools, communities, public spaces or playwork settings, their opportunities for relational innovation are equally diminished. Protecting children's right to play is therefore not simply about safeguarding opportunities for recreation; it is about safeguarding children's capacity to participate, create, question and transform the worlds they inhabit.

Ultimately, innovation in childhood does not begin with new technologies, redesigned curricula or adult-led interventions. It begins with children themselves: a cardboard box becoming a spaceship, a stick becoming a story, an ordinary space becoming somewhere entirely new. If we are serious about fostering innovation, we must first recognise, value and protect the extraordinary innovation that children already enact through play every single day.

Note on images: All images in this article are AI-generated. Informed consent for photographing children in school settings is difficult to obtain and, even where it is extended to the researcher, it does not extend to third-party organisations such as the International Play Association (IPA).

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Figure 1. A child with a disability in a wagon with a peer, heading out to the forest

Innovating for Inclusion:
Supporting Outdoor Play for Children with Disabilities through the SPROUT-able Project

Maeghan E. James, Bayan Kaid, Amy Jo Smith, Louise de Lannoy, Alessia Capone, Paula ter Huurne, Kelly P. Arbour-Nicitopoulos

What does it take to make a forest a place where every child belongs? More than accessible paths or adaptive equipment, it takes a willingness to rethink assumptions, listen to children, and approach inclusion as a shared, evolving practice. In Ontario, Canada, the SPROUT-able project brings researchers, educators and families together to explore how children with disabilities can shape and enjoy outdoor play on their own terms. From everyday adaptations to children's inventive ways of joining in, this collaborative endeavour asks how outdoor childcare can move beyond opening the gate to creating genuine opportunities for exploration, connection, challenge and joy.

Photo credit: All photos by Authors.

For many children in Canada, outdoor environments are a space for play, freedom, exploration, and connection with the natural world. Yet for others, the same spaces can present barriers that limit full participation. Although the United Nations recognises play as a fundamental right for all children (United Nations, 1989), access to meaningful, high-quality outdoor play is not experienced equitably across all children in Canada. This is especially true for children with disabilities, who frequently encounter barriers within both the physical environments and social contexts in which outdoor play occurs (Brown et al., 2021; Lynch et al., 2020). In fact, 80% of children with disabilities who have participated in childcare have experienced exclusion (Crawford et al., 2014) and 80% of early childhood education directors in Canada report challenges with providing inclusive care to children with disabilities (Irwin & Lero, 2020). International leaders, including the International Play Association (2015) and Outdoor Play Canada (Lee et al., 2025), have increasingly emphasised the importance of ensuring that outdoor play is accessible and inclusive for all children. The gap in access to, and support for, outdoor play for all children in Canada was also identified in the Outdoor Play in Canada: 2021 State of the Sector Report (Outdoor Play Canada, 2021). When outdoor spaces and activities are not designed for inclusion, children with disabilities may face barriers that limit exploration, play, and social connection. Spaces that should support learning and discovery can instead restrict participation.

In Ontario, Canada, we are innovating for inclusive and accessible play through the SPROUT-able project, which is the focus of this field report. In this report we adopt Murray and colleagues' (2010) definition of social innovation as "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations" (p. 3) to describe the SPROUT-able project. This framework positions innovation not only as the development of new solutions, but also as a collaborative process that brings together diverse actors to address complex social challenges. Murray et al. (2010) outline six specific stages that characterise this process: (1) Prompts, Inspirations and Diagnoses; (2) Proposals and Ideas; (3) Prototyping and Pilots; (4) Sustaining; (5) Scaling and Diffusion; and (6) Systemic Change. This series of stages provides a useful lens for understanding how ideas evolve from identifying a social need to developing, testing, and ultimately expanding solutions that can influence broader systems. In Canada, many early childhood education frameworks highlight the importance of high-quality and inclusive play experiences for children



Figure 2. Two children engaging with the communication board in winter

in childcare (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). There also exists an outdoor play framework for early childhood education developed by Outdoor Play Canada (Lalonde et al., 2024). However, there remains a significant gap in frameworks that explicitly address accessibility and disability inclusion in outdoor play environments. Few of these frameworks centre the experiences of children with disabilities or provide practical guidance for implementing accessible outdoor play in childcare settings. Using Murray et al.'s (2010) social innovation framework allows us to examine how a new response to this unmet need (i.e., taking an intentional, disability-focused approach to outdoor play in childcare) was developed, tested, and mobilised in a childcare setting. In this field report, we position our project within the stages of social innovation, illustrating how our efforts aim to expand inclusive and accessible outdoor play in childcare. We describe the processes, partnerships, and insights that both shaped the work and emerged through its implementation.

Stage 1: The Inspiration

Our journey began with securing funding to launch the Canadian Centre for Outdoor Play (CCOP). The CCOP is a research–practice–policy partnership built around Forest Explorers, one of Canada's first licensed outdoor-focused childcare programmes, situated on 500 acres of forested land. Around this programme, the CCOP leads outdoor play demonstration projects, informs policy and practice, offers professional development, conducts applied research, and drives nationwide knowledge dissemination and implementation to advance outdoor play and learning for children's health and wellbeing in Canada. During the planning process for this initiative, families, educators, and organisational partners raised an essential question: "How might a nature-focused programme be intentionally designed so that children with disabilities can participate meaningfully?" This question became a critical prompt for our work, challenging us to reconsider common assumptions that natural environments are inherently inaccessible and to begin thinking differently about how outdoor programmes could be designed to support quality participation for all children (Evans et al., 2018). The SPROUT-able project emerged through the collaborative work of the CCOP and is led by a team of researchers and practitioners. This four-year project aims to generate knowledge alongside families and educators about how participation for children with disabilities can be meaningfully supported, with the goal of informing and inspiring the development of more inclusive outdoor play environments in Canada. By learning directly from those involved in the day-to-day experiences of outdoor-focused childcare, we seek to better understand the barriers that exist, the conditions that enable quality participation (i.e., feeling satisfied, experiencing pleasure and achieving meaningful goals; Evans et al., 2018), the professional learning required to support early childhood educators, and the changes needed to ensure that outdoor play environments are accessible and inclusive.

Stage 2: Proposals and Ideas

We received a four-year grant from the Public Health Agency of Canada to support inclusive outdoor play at Forest Explorers and to evaluate barriers and facilitators to outdoor play experienced by children with disabilities in childcare settings. Before Forest Explorers' official opening in June 2024, we conducted qualitative interviews with caregivers of young children with disabilities – including physical, developmental and sensory disabilities – and with educators who regularly support these children in early childhood settings. Findings from this work highlighted that caregivers and educators who value inclusive outdoor play often carry the social labour of navigating others' perspectives, disability-related biases, and the practical challenges of natural environments. Across our conversations, it was clear that children with disabilities enjoy and benefit from outdoor play, yet ableist expectations and physical barriers can limit their participation. Adults play a crucial role in either constraining or enabling access, and autonomy-supportive environments allow children to explore more freely. Overall, participants emphasised that outdoor spaces uniquely foster child-led, meaningful play and learning for children with disabilities. The results of this initial research highlighted key areas for innovating inclusion that included physical adaptations in the outdoor space but also aspects of the social environment such as parental attitudes and educator awareness that contribute to inclusive outdoor play.

Stage 3: Prototyping and Pilots

According to Murray et al. (2010), the Prototyping and Pilots stage is where proposals and ideas formed in Stage 2 are tested in practice. At Forest Explorers, we began experimenting with equipment, routines, and co-designed processes to better support accessibility and inclusion. The project team included an inclusion support worker who had an active role in the Forest Explorers programme, providing ongoing support to educators and children. In this role, the inclusion support worker gathered informal feedback from educators and made observations in the field that informed the project (e.g., the creation of inclusion-focused workshops and development of educator resources). The researchers on the team did not participate directly in programme delivery. Rather, their role focused on conducting standardised assessments with participating children, analysing the resulting data and sharing findings with families and educators.

At the beginning of the programme, we invested in a range of adaptive equipment designed to support participation in outdoor play for children with physical, sensory, social–emotional, and communication needs.

The project team included an inclusion support worker who had an active role in the Forest Explorers programme, providing ongoing support to educators and children.

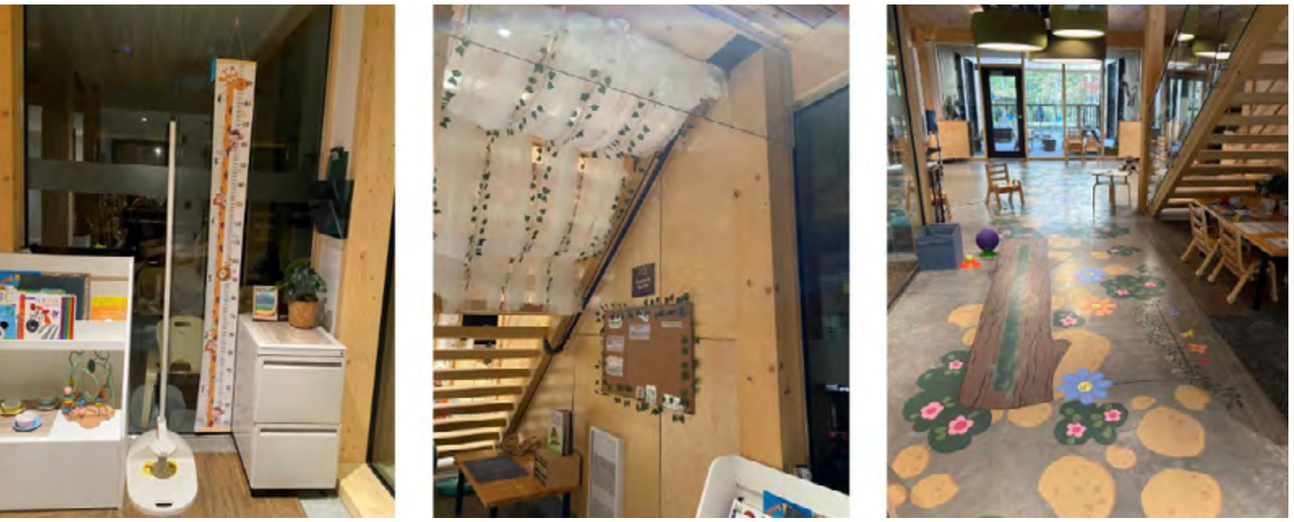


Figure 3. The research garden at Forest Explorers

Items included all-terrain wagons for mobility across varied surfaces, hammocks and swings for sensory support, weighted or textured balls for sensory feedback, adjustable seating for stability during play, sensory supports such as "chewlery" and noise-reducing headphones, and visual timers for transitions.

These materials were not only acquired but actively integrated into daily programming, allowing educators to adapt play experiences in response to individual children's needs. For example, to support a child with limited mobility, educators used wagons and, in snowy weather, sleds to ensure the child could reach and engage in the outdoor environment alongside peers (Figure 1).

In another instance, educators introduced weather-proof communication boards to support children with social and communication needs outdoors (Figure 2). Children have also been observed initiating use of equipment to engage in play that feels good for them. For example, a child with autism would regularly access a hammock hanging between two trees, often enjoying the gentle sway and input to his proprioceptive system, and the calming quiet of the hammock over the busy play of his peers in some of the other forest spaces.

When reflecting on the use of adaptive equipment in the forest, Amy Jo Smith, inclusion support worker, registered early childhood educator and SPROUT-able team member, shared: "I have watched educators and children engage together in a dynamic process of collaboration. With keen observation from the educators on the emerging interests, needs, and skills of each child, they work together to innovate and create a rich and engaging learning and care environment. This has been a fluid process of trying new equipment or strategies, observing the level of success, and adapting or modifying to continue to meet the individual needs of the children."

Interestingly, not all inclusive and accessible outdoor play required the addition of physical equipment or educator-led modifications. What emerged as particularly striking in our observations was the extent to which children themselves adapted and innovated their outdoor play experiences in ways that supported their own participation and inclusion. For example, a preschool-aged child who experienced challenges with balance encountered difficulty navigating some of the uneven terrain in the forest. Rather than attempting the most difficult route, they selected terrain that felt manageable for their current abilities and gradually progressed to more challenging surfaces as their confidence grew. In other words, the physical environment afforded them opportunities to create their own progression of challenge without requiring adult intervention.

In inclusive practice, modifying the environment or introducing equipment is often an important and necessary strategy for supporting quality participation and access for children with disabilities. However, in this instance, the child independently adapted their play using the natural features already present in the environment. This example illustrates how natural environments can provide diverse and graded opportunities for engagement without requiring immediate adult-directed adaptation. This highlights an often-overlooked benefit of natural environments: their inherent diversity provides multiple points of entry into play (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). Natural landscapes contain varying levels of challenge, allowing children to make decisions about how they may engage based on their own abilities and comfort levels. In this way, inclusion is not only achieved through external adaptations (e.g., using adaptive equipment) but can also emerge through children's own creativity and problem-solving skills that help support quality participation (Evans et al., 2018).

To further enhance inclusion and reduce barriers to outdoor play, we introduced a Clothing Library into the Forest Explorers programme. The Clothing Library includes weather-appropriate gear for all seasons in a range of sizes, including adaptive options (e.g., Velcro or magnetic closures, poncho-style rain gear, seamless or sensory-friendly clothing, mittens with extended cuffs or clips). Families are encouraged to borrow or exchange items as needed to ensure children can comfortably participate in outdoor activities. Recently, this Clothing Library has also expanded to include adult outdoor gear, so clothing is not a barrier for educators.

To systematically evaluate the impact of Forest Explorers, we launched the Sending PReschoolers OUTside (SPROUT) study, a four-year longitudinal study with biannual data collection (James et al., 2026). This study examines the health and developmental outcomes of children with and without disabilities at Forest Explorers compared to those in conventional childcare programmes. Our goal is to better understand how inclusive outdoor play environments support children's growth and learning. To embed research within the daily rhythms of the childcare centre, we co-designed a research garden (Figure 3) with educators to provide a familiar, welcoming space for children during data collection. To our surprise, the children quickly became highly engaged with the research process, frequently asking educators when it would be their turn to "do research." One educator described how children began incorporating elements of the gross motor assessments into their outdoor play, adopting the role of researchers and recreating assessment activities with their peers. Rather than simply participating in the research, children transformed these experiences into self-directed play. This behaviour illustrates children's autonomy in constructing meaning from their experiences and their ability to integrate new ideas into their play.

Figure 4. Summary graphic from the World Café



As we continue to learn, adapt, and innovate, we remain committed to ensuring that every child can explore, take risks, experience joy, and connect with nature.

Part of our research also involves the use of GoPro cameras during children's outdoor play. The footage collected provides insight into children's perspectives on barriers, facilitators and outdoor play innovations that adults may not always notice, from uneven pathways to subtle peer dynamics. An example of this is captured in the following vignette from a GoPro reel:

Footage shows Participant A nestled in a quiet nook behind a mud kitchen. "Banana head!" they start to shout at a passing educator wearing a toque. "Happy birthday to you …" They trail off into a series of songs and sounds of varying volumes … "do do do, do do do, to to to, DO DO DO, DO."

Audio and video recordings capture the following out-loud thought from Participant A as they cautiously and slowly move outside of their nook: "I want them to come around to playyy … to playyy … around to playyyyy … no one?" – they quickly run back to their spot behind the mud kitchen, what appeared to be a safe place for them, and call to the other kids, saying "hello", jumping, and finally "ROOOAARRRR" … the other children are intrigued. "AWOOOOOOOOO" – "I'm roaring", the friends jump in together and Participant A reorients their squished body in the space that was once only theirs.

After this connection, the video shows Participant A to be moving more directly and swiftly within the play area; they leave their nook to find other activities in open areas with friends. Still shouting back to the others squished behind the mud kitchen, it seems as though Participant A has established a wolf pack (figuratively, of course). They find themselves alone again – "AWOOOOO" – and, with several responding howls, they move towards another activity.

This vignette demonstrates the importance of capturing children's play experiences from their own perspectives and not always from the perspective of an observing adult. In this instance, without the GoPro footage, we wouldn't have heard the child quietly saying to themselves that they wanted to play with friends. From an outsider's perspective, it may have seemed that the child was removing themselves from play and wasn't interested in playing with others, or didn't have the skills to initiate play with others. However, the GoPro footage revealed that the child was quite interested in social play and had the skills to initiate it; they just needed a bit of innovation (animal calls) to get others' attention and signal that they wanted to engage.

We use the findings from the GoPro footage to adjust the outdoor environment, support educators in refining their facilitation strategies and generate new research questions for our project.

Five months after the opening of Forest Explorers, we hosted a World Café event with parents/caregivers of children with disabilities, educators, and community partners. Participants moved through the outdoor space – either by walking or wheeling – while identifying both barriers and facilitators to play. A graphic recorder captured observations and feedback in real time, visually mapping barriers and facilitators to inclusive play at Forest Explorers (Figure 4). The graphic guides the SPROUT-able project in prioritising the centre's greatest needs.

Stage 4: Sustaining

More than two years after opening, Forest Explorers and the CCOP continue to evolve, recognising that sustaining inclusivity requires ongoing reflection and adaptation. This includes evaluating children's growth and development every six months through the SPROUT study and conducting regular observations to examine the physical and social environments of the outdoor spaces. Educators are also invited to participate in regular "Bites and Insights" sessions, where they share successes, challenges, and ideas for improving practice. These sessions have been offered as either day-long or week-long events, allowing educators to participate at times that fit within their programme schedules. To support long-term sustainability, we are also prioritising professional development on inclusive and accessible outdoor play for Forest Explorers educators.

Stage 5: Scaling and Diffusion

As part of our Scaling and Diffusion efforts, we are developing toolkits and micro-learning videos for use in other childcare programmes. These resources, available on our project website (https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/sprout-able-modules-and-resources/), include equipment suggestions, environment checklists, clothing library guides, and facilitation prompts. We have also launched a CCOP Champions programme (https://www.outdoor-playcanada.ca/ccop-champions/) to recognise educators across Canada who demonstrate a commitment to inclusive outdoor play and learning, provide resources to support their work, and build a national network to share best practices and foster innovation. Together, these efforts support peer learning networks that help programmes test and adapt these ideas in their own settings, strengthening inclusive outdoor play practices across childcare programmes.

Stage 6: Systemic Change

Our long-term goal is to contribute evidence and practical models that help shape policy across the early childhood sector in Canada. Licensing standards, funding structures, and educator training programmes must better support nature-based and inclusive practices by creating the conditions and providing the resources needed for all children to thrive. By sharing what we learn through research and practice, we hope to advocate for policies that recognise the value of outdoor play and ensure it is accessible to all children. Ultimately, all children, regardless of their abilities or support needs, should have equitable access to high-quality outdoor play and learning experiences.

Conclusion

Accessible and inclusive outdoor play is both a child's right and a collective responsibility. Through the SPROUT-able project, we are learning that meaningful inclusion is shaped through many small, but impactful, decisions. These decisions include access to equipment, weather-appropriate clothing, intentional routines, collaborative problem solving, and strong relationships with families and educators.
As we continue to learn, adapt, and innovate, we remain committed to ensuring that every child can explore, take risks, experience joy, and connect with nature.

"Both of my children had diverse needs that were not only accommodated but also celebrated and embraced at Forest Explorers. Outdoor play instilled a lifelong love of the outdoors and the many creatures in it, while improving their confidence, sense of belonging and curiosity. Their love of learning and exploring has been an invaluable experience." – Parent of two children with disabilities who attended Forest Explorers

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2,400 Blue Bricks, No Rules

A Field Report from Seoul, South Korea.

Yeonjae Lee

What happens when a playground offers no equipment, no instructions, and no rules – only 2,400 blue bricks? In a Seoul plaza newly reopened after more than a century behind walls, playground designer Yeonjae Lee watched 205 children and adults answer that question together: building, connecting, and joyfully knocking down a village of their own making.

Photo credit: All photos by author

As a playground designer, I have spent years observing how children play – in playgrounds, in parks, in the spaces between. What I noticed was this: equipment acts as a catalyst, but it is the people who create the play, finding more joy in what they invent than in what they are given. This led me to design open-ended playgrounds that leave the possibilities of play as open as possible – and eventually to this experiment: 2,400 blue bricks, no rules, and the question of what might happen when a playground is designed not to instruct, but to invite.

One Saturday in April 2023, a scatter of blue bricks appeared in one corner of Songhyeon Green Plaza in central Seoul. The bricks were not arranged neatly. Some were piled up like small hills; others lay spread across the ground. Several pieces of peach-coloured cotton fabric fluttered in the wind, creating a quiet sense of welcome.

A sign read: "Everyone's Playground." But there were no slides, no swings, no playground equipment. Just one note:

'No Rules, Only You'

People passing by almost always stopped. And everyone asked the same question.





"What is this place?" "How do we play?" "Is it only for children?"

"Welcome! There is no instruction. Anyone can play – children, adults, everyone. There's no set way. However you play is the right way."

A Playground by Everyone, for Everyone

There was a clear reason I chose this place. Songhyeon Green Plaza sits in the heart of Seoul, surrounded by palaces and traditional hanok houses. For over a century, the land had been hidden behind four-metre walls – first as housing for Japanese colonial bank officials, then as quarters for American military personnel and US Embassy staff after liberation. Returned to the Korean government in 1997, it remained vacant for decades. In October 2022, it finally opened to the public for the first time in over a hundred years.

One day, riding the bus as usual, I caught sight of it – a green plaza, wide open, where there had been only walls. It looked to me like an empty canvas – one that anyone could draw anything upon. I thought: this place has returned to its citizens. They should experience it as their own, equally and freely.

Seoul City rejected my application twice, asking for standardised forms specifying expected outcomes. But the entire point of my project was that the outcome could not be predetermined. After three months of persuasion, permission was granted.

This project was the first citizen-participatory event held in that space. In the years that followed, Songhyeon became home to large-scale events – the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, international art fairs, cultural festivals. The space became, truly, what it had always been meant to be: a place that belongs to everyone.

The main elements of a playground are not the equipment, but the people – and the space they inhabit, and the time they are given. Instead of providing a completed playground, I wished to create an environment where people could shape it together freely, without obligation. The space had only just opened, and curiosity was already flowing through the air. The time was a Saturday afternoon: five hours, no entry fee, no structure. The three elements were assembled. What came next was open, and it belonged entirely to the participants.





My intention was simply to create an atmosphere where anyone could experience the right to play, freely and comfortably. My role was that of loose facilitation: present, but never directing. Playing quietly alongside others, offering an occasional word of encouragement, a warm glance, a friendly answer. Nothing more.

Simple Materials, Open Possibilities

I prepared only one thing: 2,400 bricks – made from upcycled textile waste (such as discarded clothes, banners, and fabric offcuts) compressed into construction panels without chemical adhesives or wastewater. Choosing materials that do not harm the planet is one of the principles I consider important when designing playgrounds.

I prepared only one thing: 2,400 bricks – made from upcycled textile waste (such as discarded clothes, banners, and fabric offcuts) compressed into construction panels without chemical adhesives or wastewater.



Each brick weighed about 0.9 kilograms, light enough for children to lift, yet heavy enough to stack reliably. The bricks were coloured blue, symbolising openness and possibility, like the sky and the sea.

Play equipment often comes with fixed functions that guide behaviour in predetermined ways – what Nicholson described as environments that are "clean, static and impossible to play around with" (p. 30). (Nicholson, 1971). Simple materials, by contrast, leave space for interpretation, inviting people to imagine their own possibilities.

I offered one simple material in abundance. This was intentional. Because the bricks had no fixed function, they invited many possible actions. Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances describes how objects offer possibilities for action, not through fixed design, but through what people perceive they can do with them. The bricks offered many: they could be carried, stacked, sat on, connected, knocked down, and rebuilt. As Nicholson argued, creativity and discovery grow with the "number and kind of variables" in an environment (Nicholson, 1971). Here, the variation came not from many different materials, but from the many ways one simple material could be moved, combined, and reinterpreted. When materials are plentiful, the focus shifts from competing to creating together.

From Hesitation to Play

At first, people hesitated. Many stood at the edge of the space, observing quietly. Most play environments present clear rules or instructions. Here, there were none. Eventually, a few people picked up some bricks and began stacking them. Interestingly, the adults were often the ones hesitating. Children, on the other hand, joined instinctively. Once about four people were visibly playing, others began to enter the space as well. It felt almost magnetic. People drifted in between the bricks and between strangers.

The children approached carefully at first, as if expecting something light, like the paper blocks they knew from kindergarten. Then came the discovery of their weight: a small surprise, met with delight. Arms opened wide, gathering as many as they could carry. A sudden urge to build something big, something worthy of the material. Two thousand four hundred bricks were not a random number. It was a generous stage for free creation.

Each child began in their own way, and almost immediately wanted someone alongside: a friend, a parent, a sibling. This reminded me of Vygotsky's (1978) observation that "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 90). Throughout the afternoon, I observed how naturally children shared ideas, helped one another, and created together.

A Playground Comes to Life

Soon, many small scenes began to emerge. Children who had never met before started talking and building together.

"Let's make a house!" "If we connect ours to that one?" "Let's build a road!" "We can connect all the houses!"

Nearby, five university students had built a tall tower inspired by Cheomseongdae, an ancient Korean observatory. When the children's road reached them, one laughed:

"Oh, perfect! We were wondering how to get home from here. Now we have a road. Thank you!"

The children beamed with pride. Moments like these

are always deeply touching. When a child's imagination meets a genuine response, the child discovers their ideas have weight: that they can create, solve a problem, and that failure is perfectly fine. Each small success builds confidence. I tried something. It worked. I can try again. This is how resilience grows: not through instruction, but through making, failing, adjusting, and trying again. And it begins, so often, in play.

Nearby, two brothers played together. The older built a small house; the younger, about four years old, could not build as easily, but carefully brought bricks one by one and handed them over to his brother. In his own way, he had found his role in the play.

An elderly man with white hair approached cautiously and asked, "May I play here too?" He sat down slightly apart and slowly began stacking bricks, at his own pace, pausing between each one, as if every small movement carried something precious.

One family visiting from France built a small Eiffel Tower together. The father lifted his young son to place the final brick at the top. People nearby applauded and cheered. This playground welcomed everyone equally: regardless of age, nationality, or ability. It belonged to whoever arrived.

In another corner, children who had been strangers built a large archway together. Wordlessly agreeing, they counted "One, two, three!" And knocked the whole structure down. The shout that followed was pure joy. Even I felt it: that wonderful release that comes from bringing something down together. When materials can be destroyed without loss, children feel free to be brave. To try. To fail. To start again. Destruction, here, was not the end of play. It was part of it.

A Space That Kept Changing

Over five hours, 205 people participated, counted as any person who picked up, moved, or built with the bricks. Observations were documented through photography and video, with the support of colleagues I call the Play Crew, who were present throughout the event. As time passed, the scattered bricks gradually formed a landscape. People began to notice what others had built and started connecting them. Paths appeared. Structures expanded. What had been separate now joined together. For a moment, the space looked like a small village.

But nothing remained fixed for long. Some structures were dismantled, others rebuilt. New ideas emerged constantly. The playground never looked the same twice. People came and went at their own leisure. The playground was constantly being remade.



A Playground That Asks a Question

This playground did not explain how to play. Instead, it offered a place where questions could emerge.

Questions to oneself.

Questions to others.

Questions about possibility.

These were not questions I had expected. They were real, heard out loud, throughout the afternoon.

"How high are you going to stack it?" – a child watching a university student build a tower.

"Can I connect my road to pass in front of your building?" – a gentle offer to a stranger nearby.

"Can you trace my body with the bricks while I lie down?" – a friend to a friend, laughing.

"Shall I bring you a lot of bricks? I'm really good at that." – a younger child, finding her place.

"What if I go inside?" – a child constantly suggesting new ideas, transforming the round tower they were building together.

"I wonder what this is going to become ?" – a mother to her child, kneeling beside a half-built structure.

Within the simplicity of the materials and the openness of the space, people felt comfortable imagining, experimenting, and connecting with others.

I had not built a perfectly finished playground. I had simply created an open invitation: an atmosphere where anyone could feel curious and free to begin.

Through an Innovation Lens

Looking back, I believe the innovation in this playground lay in its open-endedness. Rather than designing play in advance, I left its shape to the intuitions, ideas, and imagination of the people who arrived, with no rules to follow and no fixed outcome to reach. What emerged resembled the way informal settlements grow in many cities: incrementally, without a master plan, built by those who inhabit them. Paths appeared where people wanted to connect, structures expanded as neighbours joined in, and a small village took shape that was continually negotiated, adapted and remade. The innovation lay not in the object designed, but in the conditions that allowed people to become the designers of their own play.

Four shifts stood out. The first concerns who designs. Over five hours, 205 people – children, parents, university students, an older man, a family visiting from France – became co-authors of the playground. A child's road met a student's tower, and strangers joined their structures into a village that no single designer could have drawn. My own role was to hold the space open, not to fill it.

The second concerns time. Nothing was meant to last. Structures rose, were knocked down and were rebuilt, so the playground was never finished and never the same twice. Because the bricks could be destroyed without loss, failure became part of play rather than its end, and children could take the small risks through which confidence and resilience grow.

The third concerns place and policy. The project asked a city to permit an event whose outcome could not be predicted, in a public space that had been closed to citizens for more than a century. Securing that permission took three months, but it made this the first citizen-participatory event on the site and showed that public authorities can commission the conditions for play rather than predetermined products. This echoes General Comment No. 17, which describes play as "non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, para. 14(c)).

The fourth concerns materials. The bricks were made from upcycled textile waste and cost about KRW 5,000,000 (approximately US$3,800 / £2,800) – a modest, portable and repeatable investment that other cities and communities could adapt. Taken together, these shifts suggest that an innovative playground may be judged not by how well it instructs, but by how generously it invites.

The right to play is not something to be taught. It already exists within every person. Sometimes all that is needed is space, time, and freedom. This playground asked people a question. And through play, they answered it together.

Playgrounds are not built by materials, but by people playing. And by an atmosphere of curiosity: one that asks a question, and leaves the answer open.

About the Project

This project was made possible through pilot funding from the Next Generation Foundation and Community Chest of Korea's non-profit incubating programme. The bricks were custom-made (190 × 90 × 50 mm) by Sejin Plus, a Korean manufacturer that upcycles discarded textile waste into construction panels. The bricks themselves cost approximately KRW 5,000,000 (approximately US$3,800 / £2,800).

After the event, the bricks were donated to two places where children have fewer opportunities to play. The idea is to give play materials a second life where they are needed most, opening up new possibilities for more children.

For the next brick series, I would like to explore new materials: mycelium-based materials and wood salvaged from wildfire-damaged forests.

Consent Statement

Participants provided informed consent for photography and recording through a QR-linked online form, written consent forms, and verbal consent on-site during the event. For child participants, we obtained consent from their accompanying adults.

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IPA Membership Benefits

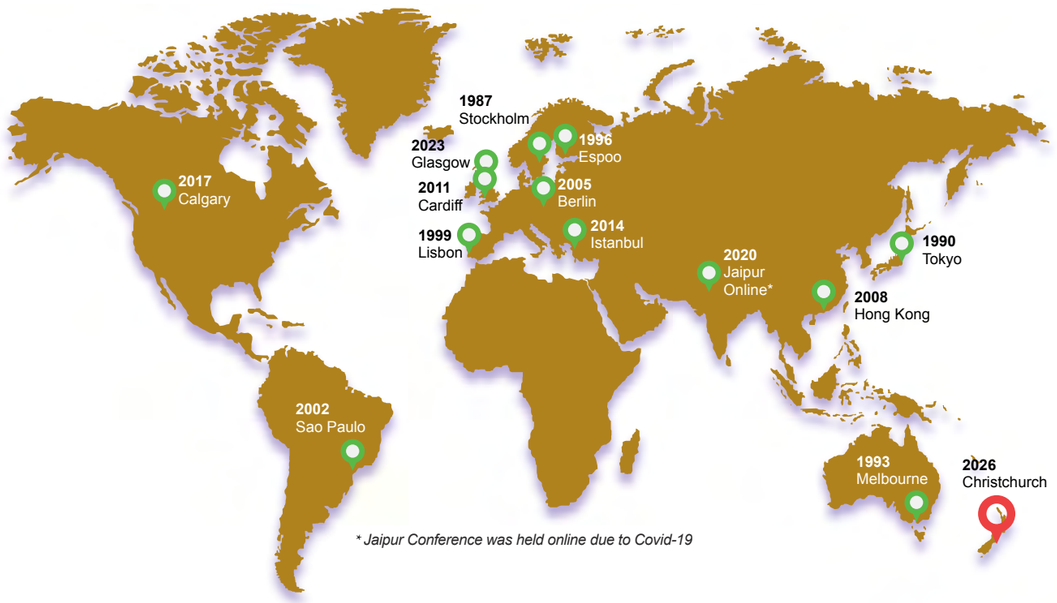
When you become a member of IPA, you will connect with a global network of passionate individuals advocating for the child's right to play. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to participate in global conferences and projects, and you can write for us and have your work featured in the IPA magazine.



IPA Triennial Conferences

Conferences are a primary means by which IPA seeks to fulfil its purpose of maintaining an international cross-sectoral forum to protect and promote a child's right to play, facilitate the exchange of experiences, disseminate information, and influence society. Every three years, the IPA holds a world conference. It is always a powerful and motivating experience with people engaged in creating a world where all children have the right to play and come together to learn from each other. **Members enjoy a discounted rate to participate.**

Previous IPA Triennial World Conferences have been held in the following countries.





IPlay Rights Magazine

The Play Rights is a multi-disciplinary, online, print-on-demand magazine published by the International Play Association (IPA). It highlights the importance of play in child development and disseminates knowledge on the child's right to play by connecting the worlds of research, policy, and practice. The current board is committed to publishing two high-quality issues per year showcasing distinct viewpoints on children's right to play and varied approaches embedded in diverse cultures, disciplines, and regions worldwide. **The magazine is circulated for free among all financially viable members of IPA.**

Webinars

Did you know that IPA World has its own YouTube Channel? You can catch our latest recorded webinars at https://www.youtube.com/@internationalplayassociati5755

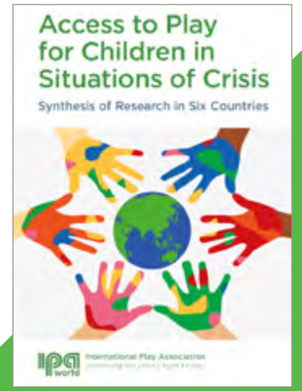
In 2025, starting February 12, we will host free member webinars on the second Wednesday of each month. These **"Webinar Wednesdays"** are wonderful opportunities for members to share their projects, research, and the latest initiatives.

Sessions are one hour long and start at 12 p.m. London time.
Do you have a presentation or idea for a webinar? Email us your bio and a brief 200 words summary of the topic you want to share secretary@ipaworld.global

Special projects

IPA undertakes special projects to deepen our understanding of Article 31 and play as a child right. IPA branches, members, and trustees participated alongside invited experts in many significant projects.

• **General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC:** In 2013, the IPA reached a significant milestone when the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the General Comment (GC) on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). **IPA spearheaded the GC-17 effort and positioned this neglected article 31 and the forgotten right of children, the right to play, more centrally within the fuller context of the UNCRC for the benefit of States Parties worldwide and increased opportunities for its compliance.** IPA Executive and Council are currently reviewing how countries have used the document and preparing a report on recommendations for further action to support the use of the General Comment to inform and educate the community and policymakers on implementing Article 31. A formal report will be released in early 2025.



• **Access to Play in Crisis:** IPA shared the Committee on the Rights of the Child's concern that in situations of conflict or disaster, the child's right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter, and medicines despite play being crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival. In 2016, the **IPA engaged in an international research project called Access to Play in Situations of Crisis in India, Japan, Lebanon, Nepal, Thailand, and Turkey** to address the gaps in knowledge and programming for promoting children's right to play in situations. **IPA also developed the Access to Play in Crisis (APC) tool kit to provide a practical document for those who work with children in challenging circumstances or situations of crisis** (humanitarian, natural, and man-made disasters) to support children's opportunities for play. Our national IPA branches and members participated in both APC projects.

News From Our Branches

IPA World currently has branches in 19 countries.
Here we share updates from six of them!

AUSTRALIA

Growing Through Risk: A New National Position Statement

Play Australia has released *Growing Through Risk: Supporting Play and Wellbeing for 9 to 15 Year Olds,* a national position statement calling on families, schools, councils and planners to make room for adventurous play in the lives of older children and young teens.

Young people in this age group are too often told to slow down, stay close and play it safe. The statement argues that challenge, uncertainty and a degree of risk are part of growing up well. Climbing higher, exploring further and testing their own limits helps young people build confidence, resilience, sound judgement and a strong sense of who they are.

Written by Tonia Gray, Jaydene Barnes, Michael Down and Marion Sturges of Western Sydney University, the statement draws on international evidence and was guided by a national reference group of fourteen experts. Young people were consulted throughout, and their voices sit at the heart of the work.

Launched on International Youth Day (12 August) with support from the Victorian Government, the statement offers practical guidance for parents, carers, local government, planners and schools, alongside easy-to-read information sheets.

Read the full statement and download the resources at https://www.playaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/PA_Growing-ThroughRisk_PositionStmt_web.pdf



Photo credit: Play Australia

BRAZIL

Guardians of Play: A Brazilian Programme Reaches the International Academic Literature

How can older adults help strengthen a culture of play – not only for children, but for themselves?
IPA Brazil is pleased to share the publication of a new article on Guardians of Play, an innovative training programme that invites older adults to rediscover play in their own lives and to become advocates for children's right to play in their own communities.

First implemented across ten neighbourhoods in São Paulo, the programme engaged more than 800 older adults through experiential workshops exploring play, creativity, children's rights and community leadership. Each course culminated in a shared Play Day with children, bringing the generations together through play.

The article, co-authored by Janine Dodge, Jessica Gimenes Martins and Belisa Pereira, has been published in *the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships.* Beyond documenting the Brazilian experience, the article offers an approach that IPA branches and play advocates elsewhere could adapt: recognising older adults both as participants in play and as important allies in protecting children's opportunities to play. As populations age, this intergenerational approach points to a growing, and often overlooked, constituency for play advocacy.

Read the accepted manuscript (free access): https://popplace.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Dodge-Martins-and-Pereira-2026-Training-Older-Adults-as-Advocates-for-Intergenerational-Play-The-Guardians-of-Play-Program-in-Brazil-accepted-manuscript.pdf

ENGLAND

The Lady Allen of Hurtwood Memorial Trust: Travel Grants for Playworkers

IPA England has for many years been closely involved in running the Lady Allen of Hurtwood Memorial Trust. Lady Allen, a pioneer of adventure playgrounds and one of the founding members of IPA, died in 1975, and the Memorial Trust was established in her memory. IPA England has played a central role in the Trust ever since, with two representatives on its Board, one of whom is the current Chair.

The Trust offers travel grants to playworkers so that they can visit projects and programmes in other parts of the world, enriching their knowledge, experience and practice, and bringing fresh ideas home to their own settings. Awards are advertised between May and September each year, after which the Trust meets to decide which applications to support. Grants average £1,000.

Recent awards have enabled Forest School playworkers from Belfast to travel to Finland and Denmark, and a hospice play therapist to visit and learn from similar projects in Europe. The Trust welcomes applications from around the world, and past recipients have visited projects as far afield as 'Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo)' and 'Calcutta (now Kolkata)'.The Trust is currently reviewing its 2026 applications and will advertise again from May 2027 for next year's awards. For more information, visit https://www.ladyallentrust.org.uk



NORTHERN IRELAND

Playing out: Understanding Play Deprivation in Northern Ireland

In Playing Out – Understanding Play Deprivation in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland branch of IPA (IPA NI), in partnership with PlayBoard NI, examines play deprivation in the context of modern childhood, looking back to Bob Hughes's research in Belfast in the early 1980s. The pressures may have changed, but the central issue remains: when children's environments become restricted, they lose time, space, freedom and choice to play. Although rooted in Northern Ireland, this challenge has global relevance.

Play is not an optional extra. It is a human right under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Organised activities, while valuable, cannot replace child-led play, through which children develop resilience, confidence and social skills. Children need time and space to play freely, on their own terms, every day.The report warns that play deprivation is unequal, with poverty, inaccessible environments and social attitudes creating additional barriers for some children. It calls for rights to be translated into action through play strategies, playable neighbourhoods, protected school playtime and genuinely inclusive design.

Published to mark the UN International Day of Play (11 June), the report is available at https://www.playboard.org/resources/playing-out-understanding-play-deprivation-in-northern-ireland/

PORTUGAL

IPA Portugal Celebrates Its First Year as a Formal NGO

Celebrating its first anniversary as a formal NGO, IPA Portugal has spent the past year actively pursuing its mission to protect, preserve and promote children's right to play. The branch has created six internal working groups, launched a monthly webinar series and presented its work at major conferences, including ICCA 64th International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) World Congress in Porto and 'Play in Cascais'.

To increase its visibility and collaboration, IPA Portugal formed institutional partnerships with Naturalizar.pt and the Bloom Movement, contributed to public media on community healing after Storm Kristin, and submitted a national application for the Sonae Education Award.

To mark the International Day of Play 2026, the branch launched '11 + 6 + 31', an innovative national campaign challenging communities to play in different spaces, with everyday objects and for extended periods each day.

On 13 July 2026, IPA Portugal partnered with the Municipality of Óbidos and APEI to host its first seminar, 'All We Have Left Is to Play', which featured the launch of Professor Carlos Neto's new book, co-authored by IPA Portugal board trustees.

Throughout its inaugural year, IPA Portugal has brought together active agents to advocate for children, families and their communities in the face of everyday uncertainty, through the fundamental principle of play.



USA

The IPA USA 2026 White Paper: A Call to Action for Play

IPA USA proudly presents its 2026 White Paper as a call to action for educators, policymakers, researchers, families and advocates. Building on decades of scholarship and advocacy, the collection brings together 66 papers by 95 authors from six continents, 14 countries and Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China), all committed to protecting and advancing every child's right to play.

Readers will find research-based insights, practical recommendations and powerful examples showing why play matters and how to support it at home, in schools, in communities and through public policy. Above all, the White Paper is an advocacy resource, equipping readers with the evidence and tools to champion play in their local contexts.

The papers are organised into eleven categories: Advocating for Play; It's a Child's Right; Leading for Play; Nature Is Essential; Play Across the Lifespan; Play as a Biological Necessity; Play and Climate Change; Play and Culture; Play in the Age of Algorithms; Playwork; and The Method: Strategies and Principles of Play.

"The future of childhood depends on the choices we make today," write IPA USA Co-Presidents Deb Lawrence and Brian Stone, who thank all 95 authors for their time and commitment to advancing the child's right to play.



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international play association

promoting the child's right to play

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