



Adults' motivation for bringing their children to park playgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Children's independent access to the outdoors is often restricted by parents, making young children dependent on adult motivation for visits. Since access to play in nature can be beneficial to children's development and health, this study examines the accompanying adults' motivational factors for bringing their children to playgrounds in urban green spaces. The study used on-site questionnaires to collect data in six public park playgrounds in the U.S. and Denmark, to reveal cultural similarities and differences.

The results show that the respondents have different motivations for going to a park playground. The Danish respondents find it most important to be together with their children, while the American respondents find it most important that their children are physically active whilst being there. Other results show that different factors can influence both frequency of visits and length of stays. For Danish respondents, location is very important. Pleasing green surroundings and a nearby location tends to result in more frequent visits. All respondents stay longer and visit more often if they like the social atmosphere of the playground. However, male respondents, who are more active with their children than female respondents, have shorter stays if they dislike the variety of play equipment.

Based on the results of this paper, suggestions are made as to how designers, planners and park managers can implement the results into practice, with the aim of increasing adults' motivation for taking their children to park playgrounds.

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Introduction

There is a growing concern about the increasing restriction of children's independent access to outdoor play spaces, such as local parks (Hillman, 2006; Woolley, 2006), and the decrease of children's outdoor play, especially in natural environments (e.g. Kellert, 2005; Louv, 2008). A few generations ago children were playing outside everyday both because it was a natural thing to do, but also because it was necessary due to lack of space in the home (Karsten, 2005). Today, children have access to much more indoor space (Karsten, 2005) and the barriers for playing outside are typically parental concerns; fear of strangers, teenage gangs, and especially fear of traffic accidents (Clements, 2004; Veitch et al., 2006). This has made young children dependent on their parents' motivation for visiting public parks and playgrounds, making it one of the most commonly stated barriers for park use (Veitch et al., 2006).

Enabling children to visit playgrounds on a regular basis is important due to benefits such as improved cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005). Access to nature in nearby surroundings may also lower children's stress

levels (Wells and Evans, 2003). Furthermore, playing in green areas may create a positive cycle, as it is more likely that children will go to similar places as adults (Ward Thompson et al., 2008) and eventually bring their own families.

Few children reach the recommended level for daily physical activity (World Health Organization, 2007), but as active free-play and unstructured physical activity outdoors can be important contributors to children's physical activity (Burdette et al., 2004; The Danish National Board of Health, 2010) it is important to provide and promote opportunities for such activities to take place.

Children do not always voluntarily choose the outdoors as a location for their active free-play, as they prefer playing with computers and watching the television (boys) or drawing and playing with friends (girls) (Veitch et al., 2006). Clements (2004) identified children's television watching and computer gaming as the number one reason for not playing outdoors. In the U.S. there is a growing concern about these negative changes in children's lifestyles and their lack of contact with nature (Louv, 2008), and in Denmark there is a tendency for children to follow the same pattern. This is disturbing as research suggests that once children get outdoors they actually prefer playing here and become strongly attached to especially places with nature (Chawla, 1992). Nature, at least to children in Northern countries, also seems to give them a sense of belonging to the place where they grow up and a strong concern with environmental issues (Nordström, 2010).

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There are, however, aims to increase the use of urban green spaces (City of Copenhagen, 2009a) which will make playgrounds in green surroundings into important destinations, in the attempt to change the negative lifestyles of children. This study will compare the factors influencing the use of park playgrounds in the U.S. and Denmark in order to learn how design and management of these could be improved to support a positive development in each of these areas.

Previous research on factors for visiting parks and playgrounds

Previous studies have examined factors that parents consider when choosing play spaces for children. For visits to parks and playgrounds, Berglund et al. (1985) and Berglund and Jergeby (1989) identified opportunities for activity, safety, social interaction, and experience of nature/peacefulness as important. Sallis et al. (1997) identified safety, availability of toilets, drinking water, lighting and shade as parents' most important factors for selecting play spaces outside the home or yard. A recent study in two smaller towns in Sweden showed that the most visited playgrounds according to both children and parents were not always the most interesting, e.g. having a unique piece of equipment or being newly renovated (Jansson, 2010). The most visited were instead the playgrounds located close to preschool facilities, central in the built area, and which had green surroundings (Jansson, 2010).

Veitch et al. (2006) studied requests for certain facilities in parks and playgrounds amongst Australian parents who emphasised bike paths, picnic facilities, clean toilets, shade, open space, and especially variation in play equipment. The latter is important in order to attract users (Jansson and Persson, 2010), especially families with more than one child. In Veitch et al.'s study (2006) parents often found that most play equipment only attracted preschool aged children, leaving the older child bored. These families did not visit parks and playgrounds as often as when they had only one child, but were, however, willing to drive some distance to a park playground, if they knew all children would be entertained there (Veitch et al., 2006).

Aim and research questions

Accompanying adults seem very important for young children's visits to public playgrounds in urban green spaces. The aim is thus to study further which factors may increase adults' motivation for bringing their children to the playground, staying there, and what potentially influences their choice. It is important to reveal if there is a connection between the physical environment and the use, in order for designers and managers to comply with potential planning aspects in the future.

To fulfil this aim we ask a number of research questions:

1. What characterises the accompanying adult users, and are there differences between users in the two countries?
2. What is the frequency of use and duration of stays?
3. What are the users' motivations for visiting playgrounds and for their choice of playground?
4. What characterises the trip to the playground?
5. What do the users' like and dislike about the playground?
6. Are there any connections between the above and the physical layout and location of the playgrounds?

Methods

Case study

Six playgrounds were selected based on information selection criteria with expectations about their information content

(Flyvbjerg, 2004): Four (Rødkildeparken, Vigerslevparken North, Vigerslevparken South, and Ørestad City Park) located in Copenhagen, Denmark and two (Kids Together Park and Walnut Street Park) in Cary, North Carolina, U.S. (a suburb of Raleigh, capital of the State of North Carolina). All playgrounds are relatively new (ten years old or less) and placed in high quality urban green spaces within suburban areas. The areas have approximately the same socio-economic status in both income (app. 40% earn 77,520 USD or more in the studied areas in Copenhagen and in Cary the median annual household income is 78,892 USD) (City of Copenhagen, 2009b; Move Network, 2011) and population size (around 1,125,000 people in Raleigh–Cary and 1,180,000 in greater Copenhagen).

Sharing the same overall selection criteria, the playgrounds instead vary in terms of layout, play equipment design, immediate context and size (1500–5000 m²). For detailed information about the playgrounds see Appendix A.

Data collection

The method used was on-site self-report questionnaires. In April and May 2010 the questionnaires were distributed to and completed by accompanying adults at the playgrounds in Cary, and through July–October the survey was carried out in Copenhagen. The survey was carried out on both weekdays and in weekends at different times of the day, but not on rainy or very windy days. Potential respondents were approached with a short introduction to the questionnaire, which took 15–20 min to complete. If the approached person accepted to participate he/she returned the questionnaire to the distributor present at the playground, when completed. The number of completed questionnaires at each playground varies from 38 to 49 ($n = 261$). The response rates vary from 78.4 to 94.2%. The rejections are distributed as follows: 58.8% female and 41.2% male which corresponds with the overall distribution among respondents (see Table 1). Lack of time and first time visits were among the most common reasons for rejecting to participate in the survey. The Kids Together Park and Ørestad City Park had more visitors than it was possible to approach if the survey was to be carried out at different days and times. For these two playgrounds a proportional stratified approach was chosen to sample respondents to reflect, as closely as possible, the actual constellation of users (Agresti and Finlay, 1997) in order to compare populations. At the other playgrounds it was possible to approach all potential respondents.

All questionnaire items were pre-coded with multiple-choice options. However, open questions provided an opportunity to make individual comments. The questionnaire was structured according to five overall themes: (1) the trip to the playground, (2) choice of playground, (3) time spent at the playground, (4) general questions about priorities when visiting playgrounds, and (5) demographics. The respondents were asked about their mode of transportation (e.g. biking, walking or a combination) to get to the park, including starting point of the trip (at home, at school/day care, or elsewhere) and the distance travelled (300 m, 500 m, 1 km, 2 km, or more than 2 km).

The respondents were asked what they like and dislike about the playground in question, with a number of different response options, e.g. 'It is the nearest one', 'I like the green surroundings' and 'There is not enough variety in the play equipment' (multiple choices). They were also asked to describe the reason for choosing this particular playground that day rather than other playgrounds they visit regularly.

Based on previous studies of urban green spaces (e.g. Grahn and Stigsdotter, 2003; Nielsen and Hansen, 2007), distance is expected to influence the frequency of use. Hence the respondents were asked about frequency of use during the summer on a five point

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