

Children's voices in playground design: creating fun and inclusive play spaces

July 2024



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Introduction

When it comes to playgrounds and play spaces, children are the real experts. As the primary users, they understand what makes playgrounds fun and engaging and can offer valuable input on how to improve them. Therefore, their perspectives and suggestions should be integral to the planning, design, and evaluation of playgrounds.

In their 2023 review, Morgenthaler and colleagues examined the findings of over 50 global studies focused on exploring playgrounds and outdoor play through children's eyes. These studies involved over 3670 children aged 0-12 years. Most importantly, the authors included research involving children with disabilities – a perspective frequently overlooked in playground research.

In this brief we highlight key findings from the review, helpful for anyone aiming to design an inclusive and engaging playground that offers diverse opportunities for play and fosters enjoyable interactions for children of all abilities.



Key results

In their review, Morgenthaler and colleagues (2023) identified five key themes reflecting children's perspectives on playground experiences and qualities:

1. "We seek more intense play experiences"

Preferences for intense play can vary among children; some may enjoy high speeds while others do not. Despite possible variations, many children actively seek and combine intense play experiences, relating to faster and slower, longer, heavier, deeper, bumpier, curvier, further, and more elevated play.

More specifically, children enjoy:

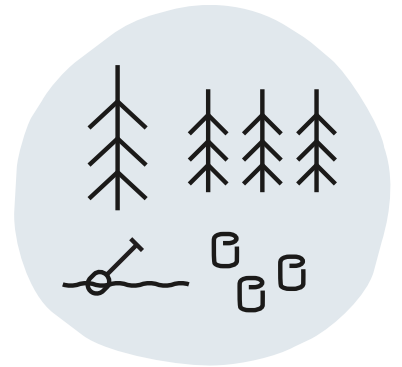


- Play experiences including swings, crossing bridges, jumping, climbing, and balancing opportunities.
- Play equipment that provides multiple ways for children of all abilities to reach the highest point.
- Smooth surfaces that enable fast driving and sliding with wheelchairs, scooters, or bikes.
- Hammocks for gentle swinging and daydreaming.
- Opportunities for diverse sensory play (e.g., getting messy with various materials, tactile play with natural items, and walking barefoot).
- Playgrounds with natural landscapes and features, real climbing trees and rocks, obstacle courses and objects that children can shape themselves.

2. "We want to make our own choices about what to play"

Children have a strong desire to independently choose and direct their play activities in playgrounds. They desire a play environment in which they can:

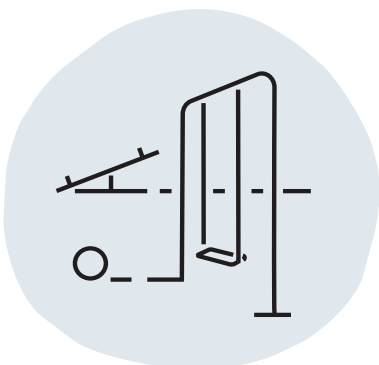
- Find suitable challenges, that match their abilities and offer varying difficulty levels.
- Use it flexibly, beyond intended purposes, making the playground seem limitless.
- Have moments to unfold their own play, during uninterrupted play time with stimulating objects.



3. "We value both playing with and away from children and adults"

Children value interacting with a diverse range of people and animals, yet they also cherish opportunities to play alone, especially when it allows for special play experiences away from adults.

- They enjoy playing with friends, which enhances enjoyment and fosters a sense of competition and belonging.
- Children appreciate it when adults join or observe, but they often prefer less supervision to socialize and play freely.
- They play away from adults to seek privacy and the thrill of breaking rules, often looking for secluded spots for uninterrupted play.



4. "We want to belong to our playgrounds"

Children feel connected to their playgrounds by:

- Being familiar with the playground, walking to it, visiting regularly, and knowing friends or other children there.



- Feeling welcome and safe, with accessible and inclusive design, and the presence of friends, community members, or caring adults.
- Enjoying playground aesthetics, preferring clean, colorful spaces with natural elements like trees, flowers, and rocks.

5. "We desire fun"

Having fun was the most important factor in outdoor play for children, achieved by:

- An engaging physical setup with intense activities and safe challenges.
- Playing with friends, family, or animals to explore new challenges.
- Providing varied play options to prevent boredom and include all ages and abilities.



Key take home message

Children's play experiences are shaped by both the playground's physical setup (like slides and swings) and the social environment (like friends and family).

→ These factors often work together to create fun experiences for children.

Children understand what makes their community playgrounds enjoyable.

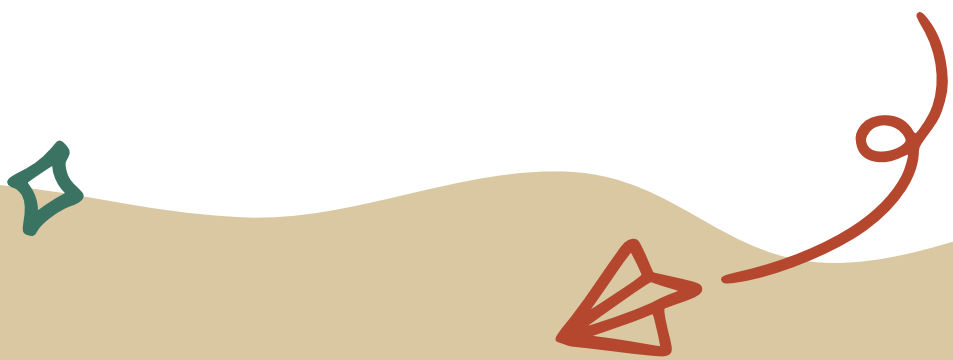
→ It is crucial to listen to their perspectives on playground design and provision, ensuring their views are valued regardless of their abilities.

→ Playgrounds should offer diverse opportunities for play, fostering enjoyable interactions and providing inclusive challenges that cater to all children.



This brief is based on

Morgenthaler, T., Schulze, C., Pentland, D., & Lynch, H. (2023). Environmental Qualities That Enhance Outdoor Play in Community Playgrounds from the Perspective of Children with and without Disabilities: A Scoping Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(3), 1763.



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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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