Space for Active Play
engaging 8-12 year old children in play space design

This project is an initiative of the Heart Foundation in partnership with Frankston, Moonee Valley, and Brimbank councils and Parks Victoria, with support from Parks Victoria and VicHealth.

Rachel Carlisle, Heart Foundation
Overview

• Background to project
• Process used
• Outcomes from children
• Integration into play space designs
• Evaluation against key desires
Background

Builds on *Healthy By Design*

- Tool to assist local governments in undertaking ‘healthy urban planning’
- Incorporates guidelines on a number of urban design considerations:
  - provision of accessible open spaces for recreation and leisure
  - well planned networks of walking and cycling routes
  - local destinations
  - engaging the community in planning decisions that affect them

Space for Active Play aims to extend work in these areas
UNICEF Child Friendly Cities

“A local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children's rights” (as outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child)

Every young citizen has the right to:
• Influence decisions about their city
• Express their opinion on the city they want
• Participate in family, community and social life
• Walk safely in the streets on their own
• Meet friends and play
• Have green spaces for plants and animals

Participation – promoting children’s active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision making processes
Time spent on moderate to vigorous physical activity and some of its components (free play, sport, and active transport (AT)), by age and gender

The filled circles represent boys and the open circles represent girls

(2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey - Main Findings)
Active Play – Why is it important?

- Healthy growth and development
- Strong bones and muscles
- Improved balance, co-ordination, flexibility
- Improved concentration and self esteem
- Provides opportunities to make friends
- Outdoor attractor to combat sedentary lifestyle
- Physical activity reduces risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, diabetes
Types of Active Play

• Structured:
  – Sport, school PE, organised games.
  – Generally controlled, has rules and specific outcomes

• Unstructured:
  – Free play – creative and imaginative, no set rules
  – Provides valuable learning and developmental opportunities as well as physical, cognitive, social, and emotional benefits

• Australian recommendations:
  – 60 minutes and up to several hours of physical activity per day
It could be argued that among primary school-aged children, active free-play or unstructured physical activity that takes place outdoors in the child’s free time may potentially be the major contributor to children’s physical activity.

(Burdette et al, 2004)
Project Sites
The Overall Aim

8-12 year old children helped to write the design brief for the upgrade of their local park space – they became ‘consultants’ to the park planners and designers. The overall aim is to produce play space that is attractive, interesting and engaging for older children.
How does it work?

Children’s Ideas Group

Themes and Ideas produced

Validation against other children in same age group: Classroom Discussion

Validation with general community: Community Events

Validation with professionals: Professional’s Workshop

Report produced to inform design of the new play space
Some methods used

**CIG group**
- Experiential learning and ‘research’ into different environments by the CIG group
- Photo and journal use by CIG group
- Pictorial as well as text theme presentation

**Secondary consultation**
- Simple ‘stickies’ voting created inclusive opportunity for providing feedback (CALD groups, young children)
- Engage with community at event in the park, library display, school fair
Do children have something valuable to contribute?

- Very much so, the CIG’s came up with themes, ideas, suggestions
- The classroom children’s consultation involved 3-4 one hour sessions per site, and those children had lots of ideas and cottoned on to the themes extremely quickly (creating a data mountain!)
What do older children want?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desire</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Recurring Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action and Adventure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bike Riding</td>
<td>Facilitates independent access. Within park challenging bike paths, hills, jumps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skating</td>
<td>Places to practice their skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Paths</td>
<td>Stepping stones, interesting surfaces eg mosaic, incorporating plantings alongside</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>Hills, slopes, twisting paths to roll, run, slide and cycle up and down</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trees and Plants</td>
<td>To climb and build in, provide shade and relaxation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Climbing</td>
<td>Challenging opportunities: high trees, rocks, tunnels, large spiders webs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring and Hiding</td>
<td>Tree houses, mazes, cubbies, secret hiding places</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Creation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building and Construction</strong></td>
<td>Build things – tree houses, cubbies, make caves, natural debris</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ephemeral Art</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Natural debris for creative play: leaves, gumnuts, flowers, berries</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sand</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sand sculpture, soft fall</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Traditional Play</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sports and Games</strong></td>
<td>Space for ball games eg football oval, tennis court, places for informal games eg hopscotch and ‘tiggy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play Equipment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>spiders web, flying fox, rock wall, spinning wheel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aesthetics and Nature</strong></td>
<td><strong>Public Art</strong></td>
<td>footpath surfacing, sculpture, artwork, debate re graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trees and Plants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>For aesthetic beauty and colour would like a variety of plants, flowers, foliage. Edibles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attracting Animals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing animal habitats: possum boxes, old logs, native grasses and trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Water</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>To attract wildlife and so that they can get wet and squirt each other!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function and Independent Access</strong></td>
<td><strong>Public Facilities</strong></td>
<td>toilets, seating, lighting, BBQ’s, bins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Getting to the Park Safely</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>signage, safe crossings, bike parking, public transport stops</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
‘Because I usually go there and I take my bike, but when I’m there I can’t ride it’
‘Paths – because I like to ride my bike somewhere quiet’
‘Hills – the big hills and the small hills – the big hills so you can ride your bike so high and then come back down, the small hills so you can do your tricks and jump up and down.’
'Natural constructions – because I would like to make a hut and make it my secret house.'
'Trees – I like all the trees. I would love to be able to have a good hiding spot and a tree house to play in. Not to mention the caves from them.'
‘Exploring – hunting for treasures, because it’s fun to explore and find interesting things’
‘I think it’s rare to find a park with exploring areas’
‘I like the spiders net because you can climb very high’
‘Artwork - because you are allowed to sit and jump on the artwork’
‘Public art – because I like to climb the sculptures’
Unexpected outcomes

• Facilities: BBQ, seating, bins, shade, toilets (so they can play for as long as they like)
• Concern regarding occupying other members of the family, play space for younger siblings
• Safety concerns, particularly from one sites’ classroom groups: fire hose, first aid kit, emergency phone, water safety
• Community members concerned regarding safety:
  - sand pit with syringes and animal attractor
  - children love bushes to hide in, parents fear unsavoury element in bushes
Designers response

• The designers took the themes and feedback from the children and used these as the basis of their design exploration for each site
Buckingham Reserve
The Design
The New Play Space
Consultation Summary

Older children had valuable insights to offer:

- they want to interact with their environment: manipulate, build, change it
- they seek visual and kinetic variety in terms of planting and nature, surfaces and undulation e.g. hills
- climbing, exploring and hiding were all favoured. How do we create an environment to accommodate these needs? How does this fit with a community safety agenda for instance?
- they would like independent access to parks, but need a supportive environment to do so – safe crossing places, bicycle friendly roads, pavements, tame traffic
Site Evaluation

Do the new play spaces attract older children to get outside and get active?

A pre and post evaluation of the three new play spaces was done to see if the play spaces have been effective in attracting older children.

Involved three methods:
• Photovoice workshops with a small groups of children pre and post construction
• Classroom based questionnaire pre and post construction
• Site observation pre and post construction (post only on one site)

Outcome report that found:
• There was a big increase in park attendance
• The designers had tried hard to fulfil the children’s desires, obviously working within budget constraints
• The children’s desires had to a large extent been met, though ‘creation’ and ‘natural features’ were less so.
Conclusion

• 8-12 year old children have a range of creative, inspiring and insightful ideas to contribute to play space planning processes.
• The secondary validation provided much richer data than expected.
• Councils valued the contribution the children made to the design brief and this in turn influenced the designs developed.
• The evaluation showed that when the children’s desires were translated into actual play space they did attract older children to play outside and enjoy being active.

What next?
• Knowledge transfer document: overview, case studies and methodology report.
We hope that the resulting play spaces will provide an ongoing invitation to older children to engage in active play.

We would like to thank all the Children’s Ideas Group members, steering committee members, and staff at the local councils and Parks Victoria for their collaboration, support and generous contribution to this project.

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