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Child in the city

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Summary:

Although the majority of Europeans live in urban areas, town and city centres are not considered to be attractive places to raise children. This has led to those families with the means to do so moving out of city centres thereby increasing urban sprawl and automobile- dependency. This trend, reinforced by current demographic changes, weakens the economic and social vitality of towns and cities.

Territorial authorities have a major role to play in making their towns and cities attractive places where children can flourish and become fully-fledged citizens. They are responsible for policies which have an influence on children's and families' lives.

Local and regional authorities should respond to these challenges by developing a sustainable approach to the built environment and by developing child-friendly spatial planning policies in terms of mobility, exchanges, autonomy and security. Strong political will is also required regarding children's participation in local life and in particular in decisions on issues which affect their daily lives and their environment.

R: Chamber of Regions / L: Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: Group European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Member not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress

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Introduction

In theory, urban public spaces should be ideal for children's development and the entire town or city should offer the best of spaces for play and learning. In reality the trend is towards cutting children off from the city and providing activities in closed-off environments or outside of the city. Automobile traffic and the anonymity of large towns and cities lead to dangers and difficulties.

This report focuses on the ways in which spatial planning can help local authorities make urban areas child-friendly. Towns and cities are places of exchange and of learning where people from different backgrounds, cultures and ages live together with a shared geographic identity. However, all too often towns and cities are considered to be unsuitable places to bring up children. This report identifies ways in which urban planning can be used to transform towns and cities into desirable places to live for children and for other citizens.

Families with young children find the urban environment badly adapted to their needs and often prefer suburban life to living in the city centre, or opt for the countryside leaving towns and cities with an ageing and less wealthy population. This trend also adds to urban sprawl and places enormous pressures on the edges of towns and cities and on rural areas. Making towns and cities more child-friendly is urgent not only for the well-being of those children living in urban areas, but also to preserve the balance both between generations and between urban and rural areas.

At the same time, some major cities are experiencing gentrification with houses in districts that were hitherto considered working class, usually in city centres, bought up and upgraded by middle-class people. Once this process starts in a district it continues rapidly until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the social character of the district is changed. This trend also limits exchange between families of different social classes.

Demographic changes in Europe are also impacting on social cohesion. Increasing life expectancy and continuing low birth rates will leave growing numbers of people dependent on fewer economically active citizens. And in the same way as social and economic phenomena first become clear in urban areas, such demographic changes are also first recorded there[1]. This development has "fundamental repercussions for social security systems, for the economy and the labour market, and for public finance"[2], and consequently for the future of towns and cities in both the shorter and the longer term.

These trends do not mean that there are no children left. There are, but most of them live in the poorer neighbourhoods, where there is a combination of problems[3] and where it is more difficult for them to grow up in a balanced way. Demographic and social developments thus highlight the need for towns and cities to become more child-friendly.

The focus of this report is child-friendliness in relation to spatial planning, especially for children aged up to 12. The recommendations are aimed at urban areas of all sizes; whilst the challenges facing small towns and large cities are very different, the solutions suggested here promote the notion of building a shared community where all members can identify with their immediate and their wider public spaces.

The elements that make up this environment include housing, public spaces, play areas, mobility, cultural, sports and recreational facilities, and schools. The recommendations mostly relate to urban planning (in the broad sense of the word, including mobility and the design of public places) and to raising citizens' awareness of the need to change some of their behaviour. As responsibilities for these fields are not distributed in identical fashion in all the countries of Europe, this report offers recommendations without making a distinction between those borne by local and those borne by higher authorities.

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[1] Environment and urban sustainability. The European Academy of the Urban Environment EA.UE in 2006, http://www.eaue.de/jahr20066.htm
[2] Müller B., Demographic Change and its Consequences for Cities. Introduction and overview. In the German Journal of Urban Studies (Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kommunalwissenschaften), Vol. 44 (2004), No. 1.
[3] Ibidem.

Finally, it has to be emphasised that child-friendliness is integral to well-organised towns and cities, and concerns the fields of overall urban planning, mobility, travel and, more broadly, education, social affairs, social cohesion, etc. Most of the measures suggested to achieve child-friendliness have an impact on the quality of life in the town and city as a whole, so they also affect other age groups. Very few recommendations can be implemented in isolation: a child-friendly policy involves the whole community.

1.   The international context

Before looking at the individual elements of urban spatial policy, this report should be put in its context. Taking the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as the starting point, the focus is on three general concerns relevant to every element: the protection, development and participation of children. These concerns are complementary and should not be discussed in isolation.

The Convention should be implemented at local level as it is here that its application is the most concrete. A proactive approach to children's rights is required which recognises that child-friendliness is very important for a better future of urban areas and for the children who live there. Territorial authorities will need to take account of children's viewpoints when they draw up on their policies.

This report forms part of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities contribution to the Council of Europe programme "Building a Europe for and with children" which was initiated following the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe (Warsaw 2005) to ensure an integrated approach to promoting children's rights. The main aim of this programme is to help policy-makers and stakeholders draw up and implement strategies to protect children's rights and to prevent violence against children.

The UN Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children (2006), to which the Council of Europe programme ensures a follow-up at European level, offers concrete proposals on the matters addressed in this report[4]. In particular it calls for governments to "encourage and assist local and municipal governments to reduce risk factors in the physical environment. Well-lit and safe public places available for children, including safe routes for children and adolescents to travel through their communities, should be included in urban planning."

2.   Housing

The home as the centre of children's life

Children's housing situation, especially in urban environments, should be the first matter of concern. It is important because, for one thing, children spend most of their time at home, but also, because it is their "nest", their safe haven that serves as an operating base for a lot of activities. It is the central feature of their lives.

Housing quality

The housing in which children live should meet certain standards in respect of health, safety and privacy and should offer a space which encourages children's development, particularly through play facilities.

-    The home should be a healthy place, well-heated, well-ventilated, salubrious and free from air, water and ground pollution.

-    Within their home children should feel secure. The dwelling is a place for family togetherness, for privacy in the family group; from the age of about 6-8, children should enjoy their own personal privacy.

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[4] http://www.violencestudy.org/r25

- Space for children's activities: There should be space at home for children to move about and to run, to sing and to shout, to read or concentrate: in short, they need room for all kinds of play. There should be enough space in the living room and/or kitchen and/or garden and/or garage, etc, which should be fitted out so that children are able to play there.

Housing for families with children

In many European countries there is a shortage of homes suitable for children. The housing market is concentrating more and more on smaller units for one or two-person households. Large houses are consequently divided up, and new blocks of small flats are built. It is hard for families with children to find a dwelling at a reasonable price. They seek dwellings with three or more bedrooms (from the age of 10, children prefer to have a room of their own), with a living room that is not too small, and they prefer to have a garden; they also need space for bikes, skateboards, and other toys.

Public authorities should improve the supply and the financing of affordable housing for the most vulnerable categories of persons as recommended by the Council of Europe Group of Specialists on Access to Housing (CS-LO)[5] which suggests that "the supply of affordable housing should be increased, including through encouraging and promoting affordable home ownership and increasing the supply of affordable public, co-operative and private housing through partnerships among public and private initiatives."

Special attention for young parents' housing situation

Cities attract a lot of people who have difficult lives. Where the families concerned have children, city centre homes are too expensive, so they find homes in poorer neighbourhoods with old housing stock. Amongst the main problems in such homes is bad insulation and dampness (causing diseases such as asthma and other respiratory problems)[6]. Other problems relate to lighting, heating, with the danger of carbon monoxide building up, and lack of sanitary facilities. Younger children (up to the age of 6) tend to grow up in worse housing conditions than older children because their parents are younger and therefore have limited income and are forced to live in poor conditions. Once the parents' income rises, they move to better housing, or make improvements to their home.

Local authorities should develop a housing policy that takes account of the specific needs of young parents with children.

Special attention for reconstituted families' housing

Family structures have changed and are becoming more complex: single-parent families, stepfamilies, reconstituted families, etc. Such families' housing needs vary over time. Divorced parents sometimes look after their child(ren) for specific periods and their houses or flats sometimes lack space and are inappropriate for this purpose.

Children in high-rise housing

Children who live in high-rise buildings are in a quite specific situation, for the whole building is comparable to a street or a whole neighbourhood for children where they can meet each other very easily. But when they leave the building the situation is different: outside the home is on a large scale, usually a public area, where it is more difficult to supervise young children and contact with their parents is weakened.

Quality of the home environment

The dividing line between the home and public space is very important to children. Just outside their front door is a place where children can enjoy the security of the home and the advantages of public space (meeting friends, watching adults) at the same time.

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[5] Policy Guidelines as discussed at the 6th meeting of the CS-LO (11-12 October 2001)
[6] Breysse P. a.o. (2004), The relationship between Housing and Health: Children at risk (http://dx.doi.org), and Buysse B. (2007), Het kind in Vlaanderen, 2006, Brussels, Kind en Gezin.

The home environment may or may not be child-friendly but certain qualities are required:

- Health and safety
  Residential neighbourhoods should be free of air, water and ground pollution. Cars should not have a prominent place in the neighbourhood, not only for traffic safety reasons, but also for health and environmental reasons. Also good lighting is required.

- Privacy and security
  Security should prevail in residential areas, where security out of doors should of the same as the situation indoors. Public security should be safeguarded by all the adults who live in the area.

- Space for children's development
  The environment in which children live should stimulate their development. It is very important, not only for there to be other children nearby, but also for there to be the material conditions that foster independent mobility and different kinds of play (see below). The proximity of services (schools, childcare, etc) also plays an important role.

Facilities for children need to be within easy reach

Homes should be close to public spaces. Towns and cites of short distances and the proximity between facilities are important elements to be taken into account by planners and the designers of housing areas and housing estates.

The relationships between the home, the street and its neighbourhood are very important, but so are the links between the neighbourhood and the wider environment. The more central to housing areas facilities for children are, the more accessible they are to children with a minimum of assistance. This is so despite the tendency to centralise such facilities in larger units. For example, the library and swimming pool should be a safe and pleasant journey away.

Towards a child-friendly housing policy

Housing policies should make homes available for families with children of varying family structures. They should offer space for children's development and take into account children's health, safety, privacy and security. Certain structures are to be avoided such open galleries in high-rise buildings or use of high-rise housing above the fourth floor for children. Cars and motorised traffic are a danger to children and the amount of space available for them should be as limited as possible. By improving the inter-connectivity between home and public space, children are encouraged to build links with other facilities of interest to them.

3.   **Public spaces**

There is a need to distinguish between public and play spaces: public spaces are for everyone, while children are the main users of play spaces. This section focuses on the ways in which public spaces can be made more child-friendly.

Cities have always been over-crowded places where greater numbers of people have less space to live in. This situation has created a quite specific kind of social life, which does much to enhance a city's attractiveness. Unfortunately, this quality is now being lost.

Spaces appropriated by automobile traffic

Over the past century, cars have had a negative impact on social life. Public space is lost to cars and badly affected by an objective and subjective lack of safety. As the quality of the space diminishes, it also loses its value[7]. Many public spaces are now used for car parking, rather than for social activities and social interaction and many have become dangerous areas[8].

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[7] Boudry L. a.o. (2003), De eeuw van de stad. Over stadsrepublieken en rastersteden. Brugge, Die Keure. p. 117.
[8] Sklavouonos, G. (1998), Children First. Exploitation of children and sex tourism. European Economic and Social Committee (CES 976/98), p. 13.

Where public spaces have come to be primarily used for traffic a lot of accidents occur. In towns and cities the main victims are those road users who are most vulnerable, including children[9]. Another consequence of traffic is pollution[10], with adverse effects on the environment, and a particular impact on young children[11].

Sharing the public space

Mobility policies should not only relate to traffic but address all the functions fulfilled by roads and streets and take into account quality of life in a broad sense. Where housing is the main function, designers should focus on the street, giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists and to informal use of the street whilst reducing the place for motorised vehicles. A different approach will be needed for streets which offer both a living environment and have an important traffic function. Specific measures should be taken to protect vulnerable road users while making mobility pleasant for all road users, including car drivers. Vehicle speed limits will improve both safety and pleasure. Changes to infrastructure are needed where speed is to be reduced.

Feelings of insecurity

The problems that children face are mostly related to their parents' feelings of insecurity. Fear about traffic accidents is an issue for a lot of parents. But children are also not allowed out in the street alone because of fears regarding the risk of kidnapping and sexual abuse. Thus parents' tolerance of children's activities in the streets is very much reduced. Of course, children need to be protected, but the tendency to overprotect inhibits their use of public space. Parents feel the need for permanent control.

Of course child abuse has to be prevented. The authorities must continue their efforts to make society safer, especially where children are concerned. On the other hand, they need to realise that an overemphasis on parents' responsibility might lead to overprotection of children and prevent them from learning how to deal with various risks. When more people feel responsible for the well-being of children, the security situation will quickly improve, thereby enabling children to leave their homes unaccompanied[12].

Private use of public space

Every outdoor space owned by the community, including the street as a whole, falls within the original concept of "public space": a place for the public, for ordinary people. It quite often happens that particular claims are made for exclusive use of this space by shopkeepers, by youngsters on skates, and even by car drivers. Every public space has different functions, and the objective is to achieve multi-functionality.

Public space: humdrum, fragmented or smartened up

The focus on cars and private developments often leads to poor investment decisions by elected representatives and makes public space in urban areas increasingly dangerous. Towns and cities become humdrum and anonymous, with public spaces making up a network of which the most important function is to interconnect houses, offices and shops. Public spaces in this context are a kind of necessary evil and positive action to enliven them is unlikely.

The "zoning" principle has led to the creation of monofunctional zones for shopping, housing, offices, recreation, nature conservation, etc. This fragmentation generates a large amount of (vehicular) traffic, and fails to meet the need for smaller units with a combination of functions.

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[9] http://ec.europa.eu/transport/roadsafety/road_safety_observatory/annual_statistics_en.htm
[10] Ashmore M.R. a.o. (2000), Effects of traffic management and traffic mode on the exposure of schoolchildren to carbon monoxide. In: Environmental Monitoring and Assessment, Vol. 65, p. 49-57.
[11] Committee of Environmental Health (2004), Ambient Air Pollution: Health Hazards to Children. Pediatrics, 2004, 114: 1699-1707.
[12] Tonucci, F. (2004, 5) La ciudad de los niños. Un modo nuevo de pensar la ciudad. Madrid, Funcación Geman Sánchez Ruipérez.

There is also a smartening-up process which contrasts with acceptance of the humdrum. In their search for prestige, in competition with other cities, some places devise prestigious projects, with visibility and communication in town planners' minds rather than utility. This is another area where a coherent approach is often lacking.

Towns and cities have recently become increasingly aware of the economic value of public space, organising a car-free town centre, with a park-and-ride bus or tram system bringing people in from outlying car parks. Thus a lot of public space is handed back to pedestrians, initially with shopping trips uppermost in the planners' minds. But the aims have become broader: informal get-togethers and cultural and sports events have also become important. Nevertheless, the target group tends to be restricted to adults. Thus pragmatic, aesthetic and economic ideas are dominating the design of public spaces.

Improving biodiversity is another aspect for which urban public space is important. They offer a space where biodiversity can be improved through the introduction of a wide variety of plants, and even animals. Long-term urban planning should encourage the development of green belts within and around the town or city with green corridors towards the centre. The recent Congress Recommendation and Resolution on urban biodiversity emphasises the crucial role of local authorities on this issue.[13]

There is also a vision which considers the city as a fabric interlinking different spaces, different functions, different qualities, different ages, different cultural backgrounds, etc. whilst nonetheless ensuring that this fabric should be experienced as a whole[14]. Public space needs to support this diversity, and provide spaces for children, with all their noise, liveliness, social contacts and play activities.

Creating child-friendly public spaces

It should be possible for children to move from one place to another, not in the same way as adults (with serious intent, in haste, with efficiency, functionally), but in their own way (while engaging in various activities, enjoying each other's company and exploring their environment). One of the important aspects of such behaviour is mental mapping[15]: while exploring, children gather a lot of information, which they absorb while at the same time building up a mental map that will help them to find their way round their neighbourhood, evaluate it and get the feeling that they are "at home".

Public areas should be made more attractive to children. An important asset in children's view is the presence of nature in urban areas. But the town or city as a whole should be made attractive to all, children included. This means that children should find life in the streets that they are in, with invitations to sit down, climb, taste, touch and play. There is no need for play equipment (that is reserved for playgrounds), but small enhancements, such as works of art, amusing objects that bring a street to life, small devices to divert rainwater in a playful way, a few flowers and trees, etc. Such aspects make the town and city more attractive not only for children, but for all citizens.

Public authorities should pay greater attention to the link between a sense of geographical belonging (pride in "my city") and children's socio-cultural identity. Urban planners should use tools specifically aimed at children to promote the child-friendliness of towns and cities and all levels of governance should encourage exchanges of good practice relating to child-oriented public space projects.

The integration of green areas in towns and cities, reduced space for cars and proper lighting can help create a feeling of security which will encourage parents and teachers to occupy and use public spaces for various (social) objectives. There should be a combination of safety and playability at every place used by children.

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[13] Congress Recommendation 232 (2008) and Resolution 249 (2008) on Biodiversity policies for urban areas
[14] Boudry L., o.c., p. 37-38.
[15] Christensen P., Place, space and knowledge, Children in the village and the city. In: Christensen P., O'Brien M., (eds), (2003), Children in the City. Home, neighbourhood and community. London and New York, RoutledgeFalmer.

4.   Mobility

The decrease in the numbers of child road casualties is certainly partly due to the continuing efforts made by the authorities, although another explanation offered is the decline in the numbers of children walking and cycling in public places. It also has to be noted that children living in a wide variety of deprived circumstances (poor neighbourhoods, unemployed parents etc.) are overrepresented in the casualty figures[16]. Another concern is children's exposure to poor air quality, which has effects on their health and can cause asthma and some forms of cancer[17].

Because of all these concerns, as well as anxiety about "stranger danger" as mentioned above, parents do not allow their children to walk or cycle on their own. They take their children to school or to the swimming pool by car, thereby increasing the traffic and the dangers to children who are on the street. Another result is a reduction in the amount of physical activity in which children engage, with a resulting deterioration in their physical condition. Recent initiatives showing some positive effects to address these issues include the creation of home zones in some neighbourhoods and around schools where the speed limit is reduced, usually 30 km/h. and the development of networks of safe routes to schools and to leisure facilities.

These mobility-related concerns are shared by both parents and children, but children also have concerns of their own about mobility. Mobility as a basic right guarantees a great deal of freedom, not only in choice of destination, but also in the means of transport used, and, as a consequence of this, in the ways in which children experience their mobility. Recent research shows that children always combine moving around with other activities. While adults can just get into their car and go to their chosen destination, children regard moving around as primarily a social activity, a way to meet others, to have a chat and a laugh, to discuss things[18]. Secondly, they also take the chance to observe their environment, spotting any cats or any fruit on the apple trees, noticing the elderly man with an odd umbrella, and so on. Adults interpret this behaviour as a lack of concentration, but it is a polycentric approach to life typical of children exploring their world and not appreciated in the education system. The need to concentrate on traffic is due to the high speed of cars, generating conflict with slower road users. This mobility situation determines people's access to the roads, and is a source of discrimination against people who walk or cycle.

But the purpose of mobility remains - for children as well - that of going to another place: visiting grandparents or friends, going to school or to a sports club. Mobility is necessary before a person knows where to go; it is an important aspect of the notion of freedom. Opportunities to move around unaccompanied are important: the chance to walk, cycle or use public transport, alone or with friends

In the interests of their protection and their development, children's mobility should be the subject of greater public attention. To escape from the vicious circle inherent in the situation described above, a long-term policy needs to be developed for sustainable mobility. Children's opportunities to walk, cycle and use public transport facilities definitely need to be increased and public spaces should be more child-friendly. Schools should also provide more cycling facilities and could envisage taking pupils by bike on short journeys to sports or other facilities instead of by bus. Children should also be taught how to maintain a bicycle. The attitude that public transport is dangerous should be rethought, and a specific pricing policy should make such transport more popular and more accessible.

Improving children's mobility

Traffic policies should encourage safe walking, cycling and public transport as these contribute to children's autonomous mobility. Good examples of such policies include 30 km/h speed limit zones and pedestrian areas. Creating a children's mobility network of roads and paths by which children can reach all the places they want to go to (schools, sports centres, public spaces, play areas, etc.) would improve the accessibility and safety of spaces used by children.

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[16] NCB, Highlight, (2007) No. 231. Transport, traffic and travel for children and young people.
[17] Ruxton S., (2005), What about us? Children's Rights in the European Union, Next Steps. Brussels, European Childrens's Network.
[18] Van Gils J. a.o. (2007), Vervoersafhankelijkheid en vervoersautonomie van kinderen (10-13 jaar). Brussels, Federaal Wetenschapsbeleid.

The provision of information and training is crucial in enabling children to move around safely. Local authorities should systematically provide training for children on road safety and sharing the street from kindergarten age and in schools.

5. Playgrounds and recreation areas

In cities in particular, play and recreation areas are scarce as a result of the shortage and high cost of space. This is exacerbated by the growing tendency for families with young children to leave cities so that the few playgrounds that do exist are not used intensively, with the result that local politicians no longer regard them as a priority. This is the vicious circle that cities are now experiencing.

Another problem is the geographical position of many play areas in inner cities. Because play areas were not initially provided, they have been developed on an ad hoc basis, on leftover spaces which are often unsuited to serving as public spaces (surrounded by blank walls, squeezed in behind private houses, close to roads used as traffic routes, suffering from restricted access, etc).

An increasing amount of attention is, however, being paid to the inclusion of play opportunities when various facilities are being planned. Many libraries have introduced play corners, and play areas now feature in shopping centres.

Indoor playgrounds are one alternative to the shortage of outdoor play spaces. They increase play opportunities for younger children, in particular, but since there is a charge for using them, they are not accessible to all children. The development of play areas in historic city centres should be foreseen in broader public space or regeneration projects.

The planning of play and recreation areas

Because cities are crowded, specific play and recreation areas are needed. It would be quite impracticable to provide every home with a garden, offering a private play area, which in any case could not meet all children's play needs. Special areas therefore need to be provided, with specific play and recreational functions. Children in such areas will not adopt the same play behaviour as in public spaces; play is much more extensive in public spaces, whereas in play areas it is concentrated. Play in public spaces lasts a short time, or is spread over multiple short periods, while it may go on for a long time in a play area. Public spaces are designed with many functions in mind, whereas play areas are designed specifically for play. Such play areas should be developed, especially in town and city centres where, as shopping and business districts, they offer excellent locations to build children's recreational spaces; public authorities could consider making the inclusion of such areas obligatory.

Large numbers of small play areas can be created in specific locations such as places where old streams become visible again, where some minor efforts (involving the pumping of water) can make the place suitable for children's play. Statues can be made attractive to climb up and sit on, market places could have equipment installed that children can use to generate certain sounds and so on. Such facilities are increasingly being produced by play equipment manufacturers.

Play area design

We can make a distinction between three age groups with different play needs: children under five years old, children aged between five and ten, and those aged over ten. The first group needs the presence of a parent, older brother or sister or another adult in whose care they have been placed. This presence can take different forms, but the most important thing is that there should be visual or auditory contact. The older the children are, the less keen they are on their parents being present.

Younger children appreciate a small and clearly delimited play area (although fences are not necessary), with a lot of sand to play in and some climbing structures that can be used for other physical activities; there could be trees to provide some shade and some benches to make the area pleasant for parents and other adults. Play areas of this kind should be small in scale so that any teenagers present feel ridiculous there and they should not be far from children's homes. Less than 100 metres is ideal.

Children in the five to ten years age group need more space: they have a wider radius and greater energy reserves, and their bodies are growing rapidly. Their play areas need to be challenging, with a large, deep sandpit, water, higher and more attractive structures, and an opportunity for creative activities, such as building dens, acting out scenes, creating a race track, etc. They should be on broken ground offering places to hide and to play with some degree of privacy. It is illusory to think that such a place could meet all of children's play needs: children will often go elsewhere to observe other activities and explore other areas. There is no need for such play areas to be so close to their homes, but they must be able to be reached by unaccompanied children, without any need for them to cross a busy road, for example.

Both for this age group and for the younger children, a play centre, or family centre, may be designed and located further away from home, but still accessible by bicycle. Whole families can spend half a day (or more) at such centres.

Children aged over ten need places to meet each other, but these should not be termed "play areas". This is not just a question of terminology, but also a matter of their identity for almost-teenagers. Their minds are made up: they no longer play (they might play football, but they regard that as a sport). In fact they play a lot: teasing each other, fighting, challenging the others to do the same tricks on their bikes, etc. But this play is what we referred to earlier as extensive, changing quickly and often. It is impossible to tie these children to a clearly defined place, for even their meeting places change as group membership or the relations between members change.

Older children need some spaces where their presence is tolerated, where they can "just do nothing" or play some music, where they can gather together only to disperse again shortly afterwards. It is hard to define such places. But their characteristics are quite similar to those of public spaces. On the other hand, sports facilities should never be far away.

Planning play areas should bear in mind not only the distance that children are allowed or ready to go, but also the type of play that they prefer at different ages. The table below shows different geographical ranges required for different aged children.

Age group	Territory	Urban planning level
Approx. 1-3	1. Close to the front door	Type and architectural style of homes
Approx. 4-6	2. In the same street	Street and living environment design
Approx. 6-10	3. Immediate living environment (delimited by physical barriers)	Living environment design
Approx. 10-12	4. Neighbourhood	Urban planning of the residential area
From age 13 upwards	5. District/city	Urban planning of the town/city as a whole
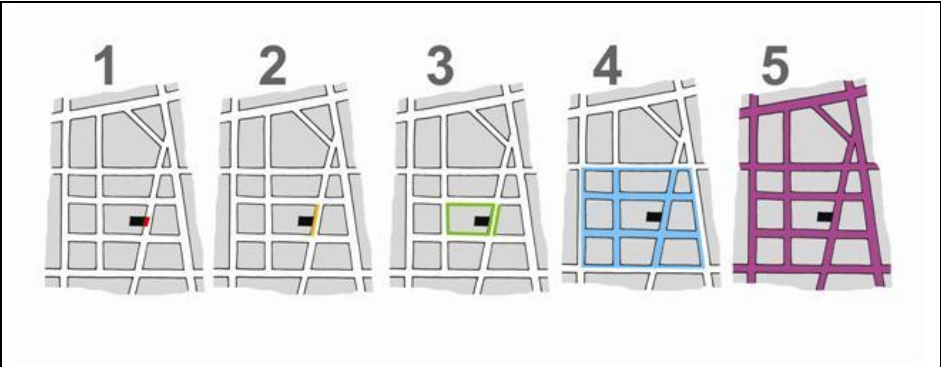
Towns and cities should develop a network of play spaces across the whole area, particularly in their centres, offering a variety of scales for different kinds of play. These should be linked to the children's mobility network outlined in section 3.

6.   Cultural, sports and recreational facilities

Urban areas have always played an important role in cultural, social, intellectual and political renewal. The quantity and diversity of human activities inspire and generate creativity[19]. The facilities provided help to make towns and cities attractive to children, while children and young people also make their own contribution to these urban assets, always being the first to take up new trends, enthuse about new forms of cultural expression and sport, and spot the (good or bad) characteristics of places that other people never notice. To children and young people, the city is an invitation to myriad new experiences, cultural (museums, exhibitions, concerts, etc), sporting (skate parks, swimming pools, specialised sports activities, etc.) and recreational (parties, festivals etc.). The urban area plays a central role which makes it attractive to people who live in the surrounding area as well.

Towns and cities need to involve children in this process of creativity by offering a wide range of cultural, sports and recreational facilities, by challenging them to develop their own initiatives in these fields and by helping them to do so. By pursuing such a policy, which needs to focus very much on those children who live in deprived circumstances, they will help to integrate children into social networks.

Making cultural, sports and recreational facilities accessible

The accessibility of these facilities is crucial, and this depends on children's mobility, the fees charged, the free time a child has and the family situation. Spatial policy should pay attention to the location of cultural, sports and recreational infrastructures and it is important that small-scale facilities should be easily accessible on foot or by bicycle. The infrastructures need to be as multifunctional and adaptable as possible and geared to the size and age of the children who will use it. Youth centres and other specific youth-related infrastructure (facilities for music rehearsals, etc.) should be built of appropriate materials so as to minimise the nuisance to nearby residents.

Cultural, sports and recreational facilities should be provided at two levels within the town or city: in the city-centre and in its component districts. Multifunctional buildings require less space than individual buildings for specific activities. Other small-scale provision could be integrated into public space. Indeed small-scale provision of all kinds of facilities (cultural, sports, recreational, educational, welfare, library, etc) for both young and old people should be provided in the areas where people live. Museums should also provide interactive material geared to the needs of children.

7.   Schools in the community

Within this context, schools should receive special attention as well. Clearly, the concerns mentioned in the chapters on public spaces and mobility relate very much to schools, which are the facilities the most important for, and used daily by, children. These concerns will not be raised again in this section, and nor will school infrastructure be discussed here. It is the link between the school and the community that will be examined below, the school as community space, and the community as space for education[20].

While cities do not offer enough space for children to play in, most school playgrounds are closed outside school hours. In practice, school facilities such as sports facilities, classrooms, meeting rooms and computers are unavailable after hours. Childcare is only available immediately before and after school. Public sports facilities, on the other hand, are used only during leisure time.

Schools are not just isolated in spatial terms, but also socially. They are detached from the life of society and provide an artificial environment in which children are taught how to live in the real world. Some European countries are endeavouring to create "broader" schools to counter this isolation.

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[19] Boudry L. a.o. (2003), De eeuw van de stad. Over stadsrepublieken en rastersteden. Brugge, Die Keure.
[20] Bartlett S. a.o. (1999), Cities for children. Children's Rights, Poverty and Urban Management. London, UNICEF, Earthscan p.166.

The school as a community space

While schools should provide an infrastructure for children's education, they also offer opportunities to be used for childcare, youth work, sports activities and other needs of the community. In this way, they could offer opportunities to adults, such as adult education, computer training, sports activities, meetings, etc. The school would cease to be an island on which children are prepared for their subsequent adult life, and become a community facility where both children and adults feel at home, and where parents have more opportunities for contact with teachers. This can be particularly helpful for parents living in difficult circumstances.

Children should feel that their school is a living environment preparing them for life, a place beneficial for their sensory-motor, social, emotional and cognitive development, for instance. Schools, as multifunctional facilities, can play an important role in the development of greater social cohesion in the community, in creating a sense of collective belonging and a better environment to live in. Efficient use of school facilities will generate more space for children, while also reducing the need to organise their transportation.

It is clear that schools should be taken out of their isolation. But schools should not be the only places where children learn. Learning should also go on wherever children are in the community. Closer links between schools and their environment will generate more opportunities to learn about life and will encourage lifelong learning for adults. In general, all public spaces should be accessible to children.

8.   Children's participation in elaborating urban spatial policies

Participation could have been a sub-heading in all six sections, as it relates to all of them. It is included as a section of its own because children themselves are concerned about their participation. As children have no right to vote in elections, they have no say in urban policy matters and they are not involved in decision-making processes. Nowadays, arrangements are increasingly being made for children to participate in decisions relating to the creation of playgrounds or other places exclusively for their use. But very seldom are children involved in decisions about subjects important to other citizens as well as themselves, such as school environments and other public spaces.

When it comes to major urban planning matters such as economic development, housing policy, social well-being, mobility, culture and education, children are rarely consulted. This is particularly relevant to the current debate on sustainable development as increased efforts are needed to ensure that the next generation is not left with the burden of the debts, ecological risks and short-term decisions of the present day. Thus it is important to find people able to represent children's interests in their city's policies and take into account their interest in overall policy.

Elected representatives should ensure that more account is taken of children's needs in the spatial planning process. Children should be involved in the consultation and decision-making processes of urban planning policy. By adopting an open attitude, planners and politicians can learn precious information about children's concerns and the viewpoints of their youngest citizens. Children will not, of course, put forward detailed plans, but they can set out their concerns and make clear what is important to them. This approach would oblige experts to communicate and to express their projects in a manner which is clear, simple and comprehensible to children.

Such processes, which make children aware of their role as citizens, thus constitute an investment in the future of the town or city. The greater children's attachment is to their town or city, the greater will be their contribution to its development. This, of course, assumes that politicians support the theories of active citizenship and of the participation of all citizens in local life.

Experiments in participation by children are now organised in almost every community. A lot of energy is devoted to the search for good ways of involving children and good systems for this. The main challenges that arise (many of them common to adult participation processes) are:

-    Children are only involved in respect of matters of direct interest to themselves, the best example being play areas. Children are, however, also interested in the broader dimension of urban planning, in mobility issues, social welfare, culture and sports;

- All too often, participation is reserved for the children in an elite group: those who are very mature and responsible and have well-developed social skills;

- All too often again, the arrangements for children's participation are modelled on those made for adults' participation, but the system of advisory councils and other verbal processes (meetings, discussions, etc) is not appropriate to the ways in which children express their feelings and their ideas;

- In order to make children's participation really effective, their approach should be incorporated into adults' decision-making processes.

Conclusion

A child-friendly town or city is first of all and foremost a people-friendly place, it is a place where people feel a sense of belonging and interest, whether at home or at work, enjoying cultural activities, shopping, leisure activities or relaxing.

Spatially child-friendly towns and cities call for special consideration to be given to housing, mobility, public and play spaces, recreational facilities and schools. Special attention must, of course, be paid to the safety and security of children, but at the same time, it is vital that children are able to live both indoors and outdoors and that their development is not restricted by over-focusing on their security. A well-considered balance needs to be found between children's protection, children's development and children's participation.

Child-friendly policies need to go beyond urban planning to encompass environmental concerns, social issues, health care, education and economic life. Local and regional authorities should be looking for the interconnections between all these domains within their responsibilities, whilst also paying attention to the needs and well-being of future generations. A well-functioning town or city ensures that people of different age groups and of different social or cultural backgrounds are able to share the same public spaces.

The best way to respond to children's needs is to involve them in the decisions which affect their daily lives and environment.