

Children's right to play and the environment: Response to IPA discussion paper

Tim Gill, independent researcher and member, IPA EWNI

Introduction

IPA is right to address the issue of how children's opportunities for play are influenced by the environment in which they live. As the IPA paper recognises, urbanisation is perhaps the most important environmental factor shaping children's play experiences. Urbanisation is in turn driven and shaped by rapid globalisation. In the face of this shift, government planning processes are often ineffective and/or weak. This failure, combined with a lack of effective citizen engagement, is leading to the spread of unplanned, speculative development that is not child-friendly, not sustainable and counter to the public good. Children's voices and perspectives on urban environments are all but absent. Moreover, the challenges facing those who wish to correct this are growing.

The IPA discussion paper gives a useful overview of the relationship between children's right to play and the environment. It rightly sets out the links between good play opportunities and wider health and developmental outcomes. Another strength is the broadness of its scope, in terms of recognising the widely differing contexts and circumstances that limit children's right to play in different parts of the world.

However, the paper has significant gaps as a position statement. Taking it forward, IPA's position should be strengthened in three ways. The first is by framing children's play in the context of child-friendliness. The second is through an increased focus on outcomes, with the aim of strengthening the policy case. The third is by recognising the lack of influence of the play advocacy sector and hence the need to build alliances with other progressive urban policy advocates whose agendas overlap.

Child-friendliness

There is a large body of research, policy and practice on the topic of child-friendliness, much of it informed by children's rights perspectives. This work could do with revisiting and reframing.

Greater recognition is needed of the role of walking, cycling and children's independent mobility, both as a means to improve their access to play opportunities and as forms of play experience in their own right. Walkability in particular is critical to children's experience of place as they grow up. Play advocates need to help expand policy-makers' understanding of this crucial planning concept so that children's perspectives and experiences of walking are properly taken into account.

For this reason, IPA should reframe its work on children's play and the environment through the adoption of a fresh conception of child-friendliness

which brings together questions of places/provision/experiences and access/mobility.

The Finnish academic Marketta Kyttä has developed a conceptual framework for child-friendliness that provides a sound, helpful basis for play advocacy (see her 2004 paper *The extent of children's independent mobility and the number of actualized affordances as criteria for child-friendly environments*, in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*). It is based on Gibson's work on affordances and on the role of children's everyday freedoms – their independent mobility - in actualising affordances. It characterises child-friendliness in terms of – on the one hand – the experiences on offer in a neighbourhood and – on the other – children's ability to access those experiences. The framework is a valuable starting point for exploring the characteristics of child-friendly environments that are most relevant to play.

One implication of this framework is that it shows the connections between child-friendliness and sustainability. Put simply, a child-friendly city shares many of the qualities of a sustainable city: it is compact, easy to walk/cycle around, and has a good supply of accessible, welcoming green space.

Outcomes

Historically the child-friendly cities (CFC) movement has focussed largely on process measures, with little focus on outcomes. For example, UNICEF's 2004 publication *Building Child Friendly Cities: A Framework for Action* sets out nine elements or building blocks, all of which are strongly process-oriented, emphasising children's engagement and participation.

Work to promote children's participation is not unimportant. But on its own, it is not enough. Advocacy based solely on principles of rights or participation has so far failed to provide the leverage that is needed to influence those whose decisions shape the lives of the many millions of children who are growing up in cities. A stronger and broader policy case needs to be made for why decision-makers should have any interest in child-friendliness.

Greater emphasis is needed on making the policy case - and building the evidence base - for CFCs, especially in terms of health, developmental and economic benefits. For example, much research has been carried out within the fields of public health and urban planning on the environmental determinants of health, including research on the benefits of compact urban design, walkable/cycleable neighbourhoods, affordable, efficient public transport, and accessible green space. Some of this research has addressed children and young people. Yet it has not been brought together or presented in a form that would make it useful for advocates of child-friendliness.

A stronger emphasis is also needed on outcome measures (as opposed to process measures) within the CFC framework and its associated accreditation and implementation tools. These could include levels of children's independent mobility, or measures of children's time spent in outdoor play.

Finally, case studies of persuasive child-friendly planning and policy interventions should be identified and shared, making clear not only the qualities that make them child-friendly but also their relevance to public policy agendas. Two candidate case studies are Rotterdam (which has invested substantial public funding into physical changes to make some neighbourhoods more child-friendly) and Bogotá (where thrice-mayor Enrique Peñalosa has placed strong emphasis on the principle that children are an 'indicator species' for cities, one example of which is its citywide 'ciclovía' network of regularly closed roads that open up public space for families to enjoy).

Links with progressive urban agendas

The above insight about the overlap between child-friendliness and sustainability is an illustration of my final line of argument: that play advocates should explore and develop shared agendas with others who are trying to influence urban policy. IPA and play advocacy organisations need to raise their profile and credibility on urban planning, transport and public space agendas. This is most likely to be achieved through engagement and dialogue with agencies that are active and influential in these policy areas, rather than through being a lone voice and developing stand-alone positions. While grounded in clear, explicit values and principles, these shared agendas should aim to move beyond the articulation of policy positions and into the territory of strategy and tactics.

For example, those campaigning for liveability and sustainability in cities support many initiatives – the promotion of walking and cycling, for instance, and improvements in public space - that would also make cities more child-friendly. Through building on these shared agendas, play advocates and advocates for liveability and sustainability are more likely to have a positive influence than if they remain separate. As globalisation - and the neoliberal planning processes and practices that it gives rise to - gain momentum, those who seek to steer urban development in a progressive direction will face ever greater challenges. This strengthens the rationale for broad progressive alliances.

Recommendations

I offer three recommendations below, which distil the key actions from the above discussion. These recommendations focus on the role of IPA and play advocacy groups, as these are likely to make up the audience that IPA's programme of work is most likely to be in a position to influence.

1. Adopt and adapt the CFC framework

The UNICEF CFC framework should be reviewed to focus on play, leisure and independent mobility and on outcomes and impact (not just process).

2. Build the policy case

IPA should gather and disseminate the evidence base in support of more child-friendly cities, including compelling and well-documented case studies.

3. Develop shared agendas

IPA should build links and develop shared agendas with NGOs that promote progressive approaches to urban planning, transport and public space, and should encourage play advocacy groups to do the same.

Tim Gill, 31 July 2016