

# Which park features are essential for promoting physical activity in children?

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# Introduction



Research has shown that in lower-income and diverse neighborhoods, parks play a vital role in children's active lives.

Parents' and caregivers' preferences for parks significantly influence children's activity levels, and understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing health disparities, particularly in African American and Latino youth, as well as those from low-income families.

In this brief, we highlight key findings from two studies, stressing the need for effective programs, environments, and policies to promote active lifestyles. This includes utilizing parks and playgrounds as free resources for play and physical activity.

This brief is relevant for playground, city, and park planners, as well as researchers and professionals engaged in the planning and design of public open spaces.

## The two studies in short

**The first study** (Ogletree et al., 2020) surveyed parents in New York City, Raleigh, and Durham, NC, about their park preferences, which could influence children's physical activity (ages 0-14).

In the study, it was also explored how these preferences differ across racial or ethnic groups. A total of 314 survey responses were collected.

**The second study** (Marquet et al., 2019) conducted 79 site visits to New York City parks in 2017, focusing on low-income communities of color, to understand patterns of park and playground use and their potential impact on obesity rates.





The authors observed over 16,500 kids aged 5 to 10 years old in total.

## Key results

Looking at the two studies, the authors found that **parental preferences**, **areas of activity**, and **differences by race and ethnicity** can influence children’s physical activity in parks.

### 1. Parental preferences

Overall, parents’ preferences can be categorized into:

<p><b>Physical attributes</b></p> 	<p><b>Playground facilities</b></p> <p><i>Swings, slides, water feature, sand, monkey bars, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Sports fields</b></p> <p><i>Basketball fields, soccer fields, workout equipment, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Natural environments</b></p> <p><i>Grass, trees, open space, shade, gardens, etc.</i></p>
<p><b>Experiences</b></p> 	<p><b>Safe facilities</b></p> <p><i>Safe playground facilities, surfaces, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Safety &amp; security</b></p> <p><i>Police/safety patrol, limited entrances, park staff, close to home, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Cleanliness</b></p> <p><i>Clean bathrooms, maintenance, etc.</i></p>
<p><b>Social environment</b></p> 	<p><b>Play with kids</b></p> <p><i>Play with other kids in the same age group, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Friendly people</b></p> <p><i>People are nice, respect each other, etc.</i></p>	<p><b>Activity</b></p> <p><i>Activities, games, etc.</i></p>
<p><b>Park amenities</b></p> 	<p><b>Variation</b></p> <p><i>Restrooms, water fountain, picnic area, bike facilities, etc.</i></p>		

Here, you can take a closer look at the parental differences, Ogletree and colleagues (2020) found in the three cities.

### New York City

- Asian parents displayed a stronger preference for physical attributes, such as playgrounds and sports fields
- In contrast, Latino parents emphasized positive and safe experiences as their primary concerns.

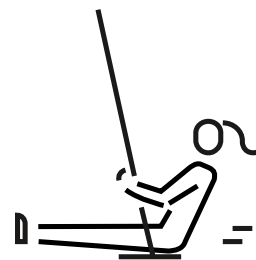
### Raleigh and Durham, NC

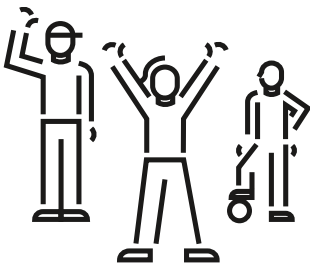
- African American, Latino, and other parents all expressed a strong preference for positive and safe experiences in parks
- The second most commonly mentioned preference was for park amenities, like picnic areas or bicycle facilities.

## 2. Areas of activity

In the 79 site visits in New York City parks, Marquet and colleagues (2019) identified areas with the most activity. They found that:

- Swing sets were the busiest areas in the park, with the highest activity levels
- Water/splash features were the least active spots
- Playgrounds were popular and well-used
- Structured activities like sports practices or supervised events were infrequent, but attracted more children when they occurred





- During organized activities such as soccer practice, there was a higher presence of children. However, children were mostly found playing in informally organized areas
- Informal play opportunities outnumbered formal ones significantly across all parks
- Handball courts and baseball fields had the lowest presence of children.

Overall, park use was lower in the early afternoon hours, and highest in the early evening (6-7 pm) and weekends. Children were less active in the shade or when the weather was warmer.

### 3. Differences by race and ethnicity

Among the 16,500 kids, one-third were Asian-American, 40% Latino, and almost 20% African American (Marquet et al., 2019).

- African American children were less likely to visit parks immediately after school hours (3-5:30 pm) in spring
- Latino children showed the highest likelihood of being in parks during weekend days
- Areas with formal organized activities tended to attract Asian American and Latino children more frequently
- The majority of children, particularly Latino and Asian American children, were observed using swing sets and playgrounds
- African American children were most commonly found on basketball courts.

## Key take home message

The findings emphasize the need to enhance parks to meet the needs and desires of all families, boosting usage by both children and adults.

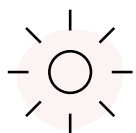
Key concerns for parents include **safety** and **park facilities**.



### Safety first

In Raleigh, Durham, and New York City Latino neighborhoods, where safety concerns are prominent, it is necessary to enhance security. This could be ensuring:

- Sufficient lighting,
- reducing litter and graffiti, and
- fostering community engagement to build trust within the park environment.



### Focus on specific hours, organized activities, and spaces for warm weather

New York City parks could engage with children aged 5 to 10 directly after school to increase park usage, particularly during underused hours like 3-5:30 pm.

Increasing organized sports and programming, especially in areas like handball courts and baseball fields, could enhance park activity.

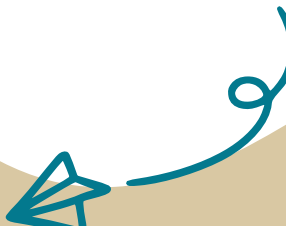
Moreover, parks should prioritize creating spaces that facilitate active play, even in hot summer months. Providing shaded areas for children to cool down is important, especially during warmer days, while ensuring they engage in at least 60 minutes of play each day.

## This brief is based on

Ogletree, S. S., Huang, J. H., Alberico, C., Marquet, O., Floyd, M. F., & Hipp, J. A. (2020). Parental Preference for Park Attributes Related to Children's Use of Parks in Low-Income, Racial/Ethnic Diverse Neighborhoods. *Journal of healthy eating and active living*, 1(1), 6-15.

Marquet, O., Hipp, A., Alberico, C. & Huang, J-H, Fry, D., Mazak, E., Lovasi, G. & Floyd, M. (2019). Park use preferences and physical activity among ethnic minority children in low-income neighborhoods in New York City. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*. 38.

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# Contributors

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