

As a global voice supporting the value and benefits of parks and open space, World Urban Parks Association recognizes the important role urban parks play in children’s quality of life worldwide. Access to active self-directed play in nature is fundamental to healthy childhood development.

A CALL TO ACTION:

World Urban Parks represent agencies that provide and manage environments for play and experience of nature. Our members have an important role to serve in advocating for improved opportunities for play outside in nature for children, young people, adults and families

Our members have a responsibility to:

- Help educate peers and stakeholders on the important role parks play in children’s health and well-being.
- Make children and young people a priority in the design and management of urban parks and open spaces.
- Create more unstructured play opportunities in nature through investments in both design and programming of parks and open spaces.
- Engage children and caregivers in planning and design of parks and open space, giving them a voice and seat at the table to better understand their needs and create more welcoming and inclusive spaces.

BENEFITS OF PLAY AND NATURE

Play is essential to the health, development and well-being of children.

“Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth.”^[1]

- Unstructured play is important because:
 - neurological research indicates this is significant in the development of the brain’s structure and chemistry
 - child-controlled play is necessary for optimal physical and emotional functioning
 - free play teaches children to share, cooperate and resolve problems.
- Play outside in nature is important because:
 - Children tend to be smarter, more cooperative, happier and healthier when they have frequent and varied opportunities for free and unstructured play in the outdoors.
 - Children are more physically active outdoors.
 - Nature contact can lower stress levels and reduce aggression in children.
 - Positive active outdoor experiences as a child can build lifelong habits of physical activity for health and well-being.
 - We protect what we love. Positive experiences with nature in childhood build respect and appreciation for our natural world. Play in nature helps to develop care for the future of our parks and natural areas.

Background

The World Urban Parks' Children Play and Nature Policy Statement is underpinned by the vision and actions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 31 (General Comment 2013):

The right to play and informal recreation, for all children and young people up to 18 years of age is contained in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 includes a number of related, but distinct, rights: rest, recreation, leisure, play, participation in cultural life and the arts.

Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

GLOBAL DEFICIT OF FREE PLAY IN NATURE

Children today are spending less time outdoors in unstructured play than in any other time in history.

What is unstructured or free play?

- play that is controlled by children rather than adults
- play undertaken for its own sake and not for prescribed purposes.

Children's access to nature is becoming more limited. This is particularly the case in urban and high density areas.

- Natural and wild spaces are frequently built over or controlled. And children's independent access to these spaces has also changed in recent years.
- For many children, their access to nature is entirely dependent on adults making it happen.

CHALLENGES

The United Nations Article 31 and recent General Comment recognise the constraints to play for children and young people worldwide. There are many identified constraints and societal issues that potentially affect how children worldwide play. Among these are:

- Adults and decision-makers not understanding the importance of play
- Reduced risk taking and physical challenge creating an 'over protection' of children. The converse also exists - increased risk taking creating an 'under protection' of children, especially in informal urban environments
- Lack of independent mobility – perceptions and real risks of traffic injury and 'stranger danger' anxiety
- Technology, other family demands and organised activities absorbing time for unstructured play
- Lack of prioritised time for unstructured play
- Lack of tolerance for children and adolescents in public spaces
- Lack of access to nature
- Increasing populations and urbanised living with settlement planning designs limiting access to outdoor space suitable for unstructured and 'unsupervised' play

[1] Ginsburg K, "The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent child bonds," American Academy of Pediatrics 2007.