

Creating child-friendly neighborhoods

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, spatial conditions have changed dramatically. The term “*domesticated childhoods*” highlights the increasing dominance of indoor settings over outdoor environments. Today, children spend more time at home, in daycare centers, and in schools, leading to significant limitations in outdoor play.

However, free (outdoor) play remains crucial for children’s development. It helps them gain independence, understand social rules, develop autonomy, and build self-confidence.

The “Raum für Kinderspiel!” [“Space for children’s play!”] study investigated play opportunities for over 5,000 children in southwest Germany. The researchers conducted standardized surveys, exploratory walks with children, analyzed children’s drawings, environmental inventories, and interviewed urban experts. The findings highlight how the quality of urban residential areas can impact children’s daily lives, development, and overall well-being.

This brief summarizes the study’s key insights, offering valuable information for city planners, architects, policy-makers, and other professionals involved in urban planning and development.

Key concept

The study is based on the assumption that the quality of so-called **activity areas** significantly influences children's every-day lives, quality of life, and developmental opportunities.

Activity areas are spaces in children's residential environments, defined by four characteristics:



Safety:

The area is safe enough for children to recognize and manage potential dangers.



Accessibility:

The areas are within a reasonable distance and not obstructed by barriers.



Shapeability:

Children find the areas engaging and have opportunities to not get bored.



Interaction Opportunities:

The areas allow children to connect with other peers.

Key results



Opportunities for Free Outdoor Play:

Just over half of the children (55%) could play outdoors unsupervised and without parental concerns. For nearly a quarter of the children, however, parents were concerned (23%), and around 22% of children either needed parental supervision or could not play outdoors, in their neighborhoods, at all.

Quality of Activity Areas:

The quality of activity areas significantly affects the amount of time children spend playing outdoors. In “really good” areas (safe, accessible, engaging), children played unsupervised for an average of 108 minutes, while in “really bad” areas, the average unsupervised playtime was only 16 minutes.

Traffic Control:

In areas where the speed limit was 30km/h, young children spend twice as much time engaging in free outdoor play each day - 66 minutes compared to 32 minutes in areas without traffic calming measures.





Family Resources:

Families with greater resources (such as higher parental education, not being single parents, employment, and no immigrant background) were more likely to live in neighborhoods with high-quality activity areas. This allowed their children more freedom to play outside, with less supervision.

Sport Activities:

Children growing up with more favorable conditions (higher family resources) more frequently used sports facilities and participated in organized activities. This trend reflects how family resources influence both the use of structured activities and the opportunity to grow up in favorable residential areas.

Social Neighborhoods:

Social connections within the neighborhood and mutual familiarity foster trust and security. Parents are more comfortable letting their children play outdoors, knowing that other adults or peers are around to help. In turn, a child-friendly neighborhood encourages neighbors to connect, fostering a supportive community.



Key take home message

To support the impact of residential activity areas on children's lives, the researchers recommend the following:

- Urban development policies should create safe, accessible, and engaging public spaces for children that go beyond playgrounds, considering the overall urban space quality.
- It is important to involve all stakeholders in planning urban and green spaces, including municipal child advocacy groups and initiatives. Especially children should be directly involved wherever feasible.
- Implementing traffic calming measures, like 30km/h speed limits, significantly enhances outdoor playtime for children.
- Schools, daycare centers, and community institutions should focus on neighborhood needs, advocate for children's right to play, and improve understanding of social spaces.



This brief is based on

Höfflin, P. (2019). Die Qualitäten urbaner Räume und deren Bedeutung für die Entwicklung von Kindern. [The Qualities of Urban Space and their Importance for the Development of Children] In *Forum Wohnung und Stadtentwicklung* (pp. 3-7).

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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.

Briefs provide summaries of key research findings and their implications, serving as valuable resources for policy and decision-makers.

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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