2026

SDU
World Playground
Research Institute

Principles for co-creation with children in schoolyard design



Developing the principles

The World Playground Research Institute hosted a workshop in 2026 at the International Play Association Conference in Christchurch, New Zealand, to collaboratively develop principles for co-creation with children in the design of schoolyards that provide play opportunities for all.

The workshop brought together 34 experts representing a range of fields, including design, pedagogical practice, research and NGOs working with play and physical activity.

Participants were divided into four mixed groups and engaged in a structured, collaborative process consisting of three steps:

1. **Silent reflection – individual perspectives**
   Each participant independently wrote down three key considerations for meaningful co-creation with children.

2. **Affinity mapping – identifying common themes**
   Within each group, participants shared their reflections and collectively clustered similar ideas and considerations into overarching themes.

3. **Consensus discussion and small-group synthesis – developing principles**
   Each group discussed and prioritised the identified themes, selecting the one or two most important themes to translate into concrete principles. A common template guided this translation process:

   - A principle for co-creation with children is ...
   - Why does it matter?
   - What does it look like in practice?

The principles developed during the workshop were further refined after the event by a smaller group of the participating experts who volunteered to contribute to the follow-up process. As part of this process, some principles were merged where they addressed similar themes and overlapping ideas.

Four principles for co-creation

The four groups developed the following four principles for meaningful co-creation with children in schoolyard design:

1 A principle for co-creation with children is to be completely honest and transparent about the project's financial and physical limitations from the beginning.

Why does it matter?

If we let children develop unrealistic dreams (like a water park), we create disappointment, which can lead to distrust of adults and democratic processes when those ideas have to be cut from the budget later on.

What does it look like in practice?

We start the workshop by showing the children the exact physical boundaries on a map and explaining the budget visually (e.g. using LEGO bricks), so they know the exact playing field from the start. We also tell the children afterwards which ideas were used, which were not and why.

Theme: Honesty and transparency about constraints





2 A principle for co-creation with children is to provide multiple and varied ways for children to express their perspectives and contribute to the process.

Why does it matter?

Children have different ways of learning, communicating and expressing themselves. Offering multiple ways to contribute helps ensure that a diverse range of children's voices and perspectives is heard, rather than privileging those who are most comfortable with particular forms of communication. It also supports meaningful involvement and a sense of being heard and valued.

What does it look like in practice?

Use a variety of creative and interactive methods to engage children, allowing them to contribute in ways that suit their age, interests and abilities. Examples include drawing, sketching, model-making, photovoice, storytelling, mapping, videos, walking around the area, voting, collage, stickers and observing children's play.

Theme: Flexible and inclusive ways of listening to children's voices

3 **A principle for co-creation with children is to actively include and value diverse voices, experiences and perspectives throughout the co-creation process, ensuring that both the process and the final design reflect the diversity of children.**

Why does it matter?

Every child deserves to feel heard, valued and represented. Children have different experiences, preferences, needs and ways of using playgrounds. Without actively seeking out diverse perspectives, some voices risk being overlooked, and the design may reflect the needs and preferences of only a limited group of children. There is no such thing as a "standard child".

What does it look like in practice?

Involve children of different ages, abilities, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences, paying particular attention to groups who are often underrepresented or marginalised.

Theme: Diversity and inclusion





4 **A principle for co-creation with children is to create a playful and engaging co-creation process that gives children the freedom, agency and confidence to take initiative and actively shape the design process.**

Why does it matter?

When children are given space to take ownership and influence the process on their own terms, they are more likely to feel motivated, engaged and valued. A child-led and playful approach can strengthen children's confidence, creativity and sense of ownership, while making participation an enjoyable and meaningful experience in itself.

What does it look like in practice?

Allow time and space for free exploration, play, imagination and experimentation, and be open to unexpected ideas and directions that emerge through children's play and creativity. This includes encouraging children to take the lead, make choices and initiate ideas rather than simply responding to adult-defined tasks.

Theme: Child-centred and playful processes

Acknowledgements

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