

# What is the future of playground design?

December 2023



# Introduction



Explore the future of playground design in this brief, unveiling key insights from a 2023 article that compares traditional playgrounds with innovative designs\*. The focus is on understanding how the design of a playground may influence usage and promote physical activity.

Globally, inactivity poses a significant health risk making it crucial to research how playground design can encourage physical activity for improved overall health and well-being. Additionally, the highlighted study investigates the role of neighborhood contextual factors.

The authors selected 30 traditional and 30 innovative playgrounds across ten U.S. cities. Utilizing the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities, they recorded user numbers and characteristics through 19 hourly observations per playground over a one-week period during the summer of 2021.

This brief is especially relevant for playground planners, designers, architects, as well as researchers and professionals involved in planning and designing playgrounds.

## Key messages

The authors discovered that innovative playgrounds attracted 2.5 times more users and were a strong predictor accounting for 43% more MVPA. Neighborhood and playground size can also play a significant role.

## Neighborhood contextual factors

In high-poverty neighborhoods, playground usage was generally lower compared to low-poverty neighborhoods. However, innovatively designed playgrounds reduced this difference by 60% compared to traditional playgrounds.

Innovative playgrounds reduce the gap in playground usage associated with neighborhood poverty by 60% for overall visitors and 70% for the total amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity generated.

## Playground size

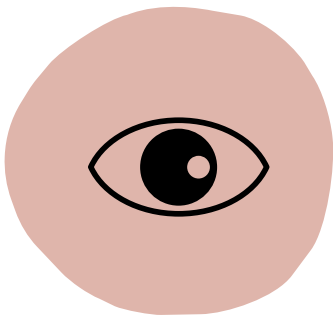
For every 1,000 additional square feet of playground area, visitors increased by 1%.

Given the average innovative playground is approximately 23,000 square feet larger than the typical traditional playground, size accounted for a 23% increase in both visitors and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.



## Key take home message

The authors recommend that:



### 1. Optimizing playground proximity

City planners should prioritize ensuring that playgrounds are available within a half-mile radius of all residents.

This strategic placement enhances community access and promotes physical activity.

### 2. Enhancing variety in playground design

Future renovations for all types of playgrounds should consider incorporating more unique features.

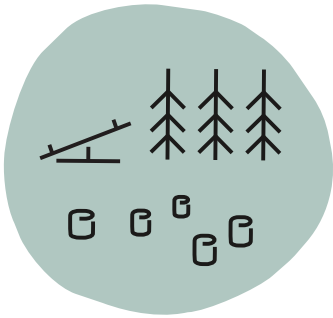
A variety of diverse features offers opportunities for several activities, such as climbing, spinning, crawling, balancing, and jumping.

This diversity also allows for the engagement of different muscle groups and heightens the overall appeal.





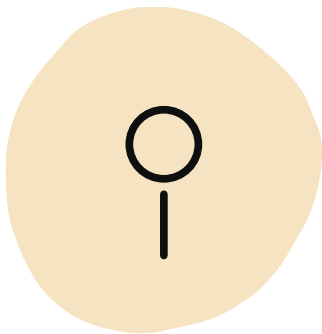
### 3. Recognizing the value of larger playgrounds



From a public health perspective, city officials and park planners should take note of the substantial return on investment for larger playgrounds.

The positive impact on visitor numbers and physical activity levels underscores the importance of allocating space for expansive play areas.

### 4. Strategic location for multi-attraction visits



Location matters not just for convenience but also because being close to other nearby attractions, like a beach, wharf, or downtown area, could allow family members with diverse preferences to combine visits in a single trip.



## This brief is based on

Cohen, D. A., Talarowski, M. R., Han, B., Williamson, S. L., Galfond, E. C., Young, D. R., Eng, S., & McKenzie, T. L. (2023). Playground Design and Physical Activity. American journal of preventive medicine, 64(3), 326–333.

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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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