



## Active Transport and Play - The Perfect Match

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Play is an essential activity for all age groups as it promotes physical, mental and emotional wellbeing as well as stimulating social development. The Convention on the Rights of the Child that was ratified in 1989 recognises the right to play as one of the fundamental precepts of a child-friendly city. However, the term *play* cannot be constrained to simply refer to the provision of conventional, prescriptive areas such as playgrounds. Rather, a true child-friendly city is one that is actively engaged in fulfilling the right of every young citizen (under the age of 18) to a wide range of standards. These include their participatory rights in their communities as equal citizens, their rights to be safe and protected from harm and their rights to have environments supporting their needs to learn, play and be social (UNICEF 2013).

Children's ability to freely move around and engage in unstructured play can be a true indicator of the child-friendliness of a place. Indeed, the UNESCO initiated project Growing Up in an Urbanising World, lists both the positive and negative indicators for 'child-based environmental quality' (Chawla 2002). In relation to neighbourhood environment, the positive indicators such as 'safety and free movement', 'peer gathering places', 'varied activity settings' and 'safe green spaces' all directly relate to children's mobility and their ability to freely play within their local environments. In contrast, 'heavy traffic', 'lack of gathering places' and 'lack of varied activity settings' indicate low environmental quality for children.

Unfortunately, there has been an increasing trend, particularly across the Western countries, to move away from more free forms of unstructured play in local outdoor environments towards more structured, organised and supervised forms that usually take place in private indoor places. One of the key reasons for this trend away from unstructured outdoor activity is the pervasive dominance of the car in our cities and the parental concerns over traffic safety (Loon & Frank 2011; Whitzman & Mizrachi 2012). The dominant use of cars in our day-to-day mobilities including those to transport children for their daily activities counteract children's ability to freely and safely move around their local environments and engage in play and can result in the development of social, emotional and mental problems (Hillman 2006; Gill 2008; Gray 2013).

These social, emotional and mental problems associated with the loss of active play opportunities in the highly organised and supervised lifestyles of today's children continue to gain attention. A number of researchers in this field articulate the prevalence of a loss of excitement and essential life skills such as confidence, creativity, negotiation and sense of belonging due to parents removing



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exposure to various risks in children's lives and driving them to most of their activities (Tranter 2016; O'Brien 2003).

In fact, with the car becoming the standard travel mode when accessing school and other educational and recreational activities, children have essentially disappeared from the streets and public places. This results in children missing out on many play opportunities that non-car based travel modes, such as walking, cycling, skateboarding and scootering afford.

Unfortunately, due to our busy, individualist contemporary lifestyles, we normalise the way that children are transported to most of their activities by private cars. This normalisation of children's car-based mobilities combined with the overall traffic safety concerns further reinforce the idea that we should have child specific places that are segregated from broader neighbourhoods. Despite a widespread critique of these approaches (Broberg, Kyttä & Fagerholm 2013; Gillespie 2013), they are still commonly implemented across the Australian cities, often with an aim to keep children out of harm's way. It has been argued that the provision of these specific areas may actually impact on the capacity to undertake the said activity outside of these areas (for example skateboarding being banned outside of skate parks) (Woolley and Johns 2001). Instead, it is important to embed playfulness in children's everyday places (Christensen et al. 2016).

By nature, it is difficult (and less relevant) to embed playfulness and child-friendliness into children's everyday places when these places are confined to private indoor venues or highly prescriptive child specific public places. More importantly when children spend most of their transit time in cars, where the street and wider public places become a passive backdrop to the car window, it is easy to ignore the need for these places to be child-friendly that facilitate free and safe play.

In contrast, when children walk, cycle, skate or scooter for their daily activities they are offered instant opportunities to play. Since the trip becomes more of a 'journey' than simply getting from point A to B, these play opportunities could be in the form of playing tag with friends or taking the opportunity to climb a tree along the way. In addition, as opposed to passively sitting in the car, active transport modes provide better opportunities for children to have a playful, sensory engagement with their local environments, including with the plants and animals surrounding them.

There is justified concern about the loss of opportunities for children to play and explore their local environments and how this affects them in terms of their physical, social, emotional and mental development as per the growing body of research. Our efforts to change these trends should be proportional to the consequences. With this, we need more comprehensive, more effective and longer-lasting, larger-scale policies and programs to promote the conditions that facilitate children's safe active transport and active play at the level where cars have hitherto been promoted. In the case of school-aged children, these policies need to be supported by various educational programs and resources for communities at the level of the street, neighbourhood, school, sporting clubs and other extra-curricular activity providers.

To fulfil the right of children to play within their local environments, we need to embed child-friendliness into our everyday places. This would mean a shift from the provision of prescriptive, often age specific play spaces only to child-friendly streets and public spaces, that span 'from the front doors, foyers, corridors, verandahs to the street, the square, the park, the nature strips' (Gilbert et al. 2018, p. 118). One of the most important prerequisites for this kind of change is to diffuse the privilege of cars in our communities by taking deliberate actions. These actions include continuing investment in the redistributing of the public and private space across our neighbourhoods through the building and maintenance of safe walking and cycling paths and associated infrastructure including green spaces, trees, pedestrian crossings, accessible public places that welcome informal play, scooter and skateboard friendly public places (as opposed to single-



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purpose skate parks only) and reducing speed limits and traffic flow to ensure traffic safety (Gilbert et al. 2018).

Our communities have much to gain from investing in active transport modes such as walking and cycling as they are conducive to play while reducing the dominance of private cars which are a significant barrier to play.

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### Brief Bio:

Hulya is an urban planner, demographer and researcher with over 10 years of industry experience with both local government and non-government sectors. She is currently completing her PhD on the role of child and youth friendly places in creating socially and environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods in the context of active travel and active play at the School of Art, Architecture and Design at UniSA.



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