

“Children can play anywhere and everywhere”

November 2023



Introduction



Children are more active outside than inside. Playing outdoors in contact with sunlight and nature not only influences children's health and personal development but also sharpens their motor and social skills.

Outdoor play contributes to children's mental health and well-being, and children who engage in outdoor activities daily tend to be happier than their indoor counterparts.

However, there is a need to explore their interaction with outdoor environments and activities, especially during free time after school, while also identifying gender and age differences.

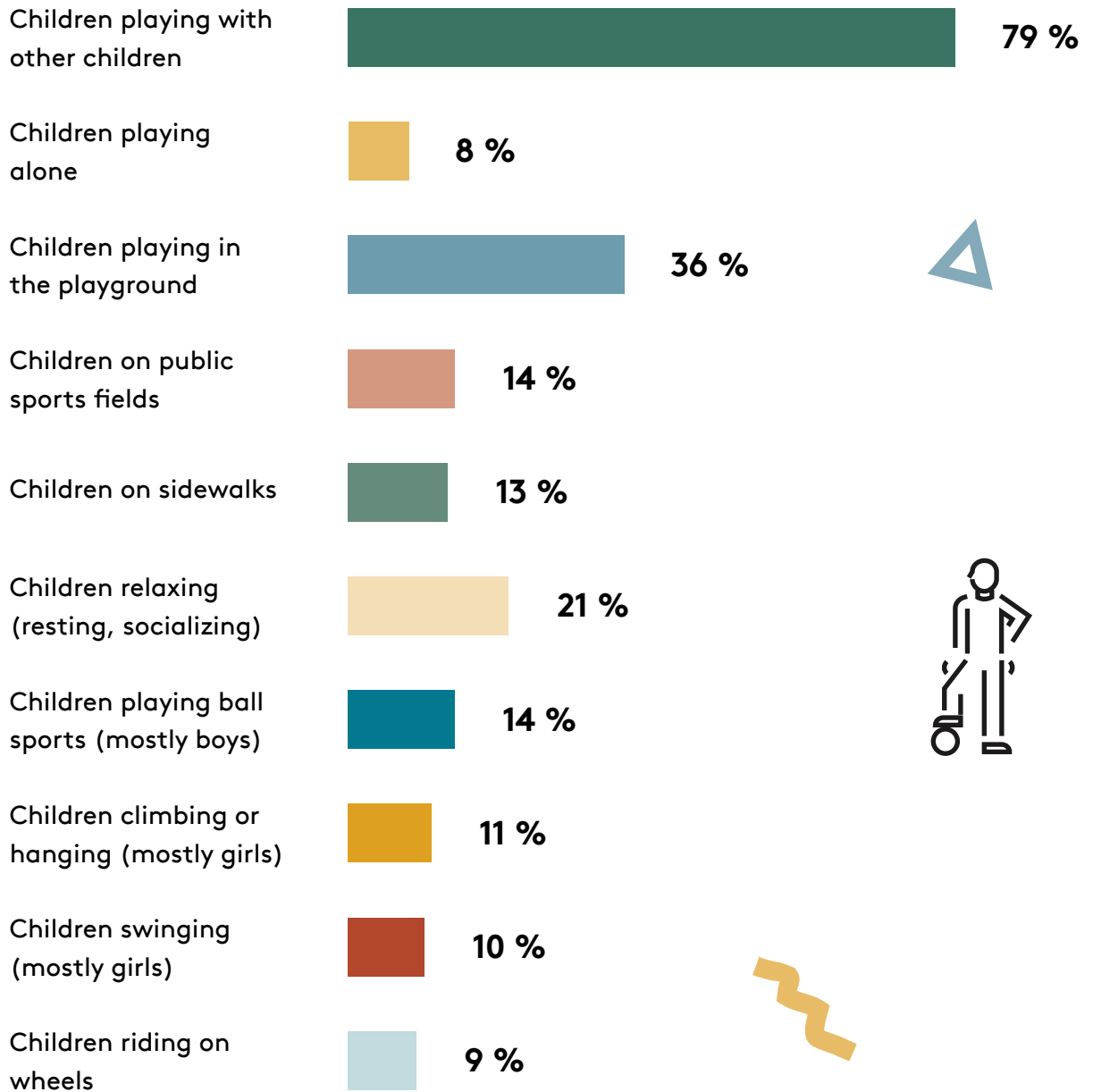
The insights presented in this brief are drawn from an article published in 2023. The authors closely observed 1,127 children aged 0-18 after school hours across three cities with diverse populations in the Netherlands.

This brief can serve as a valuable resource for policy-makers and decision-makers engaged in the planning, design, and maintenance of outdoor play spaces. It is equally relevant for researchers and professionals seeking to create inclusive play spaces that cater to everyone's needs.

Results



The study finds:



A holistic approach to play and play spaces

The research findings suggest that not all outdoor activities can be categorized as active play. In fact, one-fifth of the observed children were found relaxing, chilling, talking or watching others. This could indicate a form of 'resting' or 'restorative play'.

However, this is not merely restoration, it is also watching others to learn things ('copycat'), watching another child perform preparatory work, such as hanging a rope to jump rope later ('prelude') or exchanging experiences with each other ('socializing').

The study also shows play as a broad concept and that children do many different things when they are outside. And that in some cases, outdoor play can also be purposeless.

"It's important to look beyond standard play areas in future research and policy when we talk about children's play environment."

Helleman, Nio & de Vries, 2023

The research underscores the importance of considering more than traditional play areas in discussions about children's play environments.

It encourages distinguishing between "places for children", designed by adults for children, and "children's places" which are undefined spots that kids fill with special meaning through their actions. In simpler terms, it's about aligning adult intentions with children's desires.

Gender difference

Above nine years old, the difference between girls and boys increases (29% vs. 71%), while they were quite evenly distributed among 5-8 years old children.

Girls make less use of sports fields, and are more often swinging, hobbling, climbing and hanging than boys.

Boys are more likely to engage in sports and active games, while girls are more likely to play with, at, or inside playground equipment.



District differences

The study found that informal spaces depend on:

- Accessibility
- Safeness
- Attractiveness

Also, car-free streets, closed courtyards (with some play elements here and there), and wide sidewalks attract more children.

Implications and key take home messages

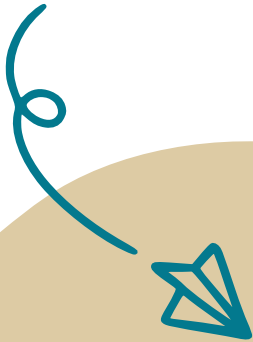
We need to pay more attention to a number of aspects in outdoor play, both in research and in policy. When planning, (re)designing and maintaining outdoor play spaces, we should look at:

- Personal factors (age, gender etc.)
 - Sufficient benches for accompanying parents with a view of the children playing are therefore important (to enhance comfort and sense of safety).
- Make play spaces big enough to facilitate different kinds of play
- A broader definition of play should be taken into account and in policy
 - More attention should be paid to places where children can sit together face to face, hang out, socialize and chat.

This brief is based on

Helleman, G, Nio, I & de Vries, SI. 'Playing outdoors: What do children do, where and with whom? Journal of Childhood, Education & Society 2023, volume 4, issue 3, 322-337.

Sharing research



At the World Playground Research Institute we are dedicated to sharing valuable insights from research studies and reviews through concise and accessible publications called Briefs.

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All briefs focus on topics related to the development and design of playground as well as the impact of playgrounds on children's physical activity, mental and social health and motor skills.

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