



Fostering free play

to improve the well-being of children and restore their right to the city

The importance of free play for healthy child development and independent mobility

Free play refers to activities that are spontaneously initiated by children, without planning or intervention by an adult. The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) defines it in these terms: "We are talking about free play when children follow their instincts, ideas and interests without having a result imposed on them". It's about children "determining their own limits. [...] Free play can be facilitated, but not imposed". This practice allows young children to have fun, and to use their five senses to discover their environment, to gain self-confidence, to bond, to experiment, etc.

Having documented and recognized its impact on the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development of children and adolescents since 1989, free play is considered to be a right of the child¹ by the United Nations (UN). More concretely, free play contributes to the well-being of children in all aspects described by the World Health Organization (WHO)².

Benefits



PHYSICAL HEALTH

by reducing sedentary behaviours, free play promotes musculoskeletal and cardiovascular health³;



MOTOR SKILLS

by enabling children to move freely within a space, free play improves gross motor skills, reflexes, etc.;



MENTAL HEALTH

free play helps reduce anxiety and contributes to the development of self-esteem and social relationships;



SOCIAL SKILLS

free play allows children to communicate better, to cooperate and to bond with their peers;



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

free play helps children develop empathy, listening, the concept of compromise, fear management, etc.;



LEARNING SKILLS

free play promotes cognitive development, especially concentration and memory;



COPING AND RESILIENCE

children engaged in free play learn to manage risk, deal with changing situations and overcome challenges.

And beyond these benefits, free play itself acts as a great source of pleasure for children. Playing is fun, entertaining and joyful!

INDEPENDENT MOBILITY

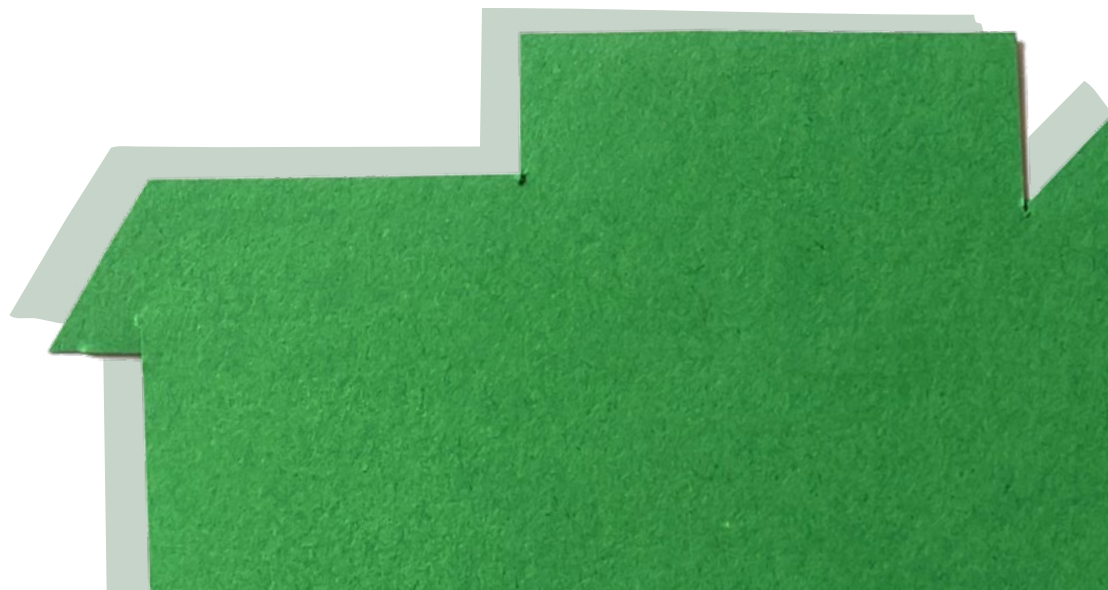
In the same spirit as free play, independent mobility refers to the freedom to move around and explore independently, without the supervision of an adult. While it obviously has physical health benefits, independent mobility is also essential for children's social, cognitive and emotional development. Traveling alone or with friends means becoming responsible, gradually taming your immediate environment and potential risks, learning to orient yourself in urban space, anticipating dangers, etc.

Providing young children with a safe and friendly environment so that they can move freely on foot or by bike around their home and their school has very positive impacts on their well-being, but also allows for the fun and empowering exploration of the neighborhood, in a routine and spontaneous way. The child also gradually acquires skills that will later enable them to approach the complexity of the city with confidence.



“It is essential to differentiate risk taking from real danger, and to put as much importance on health and pleasure as we put on safety”

— Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) ⁴





Giving children the right to the city

A REBALANCING OF THE SHARING OF PUBLIC SPACE

In recent decades, there has been a trend towards the design of playground equipment that is standardized and minimizes the risk of injury to users. These structures inhibit children's creativity, limit their freedoms and strongly condition children's use of the city. Meanwhile, a large and ever-growing portion of the urban territory has been dedicated to motor vehicle traffic, in a functionalist perspective established in the 1950s.

Responding to the health and ecological challenges of our time, it is essential to change the paradigm and work to create cities that consider functionality at the human scale, giving citizens a place of choice in public spaces. Pedestrian streets, friendly streets, shared streets, slow streets, quiet streets - the types of street sharing projects vary, but the vision underlying the redistribution of the public domain is the same: to offer a better balance between modes of travel and between different users, in order to create safer, friendlier and more sustainable living environments.

AN URBAN SPACE DESIGNED BY AND FOR CHILDREN

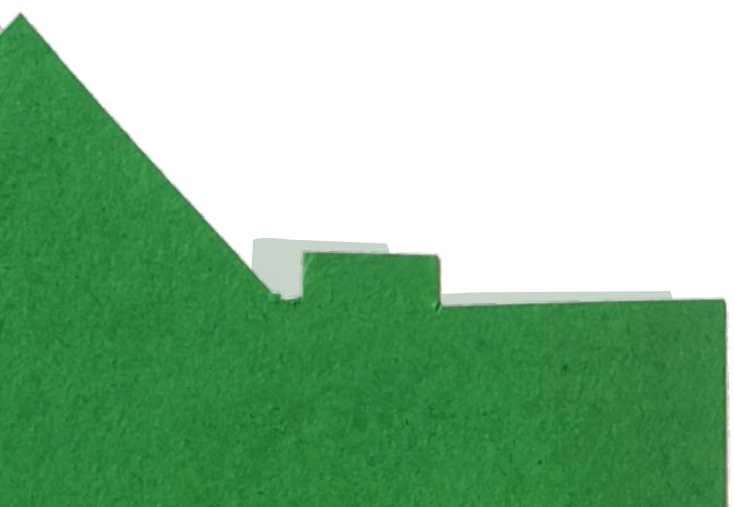
Around the world, interest in the benefits of free play and independent mobility for children is beginning to shape how the public realm is developed. Various reports and guides have been produced to support professionals in this field, including:

- ***Designing for urban childhoods***, produced by Arup in 2017, presents 40 case studies leading to the formulation of 14 interventions and 15 best practices for professionals and institutions;
- The ***Building Better Cities with Young Children and Families*** report designed by 8 80 Cities; and
- The National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) is currently developing the ***Designing Streets for Kids manual*** to supplement the ***Global Street Design Guide*** (2017), based on a support program for municipalities to review the sharing of streets in favor of children.

It is also essential to involve the players most concerned with this work: the children themselves. Since 2000, UNICEF has stressed the importance of participation among young children in democratic processes, particularly in the making of their cities, in order to consider their unique perspective and better understand their priorities. In this spirit, in 2009, Montreal became the first "Child Friendly Municipality" (CFM) in Canada. Now, over 50 Quebec municipalities are CFM accredited.

"Rethinking the city
is trying to restore
spatial justice: who
owns the public
domain, who has
the right to use it,
occupy it, play in it?"

– Tim Gill⁵





Foster the development of the whole community

“Creating multifunctional play spaces – beyond the simple play area – is strengthening daily freedoms and creating public spaces for citizens of all ages to enjoy”

– ARUP⁶

A CITY DESIGNED FOR CHILDREN IS A CITY FOR EVERYONE

Thinking of the city in favor of children means putting vulnerable users at the center, which in turn contributes to the development of the whole community. The equation is simple: a pleasant and safe street for young children will be a pleasant and safe street for all. Like the concept of universal accessibility, urban planning that considers the needs of children has positive outcomes for all users: it is safer, more inclusive, facilitates social interaction, and encourages physical activity, etc.

BENEFITS AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL

In Montreal, whether they are residential “woonerfs”, where children can play safely, or closed streets accompanied by active design measures around schools, recent experiences have had a very positive impact at the neighborhood level. These street-level interventions make it possible to:

- Improve the quality of living environments;
- Create safe and friendly spaces for everyone;
- Encourage active modes of travel;
- Strengthen the social fabric within the community; and
- Improve air quality in the area of intervention.



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1 According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989.

2 « Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity» (WHO).

3 In Canada, the situation is even more concerning : obesity affects 14.73% of boys and 9.92% of girls, and a third of young Quebecers between 5 and 17 years old are considered overweight (Lancet 2017).

4 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, Susan Herrington, MLA, University of British Columbia & William Pickett, Queen's University.

5 “Le bien-être des enfants, la clé de la qualité de vie dans des villes durables” : interview with the researcher and writer Tim Gill in 100°, an online francophone magazine promoting healthy lifestyles among young people.

6 Cities Alive, Designing for urban childhoods, ARUP, 2017.