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Safety in public spaces for children's play and learning

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ABSTRACT

With societal changes in recent years, issues related to child safety in public places have become more diverse and more complex. Every age has its hardships, and an environment in which children develop into people who overcome such hardships is necessarily one that is not completely free of danger. Nevertheless, there is tendency toward an excessive emphasis on safety. The children of today have been driven indoors, deprived of spaces for group play and of natural environments that encourage a diversity of experience. The development of IT media has further reinforced this tendency. These conditions can be said to produce bullying, abuse, isolation, and a lack of ambition. It is critical that children's living environments, especially public spaces for playing and learning, have a porous structure with numerous routes of escape.

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1. Introduction

This paper takes up for discussion safety in children's maturation environments, especially public spaces for playing and learning. Although any person under the age of 20 can be defined as a child, this paper primarily addresses children through elementary school age.[1] Public spaces for playing include parks, urban plazas, green zones, play streets, and sidewalks; public spaces for learning include kindergartens, elementary schools, nursery schools, libraries, museums, and gymnasiums. The issue of safety includes both natural disasters and man-made disasters (fires, bullying, crime, violence, accidents, etc.). Looking at the issue of safety across a variety of domains, this paper considers criteria for children's maturation environments[2] that foster children's healthy growth.

2. Background

In order to think about child safety in public spaces in Japan, we must consider the overall maturation environment for children. Considering the difficult situations found in many countries around the world—children whose lives are threatened by regional disputes, children who suffer from famine due to agricultural damage rooted in global warming-induced climate change, children prevented from getting an education by religious conflict—children in Japan are able to live peaceful, stable lives with little in the way of lethal threats. Japan's infant mortality rate [1] is the lowest in the world. The likelihood of being abducted or involved in other crime is low, as are the odds of dying in an automobile accident.

Nevertheless, as reflected in the results of the survey on loneliness [2] conducted by UNICEF in 2007, in which Japanese children agreed with the statement "I feel lonely" at a far higher rate than those from any other country, the maturation environment for children in Japan has been in decline over the last sixty years of change. Even if not in terms of their physical lives, children in Japan can be seen as facing an extremely big problem in terms of their spiritual health and their development into people capable of overcoming difficulties. This paper first considers issues related to children's maturation environments.

2.1. The state of decline

The athletic ability and physical stamina of children in Japan has been falling since about 1985 (See Figs. 1 and 2 [3]). In terms of physique, over the last sixty years weight, height, and sitting height have all increased 3–4%. Weight in particular has increased sharply—by 13% among boys—suggesting a tendency toward obesity. This is likely largely due to a lack of exercise and the influence of dietary factors, but the impact of a reduction in outdoor play during childhood must also be noted.

The sense of loneliness among 15 year-olds is far higher in Japan than in other countries, as noted above, and few children have a clear image of their future careers [4]. Once every five years, the Fujisawa City Board of Education in Kanagawa prefecture surveys junior high school students in the city concerning their desire to learn (See Fig. 3) [5]. Over the last 40 years it has dropped by 40 points. Although the downward trend has stopped in recent years, where once 65% of students were motivated to respond, "I want to study very hard," the current figure is low at only 25%.

It should be noted that the desire to exercise, the desire to learn, and the desire to play are all interconnected during childhood, and we should be profoundly concerned about the long-term trend toward a decline in desire.

2.2. The deterioration of maturation environments

Broadly speaking, maturation environments can be seen to be composed of four elements: space, time, method, and community (See Fig. 4) [6]. All of these elements are interrelated and all are deteriorating. The biggest element is maturation methods—changes in our way of life and the tools we use. Representatives of these changes are our automobiles and our information and technology (IT) media. In 1965, penetration of black-and-white television sets reached 90% in Japan (See Fig. 5) [7]. Penetration of automobiles was just under 10% at around the same time (See Fig. 5), but the ensuing spread of the automobile not only revitalized industry during the period of rapid economic growth but also by prioritizing physical distribution, transformed streets into places where children could no longer play.

[1] Given that the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as persons up to the age of 18, and the Japanese civil code as persons under 20, the Science Council of Japan's Subcommittee for Children's Maturation Environments defines children as persons under 20, encompassing the fetal period, infancy, and school-age, but takes as its subject the period most important in terms of growth experiences: from the fetal period through 12 years old. This is the range used to define "child" for the purposes of this paper.

[2] Understood to encompass both the physical habitat and the nurturing environment for children's growth.

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