ISSUE 3 | VOLUME 2 JUNE 2026

# play magazine

RIGHTS

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



A Tokyo playworker's perspective on inclusive play

Recognition and relational safety for inclusive play of Roma children in Istanbul

Playing Neighbourhoods Sweden

A case study of health play services from England

Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces for Adolescents in Two Indian Cities

## play and inclusion

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promoting the child's right to play

# 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


Fantasy play

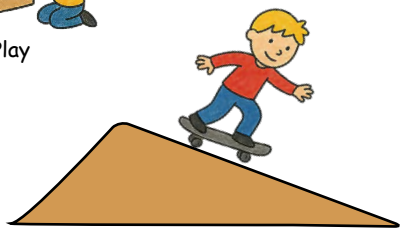

Construction play


Socio-dramatic Play


Locomotor Play


Imaginative Play


Symbolic Play


Deep Play

**Magazine design by Safia Zahid**
**Play Types illustrations by Safia Zahid**
**Cover photo: Lynn Petrin**

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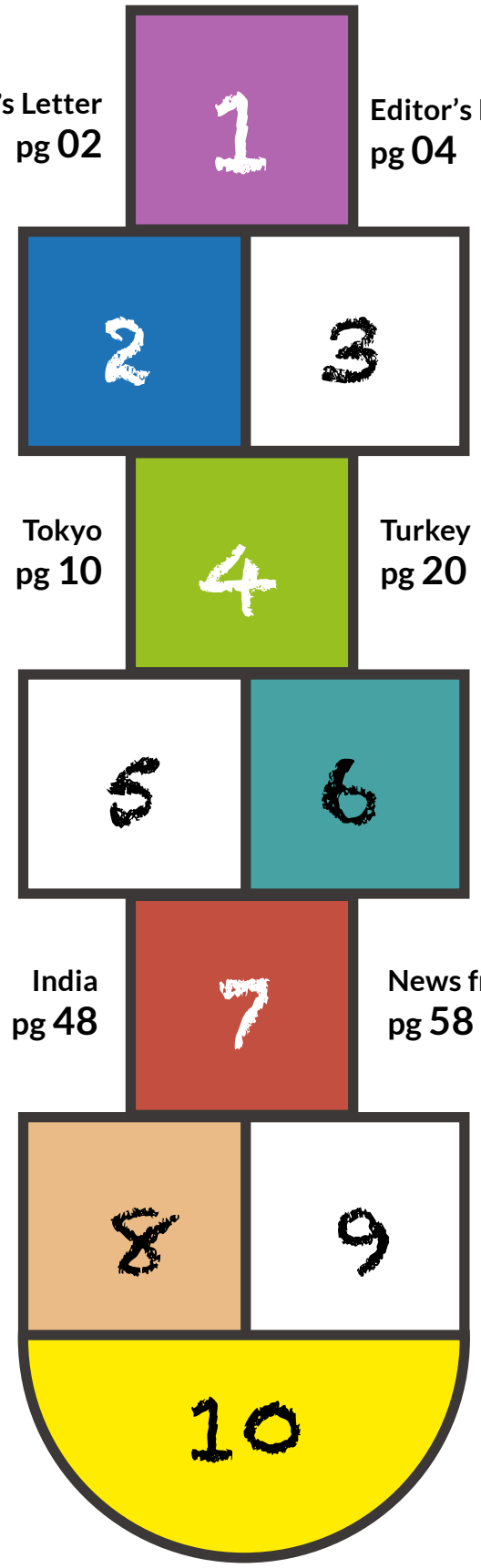


# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It is my great privilege to welcome you to this edition of PlayRights, dedicated to the many faces of inclusive play. **This issue reaches you on a date that holds enormous meaning for our global movement: the eleventh of June, the International Day of Play.** I can think of no better moment to celebrate the rich, thoughtful, and often challenging conversations that fill these pages.

I want to begin by sharing the joy and inspiration I carry with me from a recent visit to Taiwan. From bustling community playgrounds to lively conversations in schools and universities, I witnessed a community deeply committed to ensuring that play sits at the heart of childhood. I came away renewed, more convinced than ever that the work we do together matters, and that our shared commitment to children is strengthened every time we gather, listen, and learn from one another.

**The opportunity to play is not equally distributed. The International Day of Play is a moment of celebration. It is also, I believe, a moment of reflection. I invite each of you to stop, pause, and consider the children in your own community. Who is missing from the playground?**

That visit also reaffirmed for me the central theme of this edition. Inclusive play is not an optional extra. It is the very foundation of what we stand for. Every child, regardless of ability, background, gender, language, or circumstance, has the right to play. More than that, every child needs to play. Play is not only a human right protected under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a biological necessity, vital for the developing brain and body, essential for emotional wellbeing, and irreplaceable as a way for children to learn how to navigate the complex social world around them.

And yet, we know the reality. The opportunity to play is not equally distributed. The International Day of Play is a moment of celebration. It is also, I believe, a moment of reflection. I invite each of you to stop, pause, and consider the children in your own community. Who is missing from the playground? Who does not yet have the time, permission, or space to play every day? What barriers stand in their way, and who can you work with to dismantle them? These are not abstract questions. They are the questions that drive our daily advocacy and our most meaningful collaborations. The articles in this issue explore these realities with honesty and hope, and I am grateful to every contributor for the care they have brought to this conversation.

I cannot write to you on this International Day of Play without acknowledging the children whose right to play is being most profoundly violated. Around the world, children in war zones, in displacement camps, in regions torn apart by conflict, are being denied not only their right to play but their right to safety, to learning, to childhood itself. They demand our voice. They demand that we continue, loudly and persistently, to insist that play matters even, and perhaps especially, in the hardest places. Play is how children begin to heal. Play is how communities rebuild. Play is how hope is kept alive.



To our members working in regions affected by conflict, in refugee settings, and in communities recovering from disaster, please know that you are seen, that your work is valued beyond measure, and that the global IPA family stands with you.

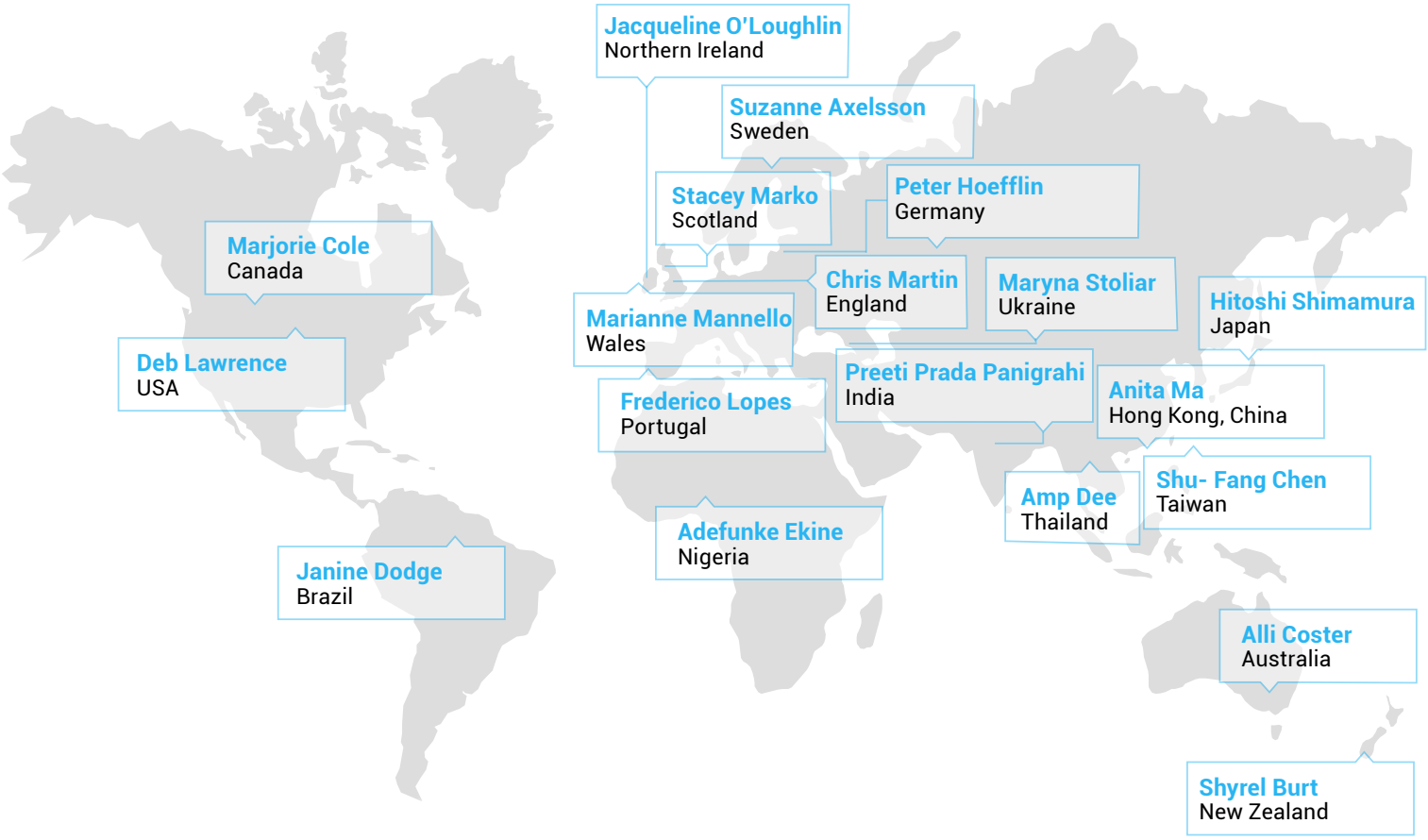
Looking ahead, I am delighted to remind you that the IPA World Conference will be held in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, in November. The programme is shaping into something truly special, and the warmth of our New Zealand hosts is already evident in every conversation. I do hope you are making plans to join us.

In the meantime, I wish you a meaningful International Day of Play. Celebrate, yes. Reflect, certainly. And then, as you always do, return to the work of making play possible, every day, for every child.

Yours Playfully

**Robyn Monro Miller AM**
President
Play Rights, IPA World

# BRANCHES & COUNCIL MEMBERS

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

**In a world where the right to play remains, for so many children, aspirational rather than real, this volume is offered as both evidence and invitation. Evidence that inclusive play is achievable—in the most resource-constrained settings, the most stigmatised communities, the most clinical environments—when adults commit to the relational work it demands.**

When we published the first volume of PLAYRIGHTS' themed issue on Play and Inclusion, we did not anticipate the depth of response it would generate—or how much further there was still to go. The articles that arrived in our editorial inbox from practitioners, researchers, and advocates around the world told us something important: the conversation about inclusive play is neither settled nor singular. It is layered, contested, and urgently alive. This second volume emerges from that recognition. It deepens the inquiry begun in Volume 1, extending our gaze to new geographies, new populations, and new questions about what it means—politically, practically, and relationally—to build a world in which every child's right to play is genuinely realised.

As I noted in the first volume, the right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is far from universally realised. Two decades of working with children have taught me that equity and intersectionality must be embedded in every conversation about play—not as qualifications added at the end, but as the very starting point. This volume takes that principle seriously. Its contributors do not speak of 'children' as an undifferentiated category. They write about Roma children navigating stigma and displacement in Istanbul; about adolescent girls whose right to public space is curtailed by gender norms in Jaipur and Bhubaneswar; about children in hospital whose play is systematically deprioritised by clinical cultures that do not yet see play as care; about children in adventure playgrounds in Tokyo who teach us that inclusion is not a design standard but a living, relational process. Together, they insist that the barriers to play are structural—and that dismantling them requires structural imagination.

Hitoshi Shimamura's reflexive practice note from Tokyo opens this volume with characteristic warmth and deep insight. Drawing on nearly three decades as a playworker in Japan's adventure playgrounds, Shimamura argues that inclusion is not something imposed upon a setting—it is something that emerges through relationship, patience, and the deliberate creation of opportunities for genuine participation. His insistence on cultivating co-creators rather than consumers—whether in permanent adventure playgrounds or temporary play streets in central Tokyo—offers a philosophy as much as a methodology.

Mine Göl-Güven's ethnographic work in three Roma-majority neighbourhoods in Istanbul brings a sharper political edge to these questions. Drawing on the International Play Association's Access to Play in Crisis research, Göl-Güven documents how Roma children's play is constrained by an interlocking accumulation of barriers: poverty that restricts spatial mobility; normalised neighbourhood violence that blurs the line between play and harm; and the "social fencing" of public institutions that treats Roma children as suspects rather than participants. Based on her comparative analysis of two community centres, she concludes that inclusion is produced not through representation alone but through recognition: children feeling seen, respected, and valued.



Krister Svensson's field report on Playing Neighbourhoods (Lekande Kvarter) in Malmö, Sweden, approaches these same questions through the lens of community development and civil society. Operating in two residential courtyards marked by socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic diversity, and exposure to gang-related criminality, the project positioned play as social infrastructure—not a programme but a way of being together. Svensson's bottom-up, relational methodology is striking in its ordinariness and reminds us that inclusive play environments are not primarily physical; they are social, built on shared ownership and the recognition of every child, regardless of background, as a full and valued participant in community life.

Adrian Voce and Sarah Owen take us into a domain of inclusion that is too rarely foregrounded in play policy discourse: the healthcare system. Their article on health play services in England makes a case that should be self-evident but is not—that children do not cease to be children when they enter a hospital, and that the right to play does not pause during illness. The article weaves together policy analysis, historical context, and Sarah Owen's account of her son Hari's experience of paediatric cancer, where play was not a comfort but a lifeline. The launch of the Play Well Toolkit by NHS England and Starlight in June 2025, and its subsequent endorsement in the National Cancer Plan, represents a watershed—but, as Voce and Owen caution, documents do not change experiences. Concerted action and investment remain urgently needed.

Prerna Vijaykumar Mehta's field report from WRI India on Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces for Adolescents brings both a demographic scale and a methodological rigour that commands attention. India's 253 million adolescents are systematically invisible in urban planning. Too old to be covered by provisions for children, too young to be treated as adult stakeholders. The project's response was to position adolescents themselves as Public Space Ambassadors and co-creators of a rigorous, evidence-based tool. The result was not only transformed public spaces—eleven thousand square metres across six sites—but a fundamental shift in institutional mindsets. City officials who began by questioning whether adolescent inclusion was necessary ended by asking how it could be scaled.

This volume's Spotlight review, by Theresa Casey, examines the Guide to Creating Urban Public SPACES for Children, published in 2025 by WHO, UN-Habitat, and UNICEF. The research and writing of the guide were led by Sudeshna Chatterjee with fantastic research support from Anupama Nallari and Chandrani Dutta, and several IPA members contributed case studies. Casey reads the guide with the eye of a practitioner and finds much to commend. She is particularly struck by the guide's recognition of liminal spaces—stairwells, alleys, neglected plots—as legitimate children's environments that nurture "cultures and adventures" beyond adult gaze. Casey concludes that the SPACES guide offers a genuinely doable framework for inclusive placemaking, and one that resonates with the ethos of the International Play Association's long advocacy for children's right to play.

Read together, the contributions to this volume trace a set of recurring and interlocking themes: inclusion is always relational; participation must be structural, not symbolic; the barriers to play are intersectional; and inclusive play takes time. It cannot be manufactured, mandated, or rushed. It unfolds through trust, through process, through the slow and irreplaceable work of building communities of belonging. In a world where the right to play remains, for so many children, aspirational rather than real, this volume is offered as both evidence and invitation. Evidence that inclusive play is achievable—in the most resource-constrained settings, the most stigmatised communities, the most clinical environments—when adults commit to the relational work it demands. And an invitation to go further: to listen more carefully to children whose voices have been systematically marginalised; to design with rather than for; to recognise that to include through play is, as I wrote in Volume 1, to honour the politics of recognition and participation. Play Rights will continue to hold space for these conversations, in all their complexity and hope.



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



*Illustration credit: iStock*

# EDITORIAL BOARD



## **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 Ross Centre for Cities. She led the research and writing of the "Guide to Creating Urban Public Spaces for Children" published by f UNICEF, WHO, and UN-Habitat.



## **Dr. Matluba Khan**
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Matluba is a senior lecturer in urban design at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. Her research explores the connection between the natural and built environments and human behaviour, focusing on the impact of school ground design on pedagogy and play. She has studied the outdoor learning environment of children at primary schools and urban residential areas in Bangladesh and Scotland.



## **Dr. Chris Martin**
England

Chris is a playworker, writer/ researcher, and playwork activist. He is the chair of IPA England and Tiverton Adventure Playground. He wrote the UK Play and Playwork Education and Skills Strategy 2011-2016; facilitated the All Party Parliamentary Group on Play, and was National Playwork Convenor for Unite the Union.





## **Marjorie Cole**
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Marjorie is President of IPA Canada and focuses on the importance of play in education as an Education Coordinator for a non-profit dedicated to early intervention. She advocates for the transformative power of play and educates post-secondary early childhood educators about play. She also pursues graduate studies in counselling and psychology.

## **Dr. Helen Little**
Australia

Helen is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education. Before entering academia, she was an early childhood teacher. Her main area of teaching is outdoor play, which, for her is a key context for advocating for children's right to play. She aims to support her students in becoming advocates for play.



## Dr. Tolu Okoruwa
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## Dr. Maria Nordström
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Anupama is a member of the urban team at Save the Children where she supports knowledge and content development for the Global Alliance – Cities4Children. She received her doctorate in Environmental Psychology from the City University of New York. Her past work includes research on common space in informal settlements in India, facilitating child-focused participatory planning and design, and supporting the development of global guidance and principles for public spaces for children in both formal and informal contexts.



## Tassy Ellen Thompson
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Tassy currently practices as an artist-researcher and is a doctoral fellow and university lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of South East Norway. Her work explores landscape and sustainability in relation to play, performance, and education.



## Michael Dietrich
Germany

Michael is the artistic director of the improvisational theatre "Mixxit Theater" and the spinning theatre for children "Mit Zick & Zack auf Geschichtenreise". For 20 years he has initiated and organized media and theatre projects in the cultural education of children and young people, currently as managing director and board member of PA/SPIELkultur eV in Munich and for maninoy eV in the Philippines.





# CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS



## Adrian Voce

Adrian Voce OBE is head of policy and public affairs at Starlight Children's Foundation. Previously, after a long career in playwork, he was the last director of the Children's Play Council and the founding director of Play England (2004-11), where he led the campaign for a national play strategy for England. He was the key advisor to the UK government on the design and implementation of the Play Strategy. He led the support programme for the strategy's delivery before it was terminated after the change of government in 2010.



## Hitoshi Shimamura

Hitoshi Shimamura is the founder and director of TOKYO PLAY. He is also the director of the Japan Playwork Association. A playworker and playwork trainer, Hitoshi brings hands-on expertise to his advocacy, supporting practitioners and communities to create environments where children can play freely. He works to ensure that all children — regardless of ability, background, or circumstance — have access to meaningful play opportunities, and is a leading voice in Japan's play movement and in international conversations on play, inclusion, and child-friendly cities.



## Krister Svensson

Krister Svensson is an educator, researcher, and entrepreneur specialising in children's living conditions, play, learning, and development. He founded the Nordic region's first international toy research centre and initiated the master's program in Child Culture Design at the University of Gothenburg. Through his company Play Design Sweden AB, he focuses on product development and consultancy. An author and lecturer, his work integrates pedagogy, children's culture, and design, emphasizing children's rights.



## Mine Göl-Güven

Mine Göl-Güven is an associate professor at Bogazici University. After graduating from Istanbul University's Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, Göl-Güven earned her master's degree from Syracuse University's Department of Child and Family Studies and completed her PhD at Penn State University's Department of Curriculum and Instruction. She has been conducting research on children's play and social and emotional learning within school settings. Her areas of interest include school and program evaluation, as well as training for pre-service and in-service teachers.



## Prerna Mehta

Prerna Mehta is the Associate Director of Urban Development at WRI India, leading the Nurturing Neighbourhoods program, which aims to create child- and family-friendly urban spaces in Indian cities. Through her work on the Botnar Foundation's Safe and Healthy Cities for Children initiative, she promotes the design of urban environments that support adolescent safety and wellbeing. Prerna's expertise lies in public spaces, liveable neighbourhood design, and inclusive urban planning, bridging global frameworks with local realities to foster thriving environments for children and adolescents.



## Sarah Owen

Sarah Owen is a policy professional and advocate for play in children's health, shaped by her lived experience as a parent. At Starlight, she works to embed play in national policy, to drive meaningful change for children in healthcare. She serves as Deputy Co Chair of GOSH Charity's Patient and Family Experience Panel.





# Experience of Inclusive Play in Tokyo



Hitoshi Shimamura

This is a reflexive practice note by internationally acclaimed Asian playworker Hitoshi Shimamura, exploring how everyday moments of play in Japan can quietly transform spaces, relationships, and possibilities for truly inclusive play.

*Inclusion happens where people believe in it—where they really want it to happen. It becomes successful where everyone has a positive can-do attitude and when people truly work together for everyone's benefit.*
Douch (2020), p. 3



*Photo credit: Author*



*Board game on the street. Photo credit: Author*

In this article, I reflect on 'inclusive play' drawing from my background as a playworker in adventure playgrounds in Japan since 1996 and my experiences with various projects through Tokyo Play, the regional play organisation I have directed since 2010. This reflective note explores how building relationships lies at the heart of inclusive play, whether in an adventure playground or a temporary setting.

Before discussing my experiences in different play provisions, I would like to begin with a story about my daughter when she was six years old.

She was an extremely anxious child who became petrified in large crowds, though she was relaxed and talkative at home. Some might call this 'selective mutism'. Even at her nursery school, she tended to stay alone. What brought about a small but significant change was a stuffed bunny brought by a nursery teacher. Her favourite bunny gave other children a way to connect with my daughter. The bunny and she became good friends over several years until they graduated from the nursery.

When primary school began, it was a very difficult transition for her. The school suggested she should not bring any stuffed toy as she was now a 'big girl'. Although I explained my daughter's background to the class teacher on the first day, nothing changed. In a classroom with 30 unknown children, she could not move or speak for the entire day. She could not participate in learning activities either.

A few days later—about a week after school started—during a language class, children were practising writing Japanese letters while my daughter remained still, not even holding a pencil. The class teacher approached her desk with a bunny hand puppet. To my daughter's surprise, the bunny gently picked up her pencil and began writing a letter in her notebook. It was the first time my daughter spoke at school. The teacher explained to the other children why my daughter needed the puppet, and the children accepted it as something required by those in need. From that day forward, she began making friends with her classmates. I am not certain whether to call this 'inclusive play', but the teacher's playful mindset and attitude transformed the classroom culture so that my daughter felt welcome, interested, and that she belonged. She was not merely integrated—she was included.

## Adventure Playgrounds in Japan

The same principle applies to adventure playground practice, where one of the most important roles of playworkers is to demonstrate an attitude that makes every



*Get wet on the ground.. Photo credit: Author*

child feel welcome, interested, and that they belong. While children do not typically introduce themselves before playing, remembering each child's name is one of the first steps for playworkers. This is why we make an effort to speak with every visitor to the playground, even though adventure playgrounds operate as open-access provisions.

> *An adventure playground can be described as a space dedicated solely to children's play, where skilled playworkers enable and facilitate the ownership, development and design—physically, socially and culturally—by the children playing there.*
> Play England (n.d.) p. 2

Adventure playgrounds originated in Denmark as 'junk playgrounds' in 1943. The concept evolved into what became known as 'adventure playgrounds' and spread to the UK, Germany, and other countries from the 1950s onwards. The idea was introduced to Japan in the early 1970s. The first permanent adventure playground opened in Tokyo in 1979, and there are now more than 500 projects nationwide, including 25 permanent sites alongside many temporary and pop-up provisions.

As the first Asian country to embrace the adventure playground concept, Japan has developed it in unique ways. Most provisions do not have fences around the site. The prevailing philosophy suggests that children's play should be visible to adults, so it can be recognized and supported, rather than separated from adult awareness.

Many adventure playgrounds in Japan prioritise modifiable environments with simple, natural elements and materials such as water, soil, mud, fire, trees, timber, leaves, acorns, pebbles, and various salvaged items, rather than building large fixed structures. These materials tend to support diverse forms of play for children regardless of age, mood, ability, or background. Among these elements, water is particularly accessible and versatile in Japanese adventure playgrounds. Children can simply get wet and splash; dig channels to create water flows; throw pebbles into puddles; colour water or make perfume by squeezing flowers; boil water in steel barrels for baths; play with ice and frost in winter; mix soil to make mud for getting soaked, playing house, or crafting shiny mud balls; or build and destroy dams.

## Participation and a Risk-Averse Society

Inclusive play goes beyond simply installing various elements and materials. When we think about inclusive play in adventure playgrounds, the concept of 'participation' is crucial. To explain why we highlight 'participation' in adventure playground practices, it's important to address the challenges we face due to a culture of complaints in our risk-averse society. In an effort to avoid problems or conflicts, many individuals tend to shy away from engaging with strangers and prefer to rely on 'professional workers' to manage everything.

However, in many after-school clubs, this approach leads to a plethora of rules aimed at controlling children's behaviour and reducing risks. For example, you might frequently hear rules such as: 'No climbing higher than

**Adventure playgrounds continue to function as informal community centres. Therefore, a significant part of playworkers' roles involves working with adults on site as well as engaging in playwork with children.**



*Ice block provided from fish shop. Photo credit: Author*



*Making a mud ball. Photo credit: Author*

the third bar of the climbing frame,' 'No standing on swings before turning eight,' or 'No access to the corner of the school grounds.' These rules can limit opportunities for genuine participation and adventure.

While the commercial sector often emphasizes maximizing individual customer satisfaction, this tendency frequently neglects the importance of inclusiveness. This approach may work well in a theme park environment, but an adventure playground serves a different purpose: it is a space for children to learn, grow, and interact with one another. Engaging with peers is an essential and natural aspect of children's play. This is closely linked to the idea of 'inclusive play,' where the benefits of learning are shared by everyone rather than just one individual.

In an adventure playground, what we provide are 'opportunities' to participate in creating an inclusive play environment. As our society becomes increasingly commercial-oriented and people unconsciously become 'accustomed to being served by professionals', playworkers concentrate on designing processes of participation from the beginning of each day. When should we provide hand tools, buckets, and shovels? With whom should we install play equipment? Adventure playgrounds can create many opportunities for collaborative environment-building, including aerial runways, fire kits, saucepans for mud play, water slides, and monkey bridges. There are countless things to work on together—it does not matter whether participants are children or accompanying adults. The mission is to cultivate a mindset of 'being a co-creator' rather than 'being a consumer' of the playground.

Takanawa Morino Koen Playpark is an NGO-run adventure play provision that opens four days a week at a temporary site in central Tokyo. Playworkers regularly call for help from visitors: 'Anyone who wants to help us pull the rope!?' Playworkers never force participation; the process of constructing a monkey bridge is interesting enough to attract willing participants. 'One, two, three!' While it would certainly be more efficient to have only strong adults pull the rope, younger children are often involved. What is more important for the playground is fostering a willingness to act rather than focusing solely on efficiency.

**Inclusive play always emerges through process. Sometimes it develops gradually and takes considerable time.**



*Flowing noodles. Photo credit: Author*

Over time, the playground takes pride in the regular interactions between children and adults, who actively engage with other visitors and enjoy spending time together. This effort goes beyond the mindset of a few professionals; it involves cultivating this attitude in everyone. I believe that adventure playgrounds can serve as learning centres for inclusiveness through play. Fostering such collaborations represents one of the essential competencies that playworkers must possess for the future of our society.

## Yoji's Flowing Noodles

Inclusive play always emerges through process. Sometimes it develops gradually and takes considerable time. Children play to pursue their own goals and are not always willing to play together with others. Therefore, it becomes meaningless for playworkers to forcibly integrate children in order to achieve 'inclusive play'. What playworkers can do is focus on creating playable opportunities where inclusive processes might naturally unfold.

Yoji (name changed) was an eight-year-old boy who regularly visited an adventure playground where I worked. He experienced disfluency when stressed and had difficulty expressing his feelings or objecting to other children. Whenever he came to the playground, he always brought two or three packs of marshmallows. However, the marshmallows were often taken by other children who claimed 'Yoji said OK', until more than half were gone. He would murmur about how little remained. Despite this, the marshmallows seemed to serve as Yoji's way of being recognised by other children.

On the other hand, he loved sharing his ideas with playworkers: "I want to make handheld fireworks for the playground event next Saturday", or "Have you ever tried flowing noodles? I want to try it." 'Flowing noodles' (nagashi sōmen) is an entertaining traditional Japanese summer food culture where people use chopsticks to scoop cold noodles flowing in water along a gutter made from halved bamboo. Everyone knew it would be time-consuming to prepare bamboo gutters from scratch and build a structure for flowing noodles, but we decided to give it a try one day. Yoji, other playworkers, and I began splitting a three-metre-long bamboo pole in half, removing all the inner partitions, and smoothing the edges with sandpaper. Meanwhile, some older children arrived at the playground. "What are you doing?" they asked. "We are going to do flowing noodles. It's Yoji's idea." "Oh, that's fantastic! I want to join! How can I help?" Eventually, six other children joined—including some who used to take marshmallows from Yoji. They divided the tasks: some boiled water over a fire pit; some constructed a structure using a ladder and bottle crates; some tied the halved bamboo onto the structure with string; others cooked the noodles. When everything was ready and the noodles were cooked, all the children insisted that Yoji must come to the very front of the line to scoop the first noodles. "Yoji should be first because this was your idea! Come on, Yoji." He was not the last one to receive leftovers this time. A week later, Yoji arrived at the playground without any marshmallows.



*Making water stream, Photo credit: Author*

**The philosophy of our play street project mirrors that of adventure playgrounds: the more you try to entertain and provide perfect services, the more visitors become dependent consumers. This is why we intentionally minimise our preparations.**



*Mud cake with flower, Photo credit: Author*

## Inclusive Play and Play Streets

A play street is a temporary closure of a residential street for a few hours, usually organized by local residents. It is not a large public event but rather a small community gathering that allows neighbors to easily access and participate in activities on the street. Tokyo Play supports the organisation of such play streets through a project called 'Playbourhood Street Tokyo'. In this project, we advise organisers not to make play streets programme-based or overly entertaining. Typically, we provide only a bucket of chalk, skipping ropes, spinning tops, and some board games.

Soshigaya Play Street is a project I organise in my neighbourhood with fellow parents and local community workers in Tokyo. It takes place four or five times per year. The philosophy of our play street project mirrors that of adventure playgrounds: the more you try to entertain and provide perfect services, the more visitors become dependent consumers. This is why we intentionally minimise our preparations.

Interestingly, different residents bring different items when there is space for participation. A neighbour sometimes brings a ten-metre-long roll of artificial turf. On another occasion, an elderly neighbour approached us and asked, "Can I bring my handmade toys, even though my wife objected to this?" We answered, "Yes, of course." We discovered that his toys were simple but became extremely popular, particularly among younger children. He has now become a regular participant, bringing cardboard boxes from a neighbouring shop to create a table for displaying his toys.

Another day, an ex-kickboxer father appeared with his kickboxing gloves and mitts, offering rounds not only to children but also to parents and teenagers passing by. "Left, right, left, right! Okay, you're good!" After a while, older children picked up the gloves and mitts and continued playing on their own. In a different play street, a nearby fish shop brought a large block of ice, originally intended for preserving fish, onto the street for children to enjoy. While the environments of play streets are less adaptable than those in adventure playgrounds, the uniqueness of each play street always comes from the people who live there.

During a play street session, many children and adults stop and stay for a while. Some are friends of the organisers; some are simply passersby interested in what is happening; some draw new pedestrian crossings with white chalk; some sit along the edge of the pavement. Elderly people love watching children play chess, cheering them on and sometimes offering unsolicited commentary. Spinning tops are also popular items that help share the fun of childhood between young and older people. Some remark, "This is the first time I've played this in almost 50 years." In this way, play streets also function as socialising spaces for isolated elderly people or children outside formal education systems.

In play streets, one of the key roles of the organizers is to engage in conversation with as many people as possible in a relaxed atmosphere. We often share sweets or cups of tea during these interactions. Interestingly, a portable blood pressure monitor has become a popular 'toy' enjoyed by people of all ages. It is essential for the organizers to maintain an open and welcoming attitude, regardless of participants' age, nationality, disability, or socioeconomic background.

As a regular practice, we request assistance about 20 minutes before the end of each play street session to sweep chalk off the street using brushes and buckets of water. Since this opportunity to clean the street is quite rare, younger participants often rush to join in on this fun activity. Some parents take the time to teach other children how to use the brushes and where to apply the water. For those who have difficulty managing a bucket, we have created makeshift sprinkling bottles by recycling soft drink bottles and punching small holes in the caps. Within 20 minutes, with approximately 30 people working (or playing) together, the street is clean once again.

## Conclusion: What this means for playworkers promoting inclusive play

During an event organised by Tokyo Play at a newly opened inclusive playground in a large public park, a mother approached us afterwards to share her thoughts about her son. She expressed, "One of my goals for my son is to have many people call him by his name, 'Ken,' instead of referring to him as 'that child in need of special care."

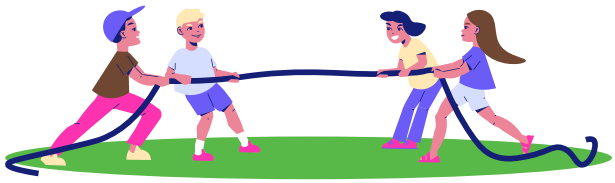
Her words capture the essence of inclusive play. Creating opportunities for shared play experiences where everyone feels welcome, engaged, and develops a sense of belonging is an ongoing process.
For playworkers committed to promoting inclusive play, several principles emerge from these experiences:

**Building relationships is fundamental.** Whether through remembering a child's name, using a bunny puppet to connect with an anxious child, or sharing tea with neighbours at a play street, inclusion happens through human connection, not merely through physical infrastructure or policy mandates.

**Participation transforms consumers into co-creators.** When we design processes that invite genuine participation—pulling ropes for monkey bridges, preparing flowing noodles, bringing handmade toys to play streets—we shift people from being passive recipients of a service to becoming active contributors. This shift is essential for fostering truly inclusive communities where everyone has agency and ownership.

**Materials and environments should be open-ended and accessible.** Water, mud, chalk, bamboo, and simple tools enable diverse forms of engagement regardless of age, ability, or background. These loose parts create multiple entry points for participation rather than prescribing a single way to play.





**Welcoming attitudes create inclusive cultures.** The teacher's playful use of the bunny puppet, the playworker's call for rope-pullers, the play street organiser's open invitation to bring handmade toys—these small acts of inclusion signal that everyone belongs. This atmosphere of acceptance becomes contagious, spreading from adults to children and throughout the community.

**Inclusive play takes time and cannot be forced.** Yoji's journey from being exploited for marshmallows to becoming a respected idea-generator happened gradually through meaningful shared experiences. Playworkers must create conditions where inclusive processes can unfold naturally, resisting the urge to manufacture quick outcomes.

**Inclusiveness is collective learning, not individual service delivery.** In an increasingly commercial society where people expect professional services, playworkers must actively cultivate a different ethos—one where learning to live and play together becomes the goal, not individual customer satisfaction. Adventure playgrounds and play streets can serve as learning centres for this essential social competency.

We hope that creating such opportunities becomes ordinary and standard practice in our future society. For playworkers everywhere, the task is clear: concentrate not on providing perfect programmes or eliminating all risks, but on designing processes where relationships can flourish, participation can thrive, and every person—whether child or adult, with or without disabilities, young or old—can experience the profound sense of belonging that defines truly inclusive play.

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*Roma children playing in streets of Istanbul. Photo credit: iStock*

# Inclusive Play Experiences of Roma Children in Community Centres in Istanbul, Turkey

Mine Göl-Güven

The author draws on her ethnographic work from IPA's Access to Play in Crisis project in three Roma-majority neighbourhoods in Istanbul, and explores the graded potential of community centres to foster inclusive play for marginalised ethnic minority children.

## Why Roma children's play becomes an inclusion issue in big cities

For many Roma children in Istanbul, play is not simply "something extra" after school. After-school play highlights the realities of poverty, stigma, urban insecurity, and displacement, raising important questions about who can participate, where, with whom, and what risks they face (Byrne, 2024). Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to rest, leisure, play, and engage in recreational activities. However, the spirit of that right is undermined when children's everyday environments fail to provide safe, accessible, and socially welcoming places to play.

In marginalised neighbourhoods, the accumulation of barriers to play presents a significant challenge that requires attention and intervention. Low household income limits access to toys, transport, and paid activities. Neighbourhood conditions such as crowded housing, street violence, drug use, traffic, and poorly maintained public spaces shrink the "radius of permission" that families can reasonably grant. Discrimination and stereotyping, including racialised labelling of Roma children as "troublesome," can turn playgrounds, schools, and public institutions into hostile spaces rather than inclusive




ones. Displacement disrupts social networks and removes children from familiar play territories, creating a sense of loss and practical barriers to "hanging out" safely (Foggo, 2022).

Over six months, I visited three Istanbul neighbourhoods with significant Roma populations—Sulukule, Kuştepe, and Tarlabaşı—and made six visits to community centres. During these visits, I observed activities and everyday interactions, held informal conversations with children and adults, and used participatory methods with children aged roughly 8–13 (body maps and 'flower maps' focused on everyday life, leisure, and sources of support).





*Body Map and Body map on paper. Photo credit: Author*

In this article, I focus on how community centres can function as child-friendly spaces—places where safety, culturally meaningful activities, and trusted relationships can be built despite adverse urban conditions. I address three questions: (1) how exclusion from play manifests in everyday life in three Istanbul neighbourhoods with significant Roma populations; (2) what inclusive play looks like inside community centres; and (3) what transferable lessons emerge for marginalised ethnic minorities in large cities.

## Context of the neighbourhoods and the community centres

The neighbourhoods illustrate overlapping processes of poverty, marginalisation, and urban transformation. Sulukule is widely recognised as a historically significant Roma neighbourhood shaped by controversial redevelopment and displacement. Kuştepe is a Roma-majority area characterised by economic precarity and limited access to services. Tarlabaşı is an inner-city district characterised by dense housing, multiple marginalised populations, and repeated pressures for redevelopment.

One of the centres is the Roma Art House in Kuştepe, which operates mainly on weekends. Grasshouse, another community centre located outside Roma neighbourhoods, primarily serves Roma children displaced from areas such as Sulukule.



*Artistic expressions. Photo credit: Author*

Unlike the Roma Art House, Grasshouse operates daily and is managed by a child development professional. It is supported by volunteers, whom the children refer to as "brothers and sisters." These volunteers include young adults with strong ties to the local community and engage in culturally relevant activities, particularly in music and rap, there were also few university student volunteers. At Kuştepe, the coordinator shares a Roma background with the children, while the volunteers are university students. The weekend



*Play in local vacant lots. Photo credit: iStock*

sessions primarily focus on academic support, with fewer cultural or recreational activities. Both Kuştepe and Grasshouse offer academic support due to the low academic achievement of Roma children, which is largely attributed to the discrimination they face.

## How exclusion from play manifests: poverty, insecurity, stigma, displacement

Exclusion from play didn't manifest as a singular, dramatic obstacle. Instead, it unfolded as a series of limited choices, increased risks, and societal messages that gradually restricted children's freedom. Four interconnected aspects are particularly important for advocating play rights in large cities.

### *Spatial Constraints on "Permission to Play"*

Many children's play opportunities were effectively limited to streets and their immediate surroundings because there were few accessible, safe, and welcoming alternatives. Even when formal play spaces exist, they can still be functionally unavailable due to parental fears, social hostility, or dangers on the way. Children often described fear as a normal part of their environments, worrying about issues such as kidnapping, assault, burglary, or violence. These fears were not always based on direct victimisation; rather, they were reinforced by parental warnings, neighbourhood stories, and media narratives. The result was clear: children's independent mobility was restricted, and play became something they had to "fit in" around adult monitoring, household responsibilities, and risk calculations.

### *Normalisation of violence*

In Kuştepe, the atmosphere of the neighbourhood and its immediate surroundings conveyed a sense of ongoing insecurity. During a visit, an explosion-like sound did not trigger an alarm; instead, adults shouted warnings to children, indicating that such incidents were commonplace. In another instance, children were seen fighting in the street, and a knife was taken out before adults intervened. These are not merely "playful scuffles"; they indicate that children are becoming accustomed to living with danger. When violence becomes a part of daily life, children's play is influenced by vigilance and by behaviours related to self-protection, dominance, or avoidance. Inclusive play becomes challenging when the line between play and harm is constantly crossed.

### *Discrimination and "social fencing" in public institutions*

The exclusion of Roma children from play also highlights their social positioning. Roma communities in Türkiye face deep-rooted stereotypes and a low social status, which have far-reaching effects on education, employment, and access to public services. For children, this often results in discrimination and increased surveillance in public spaces based on the



*Photo credit: iStock*

expectation that they will misbehave. Even when children are present in public playgrounds, parks, or schoolyards, their sense of belonging can be undermined by an invisible "social fence" – the informal attitudes and behaviours that mark them as outsiders and restrict their full participation. This can include being watched closely, being asked to leave, being treated with suspicion, or facing unequal disciplinary actions.

### *Displacement and loss of play territories*

Displacement—whether caused by redevelopment or a series of unstable housing decisions—breaks children's connections to familiar places and people. It disrupts the informal social networks that often facilitate play, such as trusted neighbours, well-known routes, shared courtyards, and intergenerational support. In the study settings, young people talked about the loss of local gathering spots and their need to find new "hubs." As a result, displacement reduces opportunities for play not only by relocating children from physical spaces but also by dismantling the social environment that makes play safe and meaningful.

## The nature of inclusive play in the centres

Both centres featured in this article aimed to provide support through learning and activities, but they differed sharply in how inclusion was enacted. The contrast is instructive for play rights practice because it shows that "having a centre" is not enough; the organisational culture, adult–child relations, and activity design can either widen or narrow children's right to play.

### *Safety as a precondition for play*

At Grasshouse, safety was created through several reinforcing layers: a predictable daily routine, an adult presence that was relational rather than punitive, and a physical environment designed to support children staying for long periods. Parents' trust in the centre was a key to access, as they were more willing to let children travel to and spend time there when they knew responsible adults were present, attentive, and in regular contact with families. A major source of this trust was the Grasshouse coordinator, who consistently checked in with parents about their needs and hopes for their children. In this way, Grasshouse expanded children's "permission to play" by reducing families' perceived risk.

In Kuştepe, the centre operated within the neighbourhood but did not reliably offer a sense of safety or calm. Children moved in and out rapidly, noise levels were high, and regulation relied mainly on warnings and threats of exclusion rather than on supportive mediation. Inclusive play requires boundaries, but how those boundaries are set matters: relational regulation – with predictable rules, opportunities for repair, and a focus on care – supports inclusion, while reactive punishment often reproduces exclusion, especially for children already seen as "difficult."

### *Inclusion through relationships*

A central finding across the research was that inclusion did not depend simply on sharing an ethnic background. In Kuştepe, the coordinator shared Roma identity with the children, yet children's experiences suggested uncertainty and, at times, feelings of discrimination within the centre. Representation is important but insufficient. What matters is recognition—children feeling seen, respected, protected, and valued.

Grasshouse built inclusion through relational density. Volunteers known as "brothers and sisters" were not just supervisors; they functioned as trusted near-peers who shared cultural repertoires and understood local realities. Children sought closeness, wrote messages, and oriented their participation around specific relational anchors. These ties are also linked to identity: the centre became a place where children could be "good at something," be celebrated, and be part of a group narrative that countered stigmatising labels. For marginalised ethnic minorities, the presence of trusted adults who combine emotional availability with consistent expectations is a practical mechanism for inclusion. It builds what might be called "relational safety," which is often a stronger predictor of sustained engagement than the mere presence of facilities.

### *Inclusion through culturally meaningful play and creativity*

Inclusive play in Grasshouse was not limited to generic games. Activities included culturally resonant practices—music, especially rap music, rhythm, drama, and group creative work—where children's cultural knowledge and expressive styles were assets rather than deficits. A vivid example came from a group activity where children imagined and built fictional planets. Children initially named what they wanted to exclude (war, abuse, drug users, burglars, police violence), and then shifted toward aspirational messages (peace, serenity, dignity, solidarity). This is play as meaning-making: a space where children process fear and imagine alternatives. It is also a rights practice because it centres children's voices about what safe, inclusive worlds should contain.

Kuştepe also included structured play and craft activities that produced moments of joy and togetherness (for example, a paper-flower activity that drew attention and collaboration). However, these moments were often brief and occurred amid constant movement, interruptions, and weaker scaffolding for sustained engagement. Children could participate, but the setting did not always support deep absorption, shared focus, or a sense of continuity—qualities closely linked to restorative play.

### *Balancing learning and play*

Both centres offered academic support, reflecting families' real needs and the broader institutional pressure around school achievement. In contexts where caregivers may lack the time, education, or resources to help with homework, such centres become vital educational supports. The risk, however, is that "education" becomes the dominant logic and play turns into a reward—something children receive only if they comply. Grasshouse seemed better able to weave learning into playful, relational activities, sustaining a broader understanding of children's wellbeing. Inclusive play environments treat play as intrinsically valuable and as a way to build learning, confidence, and belonging.

### *Children's voice as an inclusion practice*

At Grasshouse, participatory activities were possible, and children's experiences of fear, routine, and support emerged clearly through child-friendly methods such as body maps and flower maps. Drawing on the larger ethnographic study with Roma children and community centres in Istanbul, conducted as part of the Access to Play in Crisis international comparative research project by the International Play Association (2017), these methods did more than generate data for researchers. They created structured opportunities for children to voice what limits and enables their play, and for adults to listen and respond. In this sense, participation is not just a research advantage; it is a mechanism of inclusion, helping reshape the centre around children's own perspectives.

At Kuştepe, restrictions prevented similar participatory engagement. From a play-rights perspective, this raises a broader question: do centres treat children as active contributors to the environment or merely as recipients of adult-designed programmes? The wider comparative project shows that when children's voices are systematically sidelined, centres struggle to identify and address everyday barriers to play. Child participation is therefore not an optional add-on; it is a structural component of inclusion.

## Transferable lessons for marginalised ethnic minorities in large cities

The Istanbul case provides concrete lessons that travel beyond Roma communities. The mechanisms of exclusion—poverty, unsafe neighbourhoods, discrimination, displacement—are common across marginalised ethnic minorities in many large cities. Below, I outline practical principles for realising children's right to play through child-friendly spaces in contexts of deep-rooted exclusion.

| TERMS | PRINCIPLES | PRACTICES |
|---|---|---|
| **SAFETY** | Treat safety as relational infrastructure, not only physical infrastructure | Investments in buildings and equipment matter, but children's access depends on relational safety: caregivers' trust, reliable adult presence, predictable routines, and non-punitive boundary-making. Centres should prioritise staff training in de-escalation, restorative approaches, and trauma-informed practice—especially where children routinely witness violence. |
| **ACCESSIBILITY** | Proximity and accessibility are rights issues  | In high-risk neighbourhoods, distance can be exclusion. Safe spaces must be reachable without expensive transport and without routes that expose children to harm. Where centres are outside marginalised areas (as with Grasshouse), they may still be accessible if trusted adults, safe travel practices, and strong communication with families reduce perceived risk. Municipalities and funders should treat "safe routes to play" as part of play provision. |
| **RECOGNITION** | Inclusion is produced through recognition, not just representation | Hiring from the community can be powerful, but inclusion depends on how adults relate to children. Centres should build cultures where children are addressed respectfully, conflicts are mediated, and exclusion is a last resort. Monitoring whether children feel unfairly treated inside the centre is essential, because a centre can reproduce discrimination even while claiming to serve marginalised groups. |
| **CULTURAL RELEVANCE** | Make culturally sustaining play central, not peripheral  | Culturally meaningful play—music, storytelling, dance, creative expression—can transform a centre from a service site into a place of belonging. This is particularly important for ethnic minorities whose cultural practices are often stigmatised in mainstream institutions. Designing programs with children and community members helps ensure that culture is not tokenised but lived. |
| **DURATION** | Offer long-duration, predictable time for play | Short, fragmented activity blocks tend to privilege confident children and exclude those who need time to settle, observe, and build trust. Predictability (consistent days, stable routines, familiar adults) supports children's attachment and enables deeper play. This is a direct counter to the instability produced by displacement and precarious urban living. |
| **BALANCE LEARNING** | Balance learning support with play rights (avoid conditional play)  | Academic support may be necessary, but it should not crowd out play or make play contingent on compliance. A rights-based centre frames play as part of wellbeing and development. Practical approaches include integrating playful learning, keeping free-play windows, and ensuring that children have some control over activity choices. |

| TERMS | PRINCIPLES | PRACTICES |
|---|---|---|
| **CHILD GOVERNANCE** | Build child participation into governance | Participatory methods do not need to be formal research tools. Centres can use child advisory circles, mapping perceived safety, suggestion walls, peer-led activity planning, and regular reflective conversations. The point is structural: children should be able to shape the space that claims to realise their rights. |
| **PLAN AHEAD FOR CHANGE**  | Plan for displacement and urban transformation (play provision must be resilient) | Where redevelopment and eviction are recurring realities, child-friendly spaces should be planned as durable social infrastructure. This includes securing long-term funding, protecting physical space through municipal agreements, and maintaining continuity for children even if neighbourhood geography shifts. For displaced communities, centres can function as "portable belonging" if they preserve relationships and cultural continuity across moves. |
| **EVALUATION FROM CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES** | Evaluate inclusion with the right indicators | Counting attendance is not enough. Centres should track: children's perceived safety; sustained engagement (not just presence); conflict patterns and repair; children's sense of recognition and fairness; and whether girls, younger children, or more stigmatised children participate equally. Qualitative feedback is a key inclusion metric. |

## Community centres as a partial realisation of the right to play

For Roma children living under conditions of poverty, urban insecurity, discrimination, and displacement, play is heavily constrained by forces beyond children's control. In this context, community centres can partially realise the right to play—but only when they function as genuinely child-friendly spaces: safe, predictable, relationally supportive, and culturally meaningful.

The Istanbul study suggests that inclusive play is not an abstract value but an achievable practice. It is produced through the interaction of (a) safety that expands children's permission to play; (b) trusted relationships that provide recognition and stability; and (c) activity environments where children's culture and imagination are resources. These mechanisms are transferable to other marginalised ethnic minorities in large cities—especially where the same structural barriers compress children's play worlds.
It has never been enough to assert "more play opportunities". Safe spaces, equitable belonging, and durable community infrastructure that survives displacement and urban neglect are the features that make play possible.



*Photo credit: iStock*




*Photo credit: Author*



*Photo credit: iStock*



*Photo credit: iStock*

## Practice takeaways
### (for practitioners, municipalities, and NGOs)

1. **Map exclusion from play in four domains:** material (poverty), spatial (physical hazards), social (discrimination), and historical (displacement).
2. **Build predictable access first.** Before adding new programmes, stabilise opening times, staffing, and adult presence. Reliability is inclusion.
3. **Keep the activity repertoire culturally alive.** Include music, art, celebration, and local play traditions as core, not as "special events".
4. **Train for relational practice.** Inclusion is realised in the way adults welcome, guide, and acknowledge children, particularly those who are marginalised.
5. **Protect children's dignity.** Avoid practices that teach children to hide who they are to stay safe (even when fear is understandable).
6. **Create bridges to the wider city.** Partner with institutions that can extend children's "right to the city" through supervised outings, shared projects, or joint events.
7. **Involve children in meaning-making, not only attendance.** Participatory methods (mapping, drawing, story making) can reveal what "safe", "fun", and "welcoming" mean in children's terms.
8. **Advocate for structural change while doing the daily work.** Child-friendly spaces can partly realise the right to play, but they cannot substitute for safer streets, anti-discrimination enforcement, and poverty reduction.

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# Playing Neighbourhoods: Enhancing Children's Everyday Play through Bottom-Up Playwork in Malmö, Sweden

KRISTER SVENSSON

This field report presents Playing Neighbourhoods (Lekande Kvarter), a three-year community development project implemented in two residential courtyards in Malmö, Sweden. The project sought to strengthen children's everyday conditions and social cohesion by positioning community-based play provisions as a form of social infrastructure and employing a bottom-up playwork methodology grounded in relational presence, co-creation, and engagement with civil society.

Children's everyday conditions in Swedish cities have come under increasing strain in recent years. Rising child poverty, deteriorating mental health, and the early recruitment of young people into criminal networks illustrate a shifting landscape in which children's rights, safety, and developmental opportunities face significant pressure (Roelofs & Salonen, 2019). These challenges are compounded by weakened neighbourly ties and a growing expectation that formal institutions, schools, social services, and the police, should resolve social problems deeply embedded in the fabric of residential life.

This expectation has proven insufficient. Institutional actors, however well-resourced, are rarely positioned to occupy the informal, relational spaces of a neighbourhood where much of children's everyday life unfolds. Playing Neighbourhoods (Lekande Kvarter) was established to address this gap. Initiated in collaboration with a housing company in Malmö that had identified early signs of vulnerability and social fragmentation among children and families, the project sought to strengthen two residential courtyards by centring play, participation, and local agency.

This article presents the project as a case study of play-centred community development. It draws on theoretical perspectives on play, civil society, and the sociology of urban neighbourhoods, and analyses how bottom-up relational processes can shift responsibility from "someone else" to "all of us."

## Context: Socio-Spatial Pressures and Unequal Play

The project operated in two distinct areas of Malmö. One neighbourhood, built in the 1950s, had a more stable and longer-established tenant population, including a group of older residents whose presence proved to be an important social resource. The second, built in the 2010s, had a more transient and socio-economically vulnerable population. Both areas were characterised by socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and exposure to gang-related criminality.

Children in these settings faced a particular form of spatial exclusion. As Ekman Ladru argues, the freedom of movement of children and young people is deeply intertwined with social ideas about who is recognised as a legitimate citizen in each place (Hedlund et al., 2024). Children in stigmatised neighbourhoods are often either rendered invisible or made visible only as problems, rarely seen or heard on their own terms. The residential courtyards offered limited



*Source: Lynn Petrin.*



*Co-creating play provisions as social infrastructure. Source: Lynn Petrin.*

play infrastructure, and children's physical engagement in outdoor space was frequently curtailed by traffic and by adults' demands for quiet. As one child, Ahmed, put it: "We are not allowed to play football here." His friend Shams added, "Adults say that we have to go to the park and play, but my parents say that I must not leave the courtyard, because there is a lot of traffic around the block."

These micro-level frustrations reflect broader urban planning deficits. Urban planning has historically given limited attention to children's spatial needs (Chatterjee et al., 2025; Wood, 2017). Standardised playgrounds and manicured lawns, often posted with signs reading "No ball games", restrict the diversity of play environments. Children thrive at the intersection of safety and autonomy, in spaces that allow exploration, challenge, and small-scale, intimate play.

## Conceptual Framework

A foundational principle of the project is that children are not future citizens in the making but democratic subjects in the present. Adults have a responsibility to create time and space for play, not to accelerate children toward adulthood, but to honour their right to be, explore, and develop at their own pace.

### *The Neighbourhood as an "In-Between Space"*

Drawing on the sociology of G. H. Mead, the neighbourhood is conceptualised here as an "in-between space" situated between family life and formal institutions (Mead, 1969, as cited in Berg, 2020). This intermediate zone is characterised by ambiguity about responsibility: no single actor has full oversight, and children's experiences in it often diverge from what parents imagine or institutions can observe. This ambiguity creates risk, particularly of recruitment into harmful peer cultures, but also significant opportunity when adults step into constructive relational roles.







### *Play as Social Infrastructure*

Play is understood in this project as intrinsically valuable, voluntary, and self-directed—not a tool for achieving external outcomes, even though its developmental effects are profound (Huizinga, 1955; Steinsholt, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Following Vygotsky (as cited in Strandberg, 2006), the author conceptualises play as unfolding across three interconnected rooms.

1) The physical room encompasses children's engagement with materials, space, and landscape.
2) The mental room is the arena of imagination and symbolic transformation, where children move from consumption to production.
3) The relational room is where children negotiate meaning and social roles—where learning occurs in the "zone of proximal development" (Strandberg, 2006).

Play also oscillates between chaos and order (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992); what may appear unruly to adults is a dynamic process of negotiation, experimentation, and collective meaning-making (Sutton-Smith, 2001).

### *Civil Society as Relational Intermediary*

The project positions itself as a "substitute representative", a civil society actor whose legitimacy derives from relational capital, trust, presence, and social relationships, rather than from formal authority. This positioning enabled the project to bridge gaps between residents and formal institutions, helping individuals navigate complex systems while fostering local agency.

## Project Design and Methodology

Playing Neighbourhoods had two primary aims: showcasing play as a medium for communication and collaboration among residents and making children's wellbeing a shared community responsibility. Supporting objectives included fostering intergenerational and intercultural social interaction, building trust between residents, and institutions, co-developing courtyard environments, and gradually transferring ownership of shared spaces and activities to residents themselves.

The methodological foundation was a bottom-up



**In these three rooms, the players interact dynamically. A sound, a gesture, or a found object can trigger a shared imaginative world. Three children decide to build a hut of branches. Using available material in the courtyard. They start the process. Rim says, "I think it is best to build the hut between two trees!" Ali agrees and says, "Let us find a good place for the hut." The third child, Theim says, "I can build an entrance and make a welcome sign".**

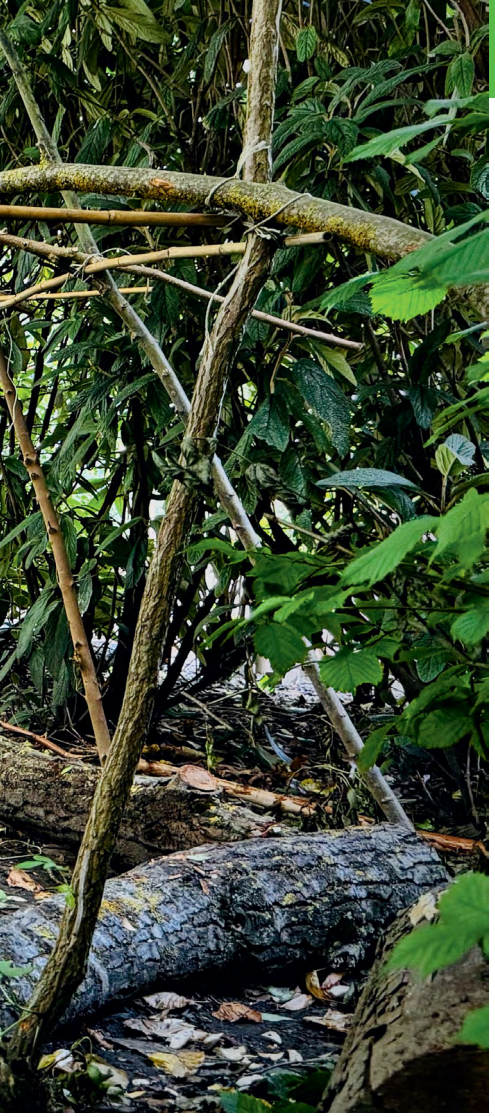
playwork orientation in which activities and collaborations emerged gradually through relationships, presence, and dialogue. Rather than arriving with predetermined solutions, the project team positioned itself within the courtyards' everyday life, physically present, engaging in informal conversations, and participating in spontaneous play. This required a high degree of improvisation guided by a clear directional intent: strengthening children's conditions through play and shared responsibility.

The project team maintained an accessible local base, a room with coffee, creative materials, sewing machines, and an open-door policy. Children drifted in after school; adults came in the mornings. No one was registered; participation was entirely voluntary. The team deliberately avoided becoming a daycare service, expecting and inviting parental presence, and hosting open-house evenings for parents and staff to discuss the project's conditions together.

## Activities and Interactions

Activities were not introduced as isolated events but as relational and collaborative opportunities. Courtyard celebrations, neighbourhood festivities, residents' evenings, and workshops served as social anchors, allowing people who rarely interacted to meet in informal, low-threshold settings. Shared food, dolmades from Palestine, pancakes with Somali spiced toppings and baklava baked by a resident father, created space for life stories, laughter, and the discovery of shared and different traditions.

Children frequently drove the most significant moments. Noor, an eight-year-old girl, asked a project





*Play in the housing courtyard. Source: Lynn Petrin.*

worker to teach her to use a sewing machine; she and a friend each brought a pair of trousers as a pattern and sewed their own. Their initiative drew in adult residents from Somalia who also wanted to learn, transforming a sewing machine into an intergenerational craft hub that expanded to include knitting, embroidery, and crochet. Elein, another eight-year-old from Palestine, organised a "language café" to teach Swedish-speaking adults to speak and write Arabic—an inspiring inversion of authority in which a child played teacher and adults became pupils.

Intergenerational gardening became another anchor activity. A group of older female residents invited local children to join their container gardening project; children received their own pallet collars to grow vegetables and flowers. Gertrud, in her seventies, brought sponge cake each week; a ten-year-old boy from Iran began bringing cakes he had baked himself at home. Together, children and families also cleared an area of the courtyard, planted willow branches in a circle, and grew a living hut. During summer holidays, two families volunteered to care for the plants while others travelled, demonstrating a concrete experience of responsibility, collective care, and a deep sense of belonging.

When tensions arose, stairwell meetings and facilitated conversations provided structured spaces for neighbours to address conflicts directly. Over time, residents increasingly handled difficulties themselves rather than calling the police or housing management. The police did visit project sites, but in these contexts children and adults were present and could ask questions, humanising institutional actors on both sides.



*A community meeting for Playing Neighbourhoods. Source: Lynn Petrin.*

## Results

A central outcome of Playing Neighbourhoods was the reduction of anonymity in the courtyards. Through recurring encounters, shared meals, creative activities, and spontaneous play, residents became increasingly familiar with one another, fostering a sense of safety and belonging. Adult engagement increased markedly as trust developed: parents and older residents became active participants in activities, discussions, and the physical shaping of courtyard spaces.

Conflict resolution patterns shifted notably: neighbours more often addressed tensions directly and constructively rather than relying on external authorities, reflecting a growing sense of collective agency. Children's play functioned as a powerful social catalyst throughout, creating opportunities for children to explore and interact while simultaneously drawing adults into shared spaces and conversations.

The informal social infrastructure for play that developed ultimately outlasted the project itself: a residents' group formed a tenants' association that has since taken over the functions and physical spaces of Playing Neighbourhoods, signalling a sustainable shift in ownership from the project team to the community.

## Discussion and Implications

The results demonstrate how play-centred, relational work can support the development of play provisions as social infrastructure within residential areas. The project challenges approaches that rely primarily on institutional interventions and highlight the value of everyday, informal, and locally embedded forms of engagement. The co-development of physical and social environments further demonstrates how shared agency over space can reinforce both belonging and collective responsibility (Kjaer, 2015).

For **practitioners,** the project offers the following guidance:

- Begin with presence, not programmes: spend time in the courtyards, learn names, and join children's play when invited.
- Involve adults to be present in the environment as "lighthouses"—visible and approachable to signal that the neighbourhood is a cared-for space.
- Treat children as democratic subjects: show respect, invite their initiatives, and avoid instrumentalising play for adult agendas.
- Lower thresholds for participation; promote resident-initiated activities; prepare actively to hand over responsibility.
- Recognise play as valuable in its own right, not merely as a means to developmental or social outcomes.

For **policymakers,** the project highlights that sustainable social change requires attention to everyday relational practices. Policies that support long-term participatory processes, accessible community meeting spaces, and

resident-led initiatives can contribute to more equitable and resilient neighbourhoods.

## Conclusion

Playing Neighbourhoods demonstrates that a relational, play-centred approach can strengthen both children's everyday conditions and the broader social fabric of residential areas. By positioning itself within the in-between space of the neighbourhood, the project addressed social challenges that formal systems frequently struggle to reach. Through everyday presence, trust-building, and co-creative processes, residents across generations and cultural backgrounds developed a sense of belonging, agency, and shared responsibility. Play functioned not as a programme or intervention tool, but as a way of being together, one that, over time, generated its own sustainable structures of care and community life. In doing so, the project advances the agenda on inclusive play by demonstrating that truly inclusive play environments are not merely physical, they are social: built on relationships, shared ownership, and the recognition of every child, regardless of background or neighbourhood, as a full and valued participant in community life.

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Note: *This article is based on the three-year project Playing Neighbourhoods (Lekande Kvarter) in Malmö, Sweden. The project was owned by Lekfrämjandet IPA in Sweden and funded by the Swedish Inheritance Fund. The author, Krister Svensson, led this project. All original photographs were taken by team member Lynn Petrin.*



*Splashing in water. Source: Lynn Petrin.*

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# Playing Well? A case study of health play services from England



Play policy must address more than the built environment; the right to play in healthcare is too often overlooked, yet it is essential for children's resilience and vital to their long-term wellbeing. The authors look at how play professionals – practitioners, advocates and parent-carers working together – are effecting change.

ADRIAN VOCE WITH SARAH OWEN

This article examines the question of children's right to play in healthcare settings. It argues that the need for children to play, along with the support of play-literate adults during medical treatment—regardless of the type of sickness, injury, disability, or condition—is essential for their safety and well-being.

In challenging and unfamiliar environments, play can provide comfort and reassurance, reducing anxiety and feelings of isolation. During difficult or painful procedures, it mitigates the risks of trauma. However, there are significant institutional and cultural barriers that prevent many children from exercising this right. These obstacles are just as severe within healthcare systems as they are in any other area of public life.

We will focus on the situation in England, where the authors, who are each play policy professionals, and their colleagues at the children's charity, Starlight, are working with the National Health Service (NHS) and with health play practitioners, to address these challenges, leading to some significant policy responses from the government. We hope that many of the issues discussed will also have global relevance.



*Source: Starlight (UK).*

## Policy advocacy for play privileges in outdoor environments

The physical infrastructure that shapes the places and spaces where children live is a major factor in either constraining or enabling their right to play. Influencing the policies and practices that drive the development of public space is, therefore, a major objective. However, this can lead to a narrow focus on the physical dimensions of children's right to play – privileging the need for child-friendly outdoor space, reclaiming the streets from motor vehicles, and a preoccupation with 'risky play'.

The pioneering play sufficiency duty in Wales (2010), for example, identifies the space available for children to play as 'open spaces, outdoor unstaffed designated play spaces and playing fields', supplemented by playwork provision. It requires local authorities to consider 'access to such space and provision, including road safety measures, transport, information and publicity'.

Whereas the legislation in Wales applies to local authorities as a whole and, in theory at least, includes the catch-all consideration of 'play within all relevant policy and implementation agendas', in practice it has tended to lead to



*Source: Starlight (UK).*

the planning system being seen as the major policy vehicle for advancing the play agenda. Thus, in Scotland, the play sufficiency principle[1] is adopted via the Town and Country Planning (Play Sufficiency Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations, 2023; while, in England, there have been moves, as yet unsuccessful, to persuade the Westminster Government to follow suit by introducing a play sufficiency duty into planning law through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (2025).

These developments represent real achievements for the UK play movement within a political landscape that has perennially overlooked, disregarded, or minimised the importance of children's play and the role of public policy in protecting it.

There is a risk, however, that a preoccupation with the built environment and the planning policy that shapes it leads play advocates to neglect other areas of children's lives and the public domains in which they occur. One such domain is the healthcare system.

## Children's play in healthcare

*"Children do not stop being children when they enter a hospital or a doctor's surgery … We recognise that play services are integral to paediatric care, not a nice-to-have."*

**– Ashley Dalton** *MP, Minister for Health, UK Government, January 2026.*

For many children, for substantial parts of their childhood, their right to play has little to do with public space and everything to do with the healthcare system. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that play is essential to children's health and well-being, contributing to physical recovery, emotional resilience, and psychological stability—and that this should be especially respected in clinical environments. General Comment 17 (UNCRC, 2013) stresses that children in hospitals and healthcare settings must have access to play, tailored to their age, condition, and cultural background. It calls on governments and institutions to remove barriers to play in healthcare, such as overly clinical environments, lack of trained staff, or

1. *General Comment 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC (2013) 'strongly encourages States to consider introducing legislation to … address the* ***principle of sufficiency*** *– all children should be given sufficient time and space to exercise these rights.' This principle had already been established in Wales, where the Children and Families (Wales) Measure (2010) had placed a statutory duty on local authorities to assess whether there are 'sufficient play opportunities' for children in their area; to identify gaps; and to produce action plans to address these. The play sufficiency duty came fully into force in Wales in 2014.*

## Play in healthcare: a parent's story

Sarah Owen

*I often tell the story of my son Hari's experience of paediatric cancer, how gruelling interventions and isolating hospital stays diminished the light of his childhood; it felt like we lost him. On the other hand, when he played, I saw his lights come back on. Play ignited his vital energy; it returned him to us and to his life.*

*While attending a conference after Hari's treatment had ended, I heard Professor Fraser Brown speak about play deprivation and its impact on children. I felt like I lost my breath as I heard a list of behaviours that I had seen in Hari. Repeated experiences in clinical environments, all with a distinct lack of play and playfulness, had significantly impacted his development and his young nervous system.*

*Hari's story is moving, but the importance of access to play across healthcare for all babies, children and young people is fundamentally an every child issue. Play should be an integral part of all paediatric care.*

*My own son's extreme experience of trauma in the healthcare system opened my eyes to the impact of wider interventions for all children who endure them. From immunisations and blood tests to A&E visits and dental checks, every encounter deserves a child-centred approach.*

*I dream of an NHS filled with enough trained health play professionals to facilitate therapeutic play for every child that needs them, through all difficult medical interventions. But we are dealing with an NHS that is stretched with limited budgets and resources.*

*As a parent working in the child health policy space, I can see a real opportunity to drive a system-wide culture change in paediatric care. I believe there can be an NHS in which play is embedded as an integral part of every child's journey. When I tell Hari's story, there is often a universal shared experience, as many policymakers share their own stories of children they know and love, too.*

*Empowering parents to understand the value of play, even when their child is sick or in a healthcare setting, holds real power to drive change because they are the fiercest advocates. Doctors and nurses who understand the value of playful interactions create calmer children, easier assessments, faster interventions, and kinder experiences. A child feeling safe enough to play in a scary environment fosters agency; they become a key player in their own experience. These all hold the power to boost recovery and resilience and ultimately future-proof mental health. Children need to be held respectfully at the centre of a healthcare system that works for them, with their right to play protected.*

*I have seen this play out with my own family; the potential for this play to transform children's health and healthcare is so significant. Advocacy and awareness of why this matter is the key, and I will continue to tell my story and encourage other parents and carers to do the same.*

restrictive policies; and to train healthcare professionals to understand and support play as part of holistic care. The clear implication of these comments by the UNCRC is that play in healthcare is not an optional extra but should be integrated within dignified, child centred, inclusive paediatric services. Our story, above, of one child's experience, as seen through the eyes of his parent, highlights why this is so important.

However, there are longstanding barriers, common to many countries: sterile, adult centred environments; lack of staff training in play practice or playful approaches; the marginalisation or exclusion of disabled children and children with complex needs; and the perennial unconscious bias towards play as something trivial and unimportant. These barriers persist even where there is strong policy language on children's rights.

### Why play in healthcare matters

There is growing evidence of the impacts of serious illness and treatment on the mental health of babies, children, and young people, including the risks of medical trauma and its long-term consequences (Starlight, 2022). Alongside this, in recent decades, the vital role of children's play to their health, well-being and resilience has become an increasing focus of research and policy.

In 2025, a major scoping review commissioned by the PEDAL (Play in Education, Development and Learning) Centre at the University of Cambridge synthesised findings from 127 studies across 29 countries (Graber et al., 2025). It confirmed that play is a vital contributor to children's holistic health and wellbeing in healthcare settings. The review positions play as a key component of person-centred paediatric care, capable of bridging physical and psychological

health by supporting emotional expression, reducing fear, and fostering social connection. Both non-medical play (e.g. storytelling, games) and medically relevant play (e.g. role-play with healthcare tools) were found to help children prepare for procedures, reduce anxiety, and maintain a sense of normalcy and joy.

The review advocates for embedding play as a consistent feature of care, supporting a preventative and holistic model that addresses the full spectrum of children's health needs. Five key domains emerged where play contributes meaningfully to health in healthcare contexts:

1. **Reducing stress and discomfort during procedures**
2. **Helping children express and manage emotions**
3. **Fostering dignity and agency**
4. **Building connection and belonging**
5. **Preserving a sense of childhood**

These findings, echoing earlier literature reviews by Starlight (2022, 2023), underscore the evolving understanding of what it means to be "healthy" or "well" in paediatric care and call for play to be recognised not just as a therapeutic tool, but as a fundamental right and necessity for children in healthcare.

## Origins of UK health play practice

Most hospitals, GP practices, and dental surgeries are clinical, orderly, and sterile by design, in sharp contrast to the typical children's play space. Yet, in England, there



*Hari, Sarah's son, playing with Lego while receiving a blood transfusion. Source: Starlight (UK).*

# 75 YEARS OF PLAY IN HEALTHCARE IN ENGLAND

**1951**



**John Bowlby's** attachment theory challenges the norm of isolating children from their main carer during medical treatment within strict and forbidding regimes.

**1952**



**James Robertson's film** "A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital" highlights the emotional impact of hospitalisation on young children, raising awareness and prompting systemic reform.

**1957**



The first staff to play with child patients at St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas' Hospitals in London are called **"Lady Greens"** by the children due to their uniforms.

**1959**




The **Platt Report** recommends that children be cared for by trained staff in environments that are educational and playful, with unrestricted parental visits.

**1963**



**Gabi Marston** at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London becomes the first health service employee specifically dedicated to playing with children.

**1968**



The influential paediatrician and psychoanalyst **Donald Winnicott** underscores the therapeutic importance of play.




*Source: Starlight (UK).*

**1975**



**The National Association of Hospital Play Staff (NAHPS)** is formed (later called the National Association of Health Play Specialists).

**1976**



The government-commissioned **Court Report** recommends greater provision of trained play staff in paediatric wards.

**1981**



**The Play in Hospital Liaison Committee (PHLC)** is formed to advise the government and the NHS.

**1985**



**The Hospital Play Staff Examination Board (HPSEB)** is established to create a national qualification for the health play profession.

**The Hospital Play Staff Education Trust (HPSET)** is formed, establishing an independent professional register (later called the Healthcare Play Specialist Education Trust).

**1990**



**The Hogg report** recommends the wider employment of qualified hospital play specialists.

**1992**




Hospital play specialists is recognised as a distinct staff group by the **NHS.** The Hospital Play Staff Examination Board is recognised as an officially mandated awarding body.

***Continued on next page...***

are an estimated 17 million healthcare attendances a year by babies, children, and young people, including 2.3 million as inpatients (El-Qasem et al, 2025). And, with an annual budget of more than £180 billion (Kings Fund, 2025) for England alone, the National Health Service represents a substantial part of the public realm where children's right to play takes on particular importance.

Since the early 1960s, the UK has seen the steady development of the practice of supporting children in healthcare by employing skilled play practitioners. Ideally, engaging with children throughout their treatment pathways, health play specialists and health playworkers make space and opportunity for children to play as an integral part of their experience as patients. Working with the intrinsic power of play, these health play teams help to normalise what can be strange and frightening experiences for children.

This development of health play practice in the UK has its roots in a broader shift in attitudes toward child wellbeing and emotional care in hospital settings. In the early 20th century, the rise of behavioural psychology and scientific medicine led to a clinical focus on hygiene, discipline, and compliance. Victorian sentimentality gave way to a more rigid and procedural approach to care. This era was characterised by a lack of emotional consideration, where children were expected to endure hospitalisation with minimal comfort or understanding.

*Source: Starlight (UK).*




*Young people with lived experience and Dame Caroline Dineage at our Parliamentary drop-in event (OCT)*

## 2003




The Department of Health's **National Service Framework** for Children, Young People and Maternity Services recommends that all children staying in hospital have daily access to a play specialist.

## 2004



**Professional Diploma** in Specialised Play for Sick Children and Young People, accredited at Level 4 on the National Qualification Framework.

## 2006




NAHPS publishes **Play for Health:** Delivering and Auditing Quality in Hospital Play Services by Judy Walker.

## 2010



Foundation Degree in **Healthcare Play** Specialism launched.

## 2013



General Comment 17 of the UNCRC explicitly links **children's right to play** in health-care to their right to good health.

## 2021



Guidance to paediatric services from the **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)** recognising the value of health play professionals to reduce the fear and anxiety and create a calm environment before, during and after interventions or procedures.

***Continued from last page...***

In the 1950s, pioneering voices such as John Bowlby (1951) began to challenge prevailing norms, advocating for parental presence, emotional preparation, and a nurturing hospital environment. Subsequent decades (see the infographic below) saw a slow but steady growth in both recognition and provision of what became known as 'health play practice' or 'health play specialism', delivered by an increasingly professional workforce.

But, despite increasing recognition, research indicates that health play services remain inconsistent, are often understaffed, and depend on charitable donations for even basic resources. Health play staff often report feeling marginalised, with their roles frequently misunderstood. Research by Starlight (2023) found fewer than 1200 health play posts in the NHS in England (many part-time) and only 570 registered health play specialists across the UK. Furthermore, as is so often the case, it is children already living with other forms of disadvantage and health inequality who are most likely to be health play-deprived and at most risk of medical trauma (Starlight, 2024).

In 2021-22, Starlight (a former wish-granting charity now focusing on systemic change for play in healthcare) was asked by NHS England to jointly convene a national taskforce to raise the profile, increase understanding, and

## The role of the health play team

Health play staff are trained in using therapeutic play to:

- Ease children's anxiety
- Prepare children for and distract them during procedures
- Advocate for them with other health professionals
- Support children's agency in their own care and treatment

Because some of the highest risks of distress and potential trauma to children are during medical procedures, health play staff should be considered an essential element of the clinical support within the multi-disciplinary team.

*From 'Play Well: guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services, NHS England / Starlight (2025)*

STARLIGHT
TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY

### 2022



National charity Starlight was invited to jointly chair the Taskforce on Children's Play in Healthcare with NHS England.

### 2023



The Starlight/ NHS taskforce of more than **60 health professionals** recommends new guidelines and standards for health play services.



**The Play in Hospital Liaison Committee (PHLC)** is formed to advise the government and the NHS.

### 2024



**NAHPS and HPSET** merge to form the Society of Health Play Specialists (SOHPS).

### 2025




The **Play Well Toolkit,** a set of new guidelines and standards for health play services, is published by NHS England, co-produced with Starlight, in collaboration with SOHPS and members of the taskforce.

### 2026




The government's National Cancer Plan includes a commitment for the **NHS** to fully implement the Play Well guidelines and standards by 2027.



stimulate growth in the health play sector. The aim was that 'more children will benefit from play services, play opportunities and play-based interventions – of a standard that everyone would want for them – as part of their treatment and care' (Starlight, 2023).

The taskforce comprised more than 60 health professionals, overseen by an executive group that included the Royal Colleges for nursing and paediatrics, alongside the two professional bodies for health play specialists. It was quickly agreed that new, more detailed guidelines were needed for the commissioners who fund health services, and the NHS Trust leaders who design and manage them.

For health play services, the task force recommended new standards to be produced, together with a systematic way to evaluate them. Underpinning these changes, a new workforce strategy would set out a roadmap for growing the sector towards the estimated 3000 staff needed to provide an optimum service for paediatric in-patients (excluding accident and emergency, primary and community care).

In 2023, the taskforce produced its final report (Starlight, 2023), together with draft guidelines, standards, and a quality improvement tool, for publication by NHS England. In 2024, this was followed up by proposals for a national workforce strategy for the profession, co-produced with SOHPS, the new professional body, to underpin the new guidelines and standards (Starlight/SOHPS/Skills for Health, 2024).

## The 'Play Well' Toolkit

In June 2025, the Play Well toolkit (NHS England/Starlight, 2025), a set of new national guidelines and standards for play in health care, was published. In essence, the guidelines, aimed at health service commissioners and leaders, describe how and why play services should be embedded within the design of paediatric care, while the standards set out for clinicians and managers the recommended measures of good practice in the delivery of health play services. A quality checklist completes the package, allowing a consistent, systematic approach to monitoring services against the standards and identifying priorities for improvement.

The toolkit, according to its foreword, is designed "to help commissioners, service managers, health play practitioners and clinical leaders to design, plan and deliver high-quality health play services for babies, children and young people …(and) support system leaders and clinical staff to embed (them) as a core part of healthcare for all children, and help make the NHS as welcoming, gentle, and child-friendly as possible".

In February 2026, after intensive lobbying by Starlight and our allies, including a Parliamentary debate on the issue, the government's National Cancer Plan (Department for Health and Social Care, 2026) committed to ensuring that all children's healthcare commissioners and providers were following the Play Well guidelines and standards by 2027. A report on health play services from the NHS Operational Delivery Network for Children and Young People in the East of England (2026), using the Play Well standards as a benchmark, provided an indication of how much work still needs to be done, with widespread staff shortages and the frequent absence of play policies within paediatric services.

## Conclusion

No child should lose their right to play because they are sick or in a healthcare setting. Every child deserves to be safeguarded from the trauma that can arise from painful, frightening procedures delivered by adult strangers in sterile, clinical settings, no



*Source: Starlight (UK).*



*Source: Starlight (UK).*

matter how important these may be to their healthcare journey. Children's right to play when they are sick and receiving healthcare should be an integral component of paediatric services, essential to their safety, agency, and dignity.

After many decades of dedicated advocacy, this aspiration is now recognised as good practice and official government policy for England. But all the evidence suggests that concerted action, investment, and commitment are still needed for it to become a reality for all children. Starlight and our collaborators in the health play profession are working closely with allies across the health and play sectors – and increasingly with policymakers – to ensure the Play Well toolkit does not become just another set of documents with little impact on children's experiences, but a watershed that will lead to all children's right to play being embedded within a kinder, more child-friendly healthcare system.

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Note: *Starlight is the UK's leading charity working to put play at the heart of every child's healthcare. Through play, they transform children's health by taking the scare out of healthcare.*

## Call to Action

Starlight is calling for government action to embed inclusive play provision within the healthcare system. This may be adapted internationally depending on context.

- Include health play professionals in long-term plans for the healthcare workforce.
- Train all children's health professionals in the principles of health play practice.
- All commissioners and providers of children's healthcare are to adopt and follow the Play Well guidelines and standards.
- Provide information for parents and carers on the role and importance of play for children in healthcare.
- Neighbourhood and public health services to employ community play specialists and collaborate with local play services to support preventative healthcare and healthy lifestyles for all children.

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# Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces for Adolescents in Two Indian Cities

**Prerna Vijaykumar Mehta**

This field report describes a five-year initiative, Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces for Adolescents, implemented across Bhubaneswar and Jaipur, India. By positioning adolescents as Public Space Ambassadors and co-designers, the project demonstrates how participatory, evidence-based methods can counter the systematic exclusion of young people from public spaces and city-planning processes.



*Bhoomia basti park, Child playing in the park. Photo credit: WRI India*

## A Demographic Dividend and a Planning Blind Spot

India is home to 253 million adolescents — one in five of its population — with approximately 17% of the total population aged 10–19 years (UNFPA, 2024). The United Nations Population Fund projects that India will remain among the world's youngest nations until 2055, offering a multi-decade window to harness this demographic dividend. Yet urban planning processes have largely closed that window to young people.

Despite numerous national missions targeting adolescent nutrition, education, and health, city development entirely bypasses this age group. Guidelines exist for designing public spaces for toddlers and senior citizens; international standards detail infrastructure for adults. But adolescence — a transformative phase marked by physi-



ological, psychological, and social changes that require positive physical and social environments — remains invisible in municipal design standards.

Public spaces are crucial for adolescents because they provide safe, informal environments for leisure, recreation, social connection, identity exploration, and practising independence beyond family and school supervision (Chawla & Malone, 2003). These experiences support social, emotional, and cognitive development (Rivera et al. 2022; Mehta et al., 2025). Yet adolescents are routinely marginalised in such spaces: adults often view them as noisy or disruptive, leading to exclusionary designs — anti-loitering benches, restrictive landscaping, and policing — that push young people out of parks, streets, and plazas. This marginalisation not only violates their right to the city but also heightens isolation, anxiety, and invisibility, undermining the very well-being that public spaces are meant to foster.



*Bhima Bhoi street before and after*
*Photo credit: WRI India*

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this vulnerability starkly. Young people confined to homes without access to safe spaces for play, recreation, and social connection experienced measurable mental health deterioration. Yet post-pandemic urban recovery planning continued to ignore adolescent needs, reflecting a deeper institutional blindness: city authorities view adolescents as either school students (an education-sector responsibility) or adults in waiting, never recognising the distinct needs of ages 10–19 for play, recreation, and safe spaces for identity formation.

The 2016 New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11 mandate universal access to safe, inclusive, green public spaces by 2030, explicitly prioritising women, children, and vulnerable populations (UN-Habitat, 2016; United Nations, 2015). Yet this global commitment has remained largely rhetorical in Indian city planning.

## Shaping a New Initiative Centred on Adolescents

WRI India launched Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces as part of Fondation Botnar's global Healthy Cities for Adolescents programme, currently managed by Ecorys UK. The initiative aims to assess, design, and enhance public spaces through a participatory approach in which adolescents are not merely beneficiaries but equal contributors and co-creators.

A Rapid Assessment Study across Rajasthan and Odisha identified Jaipur and Bhubaneswar as ideal cities for youth-led city transformation. Both cities had participated in India's Smart Cities Mission, demonstrated strong local government commitment to youth-friendly development, and had active civil society organisations focused on adolescents. Critically, the two cities offered distinct contexts: Bhubaneswar benefited from existing city-led public space initiatives with established stakeholder expertise, while Jaipur approached adolescent-friendly spaces as a novel concept.

## Listening to Adolescent Voices

Between 2021 and 2022, WRI India, with the help of interested local non-profit organisations, engaged 150 adolescents across both cities through focused group discussions, workshops, and consultations grounded in a "learning by doing" principle. Adolescents aged 10–19, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including those with disabilities, identified four consistent themes:



*Maharana Pratap park*
*Photo credit: WRI India*

• **Proximity:** adolescents use public spaces when within walking distance or accessible by local transit.

• **Safety:** for girls and adolescents from vulnerable communities, freedom from traffic, predatory behaviour, and social judgment determines genuine accessibility.

• **Activities:** spaces without opportunities for play, sport, social gathering, and creative expression remain unused. Cricket pitches, badminton courts, shaded seating, and open grounds are not luxuries — they are essential.

• **Amenities:** drinking water, toilets, lighting, weather protection, and seating transform passing-through destinations into places for extended play and recreation.

*"We do not have designated public spaces for our age group to hang out or conduct meetings. We often end up using open grounds or a friend's house to meet and play badminton and cricket on the streets."*
— Adolescent girl, aged 15, Jaipur

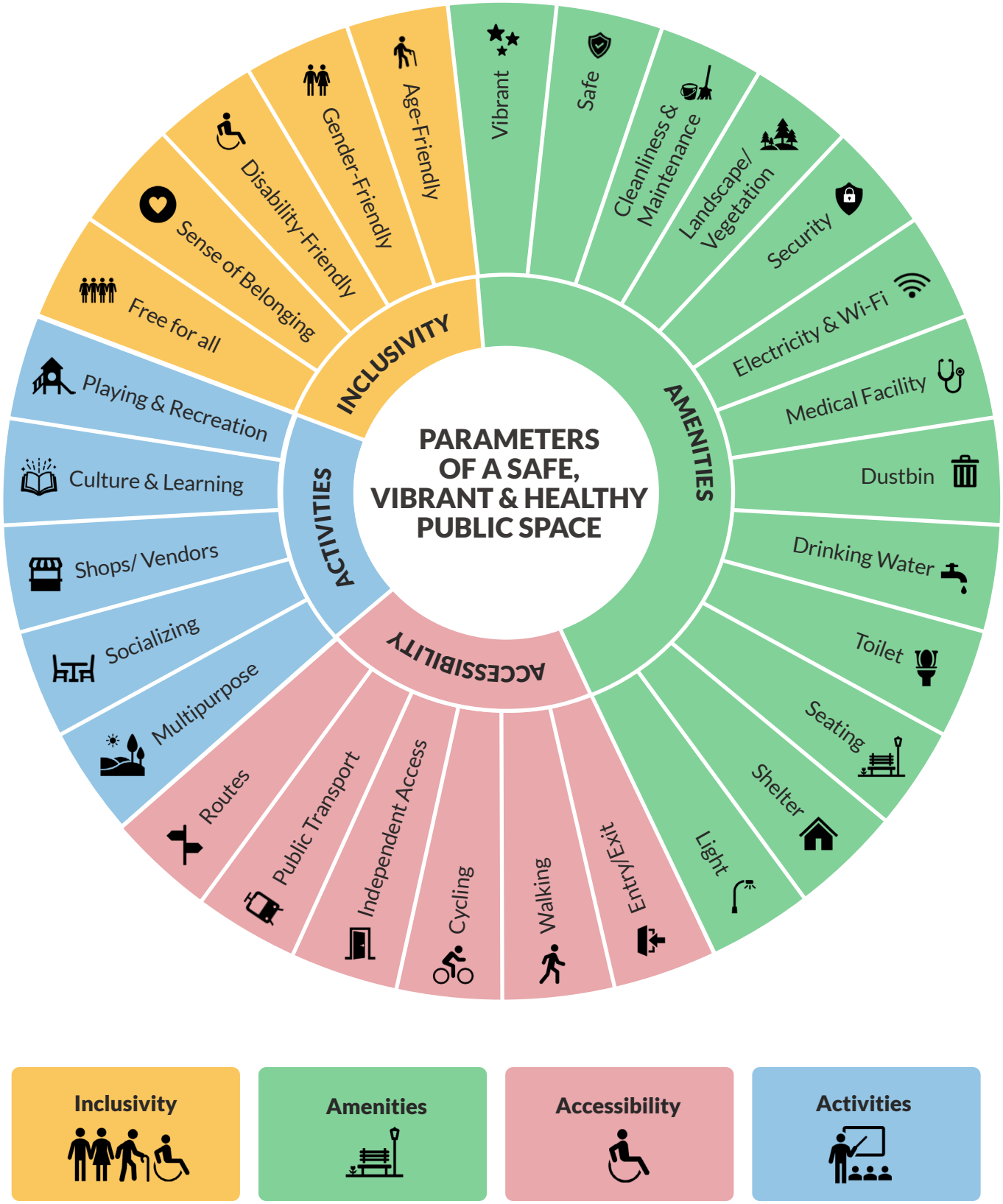
*"Everybody should be treated equally and taken care of in public spaces. Differently abled, children, adolescents and elderly people should be able to access and use public spaces as much as adults."*
— Adolescent girl, aged 14, Bhubaneswar

**These consultations achieved two critical outcomes:** they validated the urgent need for adolescent-centred public space design, and they positioned adolescents themselves as experts in articulating their own needs. City officials who initially questioned whether adolescent inclusion was necessary witnessed direct testimony of deprivation and aspiration.

## Building a Coalition for Change

The consultation process convened 26 organisations across both cities, including non-profit, private-sector, and community -based entities spanning youth engagement, neighbourhood development, education, community health, and urban planning. Organisations such as Humara Bachpan Trust and Aaina (Bhubaneswar), I-India, and Magic Bus India Foundation (Jaipur) became key partners, bringing operational capacity and deep relationships with adolescents from low-income and vulnerable communities. One stakeholder

*Figure 1: PSAF Parameters and Sub-parameters illustrates these four dimensions and their 29 sub-parameters, which are the granular criteria that adolescents and stakeholders identified as essential.*



reflection captured the initiative's core contribution: "Public spaces were never seen from this perspective; we didn't know that they could help with the physical and mental development and shape behaviours of adolescents." This statement signals a pivotal shift in institutional consciousness about what public spaces mean for adolescent development.

## Co-Creating the Public Spaces Assessment Framework (PSAF)

Adolescent and stakeholder consultations yielded extensive wish lists — basketball courts, skating rinks, music spaces, Wi-Fi zones — but wish lists alone rarely trigger municipal action. When city authorities were presented with adolescent needs, they asked a logical follow-up: how do we systematically assess whether a space is truly adolescent-friendly? No such standards existed. Rather than adapt international guidelines, in 2022, WRI India commissioned the co-creation of the Public Spaces Assessment Framework (PSAF; Mehta et al., 2025).

The PSAF was not developed by experts and then presented to adolescents for validation. Instead, 800+ adolescents participated in a rigorous testing-and-feedback cycle, auditing 50+ public spaces in both cities. Young people with clipboards, camera phones, and measurement tools systematically evaluated spaces against emerging criteria, photographing problems, counting users, assessing safety, and providing feedback on what made spaces feel welcoming or unwelcoming. This process built adolescent capacity in research and urban assessment, generated rigorous empirical data, and fostered ownership: participants understood they were not just beneficiaries but contributors to knowledge production (Kapoor et al., 2023). Through iterative testing and refinement, the PSAF crystallised into four essential parameters:

• **Accessibility:** Can adolescents easily reach and use the space? This covers location, transit options, road safety, welcoming entrances, and physical access for those with disabilities.

• **Inclusivity:** Do all adolescents feel welcome? This encompasses safety from harassment, freedom from gender constraints, and acceptance of diverse interests and abilities.

• **Activities:** What can adolescents do in this space? This includes recreational facilities, social spaces, creative spaces, and varied physical activity opportunities.

• **Amenities:** What physical infrastructure supports use? Drinking water, clean toilets, seating, shade, lighting, and waste management transform destinations into spaces where adolescents can stay and use facilities comfortably.

These four parameters encompass 29 sub-parameters that adolescents and stakeholders identified as essential (see Figure 1). The framework became powerful precisely because adolescents had shaped it: when city officials implemented the PSAF, they were implementing standards that young people themselves had validated.

## Proof of Concept: Participatory Design and Real-World Transformation

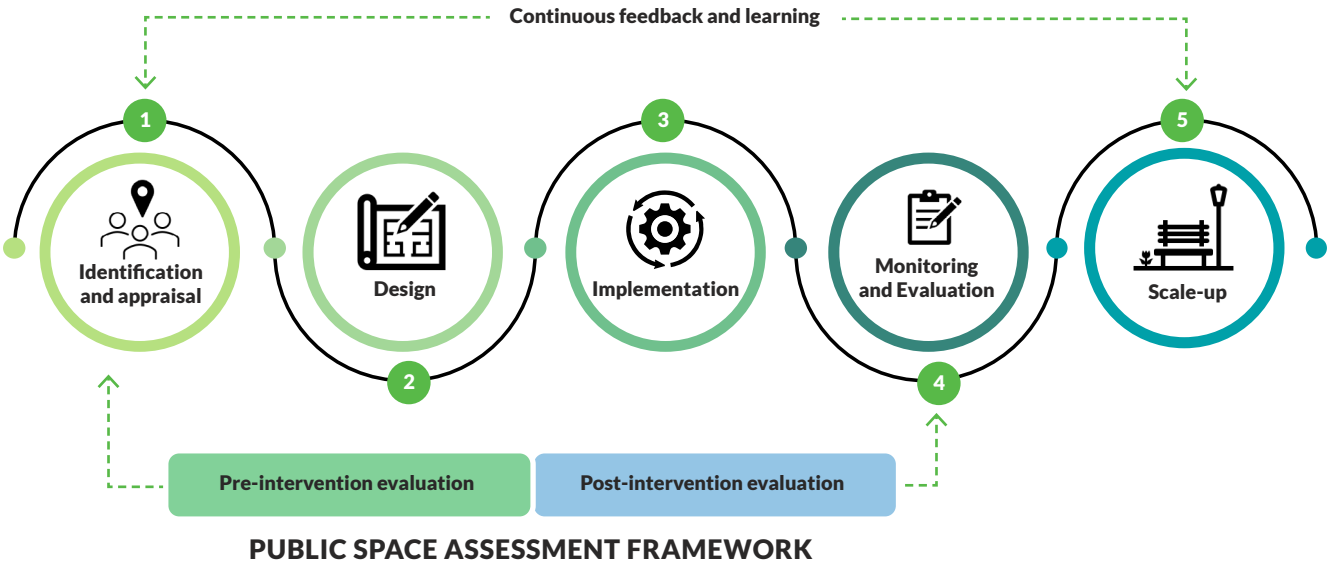
Conventional municipal public space development follows a linear sequence — site identification, appraisal, design, implementation, and maintenance — that lacks feedback loops. End-users, including adolescents, are rarely consulted about their needs, and once implemented, spaces often fail because they were designed without understanding actual user behaviour. The project introduced a crucial innovation: a five-stage PSAF-informed process that embeds evidence-based decision-making whilst maintaining planning logic.

The revised process runs as follows: (1) **Identification and appraisal**— using PSAF to identify public spaces and conduct gap analysis; (2) **Design**— developing interventions addressing identified gaps, informed by adolescent insights; (3) **Implementation**— realising PSAF-informed design through tactical urbanism or permanent intervention; (4) **Monitoring and evaluation**— redeploying PSAF to measure whether interventions achieved desired outcomes;

*"Everybody should be treated equally and taken care of in public spaces. Differently abled, children, adolescents and elderly people should be able to access and use public spaces as much as adults."*

**— Adolescent girl, aged 14, Bhubaneswar**

*Figure 2: PSAF process for public space creation that included evidence-based pathways and participatory planning*



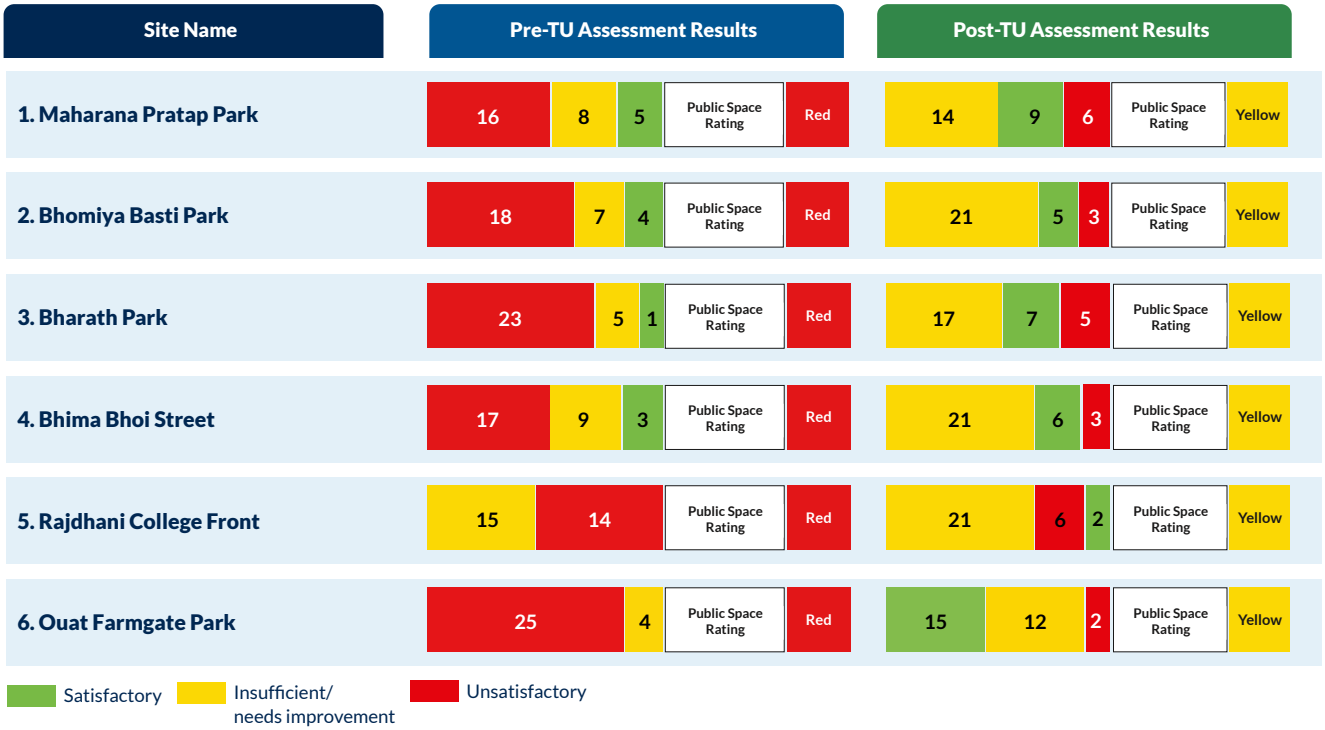

and (5) **Scale-up**— sharing learnings to guide improvements in additional spaces or transition tactical interventions to permanent municipal infrastructure (see Figure 2).

## Six Sites, Eleven Thousand Square Metres Transformed

The project selected six public spaces in contrasting contexts across both cities — open grounds, neighbourhood parks, streets, and incidental spaces — totalling 11,071 square metres and representing diverse institutional arrangements and community demographics. Adolescents conducted PSAF audits across these sites, identifying specific gaps: some spaces had good accessibility but lacked activities; others offered facilities but felt unsafe (see Figure 3).

The interventions that followed were neither grand nor expensive, but they reflected adolescent priorities and emerged directly from PSAF assessments — not top-down impositions but solutions to barriers adolescents had identified. Most importantly, after the interventions, the sites experienced increased usage, particularly among adolescents,

*Figure 3: Pre and post assessment of six public spaces by adolescents in Bhubaneshwar and Jaipur.*











*Post intervention PSAF survey and public space usage*

irrespective of gender or ability. Community leaders noticed the changes, and municipal officials observed that spaces designed through adolescent participation were used authentically, not as vacant infrastructure awaiting users. The question shifted from "Why include adolescents?" to "How do we scale this approach?"

*"Earlier we had no say, but this space feels like ours now, since we've helped design it. Seeing our ideas come to life makes us want to care for it."*
— Adolescent girl, aged 19, Bhubaneswar

*"This park used to be totally unfit for play, and now my heart is so happy to see how it's transformed! My friends visited yesterday and loved it, and now my family and many neighbouring kids ask me to bring them here to play, exercise and enjoy the space."*
— Adolescent boy, aged 17, Jaipur

## ENABLING FACTORS

### Adolescents as Public Space Ambassadors

Creating lasting change requires more than one-off consultations. The project set an ambitious goal: empower 1,000 adolescents as Public Space Ambassadors — change agents with a deep understanding of adolescent-friendly public spaces and the capacity to advocate for continued improvements. Recruitment occurred through door-to-door visits, school partnerships, community organisation networks, and open community events, each requiring culturally sensitive approaches. In Jaipur, where gender norms restricted girls' participation, local partners invested sustained effort in trust-building. In Bhubaneswar, where resistance to adolescent voices was stronger, partners navigated family and community concerns through dialogue and demonstrated benefits.

The project ultimately engaged 1,900+ individuals —




*Before and after Rajdhani College*

including adolescents, community members, and officials — in capacity-building workshops, and empowered 1,378 adolescents as Public Space Ambassadors, exceeding the target of 1,000. Notably, 773 (approximately 56%) were adolescent girls, addressing historical gender imbalances in civic participation. The selection criteria reflected the project's equity commitment: adolescents aged 10–19 from public and private schools, with a particular focus on lower-income groups, vulnerable communities, and adolescents with disabilities.

### Governance Council with Adolescents as Decision-Makers

Beyond the broader ambassador cohort, a Governance Council provided project oversight and strategic direction. Approximately three adolescents per partner organisation per year participated formally in quarterly meetings, reviewing progress, providing feedback, and leading select activities. This was not symbolic participation: council members contributed to ideation, led workshops, and represented peer voices at city level. Annual rotations ensured new adolescents gained leadership experience whilst outgoing members mentored incoming cohorts. Over five years, 31 adolescent champions served on the council, and their presence demonstrably shifted the project's trajectory into an adolescent-steered initiative, fulfilling its core ambition.

## OUTCOMES

### Behavioural and Social Shifts

The project's most significant impacts transcended infrastructure. Adolescents developed expanded civic identities, beginning to view themselves not as passive residents but as active contributors to urban development. Caregivers and community members shifted their perceptions commensurately: in traditionally patriarchal contexts, particularly in Jaipur, families began recognising adolescents as decision-makers capable of contributing meaningfully to household and community matters. Community leaders and Resident Welfare Associations demonstrated an increasing willingness to include adolescents in neighbourhood governance — a change that appeared organic rather than mandated, suggesting that direct engagement in meaningful tasks can establish credibility that abstract appeals for "youth participation" may not accomplish.

### Organisational and Institutional Adoption

Partner organisations embedded public space work into their institutional agendas. Aaina adopted a period-friendly city initiative to address menstrual health access in public spaces; I-India established a Public Space Lab, extending work into new geographies. The Bhubaneswar city administration formally committed to applying PSAF methodology in future public space development — not a rhetorical endorsement but a budgetary commitment. Success in Odisha's capital inspired other municipalities: the industrial town of Rourkela conducted PSAF audits, identified gaps, and informed municipal design solutions. Over 350 city-level stakeholders participated in PSAF testing and public space improvement efforts, and national and sub-national policy forums began incorporating adolescent-centred public space design into their deliberations.

### Critical Learnings

Meaningful inclusion is contextual and demanding. What worked in Bhubaneswar's civically engaged environment

differed from what was needed in Jaipur's tradition-bound settings. Even within a single city, neighbourhoods exhibited distinct dynamics. Trust-building, addressing power imbalances, and supporting adolescents in occupying leadership spaces in contexts where they are traditionally silent require time and sensitivity that linear project timelines routinely underestimate.

First-practice projects require patience and persistence. In settings without prior precedent for adolescent participation in urban planning, demonstration projects must invest heavily in securing institutional buy-in. City officials frequently asked for international precedents and global evidence; when the answer was "this is novel," officials hesitated. Overcoming scepticism through proof of concept — showing spaces that work, documenting behavioural change, proving adolescent capacity — required sustained effort.

Consortium models add value but demand investment. Local partners' knowledge of adolescent needs, community dynamics, and cultural contexts was irreplaceable. Yet technical gaps in urban development, tactical urbanism, and monitoring and evaluation required substantial capacity investment. Future projects should budget explicitly for technical support to consortium partners.

Adolescent voice must shape project design from inception. Engaging adolescents mid-project rather than in early planning stages yields different — and lesser — outcomes. Future projects should position adolescents at the very outset of planning and design.

Alignment with local governance rhythms matters critically. Municipal budget cycles, election timelines, administrative transitions, and policy windows create opportunities or obstacles for institutional adoption. Understanding and leveraging these rhythms accelerates scaling.

## Conclusion: Adolescents as Essential Contributors to Urban Futures

Adolescents occupy a paradoxical position in urban planning: too old to benefit from provisions made for children, too young to be treated as adult stakeholders, and too often regarded with suspicion in the public spaces they inhabit. In India, this exclusion is compounded by gender norms, economic inequality, and the near-total absence of adolescent-specific standards in municipal design. Yet India's 253 million adolescents represent not a burden but an opportunity — one that can only be realised if cities recognise safe, vibrant public spaces for play and recreation as essential infrastructure for development, not amenities for leisure. Physical activity, social connection, creative expression, and informal socialisation in public spaces shape health trajectories, psychological development, and future civic engagement.

The five-year initiative in Bhubaneswar and Jaipur established a replicable model — systematic assessment, participatory design, tactical implementation, and institutional scaling — and, where no precedent existed, demonstrated that adolescents are competent co-designers of the spaces they need. Drawing on the principle in General Comment No. 17 on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that states must make deliberate effort to create enabling environments for play among the most marginalised, this project offers more than a framework: it models a fundamental mind shift in which inclusion is not retrofitted onto urban space but built into the very process of imagining it.

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# News From Our Branches

IPA World currently has branches in 19 Countries.
Here we share updates from 9 of them!



## IPA Australia (Play Australia)

Play Australia's work continues to be shaped by Plan4Play, its long-term vision for a country where play is recognised as essential to health, learning, and wellbeing.

National Play Summits remain a cornerstone of this agenda. In February, Dr Naomi Lott opened the year's series with a compelling examination of the right to play as a foundation for child wellbeing and human flourishing.

*Advocacy at the National Level* also advanced significantly. A parliamentary event in February drew cross-party engagement and resulted in a joint statement in support of play — a meaningful signal that play is gaining recognition as a public good at the federal level. To mark International Day of Play, Play Australia distributed online advocacy toolkits to members and supporters, with shareable resources and tailored messaging for schools, councils, services, and families.

On the policy front, Play Australia is developing a position paper on play and adolescence with an expert reference group. The paper will address a longstanding gap in how play is understood across the lifespan, offering evidence, frameworks, and practical recommendations for educators, planners, health professionals, and policy makers.

*Workforce development* continues through the Certificate in Playwork Practice, delivered in partnership with Play Wales. Nearly 150 people have been trained since 2024, and a third cohort is now underway — building a national community of skilled playworkers grounded in international best practice.



## IPA Hong Kong China (Playright Hong Kong)

Playright Hong Kong continues to expand community-based play through mobile outreach, bringing creative play experiences to kindergartens, schools, social welfare organisations, and government departments.

The "*Building Tung Chung Together"* Project, supported by the Swire Trust and coordinated by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, reached a successful conclusion in March 2026. Since 2020, the project has united over 80 agencies, schools, businesses, and 550 volunteers to serve a rapidly growing community of more than 200,000 people. Playright's Play In Community Team used this platform to connect with young ethnic minority residents, contributing to a more inclusive and cohesive neighbourhood. A Project 2.0 is eagerly anticipated.

In March 2026, Playright was invited by the HKSAR Government, with sponsorship from the Hong Kong Jockey Club, to run its Signature Outreach Play event at the Hong Kong Flower Show in Victoria Park. The event welcomed more than 6,000 participants from over 2,000 families, who co-created a vibrant, joyful play space — a powerful demonstration of what child-led, community-centred play can look like.






*Photo credit: Open Tree Foundation.*

## IPA India

IPA India's member organisations have had a rich and collaborative period, with initiatives spanning national urban programmes, cross-sector summits, and citizen-led design advocacy — all converging around a shared conviction that children's right to play must be visible, protected, and planned for.

Nurturing Neighbourhoods 2.0 Gains Momentum: The Nurturing Neighbourhoods 2.0 programme — supported by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, the Van Leer Foundation, and IPA India member WRI India — continues to embed child- and caregiver-centred thinking into city systems at scale. A National Peer Workshop in Bengaluru in December 2025 brought together representatives from over 15 network cities to celebrate milestones and chart pathways forward. Across the network, cities are pioneering context-specific models: from Jabalpur's play masterplan and Pune's Child-Friendly Design Guidelines, to Chennai's first Model Anganwadi and Kochi's upcoming Metro phase — the first in India designed with an early childhood lens. Learn more at nurturingneighbourhoods.in.



Play Summit 2025: Finding Play: This momentum was reflected at the Play Summit 2025, hosted by IPA India member the Open Tree Foundation in December 2025 at IES College of Architecture, Mumbai. Over 350 participants from education, design, health, and the social sector — including several IPA members — gathered for panels, hackathons, workshops, and experiential play spaces, collectively reaffirming that play is not peripheral but foundational to how children learn and thrive.

Children Reimagine Ahmedabad: That spirit of putting children at the centre of city-making carried into February 2026, when IPA India members aProCh and WRI India partnered for the AmdavadNXT initiative, engaging children and young people to reimagine Ahmedabad's streets and public transport as safer, more inclusive spaces. More than 65 schools and NGOs working with children participated in the Innovation challenge, and more than 4000 children visited the convening and the exhibition. Through the Junior Urbanist Roundtable and a three-day immersive exhibition at the Sabarmati Riverfront, children presented visions for pedestrian-friendly, play-centred cities — placing the smallest voices at the heart of urban planning.

Documenting the State of Play Across India: Underpinning all of this activity is a commitment to

building a stronger evidence base for play in India. IPA India and its partners are embarking on a new and significantly expanded edition of the State of Play in India research — one of the most ambitious studies of children's play ever undertaken in the country. Drawing on a nationwide network of study partners, the research will document when, where, how, and under what conditions children play across urban and rural contexts, captured through surveys with parents and children, play sufficiency assessments of everyday play spaces in select cities, a national photo documentation competition, and — for the first time — an exploration of how climate change is affecting children's play. A national synthesis report will follow, with highlights to be presented at the IPA Triennial Conference in Christchurch.




## IPA United Kingdom

Branch collaboration for International Day of Play
IPA branches in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have collaborated to join forces with the UK Children's Play Policy Forum.

Together, they have called on all schools to join the Play 31 Challenge on 11 June 2026, to mark the International Day of Play and celebrate every child's right to play. At a time when children's access to play is increasingly restricted, Play Challenge 31 aims to highlight that school environments can provide a range of rich play experiences which contribute to children's improved health, happiness and life chances.

Across all branches, members are encouraging schools to extend break times, provide resources to support playful outdoor learning, and create a giant '31' with chalk, loose parts or other materials.

Ahead of the International Day of Play, branch representatives discussed the collaboration.

**Paul Soames.** Chairperson of IPA England:
*"IPA England is very happy to support and promote the UK wide celebration of the International Day of Play. This year's focus will be to encourage schools to offer 31 minutes of continuous play on the 11th June through the Play 31 Challenge. We hope that this will encourage schools across England and the other countries to recognise the importance of play in the physical, mental, and emotional development of all children."*

**Shelly McGee,** Vice Chairperson of IPA Ireland:
*"Play isn't a luxury – it's a right! Under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child is entitled to rest, play, and enjoy their childhood. Schools across Ireland have a powerful role in bringing this to life, and the Play 31 Challenge is a fun, visible way to celebrate and champion that right."*

**Jacqueline O'Loughlin** chairperson of IPA Northern Ireland:
*"Every child deserves time to play, explore and simply be a child. Schools across Northern Ireland have a vital role to play in protecting this right, and the Play 31 Challenge is a brilliant opportunity to make that commitment visible."*

**Stacey Marko,** Vice chairperson of IPA Scotland
*"At IPA Scotland, along with our partners, we are excited to support a wonderful campaign advocating for every child's right to play in all spaces. Children express a desire for more playtime, and since IDoP falls on a school day this year, we are collaborating with schools to promote an extra 31 minutes of play. Our goal is to highlight the importance of play in ensuring a happy and healthy childhood for all children.*

**Marianne Mannello,** secretary (IPA Cymru Wales):
*"As the International Day of Play falls on a school day this year, members of IPA Cymru Wales feel that it is a perfect opportunity for schools to protect playtime. Our hope is that the Play 31 challenge, and the resources we have created to support it, will inspire schools to think about how more time for play can be integrated into every school day."*




## IPA Taiwan

On 12 March 2026, IPA Taiwan (IPAT) hosted a "No-Plug Games" Carnival at the National Museum of Marine Science and Technology (NMSMT), bringing together approximately 300 children from the NMSMT Kindergarten and neighbouring institutions in a joyful, inclusive celebration of play.

The event coincided with a visit by IPA President Robyn Monro Miller, who attended after a tour of the National Taiwan University Children's Hospital. President Miller joined IPAT board members to observe the carnival and engage in wide-ranging discussions about IPA's mission and future plans.

In follow-up conversations with IPAT President Dr Ben Wu and Founding President Dr Caston Chang, President Miller heard about the branch's longstanding activities — including bi-monthly forum workshops, an annual exhibition of children's toys, games markets, and senior empowerment programmes. Members shared their research and development achievements, and President Miller offered her recognition and commitment to IPAT's growing international engagement — a gesture welcomed as a boost to the branch's future.

## Portugal

Since becoming formally established as an NGO, IPA Portugal has strengthened its role in promoting playful childhoods and child- and play-friendly communities, bringing together people, institutions, and resources in a more collaborative way around children's right to play.

To support this mission, the board has created six internal working groups covering advocacy, research, training, communications, international relations, and fundraising — each coordinated voluntarily by board members according to their interests and expertise.

IPA Portugal has launched a monthly public webinar series on children's rights and play, held on the fourth Wednesday of each month. The opening session on "Playing in the Streets" (22 April) attracted around 100 registrations. The organisation also submitted a national grant application to the Sonae Education Prize for its project *"The Power of Play in the Construction of Being a Teacher"*.

Visibility has grown through an active social media presence and new institutional partnerships — with Naturalizar.pt, focused on repurposing natural resources from Storm Kristin to improve school play spaces, and with Movimento Bloom, promoter of Outdoor Classroom Day.

IPA Portugal has contributed meaningfully to public debate: its president gave an interview to Jornal de Leiria on play as collective healing for communities affected by Storm Kristin, later referenced in a broadcast on national public radio Antena 1. In April, the president was also invited to present and contribute a preface to *"Brincar às lutas no jardim-de-infância"* ("Play Fighting in Kindergarten"), a research publication from the University of Évora.

Looking ahead, IPA Portugal is preparing activities for International Day of Play on 11 June and will host its first national conference on 13 July in Óbidos, in partnership with the Municipality of Óbidos.

## IPA United States of America

IPA USA has had an active period across advocacy, programming, and crisis response.

Its on-demand conference, Children at Play, in Nature, Classrooms, and Neighbourhoods, featured 42 sessions with presenters from eight countries. Available to IPA members worldwide at $70, all sessions remain accessible through December 2026. Contact ipausa2019user@gmail.com for more information.

In April, IPA USA Co-President Deb met with sixth graders from Genesee Community Charter School in Rochester, NY, supporting their capstone project on urban play and play equity. The students — who visited Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC — will present their findings to the Rochester City Council and plan to participate in International Day of Play on 11 June.

For Screen-Free Week (4–10 May), IPA USA sent proclamation requests to all 50 state Governors and Departments of Education, spotlighting how screens are displacing children's play. The initiative was complemented by Children's Book Week, with recommended reading lists shared through the PlayBlast newsletter.

IPA USA has also launched a Children in Crisis initiative, supporting communities affected by natural disasters and civic unrest. Planning is underway in Minnesota to bring play days to impacted families. Two revised crisis handbooks — one for early childhood practitioners, one for parents and community supports — have been developed and distributed.

IPA USA acknowledges a difficult national climate, with widespread anxiety and uncertainty affecting families and communities. The organisation asks international colleagues to keep them in their thoughts.



# IPA Membership Benefits

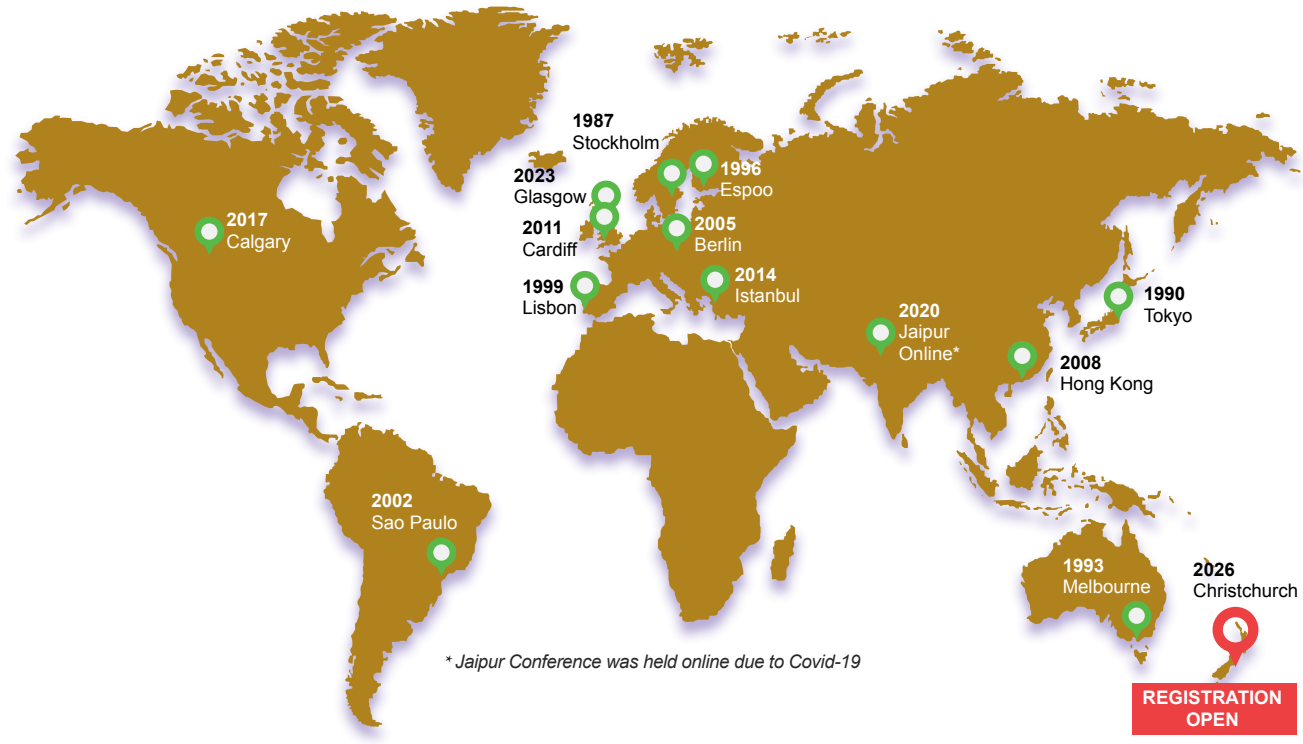
**When you become a member of IPA, you will connect with a global network of passionate individuals advocating for the child's right to play. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to participate in global conferences and projects, and you can write for us and have your work featured in the IPA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




** Jaipur Conference was held online due to Covid-19*




## Play 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.

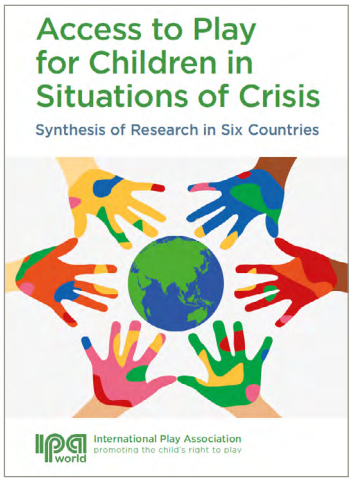
Sessions are one hour long and start at 12 p.m. London time.
Do you have a presentation or idea for a webinar? Email us your bio and a brief 200 summary of the topic you want to share secretary@ipaworld.global

## 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.



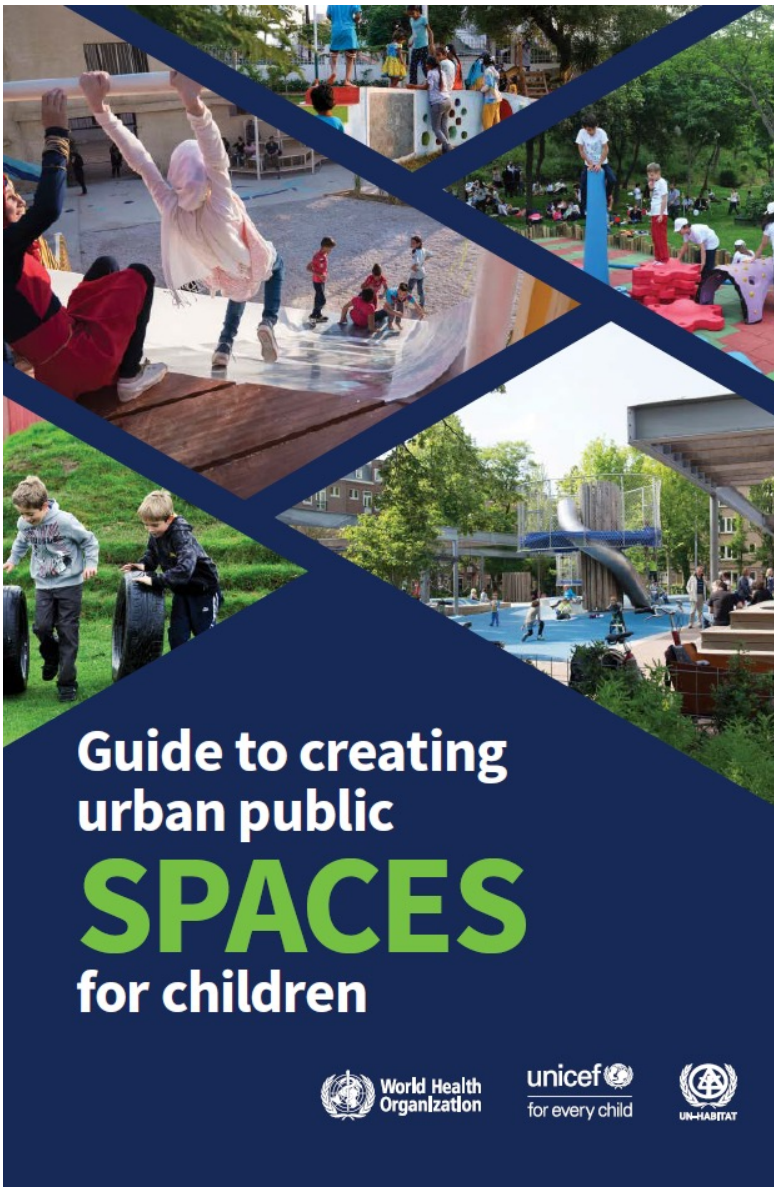
# Guide to creating urban public SPACES for children

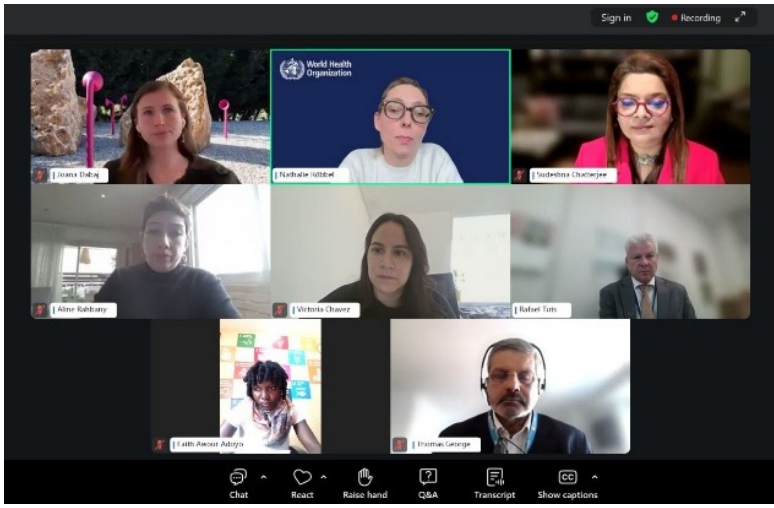
The International Play Association (IPA) community will want to take careful note of a landmark publication released on 21 January 2026: *Guide to Creating Urban Public SPACES for Children,* jointly published by the World Health Organisation (WHO), UNICEF, and UN-Habitat.

The research and writing underpinning the Guide to Creating Urban Public Spaces for Children were led by **Sudeshna Chatterjee,** IPA-World trustee and editor of Play Rights, working closely with a core research team comprising **Anupama Nallari** (IPA India, and member of Play Rights' editorial board) and **Chandrani Dutta.** The guide was jointly developed and published by three United Nations agencies — the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) — whose collective commitment to children's rights and urban equity made this publication possible.

Developed through one of the most rigorous research processes ever applied to children's urban environments—drawing on over 1,000 documents, 72 global experts across 22 countries, 30 key informant interviews, children's consultations across nine countries, and a database of more than 100 case studies—the guide introduces the SPACES framework as a governing structure for child-friendly urban planning worldwide.

For the play sector, the guide's significance is profound. Play is not treated as a peripheral amenity but as a core governing principle—Principle 2 of the SPACES framework explicitly mandates that cities plan for play everywhere, protect liminal and informal play spaces, reclaim streets through play-street schemes, and uphold children's right to risky play. Crucially, playability is woven through all six principles: safety, access, health, equity, and sustainability, each of which carries direct implications for where and how children play.



# A Review of the SPACES guide by Theresa Casey

Supporting planners and city actors to create public spaces that enable children's right to play, health, and participation in cities, the Guide to creating urban public SPACES for children developed by the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO), is child-centred, practical and, with a vivid array of examples, an inspiring call to action.

The SPACES guide defines public spaces for children as places that can be easily and freely accessed and enjoyed by all children, either alone or with friends or family, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, social status or physical ability. It recognises that these spaces may be mostly (or exclusively) used by children, such as playgrounds, or by everyone, such as streets and parks, which may be intergenerational and used for a variety of purposes.

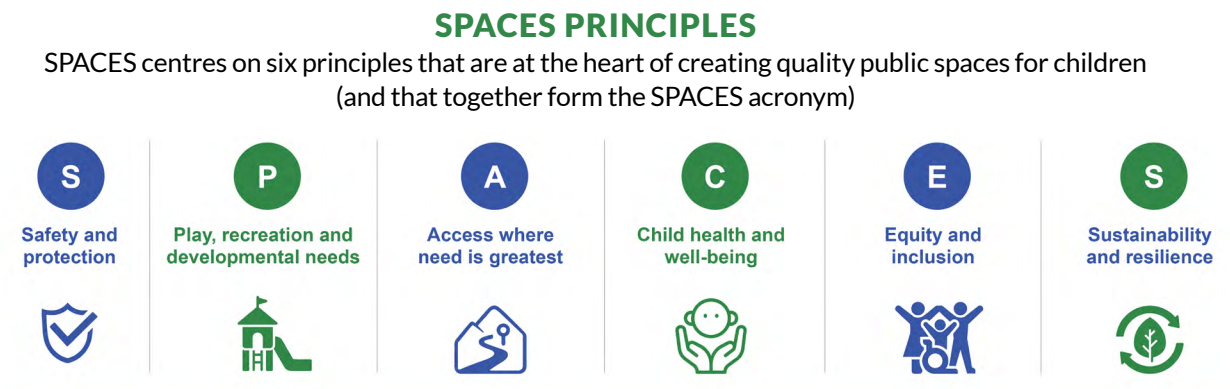
The first of three main sections defines public spaces for children, considering scale (city, neighbourhood, housing/domestic), categories (streets, public facilities, public open spaces, and liminal spaces), and urban contexts (planned, informal, and slum contexts, and crisis- and resilience-building contexts).

The six SPACES principles and the guidance in section two give us the guide's title. Each principle is clearly and concisely outlined in language accessible to the wide range of people involved in making space, from community actors, designers and artists to city planners and decision-makers. Benefitting from well-selected, characterful examples, the short case studies and images lift the SPACES principles off the page. Overall, the principles, while ambitious, appear well-designed to support conversations at all stages of projects, allowing aims and processes to be effectively framed and enabling diverse stakeholders to explore common ground and shared understandings of place-making projects and programmes at whatever scale.

The third section of the guide, "Implementing SPACES: pathways, activities and tools", makes this a very doable guide, offering activities for creating, managing and encouraging the use of public spaces for children across the contexts, scales and categories described in sections one and two. Engaging disabled children in these processes could have been made more explicit. Often overlooked due to inadvertent (or otherwise) ableist attitudes, disabled children become an invisible group in society, especially since various barriers result in them not inhabiting public space to the extent or in the same ways as their non-disabled peers.

The SPACES guide moves us into new territory by recognising and valuing 'liminal spaces', the marginal spaces, such as stairwells, alleys, and neglected plots of ground, which children inhabit, often beyond the gaze of adults. By recognising these as a distinct type of public space for children which can nurture children's "cultures and adventures", the point of view we gain from the guide is imbued with a distinctively child-level perspective on place.

This perspective is also evident in the importance given to children playing in public space. From the first line of the foreword and throughout the guide, children's right to play is intrinsic to the approach, both recognising play as a crucial behaviour to be supported, a right to be upheld, and seeing play as a way children shape space and enhance the liveability of cities. This also highlights how public spaces for children help to achieve multiple Sustainable





# Vale Dr. Jan Van Gils

*Former President, International Play Association*

by **Robyn Monro Miller** | President, International Play Association

It is with great sadness that I share, on behalf of the global IPA community, news of the passing of Dr. Jan Van Gils, a former President of the International Play Association and a treasured figure across our movement.

A Belgian by birth, Jan held a doctorate in pedagogic sciences and served as Director of the Research Centre for Childhood and Society in Belgium. He was the author of several books and a thinker whose influence shaped the play and children's rights movements across Europe and well beyond. Alongside his presidency of IPA, he led the International Council for Children's Play and founded the European Network for Child Friendly Cities, steering it with quiet authority until his retirement in 2016. In 2002, together with Johan Haarhuis of the Netherlands, he established the Child in the City Foundation, inaugurating its first conference in Bruges that same year. The conference has since become a cornerstone gathering for children's rights advocates, academics, practitioners and policy makers around the world.

Jan was a member of the IPA working group that contributed to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 on article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the landmark interpretation of children's right to rest, leisure, play, recreation, cultural life and the arts. He returned to that work often in his speaking and writing, and quoted from it freely. His passion for playful cities was inseparable from this, a vision he carried into every room he entered and every conversation he had.

In the messages members have shared since news of his passing, Jan is described in remarkably consistent terms: kind, wise, supportive, engaging. He was generous with his time and unstinting in his encouragement, particularly of those newer to the field. He listened in a way that made people feel genuinely heard, and he had a trademark habit of scratching his head as he spoke, often just before offering the insight that reframed the whole discussion.

The IPA family has lost one of its most thoughtful and humane voices. On behalf of the IPA Board, our National Branches, and members around the world, our deepest condolences go to his family, to his many colleagues across Belgium and Europe, and to all who were fortunate enough to call him a friend.

**Vale, Jan.**



2-5 November 2026

# IPA 2026 WORLD CONFERENCE

## At Christchurch, New Zealand

www.ipachristchurch2026.com

*"We're looking forward to you joining us for five days to hear about play, learn about play, play, and participate in a programme of social and cultural events. We have a unique play environment here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. We enjoy playing in bare feet in the bush and at the beach, and we love the outdoors, and all things play. Our play sector is on a journey of change and discovery, and we're ready to share it with you. We can't wait to see you and hear what you've been doing since Glasgow last year. We will release submission and booking dates in early 2025.*
***Save the date in your diary now, and we look forward to seeing you in November 2026!"***

Register and pay by **30 June 2026** and you'll go in the draw to win a complimentary registration to gift to a colleague or friend.

Play Aotearoa is excited to invite you to Christchurch, New Zealand, for the IPA World Triennial Conference from **Monday, November 2, to Friday, November 5 2026.**

Days one to four will be held at **Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre** in central Christchurch, and day five will be field trips in the Christchurch area.



international play association

promoting the child's right to play

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