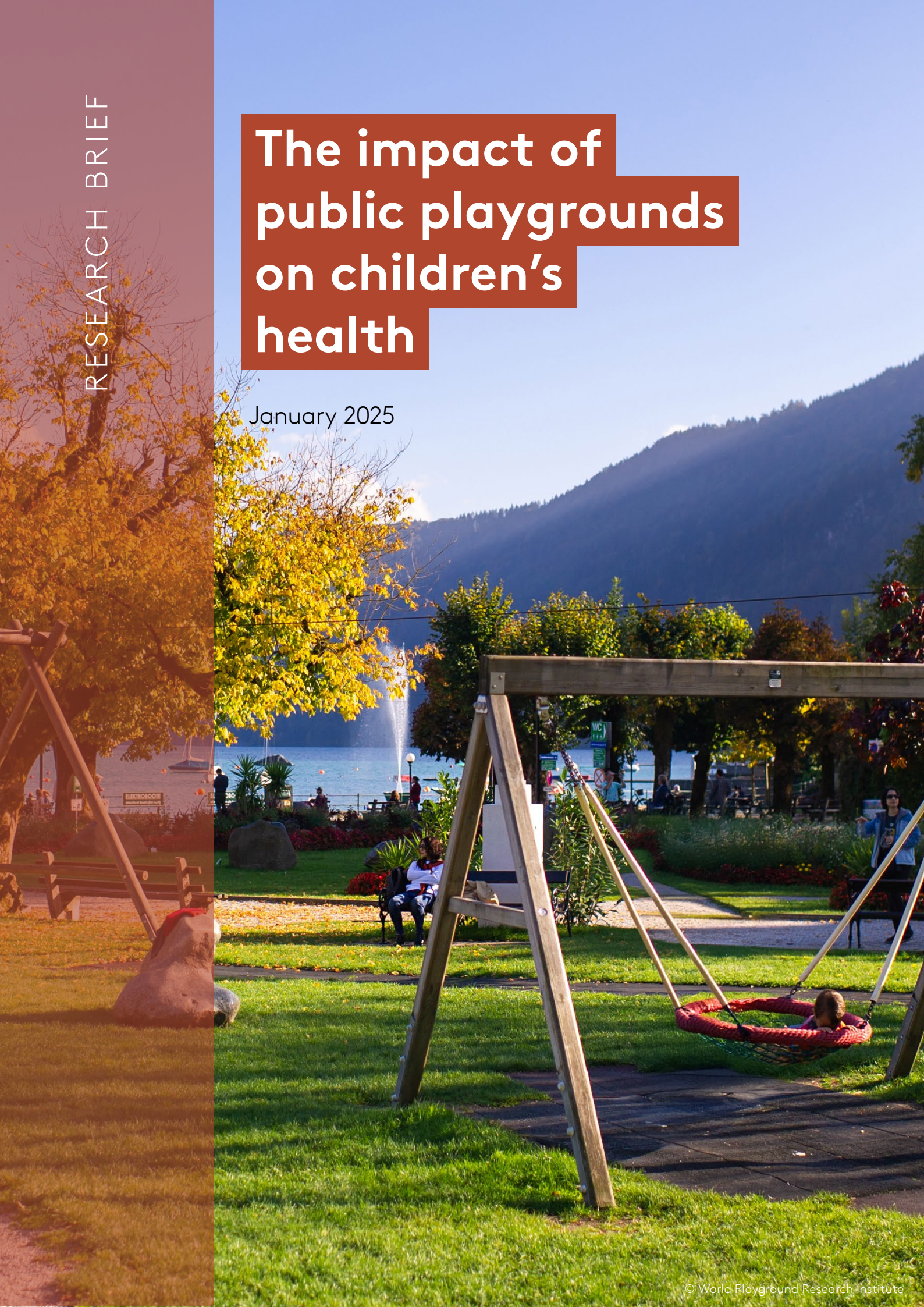


The impact of public playgrounds on children's health

January 2025



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.

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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Introduction

Active outdoor play is crucial for children's health and development, and playgrounds in public open spaces, such as parks or community areas, provide an ideal space for it.

However, the importance of these playgrounds' use for health and well-being is still unclear.

As part of the World Playground Research Institute's comprehensive scoping review conducted in 2024*, **55 studies** related to playgrounds in public open spaces were extracted from all published research on playground use and its health benefits for children.

The aim was to create a clearer and more detailed overview of public playgrounds' impact on children's well-being.

In this brief, we **summarize key insights** from the scoping review, aiming to guide health authorities, city planners, and policymakers in making informed decisions about investments and designs in the area of public open spaces.

It also supports researchers in identifying areas for future research needs.

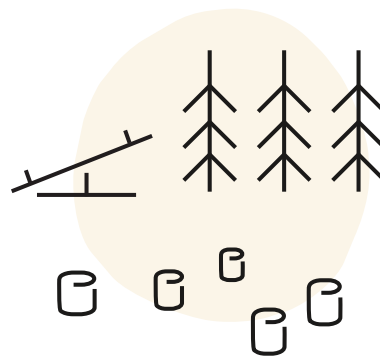
*Schipperijn, J., Madsen, C. D., Toftager, M., Nørager Johansen, D. L., Lousen, I., Amholt, T. T., & Pawlowski, C. (2024). The role of playgrounds in promoting children's health – a scoping review. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 21, Article 72. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01618-2>

Overview of the reviewed studies on public playgrounds

Most of the **55 studies** were descriptive and exploratory studies about physical activity.

Few studies were about weight status, motor skills, and mental health.

Eight studies explored feasibility and pilot interventions, while only one study focused on efficacy and effectiveness, measuring the impact of using public playgrounds in promoting physical activity.



Research quality level (1=low, 4=high)	Physical health			Social health	Mental health	Number of publications*
	Physical activity	Motor skills	Weight status			
1. Descriptive and exploratory studies	37	2	3	10	6	46
2. Feasibility and pilot studies	5	2	0	1	0	8
3. Efficacy and effectiveness studies	1	0	0	0	0	1
4. Repetition studies	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total public playground studies	43	4	3	11	6	55

* One publication can include multiple outcomes. For that reason, the numbers in each row do not necessarily sum to the overall numbers.



Recommendations and insights from the playground studies

The interventions in public open spaces differed widely, and even though many added play structures, their results were mixed and not directly comparable.

As a result, the evidence for health benefits related to public playgrounds is less convincing compared to those of schools and Early Education and Childcare (ECEC) centers.

However, the scoping review provides recommendations to guide informed decisions on investments and designs for public open spaces.

For city planners, policymakers, and health-care providers, the review recommends ...

Opening schoolyards outside of regular school hours can provide neighborhood children with safe spaces to play.

Research in low-income neighborhoods has linked opened, supervised schoolyards to **increased physical activity** and reduced time spent on sedentary activities, such as watching TV.

A study showed that building playscapes in parks **increases visitation**, particularly among children and their families, and promoted physical activity.

Building playscapes in parks can positively impact activity levels.

Healthcare providers, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and others specializing in children's health, can encourage parents to take their children to playgrounds regularly.

Prioritizing and engaging in outdoor play **enhances physical activity and social interactions**, benefiting both children and parents.

For researchers, the research on playgrounds in public open spaces...

- Needs more **efficacy and effectiveness studies**, and in particular **replication and scale-up studies** to demonstrate which types of public playground interventions are successful.
- Playground interventions in public open spaces need to be tailored to local needs and possibilities – **'one size does not fit all'** when designing playground interventions – and **evaluation studies** need to take this tailoring process into account.



This brief is based on

- Schipperijn, J., Madsen, C. D., Toftager, M., Nørager Johansen, D. L., Lousen, I., Amholt, T. T., & Pawlowski, C. (2024). The role of playgrounds in promoting children's health – a scoping review. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 21, Article 72. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01618-2>
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