

A Playful Neighbourhood in the Indian Context

Strategic Advisory



Image credits - Ravichandra GS

The advisory has been developed under the Infant, Toddler and Caregiver-Friendly Neighbourhoods (ITCN) Capacity Building Programme, implemented by National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), New Delhi with support from Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF). The programme aims at addressing the development needs of the cities' youngest citizens, below the age of six years, and their caregivers through planning and development interventions at the neighbourhood level on a city-wide scale. The programme has developed the capacity of city officials and young professionals throughout the country on making the Indian neighbourhoods young children and caregiver-friendly.

Disclaimer

While every effort has been made to ensure the correctness of data/information used in this advisory, NIUA does not accept any legal liability for the accuracy or inferences drawn from the material contained therein or for any consequences arising from the use of this material. No part of this advisory may be reproduced in any form (electronic or mechanical) without prior permission from or intimation to NIUA.

Text from this advisory can be quoted provided the source is acknowledged.

Publisher:

National Institute of Urban Affairs, New Delhi

Copyright @ NIUA (2023)

Contributed by

NIUA Team – Krishna Kant Pandey, Sonali Mahamna and Poorva Singh

Advisor

D. Ajay Suri

Supported by

BvLF Team: Victoria Chavez Barriga, Laura Ochoa Foschini, Sam Sternin, Ipshita Sinha and Prakash Kumar Paul

Graphic Design

Graphic Design Team, NIUA

Contact:

National Institute of Urban Affairs
1st and 2nd floor Core 4B
India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003, India
Write to us: itcn-cb@niua.org



A Playful Neighbourhood in the Indian Context

Strategic Advisory

Keywords: *Play Opportunities, Playful Neighbourhoods, Early Childhood Development, Play for all, and Pause & Play*

The advisory unpacks 'play opportunities' at an Indian city scale for early childhood development beyond a conventional designated playground by including play into the everyday journey of a young child and their caregivers, resulting in 'playful neighbourhoods.'

Urban Child

With changing landscape and digital boom in Indian cities, there is more complex sensorial overload for young children through increased screen time, high decibel levels and non-permeable tactile elements such as concrete, glass and steel, which can either become a catalyst or deterrent to a receptive young mind. An 'urban child' as identified in 'The Urban Child – Issues and Strategies, 1993', which came out of the National Consultation, mentioned the category of the urban disadvantaged child, specially to ensure their unique needs are covered in the national development process. While the Strategy focuses on low-income neighbourhoods, it misses out on the role of play opportunities as part of a child's development process - a stimulus more urgent within the urban setting, limiting its scope to basic health, nutrition and education. 'Early Childhood Stimulation' is touched upon under 'Education,' where 'play' is defined as a sensorial exchange (singing or vocalising) between two individuals. Play is conceptualised as an exchange with another living being, linked not only with the personal development of a child but also the strengthening of the bond between those two individuals. (p.40, Swaminathan 1993).

Indian neighbourhoods often face challenges and barriers in establishing a 'playful neighbourhood' for the young children. This is so because of the cultural and time related factors of the Indian families and caregivers that prevent young children from being outdoors. In the Indian context, caregiving for the young children is generally practised by the parents or other family members. The work schedule of the caregivers in some cases extends to a limit where the outdoor play time of the infants and toddlers becomes minimal. Also, the Indian infrastructure is not enough to cater to the play needs of young children.

Introducing play at neighbourhood level to engage the urban children would not be enough only through the provision of playgrounds. Interventions

on the level of other child centric elements of the neighbourhood such as Anganwadis, walking paths, bus stops, hospitals etc. also need to be made. Children require a whole environment that could push up their developmental phase.

Healthy children are a universal indicator of the level of well-being in a society. Hence the scope of this advisory is to zoom out a little, looking at 'play opportunities' as design interventions to engage a larger set of urban children. While the 'Urban Child' refers to play opportunities as a more personal exchange, this advisory seeks to explore its potential as an activity bringing a community closer, with the scale shifting from a playroom or designated play area to an entire urban neighbourhood.

Why 0-3 years is crucial in a child's development?

The first 1,000 days in a human life are referred as the period of rapid physical growth as well as accelerated mental development. This phase in a child's life is a unique opportunity to build health and intelligence for their entire lifespan. Its importance is compared to the time a baby is in a womb, depending on the mother for nutrition as well as holistic growth. The role of the caregiver then is at par during the First 1,000 Days. (Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram)

Early experiences influence brain development. The rich synaptic connections between neurons in an infant's brain are created in-utero and develop most intensively in the first thousand days of life. When a child is deprived of interaction and stimulation, their neuron growth is radically stunted (ITCN Policy Framework, Smart Cities Mission). Thus, the brain development process largely depends upon the early experiences and external environments in which children are inhabited. Urban external environments with a variety of textures and experience are the most beneficial to the growing brain, both structurally and emotionally. Play in

neighbourhood spaces is more than entertainment for children, it is physical and emotional learning, social communication and therefore essential for children's well-being at the early years.

An international organisation 'Thousand days', pushing the narrative of how crucial first 1,000 days are for children as well as their caregivers, has observed that babies who have been neglected, who have not been talked to or have not had adequate play opportunities have a marked difficulty reaching their growth potential. These findings are based on the academic work conducted in fields of nutrition requirements, and the physical and psychological development.

Most urban play spaces are designed without considering the youngest, instead they are designed for children who have already developed their motor skills (Superpool). In India, most play opportunities are confined to playgrounds which often themselves lack any distinct attempts to ensure age-responsive play opportunities for children in different age-groups. The common spaces tend to be taken over by older children leading to low access to creative space for younger children. Some child care centres or Anganwadis provide facilities specifically for young children but then again, these remain confined within the premises.

Older children have larger variety of dedicated urban infrastructure as well as designated activity centres in the form of music classes, dance academies, craft workshops, among others that engage them both mentally and physically. The spread and scale for children in the 0 - 3 years age group ranges from home to pre-primary schools and day care centres, and additionally to places wherever the caregivers go for daily chores such as streets, supermarkets and so on (Place Matters). Therefore, to facilitate the healthy brain development of children, it is important to enhance their early childhood experiences which largely depends upon the environment they are inhabited in. This can be done through the provision of appropriate age responsive playful surroundings at places such as pre-primary schools, daycare centres, anganwadis, parks, streets, etc. which are a part of the childrens' day to day environment. This would help in bringing them in contact with an active surrounding and would facilitate observation, interaction, playful experience and early childhood development.

Everything is Play!

Young children are often tagged along for the trips their caregivers must take for the household chores, to run errands as well as for their own well beings. The travel behaviour of children is

then linked to their caregivers, which is not a homogenised category itself ranging from elder siblings, to working parents, retired grandparents, domestic helpers, among others. Owing to this, the scope of intervention automatically broadens to a neighbourhood at large. A young-child friendly neighbourhood would not only provide for play opportunities between their daily trips but also ensure a child's accessibility to the same. An emphasis should be made to enabling healthy and safe environment for young children that aids in their development at a crucial age while fostering a sense of community and care within them.

There is growing recognition of the benefits of outdoor play experiences with a degree of risk for children of all ages and abilities. These children are naturally curious, they have an appetite for experience, and an urge to explore and understand. Even in their first few years, children's growing ability to explore and navigate their world while keeping themselves reasonably safe is evident, for instance in their progression from sitting and crawling to toddling and walking. As they grow up, they become ever more competent and able to get to grips with the world around them (Tim Gil, 2018). An important point related to children's development and growth is the gradual transfer of decision making, judgement and responsibility to them. Often it is through the experience of engaging with and overcoming everyday challenges that children learn best how to cope with them.

A young child's play activities are quite erratic to be confined to an exhaustive list. Even in a narrow time-frame of initial 3 years, a child's needs and behaviours cannot be standardised. Through this age, alongside the changes in babies' bodies their play activities are also observed to evolve in stages, as mentioned below:

- **Stage 1:** Babies play alone or with the help of their caregivers, mostly constituting movement of their hands or legs while they remain stationary; Positively responsive caregiving practices by primary caregivers, i.e., mother and father, and also the family, are an important form of social engagement for babies.
- **Stage 2:** They start watching slightly elder children, start making complex movements around them and begin playing independently next to them.
- **Stage 3:** Children start to socialize by playing simple games together in a group. Over time, they move to games with more complex, sometimes self-invented rules based on competition or co-operation.

In the fourth stage, they reach beyond the 1,000-day mark (Child Friendly Smart Cities).

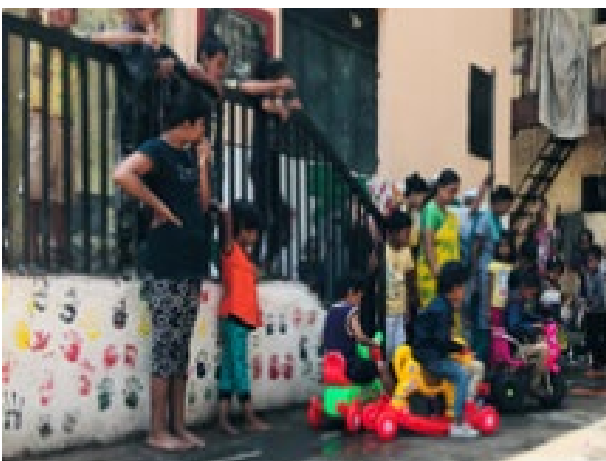
The objects and materiality of young child centric interventions must be conducive to the progressions of play patterns of a young child. Play equipment with features of multi-play allow children to engage in groups, incorporates different play elements and having them observe different individuals. Examples of such would be rope and net structures, and equipment allowing a range of movement like swinging, sliding and spinning. Additionally, interactive equipment will engage and develop a child's range of senses (Child Friendly Smart Cities). A child's actions and reactions not only inform their play and sites of play opportunities but also engagement with the built environment form the warp and weft of urban communities (Place Matters).

Programming of spaces should be considered as an important and less complicated mechanism to address play and caregiver well-being. Strategies such as reading in parks or organized play hours are quicker to set up, implement, and replicate than play infrastructure.

Case Examples (Urban95, Pune)

Anganwadi 92, Ambedkar Slum, Pune

The Anganwadi 92, Ambedkar Slum is operated and maintained by the Women & Child Development Department, GoM. The Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) is involved in designing interventions with support from BvLF under Urban95 initiative. The project was undertaken to make neighbourhoods safe, accessible and playful for the ITCs. The PMC identified various issues such as lack of play space for anganwadi and surrounding community. Moreover, the overall appearance and environment of the anganwadi did not encourage caregivers to send their children to the place. PMC developed various interventions to convert the underutilized spaces into interactive and playful area.



The elements for an ITC friendly neighbourhood undertaken were:

- Paintings on the wall and sidewalk
- Handing over the play equipments to children

The design interventions were developed based on three major objectives of an ITC friendly neighbourhood: 'Safe', 'Playful' and 'Inclusive'. The major intervention included provision of sidewalk games through paintings on street.

The number of ITCs using the space for various activities, almost doubled after the intervention. Activities such as playing cycling, caregivers walking with infants significantly increased.

Sonawane Maternity Hospital, Pune

Public Buildings are a major element that need to be emphasised upon for developing child friendly neighbourhoods. The Sonawane Maternity Hospital, Pune is operated and maintained by the Pune Municipal Corporation's Health Department. The initial observations drew that the hospital lacked desired seating space for OPD patients. Further, there was a very limited space available on the site which was already in use for the vehicular movement of visitors and parking by nearby slum dwellers. PMC designed various interventions to cater to these issues. The interventions included various ITC- centric elements such as:

- Colourfully painted seating in brick and concrete
- Fixing of broken pipe and levelling and repairing and also, levelling of an unused manhole at the hospital
- Painting of walls
- Games painted on floor

The games painted on floor enabled a playful environment and easy and universal understanding. The wall painting was done to maintain joyful atmosphere. Grouped benches provided a seating space/waiting space for the caregivers or the patients. The interventions bought out outcomes where the playful and recreational activities of the children waiting near the OPD increased. Also, the successful implementation of the interventions gave

a joyful environment to the space due to which the ITCs preferred to stay inside the hospital campus even if the waiting period is long.



Recommendations for play opportunities

Planning and design of play opportunities for young children should factor in the following considerations:

- **Inclusive:** Integrating play opportunities rather than separating them.
- **Intuitive:** Avoiding complex design to promote simple sensory stimuli.
- **Diversity:** Everything can be play so provide possibilities for creative exploration by children.
- **Tolerance for Error:** Design should be sensitive to human (children) errors.

A tot-lot could be appropriately planned to accommodate cognitive learning disguised as play. It would be certainly exhilarating for a toddler to merely play with water fountain, start friendships, or simply explore new surface materials. Something as basic as a sand pit will encourage children to come up with their own innovative methods of playing. It would be fun, safe to jump and will engage children in observational learning. Switching to a safe playground surface such as solid rubber mat will help multiply the safety factor of any play area significantly.

Spaces itself can be play activity if children are presented with an opportunity to explore it on their own. A changing topography with mounds, cavities and caves helps expand children's spatial perception and stimulate their imagination. All of this supports young children in their learning process - they learn compassion, observation and develop understanding of different senses. Every skill that

a child is learning can be leveraged to create play opportunities. Skills such as crawling, standing and walking learnt in the first three years can inspire designs for playgrounds for young children. It is interesting to explore a specific example of how a regular playground can be transformed to better incorporate ECD while playing.

Parks as play? Or can we go beyond – 'Adventure Playground' (Vox 2019)

Does a playground need a slide, colourful features, and sanitised elements? Or can old tyres, wooden planks and household tools adequately constitute a play opportunity? Should play spaces be designed in a manner that encourages children to explore more in a safe space?

Play opportunities encouraging Early Childhood Stimulation should not be limited to a designated area and a fixed activity of the day, instead knitted in the fabric of the urban space. An intelligent play space would challenge a young child to explore the usability of the provisions around, invoke their reactions to several situations in a creative manner and prioritize the risk-averse nature of the designated space.

Regulation along the following features should be considered, to minimise hazard and serious injury -

- Height
- Speed
- Sharp Tools
- Rough-and-tumble play
- Ability to disappear or
- Hazardous elements or become lost material

Another feature that adds to the adventure in a play opportunity is zoning of space. This can be achieved through a permeable boundary, which allows caregivers to keep an eye on their toddlers from a safe distance yet doesn't overwhelm toddlers with the constant supervising gaze.

The argument for the adventure playgrounds is that young children respond well when treated seriously i.e, when left at their own devices with tools that pose a certain challenge, they will exercise caution while experimenting. Whereas if placed in a sanitised static space, they are more likely to exercise ambitious for greater thrills in an external environment which can result in serious injury. (Leichter-Saxby and Wood, 2018).

The implementation of the play opportunities is not in a retrofitting mode, but rolling back and starting at the planning stage of an urban neighbourhood, encapsulating most children of that place.

References:

- i. *Child Friendly Smart Cities, creating accessible parks and play spaces: A how - to guide for Indian cities*
- ii. *ITCN Policy Framework, Smart Cities Mission*
- iii. *Place Matters – Handbook of Global Best Practices on Place Making for Children*
- iv. *Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. (2018). Journey of the first 1000 days- Foundation of a Brighter Future (p.1), Government of India.*
- v. *Swaminathan, I. (1993). Early Childhood Stimulation in Urban Slums and Low Income Neighbourhoods: Challenges and Prospects. In Urban Child - Issues and Strategies (pp 37-42). New Delhi. National Institute of Urban Affairs.*
- vi. *Superpool. (2019, June 28). Playground Ideas for 0-3 Years. Retrieved from <https://www.superpool.org/books/playground-ideas-for-0-3-years>*
- vii. *Tim Gill (April 2018). Playing it Safe? A global white paper on risk, liability and children's play in public space*
- viii. *Urban95 Pune, Tactical Urbanism Intervention, Anganwadi 92, Ambedkar Slum, Pune*
- ix. *Urban95 Pune, Tactical Urbanism Intervention, Sonawane Maternity Hospital, Pune*
- x. *Vox. (2019). Why safe playgrounds aren't great for kids. YouTube. Vox. Retrieved October 1, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lztEnBFN5zU&t=174s>*
- xi. *Wood J, Leichter-Saxby M (2016). Comparing Injury Rates on a Fixed Equipment Playground and an Adventure Playground. Parish School, Houston Texas, Pop-Up Adventure Play*

For any queries or suggestions write to us on itcn-cb@niua.org



National Institute of Urban Affairs

1st Floor, Core 4B, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi - 110003, INDIA
Phone: (+91 11) 24617517, 24617543, 24617595 ; Fax: (+91 11) 24617513
Website: www.niua.in