



Becoming a Play-Friendly City

Learning objectives:

- Define a play-friendly city.
- Describe the role community infrastructure has on the built environment and access to play.
- Identify key stakeholders and practical considerations for implementing actions that improve the playability of a community.
- Identify a framework including criteria, actions and indicators for a municipality to become more play-friendly.

Learning outcome:

Demonstrate an understanding of how to enhance the playability of a municipality.

Introduction

Children's unstructured play is defined as play that is driven by a child's intrinsic motivation and curiosity, and facilitates observational learning through trial-and-error discovery.¹ Engagement in this type of play in challenging outdoor spaces is particularly beneficial, as it increases children's environmental awareness and navigational competency.² Participation in it is influenced by neighbourhood safety, active transportation routes, street traffic, and green space proximity, all of which rely on well-devised infrastructure.^{2,3}

Across Canadian municipalities, many planning decisions aim to remove risk from infrastructure as a means of reducing liability.⁴ This basis for community design leads to a built environment in which there is a lack of accessible, adequate spaces for children's unstructured play.⁴⁻⁶ Children themselves have reported that their use of open spaces for play is mediated by the availability of interesting and/or challenging play equipment, community design features, and the distance they can roam without supervision.²

Communities can capitalize on the influence of the built environment and use infrastructure as a means to drive play participation.⁴ To do so, they should consider integrating child health and development into their approach to urban development.^{8,9}

What is a play-friendly city?

Much of the current conceptualization of play-friendly cities comes from UNICEF's framework for child-friendly cities, which outlines the right of children to an environment that promotes a high quality of life.^{10,11} Child-friendly cities address education, social services, equity, and secure living conditions within a system of local governance that invites child participation. While some of these definitions refer to the built environment and access to play, they do not focus solely on opportunities for children's unstructured play, as a play-friendly city would.¹²⁻¹⁴ A **play-friendly city** is one that:

- Considers children's wellbeing and access to play in its approach to urban planning;¹⁵
- Recognizes the role of infrastructure design in childhood development, and the need for children to be able to access this infrastructure in a healthy, safe manner;¹⁵
- Is developed through an ongoing, practical process requiring both political investment and active participation by children in decision-making;¹⁵
- Provides possibilities for activity that meet the diverse needs of children,¹⁶ mediating children's play and learning by the ability to select new challenges across childhood;¹⁶

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- Prioritizes access to play in children’s everyday environments (home, streets, neighbourhoods, etc.) rather than simply in formal dedicated play spaces;¹⁶ and
- Reflects the importance that children place on informal, proximal play environments by looking to the spaces in which children choose to play and prioritizing necessary child-sensitive improvements.¹⁶

Beyond infrastructure, play-friendly cities fulfill an important role in imparting values to their citizens.¹⁷ In the explicit decision to design for the healthy development and wellbeing of children, jurisdictions and their leaders share the message that children are valuable members of the community.¹⁷ A play-friendly city emphasizes the worthwhile investment of sustainable design that benefits both current and future residents, and seeks to establish an infrastructure system that improves the quality of life for children and adults alike.¹⁷

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This framework will outline broad criteria of *playability*, each comprised of specific municipal action items and measurable indicators or outcomes to support success. Implementation of the recommended actions outlined in each criterion is developed to assist a community to increase their playability and become a play-friendly city.

Important to Know

- Children’s unstructured play has a critical role in the development of creativity; resilience; problem-solving abilities; cognitive skills for academic achievement; and risk management skills.^{5,18}
- Play is the primary mechanism by which children become acquainted with their environment.^{8,9}
- Children’s health behaviours depend on the immediate surroundings that comprise most of the early life environment.⁹
- Community design shapes the built environment and influences the health behaviours (and thus health risks) of a population, which arise from what a person can access in their surroundings.⁹ It thus influences children’s access to opportunities for play.

Collaborative commitment to develop a Play-Friendly City

Collaboratively agreeing upon and committing to criteria and actions outlined in the framework promotes a harmonized approach to child development.¹¹ This process should include local stakeholders and municipal decision-makers who seek to strengthen and expand their jurisdiction’s child-friendly initiatives and infrastructure.¹¹ The framework would be a guiding tool for municipalities in their efforts to increase opportunities for children’s unstructured play.¹¹ The process would provide benefits through:^{9,19}

- Highlighting key areas for capacity building and multi-sectoral collaboration;
- Creating momentum for long-term commitment and sustainable interventions;
- Allowing earmarked funding and resources for specific child-focused initiatives;
- Driving positive competition within the community to achieve measurable results;
- Improving the community’s public reputation and perceived prestige;
- Encouraging community participation and connections between citizens and government; and
- Encouraging the monitoring and evaluation of changes that affect child wellbeing.

Practical Considerations

Administering actions to become more play-friendly should be tailored to the community in question and be informed by the following:

- Financial and human resources needed to implement and continue the municipalities’ actions;

- Coordination between various government organizations that may be separately responsible for infrastructure affecting play (i.e. parks and recreation, education, public health and public safety);
- Actions committed to should consider the governance context and the level of support offered to the community by the municipal governing body; the demographics of the population; the sources of financial and human resources; the timeline of the implementation process; and the establishment of a stakeholder network to coordinate partnerships and hold those accountable to their committed actions;
- Target goals should be relative to the local community context, consider disparities that may exist, and be developed using SMART* criteria;²⁰
- Goals and actions should be decided upon in a collaborative process with all parties who may be influenced by the actions, including community members and children; and
- Indicators should be measurable and align with context-specific goals.

Framework of Action

A framework for a play-friendly city centers around four criteria to improve the *playability* of a community: (1) **participation of children in decision-making**; (2) **safe and active routes around the community**; (3) **safe and accessible informal play environments**; and (4) **evidence-informed design of formal play spaces**. The framework organizes its components under these criteria, with corresponding recommended actions and example measurable indicators. Descriptions of the four criteria are provided below, while possible actions and example indicators are presented in Table 1.

The proposed criteria and action items are drawn from both the literature on barriers to children's unstructured play and the best practices of child-friendly city accreditation mechanisms. They seek to balance adaptability for diverse local needs while supporting the framework in contributing to a child's right to play.¹⁹ Above all the recommended action items are intended to be easy for municipal officials to understand and apply.¹⁹

Criteria 1: Participation of Children in Decision-Making

The purpose of a play-friendly city process is to promote children's active participation in all stages of the design process.^{10,17} Children are valuable citizens of any community and should be encouraged to exercise their right to express their views on matters affecting them. Municipalities and those involved in infrastructure decision-making should work to have children represented, and their views taken into consideration.¹⁰ This goes beyond simply giving children a platform to communicate or identifying perceived needs; it requires substantial engagement with their ideas at a level they are able to understand.^{10,21}

Criteria 2: Safe and Active Routes around the Community

Children's healthy, active living and independent mobility are often facilitated by *walkability* of their surroundings.²² The built environment and its perceived safety can influence parental decisions on how children get around in their community.^{3,22,23} Concerns over traffic and neighbourhood safety often prompt parents to limit their children's independent mobility, further contributing to high volumes of motor vehicle traffic, especially in school zones, and in turn perpetuating commuting concerns. Children, however, actually have a greater risk of injury as a passenger in a motor vehicle than as a pedestrian.²⁴ Importantly, active transportation increases the likelihood that a child will participate in children's

* The SMART goals method is an approach that aims to support the development of strong objectives for a given project. In goal setting strategies, indicators are defined as evidence one can look to in order to see if an overarching goal is being met. The way in which indicators are conceptualized can facilitate or inhibit their success. An effective way to set rigorous indicators is to apply the principles of SMART goal setting, where indicators are: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

unstructured play.²⁴ A play-friendly city must provide children with the means to safely and actively travel around their local environment in ways that promote independence, exploration and access to play opportunities.

Criteria 3: Safe and Accessible Informal Play Environments

A major theme contributing to the decline of children’s unstructured play is the growing perception of public space as adult space.¹⁷ Communities, especially urban ones, are designed to prioritize the interest of working adults and position home and school as the predominant spaces for children.¹⁷ To increase access to play, public space must allow children’s everyday independent mobility to contain opportunities to engage with and explore their world^{16,17} This is particularly relevant in urban settings, where there are few open areas for informal or natural play environments.¹⁶ Play-friendly communities should provide multi-functional, playable spaces, and safe connections between these spaces, to create a public realm for all ages to enjoy together.¹⁵

Criteria 4: Evidence-Informed Design of Formal Play Spaces

Even as infrastructure improves to encourage informal play environments, the majority of children’s physical activity continues to come from school playground use.²⁵ As children continue to use formal play spaces, it is important that play-friendly communities offer these spaces with elements that best promote children’s unstructured play.¹⁸ Both children and parents have expressed concern with the lack of challenges found in traditional playgrounds, so evidence-informed design should offer engaging play opportunities for children of all ages and all abilities.^{2,3} Play-friendly cities must also use design elements that are not limited due to weather or supervisory rules,² and incorporate loose parts and natural elements into play activities.

Table 1: Framework of Actions for a Play-Friendly City

Playability Criteria	Description	Recommended Actions	Example Indicators
<p>PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN DECISION-MAKING</p>	<p>Municipalities actively and meaningfully engage diverse groups of children in relevant political matters</p>	<p>Develop consultation processes to include children in municipal decision-making</p>	<p><i>Number of child consultation processes held per year</i></p>
		<p>Involve children in political matters that affect them in meaningful ways</p>	<p><i>Percentage of child policy changes per year that involved consultation</i></p>
		<p>Include the voices of children of diverse ages, abilities, and perspectives</p>	<p><i>Average distribution of demographics represented in consultation</i></p>
		<p>Utilize multiple mechanisms and formats for children to voice their perspective</p>	<p><i>Percentage of consultations per year that are held online versus in-person</i></p>
		<p>Provide direct access to decision-makers through municipal roles for children</p>	<p><i>Average number of municipal officials in attendance per consultation</i></p>

SAFE AND ACTIVE ROUTES AROUND THE COMMUNITY	Municipalities provide safe, accessible infrastructure that facilitates children's active and/or independent travel around their neighbourhood, especially to and from school	Design streets to safely accommodate all users (pedestrians, cyclists, transit, vehicles)	<i>Percentage of streets per neighbourhood with widened sidewalks and bike lanes</i>
		Create networks to connect child-friendly infrastructure through the community	<i>Before-and-after average independent mobility distance allowed by parents</i>
		Utilize design elements to calm traffic and reduce speed, especially in school zones	<i>Percentage of streets with speed bumps and/or increased signage</i>
		Implement measures to reduce (parental) vehicular traffic in school zones	<i>Percentage of school zones with traffic management officer</i>
		Provide active commute programming to and from school, including with reduced supervision	<i>Percentage of students who travel with an active commute program</i>
SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE INFORMAL PLAY ENVIRONMENTS	Municipalities design public space to promote unstructured play in children's everyday natural environments	Preserve play-friendly outdoor green space	<i>Total area of outdoor, natural play space per neighbourhood</i>
		Provide programming to encourage safe play on streets without motor vehicle traffic	<i>Number of dedicated street play days per year per neighbourhood</i>
		Remove municipal by-laws that discourage or prohibit street play	<i>Before-and-after comparison of legal barriers to street play</i>
		Update everyday public space to be inclusive of child play	<i>Number of interactive bus stops per neighbourhood</i>
EVIDENCE-INFORMED DESIGN OF FORMAL PLAY SPACES	Municipalities use best practices of play space design to provide challenging opportunities for children's unstructured play	Offer play spaces with loose parts, natural elements, and pop-up adventure activities	<i>Percentage of playgrounds per neighbourhood that offer loose parts play and play with natural elements</i>
		Ensure play spaces offer age-appropriate challenges across many developmental stages	<i>Average number of elements per age group per playground</i>
		Apply universal design principles to develop play spaces that are accessible for all abilities	<i>Percentage of playgrounds with universal design elements</i>
		Adapt play spaces to endure and	<i>Number of playgrounds per</i>

		be safe in typical weather conditions	<i>neighbourhood with design features for snow</i>
		Limit unnecessary rules in play spaces in order to encourage thrilling and challenging play	<i>Number of school playgrounds where supervisors have been trained on allowing challenging, explorative play</i>
		Develop play spaces through community input from diverse children and parents/caregivers	<i>Number of playgrounds that applied feedback from community consultation</i>

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