

YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARKS

INSIGHTS FROM WORLD URBAN PARKS Children, Play and Nature Committee

THE STATE OF PLAY: YOUNG PEOPLE IN PARKS

As children become adolescents, we watch them move from settings of play to places to socialise, be with their peers, or be alone. They want to explore more opportunities for risk-taking and challenge. These experiences are developmentally necessary for adolescents, contributing to their discovery of identity and belonging (UN General Comment No. 20, 2016).

As Park Managers, we have the opportunity and responsibility to champion the importance of parks for young people as places which enable these experiences. To do this we need to understand more about the needs of young people, involve them in the design of parks, consider their needs while organising programs, and manage strategies that focus on encouraging their access to parks.



Thomas – Age 16 "Mmofra Park really impacted my life. Playing there made me think in new ways and taught me to care for nature. I loved it!"

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW: QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

We all have a good understanding about the importance of parks to the health and wellbeing. However we perhaps don't know a lot about the use of parks by young people, ages 11-17 years.

- What do they enjoy?
- Are there things we need to provide to support their visits?
- Why do some young people not visit parks and what would invite them in?
- Why are girls less likely to visit parks? How does gender, ethnicity, culture influence use?

We know young people are not an homogenous group. Adolescence is an important time where independence starts and healthy habits and long-term connections to parks are formed. In addition to supporting their healthy development, we are nurturing the future guardians of parks.

This insight is a summary of the Position Paper produced by the World Urban Parks – Children, Play and Nature Committee on "Young People and Parks". The full paper (including references to research noted) can be found at <https://worldurbanparks.org/en>



WHY IT IS IMPORTANT: SUPPORTING THE USE OF PARKS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Globally, about 80% of adolescents (11-17 years) do not meet the recommended levels of 60 minutes of daily moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity (World Health Organization, 2018). This is a concern given the short and long term health consequences of insufficient physical activity. Parks are an ideal setting for adolescents to be active, therefore it is critical that public land is designed to encourage active park use.

While a growing body of evidence indicates that time in nature helps pre-teens and teens reach their full potential as people and environmental stewards, many youth development programs lack connection to nature and many communities have traditionally focused on younger children and/or sports when designing park spaces and programs. Similarly, while pre-school and younger school-aged children have access to outdoor spaces for recess and play, middle schools and high schools often lack outdoor spaces for physical activity, learning, restoration and social connection.

Parks can play an important role in filling this nature gap for adolescents, providing them access to the proven physical and mental health benefits of being active and spending time in nature, and a sense of belonging and connection to their communities.

The benefits of meaningful outdoor programs and welcoming spaces for adolescents are countless.

- Development of social-emotional skills.
- Physical activity and health, support through diverse interests, skills and abilities in outdoor spaces and natural spaces, all of which have been demonstrated to encourage adolescent girls to be physically active (Guthford et al, 2019).
- Improved mental health, as decline in play in young people has been connected to increased suicide rates (Gray and Borklund, 2018).
- Cognitive and academic improvement.
- Career paths with green focus as a result of environmental ethos built at young ages.

Despite these benefits, our parks rarely serve the needs of adolescents and our biases push them out further.

Previous research has suggested that the following characteristics may discourage adolescents from visiting parks: lack of age-appropriate equipment; poor maintenance, rubbish, graffiti and dirty facilities; insufficient natural features (e.g., lack of trees, grass); not enough sports features (e.g., courts/fields); lack of supportive amenities, such as shade/shelter, taps and toilets; safety concerns; and an inconvenient location (Riviera et al, 2021b, Van Hecke et al, 2018).

A CALL TO ACTION : PARK MANAGERS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARKS

What can we do as park managers, planners, programmers and city officials?

CHALLENGE BIAS LANGUAGE, POLICY & ATTITUDE

PRIORITISE YOUNG PEOPLE IN PARK PLANNING, DESIGN & PROGRAMMING

CREATE INDEPENDENT SOCIAL SPACES

PRIORITISE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & HEALTHY RISK TAKING

REMOVE BARRIERS TO BELONGING

INCLUSIVE DECISION MAKING AND PLANNING

As a leader in parks, we have a responsibility to take actions to make our parks inclusive for all ages.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PRIORITISATION, PLANNING

CHALLENGE BIAS LANGUAGE, POLICY & ATTITUDE

- Consider the stigma and bias in language, policy, and attitudes on young people's presence
- Shift societal attitudes. Create an understanding that in addressing needs of young people in parks that it makes it better for everyone
- Address ageism and adult-centric approach. Provide education opportunities for staff, adult park users, parents.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLANNING, DESIGN & PROGRAMMING

- Prioritise the engagement of young people in park planning, programming and design to understand their needs and values. Encourage young people to be part of the action through volunteer building and stewardship

PRIORITISE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & HEALTHY RISK TAKING

- Design places that encourage self awareness and challenges
- Consider interactive elements (not just basketball courts, sports, Skate/BMX). "If only one thing, giant swings! Build the stuff they like."
- Create spaces that are accessible by walking, bicycling, and public transportation

CREATE INDEPENDENT SOCIAL SPACES

- Create spaces that provide a sense of independence where young people can socialise in groups

REMOVE BARRIERS TO BELONGING

- Understand how young women, LGBTQ+ experience the spaces differently
- Prioritise safety and positive enforcement of rules

10 FEATURES TO ENCOURAGE ADOLESCENTS TO VISIT PARKS

Recent research (Riviera et al, 2021 a) suggests designing parks to encourage adolescents to visit parks and be active and social during their park visits should include:

- 1) Large swings
- 2) Large grassy open spaces
- 3) A café
- 4) Sports courts and goals
- 5) Walking/cycling paths
- 6) Long flying foxes
- 7) Barbecue areas
- 8) Outdoor fitness equipment
- 9) Trampolines, and
- 10) Quiet places to hang out.

Equipment such as swings, slides and climbing equipment need to be **challenging, provide a sense of adventure and be age appropriate.**

Differences were observed by gender.

- Large swings and giant slides were more important for females than males
- Sports goals were more important for males than females

Other factors:

- Social – ability to hang out with friends
- Maintenance - condition of facilities/amenities
- Aesthetics
- Safety and Location

The pandemic exacerbated social isolation among young people, especially the most vulnerable and underserved.

We are now recognising that the greatest weight of the pandemic will be borne by children and young people. The impact on their physical and mental health is already evident and we must redouble our efforts to connect them to the healing powers of parks.



Outdoor experiences help young build competence, confidence, connection, character and caring/compassion (Lerner & Lerner, 2011).

Young people are often less tolerated in public spaces than other age groups (Day and Wagner, 2010).

How did you engage with your local park as a young person?
How did this positively influence your life?

Use this as Inspiration and ACT!