

ask the children



nsw commission for
children & young people

Children and young people speak about the built environment

"I would plan a housing estate and make sure that it's child friendly, there's fences, if little kids are playing tips they don't run out into the road, parks so they have something to do and they are not being naughty and it's easier for the parents, and bike tracks and walking places and activities you can do there." (kids, 9 to 11)

Between August and November 2005 the Commission spoke with about 100 children and young people aged 4–18 years about their environment. We spoke with children and young people in schools, youth advisory councils, playgroups, and a disability service. The quotes used are taken from conversations that took place during this consultation process.

What is the built environment?

The built environment is everything built around us. It includes all buildings and built features and spaces in which people play, learn, work and live. Schools, homes, parks, shopping centres and libraries are all part of the built environment.

Children and young people, as members of our community, are users of our built environment, with their own particular set of wants and needs. It is important that their input to planning be sought and heard.

The quotes from kids in this publication illustrate the practical and useful information that they can offer.

Kids want to be social and interact with their peers and members of the wider community. Kids also have an interest in spending time in a natural environment and staying active. They want facilities available to enable them to pursue their interests safely and for the facilities to be easily accessible to them.

Key themes in what children and young people told us about their environment included:

- Community
- Facilities
- Safety
- Being active
- Transport
- Participation in planning

Community

"I love where I live. I'm good friends with everyone in the street, it's very quiet with a cul de sac." (boy, 17)

"It's great having a very diverse mix of people and neighbours." (girl, 17)

Being around friendly people, knowing your neighbours, having friends close by and having a mixed community are all important to children and young people's sense of a good environment.

"Without a sense of community it makes it hard for a community to be fun or safe." (girl, 15)

Kids like to be a part of the community rather than always being separated off into particular spaces, though they like having some kids' spaces too.

Facilities

"I like going to playgrounds that's where I meet up with my friends or make new friends." (boy, 8)

"I like where I live as there's lots to do – it's easy to get to parks, pools and shops." (boy, 16)

The most important places to children consulted were parks, schools, shops, libraries and swimming pools.

There is a need and desire for 'children's spaces' such as playgrounds and parks as well as areas for 'free' play such as the street, alley ways, natural or 'wild' environments. In order to be truly child friendly a neighbourhood, community or city needs all of these facilities to be accessible to children.

Safety

It is clear that there are particular situations where kids do not feel safe. They do not like it when people behave 'strangely'. They fear becoming a victim of theft or violence.

"Public spaces aren't safe around here. It's not safe on the streets if you're alone, you can't go to the public toilets, the train station's not safe. There are people using drugs." (boy, 12)

Others felt natural spaces could be too open and contain unknown threats such as strangers.

"The thing that's scary about the park is you could probably be there alone and somebody might come and do things to you that you might not like....Or you could be wearing bare feet and step on syringes." (girl, 8)

Children and young people told us that they feel safer in places where there are lots of people and that are used a lot, provided those people are welcoming.

This again highlights the need for spaces to be designed for use by a range of people so that children are not left feeling isolated and alone.

Being active

Some children and young people said they enjoyed spending time outdoors.

"I like big trees 'cos they help you breathe...it feels good to be able to see trees." (boy, 8)

"I like to splash in the water." (girl, 4)

A group of Year 2 students nominated the following list as their favourite places to go: shopping, bowling, roller coasters, Questacon in Canberra, the movies, school, Disneyland and Timezone.

None of them listed a really physical activity. The only outdoor activity listed is roller coasters.

Areas of natural beauty allow a peaceful place for unstructured play that children enjoy. Particularly in urban areas, developers and planners need to maintain this type of space.

More children talked about informal 'play' than talked about organised sport but the need for space for both activities was stated.

"Climbing trees is fun because you get to see over high things, you can see everything – the town and street, you can see up high, I can see my house from the tree." (girl, 8)

"There is no time for exercise because of all the stress, yet you know that you really need to exercise to manage the stress." (boy, 17)

Providing an appropriate and appealing environment for outdoor active play is one way to encourage active play.

Transport

"I don't use public transport or walk – my parents drive me where I need to go." (girl, 13)

Many kids think being driven by their parents is their only transport option, and in some cases, it is.

The cost and problems of public transport were also mentioned by some kids, as was bike riding.

"I like riding my bike, often have to share space with cars, ride around streets, ride to parks, cars often go too fast, hard to cross road. There are some places it's easy to ride around, and there are some bike tracks but it would be good to have more." (boy, 11)

Reliable, affordable public transport, and good bike and walking tracks will be beneficial to children and to all in the community.

Participation in planning

The children the Commission spoke with were knowledgeable about the decision makers and stakeholders in planning and development processes. More significantly, they wanted to be consulted about planning and development decisions, though few could give examples of being consulted.

"I think the Government should let everyone have their say about how you want to make the neighbourhood. We could draw how we wanted it to be and send it." (girl, 10)

The quality of input children and young people provided when given the opportunity suggests that there is a wealth of knowledge available, and decision makers need only ask children and young people for advice to improve their built environment planning decisions.

Where to from here?

It is important that the needs of children and young people are considered in planning and development work of all kinds.

An important part of this process is consultation with the children and young people themselves. As can be seen by some of the quotes in this publication, children and young people have a good practical knowledge of the spaces they use and suggestions for improvements.

The Commission is working with a team of researchers and local councils to develop some indicators that will help in assessing, at the planning and evaluation stages, the child friendliness of built environment projects.

Want more information?

The Commission's submission to the NSW Parliament report on the "Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment" can be found at the website

www.parliament.nsw.gov.au

There is information available on the Commission's website to help you consult with kids. There is also more information here about our work on developing child friendly community indicators.

www.kids.nsw.gov.au

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