Launceston children’s views of play spaces

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Funded by Anglicare Tasmania | Initiated by the Northern Tasmanian Early Years Group
Acknowledgements

The report, *Launceston children’s views of play spaces* represents the bringing together of the voices of a cross-section of Launceston’s young citizens. This research was conducted at the end of 2013 by a team from the University of Tasmania’s Faculty of Education to help inform future strategies in play space planning and design for the city of Launceston. The research team members express our thanks to Northern Tasmanian Early Years Group who initiated the research and to Anglicare (Communities for Children) whose funding made this project possible.

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Children’s views of play spaces

Executive Summary

Launceston children’s views of play spaces presents the perspectives of children, aged 3-12, about the elements of play spaces that are important to them. The data reported here were collected from 93 children, using a ‘drawing/telling’ methodology (Wright, 2007), in which the children’s drawings of their ideas, as well as their accompanying narratives about play, were recorded. The research, undertaken by a team from the University of Tasmania, has been carried out in the context of establishing the city of Launceston, situated in Northern Tasmania, as a Child Friendly City, “CFC” (UNICEF, 2004). A critical element of the CFC initiative, which reflects the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), is for every young citizen to be able to express their opinion about the community they want, and influence decisions about their city or community. This Report, funded by Communities for Children through Anglicare Tasmania, represents an initial step in a CFC empowerment process for Launceston’s children. Communities for Children is an initiative of the Australian Government of Social Services.

Many of the themes expressed by the children who participated in the study, regarding social interactions, types of play, the play environment and safety, aligned with the literature on children’s play, and indeed, the Launceston City Council’s own draft Play Spaces Strategy (2013). However, what this study adds to the existing body of knowledge is children’s perspectives on a topic that impacts all aspects of children’s wellbeing: physical, social, spiritual, cognitive and emotional. Analysis of the children’s comments and drawings revealed several important themes concerning their views of play spaces. In summary, the study participants suggested that play spaces are important places for social interactions with family and friends, as well as more individual activities. The children reported enjoying many different types of play, including play in which they take risks and challenge themselves. The play environment is a significant consideration for both structured and unstructured play, with safety being one of the issues that the children recognised and addressed. The children’s drawing/telling showed that play in recreational spaces is important across all five dimensions of wellbeing. Individual children, however, place different emphasis on each of these dimensions, and accordingly look to the play environment to satisfy their individual needs. The children in this study demonstrated that they were experts on the subject of their own play, who had important and unique knowledge to share with adults.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations are proposed for consideration by decision-makers in Launceston City Council, leaders in community organisations and educational settings, families and advocates for the promotion of children’s wellbeing through recreational play. In broad terms the recommendations propose that the five areas of wellbeing are considered in the design of recreational play spaces; secondly that children are recognised as experts who have a significant role to play in consultative processes as valued and knowledgeable citizens; and thirdly that play spaces should be accessible and inclusive environments.
Children’s views of play spaces

Child Friendly City Initiative

In May 2013 Launceston City Council gave in-principle support to investigate the processes required for Launceston to achieve Child Friendly City (CFC) status as recognised by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The Council partnered with Launceston to George Town Communities for Children and the Northern Tasmanian Early Years Group to convene a Child Friendly Working Group. The tasks of the Working Group include developing a strategic pathway to achieving CFC status and identifying the stakeholders and resources required to successfully embark on the process most likely to achieve this end.

A Child Friendly City is committed to the fullest implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ‘CROC’ (United Nations (UN), 1989). The ‘Building Child Friendly Cities Framework for Action’ developed by UNICEF, aligns with Article 12 of the CROC, which provides that children have a right to voice their opinions about matters that impact upon them and foregrounds the right of “every young citizen to influence decisions about their city, and to express their opinion on the city they want” (UNICEF, 2004, p. 1). Principles of participation, empowerment, local ownership, and recognition of children as social actors drive the children’s rights-based approach, advocated by CFC guidelines for involving children in planning decisions (Knowles-Yanez, 2005).

It is in this context that Communities for Children through Anglicare Tasmania funded this research into Launceston children’s views of play spaces. The research outcomes serve Launceston’s children by incorporating their ideas in adult planning and decision-making about creating play environments that contribute to their wellbeing. Woolcock, Gleeson and Randolph (2010) advocate placing children at the centre of investigations “about how human wellbeing is influenced by urban change and urban policy” (p. 179). This preliminary research study trials an approach to gathering children’s ideas in ways that reflect CFC principles described above. It may be considered alongside the Launceston City Council’s draft Play Spaces Strategy (Jeavons Landscape Architects & @ Leisure Planners, 2013) which provides a comprehensive audit of public play facilities in the greater Launceston area, and addresses a number of issues relevant to the present study. The community consultation undertaken in relation to that document, however, did not expressly seek the views of children as the users of play spaces.

Results from this research will lay the foundation for valuing and accessing children’s voice in ways that inform decision-making by Launceston City Council, local community and government organisations, and families and child advocates, as we journey together toward CFC status. It also sits alongside the draft State of Launceston’s Children Report (3p Consulting, in press) which is directed toward the more general aim of establishing Launceston as a CFC in which children’s opinions are heard.

“Building Child Friendly Cities cannot be achieved by government alone. There must be partnerships with children themselves, with families and with all those who affect children’s lives.” (UNICEF, 2004, p.2)
Research Perspectives

The research team members believe it is important early in this report to establish our philosophical approach to the research and the interpretations drawn from our analysis of the data. Firstly, we acknowledge that there are “slippery and contested” (Brooker & Woodhead, 2013, p.ix) views of play, including maturational views where play is internally motivated, critical views that relate play to the child’s world (including gender, culture, power dynamics), and cultural-historical views that focus on cultural play traditions. Our conception of recreational play is discussed below. Aligned with that understanding, we have focussed this study on play that occurs in parks, and the impact of outdoor environments on children’s play and ultimate wellbeing. We draw upon the Learner Wellbeing Framework (Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2007) as our model for wellbeing in our research of children’s play. This model is underpinned by the dimensions of wellbeing conceptualised by Pollard and Davidson (2001) for UNESCO, which views wellbeing as a function of five overlapping and interconnected dimensions: social, emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual.

Recreational Play: Benefits and Considerations

“The right of the child … to engage in play and recreational activities” (UN, 1989) is proclaimed in Article 31 of the CROC, and the importance of play is also recognised in terms of its capacity to optimise development and learning (Ginsburg, 2007). However, in addition to these the benefits of play, particularly recreational play, are significant to the development of children’s wellbeing, and contribute to well communities. Recreational play, as defined in this report, is play initiated by children, simply for the purpose of enjoying themselves (cf UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013 http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/CRCIndex.aspx ). Play, according to Ginsburg is a “simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood” (2007, p. 183). In the context of this research study, ‘recreational play’ relates to children playing in parks and other open spaces accessible to the community.

The positive effects of physical play on children’s health in terms of weight and fitness have been long documented, but Burdette and Whitaker (2005) suggest that the positive impact of play for children reaches much further. In recent decades, other benefits have also been highlighted, including the importance of physical activity to reduce stress and promote mental health and emotional wellbeing in children, especially when this play is supported, but not controlled, by adults (Ginsburg, 2007). Both increased physical activity and sunlight experienced during recreational play have been shown to improve mood and reduce symptoms of anxiety (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Outdoor play environments also provide a setting for the development of many cognitive skills. Children have opportunities to make decisions, solve problems and use their imagination (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Recreational play spaces, according to Ginsburg (2007) are social spaces and as such provide opportunities for children to interact socially with other children and with family members. It is here that different generations can interact to ensure that children’s development is “critically mediated by appropriate affective relationships” (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 183). Recent comprehensive studies and reports focus on the holistic benefits of recreational play. Godbey (2009)
for example, aligns recreational play benefits with aspects of children’s wellbeing: socially, emotionally, cognitively, physically and spiritually.

In this report we are extending the notion of play benefits beyond those usually related to children’s learning, and argue that each of the aspects of wellbeing can be maximised by the types of spaces offered for children to play in. Studies by Faber Taylor and Kuo over the past decade highlight the importance of green spaces for children with ADHD (Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004; Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2009). They found that these children rate time spent in parks as more relaxing and more fun than time spent in less natural neighbourhood and city environments, also children with ADHD experience therapeutic benefits of enhanced attention and concentration levels resulting from time spent in natural park environments (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2009). Dyment and O’Connell (2013) provide a summary of how different outdoor play environments affect children’s play. They suggest that children desire natural play spaces that provide options and choices, and that are challenging and complex.

Whilst the importance of recreational play is clearly articulated in the literature, particularly with reference to the promotion and maintenance of wellbeing, play is rarely taken seriously by public authorities (Brooker & Woodhead, 2013). Indeed, there is little reporting of what children want in terms of play and the types of spaces they would like to play in. Such information can only be found if we consult the experts, the children.

Respecting Children’s Views

This research has been conducted with the belief that children are competent social beings and citizens. The research team were conscious throughout the research process of the need to value children’s voices. Further, we were careful not to view children through a lens of their future roles and capabilities, as future adults or future citizens, but to recognise them in the ‘here and now’, as citizens having existing roles, rights and responsibilities.

There is increasing acknowledgement internationally of children’s rights as citizens to express their views in matters affecting their lives (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). The UN CROC has been signed and ratified by Australia, although its adoption in domestic legislation remains somewhat piecemeal (Cumming & Mawdsley, 2006). Article 12 of the Convention provides that “Governments... should ensure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely in matters affecting that child, and that the views of that child should be given due weight” (UN, 1989). Our research acknowledges that a crucial source of information about the play spaces children enjoy in the city are children themselves.

It is important to recognise that, as experts in their own lives, children hold the most authentic knowledge regarding matters of importance to them. “Grown ups cannot on their own understand the world from the child’s point of view and therefore they need children to explain it to them” (from The Little Prince 1945 Antione de Saint-Exupery, cited in Christensen and James, 2008, p. 9). In this way, the voice of children is the “missing piece of the puzzle in understanding childhood” (Smith, 2011). This understanding is crucial for researchers and policy makers who work with and
for children (Roberts, 2008). Thus, the recognition and acceptance of the child’s point of view is significant, in that it gives opportunities to develop a better understanding of the lived experiences of children in today’s world. This insight can help adults to support children’s healthy development, and in so doing, recognise not only the significance of the ‘here and now’, but also promote positive trajectories for the future (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Harcourt, 2011). As adults we have a responsibility to ask children their views about what they want play spaces to be, since these spaces are intended for children as places of recreation, as well as providing opportunities for authentic learning and development.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to access children’s views on play spaces and understand what children enjoy doing whilst in such spaces. A qualitative approach was adopted to address that aim.

Children’s views were accessed during a free Children’s Expo in Launceston’s City Park. This venue allowed the research team to recruit a group of 93 children, aged between 3 and 12 years, as participants in the study (with consent being obtained from both a parent, and assent from the child where appropriate). The participating children presented a mix of ages and residential locations across the Greater Launceston area (Appendix 1).

Drawing/telling

Children’s views were sought using a drawing telling method. Drawing and telling is a technique used to support children’s meaning making and communication. It gives children the opportunity to share meaning using non-verbal and verbal communication. The idea of cross modality is an important aspect of this method, as it allows both visual and verbal domains to enrich and inform one another (Wright, 2007). Through talking and gesturing whilst they draw, children are able to use signs, sounds, gestures and words as symbols to express their thoughts and feelings. In this way children communicate meaning through the grammars of the arts. Here the term grammars refers to images, sounds and movements.

This approach allows children to use and develop somatic knowledge, (often termed, ‘thinking with their body’), in which images, spatial and aural modes of thinking are used to integrate feeling and knowing. It is this multi-modal feeling and knowing that helps children to make sense of their environment (Wright, 2003). Using the arts involves a unique form of meaning making, allowing children to draw on the many languages available to them (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012). They express themselves through visual, spatial, aural and bodily kinaesthetic ways. Thus, whilst drawing and describing their drawings, children consider many interpretations, generate new meanings and expand existing meanings (Wright, 2003).

As such, this was an appropriate method to adopt in collecting data for this research, since these somatic forms of communication offered children an opportunity to share their views about what was important to know about ‘good’ play spaces. It was relevant for the age range and allowed children to explore their views using a narrative that was easily accessible to all. The exception to this was a child with multiple disabilities, but his voice was reflected in his sister’s drawing/telling on his behalf.
Findings: What the children told us

The insights offered by the children reflected many of the themes that were identified both in the Council’s *What do we mean by play* document and the key messages from Council’s community engagement process. In addition to this, the children’s perspectives offered further understanding about what they would like and value in their play. Four major themes emerged from the data made with the children and are reported here. These are: Social interactions, Types of play, The play environment, and Safety.

Social Interactions
The first major theme that emerged from the data was social interaction in play spaces. Three main ideas were evident within this theme; playing with family, playing with friends and playing alone.

Playing with family
This was one of the most dominant ideas presented by the children. They looked to playgrounds to provide equipment and spaces that enabled them to play with family in a range of different ways. Engaging in play that allows all the family to experience the play together was noted as important, as one 8 year old girl stated when referring to a swing, “My whole family, that’s 6 people, can hop onto it and you can lay down on it”. Another 6 year old girl noted that she liked the seesaw to be big ‘so daddy can fit on it’. Play spaces as family spaces, with mum or dad being close was a strong thread that ran through the data, even for those children who referred to playing on equipment independently.

Playing with friends
The park space was identified as a place where friends went together to play, it was described as a meeting place for friends, a common space where they gather and have fun.

Playing with friends was mentioned in almost every interaction. The children referred to doing things together, whether in open spaces where they could ride their bikes or scooters together, or on more traditional play equipment. Here children wanted equipment that allowed them to be together. One child referred to a ‘jumping castle for two’, whilst another child wanted a swing that fits four friends. Other equipment such as a flying fox, where more than one person is needed was also identified. Here the idea of working together with a friend was suggested.

More structured activities, particularly for older children were also noted as important things to do with friends. Facilities to...
accommodate team games, such as downball courts, basketball courts and laser tag areas were noted as desirable.

**Playing alone**

Whilst the data gave a strong sense of sharing the play experience with others, the idea of playing alone was also noted. One child particularly described the enjoyment she felt going into a tunnel in the park and watching the spider on ‘its little swing’ building its web.

The notion of intergenerational play was recognised here, where different ages and stages can play together, as well as the need for different spaces for different ages of children. Here children were able to empathise with older and younger age groups, recognising that children of different ages want different things. One 12 year old made a point that some spaces should be only for younger children, since they were ‘scared of the bullies’ in certain park spaces and did not feel safe to play. Another child recognised the need for a space for ‘the babies to play’.

**Types of Play**

The children reported types of play that were grouped into 5 main categories. These are; active play; imaginary and creative play; challenge and skill development; risk taking; and team games.

**Active play**

The children referred to the enjoyment of being active. They mentioned a wide range of activities including climbing, running fast, playing ‘chasies’, spinning and sliding, jumping, kicking and throwing balls, playing downball, riding bikes and scooters. Here, non-structured spaces where they could run, chase, skip, fly kites, and play ball games were seen as an essential element of an outside play space. Similarly, the use of specific equipment was also noted as an important aspect of play, with activities such as climbing, swinging and jumping being noted as desirable play. Many children referred to a bouncy castle as a sought-after piece of play equipment (perhaps influenced by the castle at the Children’s Expo).

**Imaginary and creative play**

Opportunities for imaginary play were well documented. The children said they would like structures like cars, trains, space rockets, shops, cubby houses, tree houses and forts that they could play in. They also referred to spaces where they could play at being pirates, fairies, superheros and monkeys.

In addition to these imaginary spaces, children also wanted spaces for more authentic play, where they could act out the skills of being an adult. Here one child referred to having an old car that she could clean and polish. Another child wanted to act out ‘teaching dolly’ how to master certain skills that she had mastered herself.
The children suggested different materials that would enable them to be creative in their play. Here the inclusion of sand was mentioned, where they could build sand castles. Others requested more tactile experiences where art works, such as painting and chalk drawing could be explored.

**Challenge and skill development**

The children shared how they liked to master skills and challenge themselves to do so during play. This skill development was reported to occur in a range of ways. Some children referred to the use of traditional equipment such as swings to practice ‘pushing themselves’, so that they could experience the play independently. They also referred to very specific pieces of equipment that help to build skills. Here they referred to climbing walls that enabled them to practice climbing, balance beams to develop their balance, practicing gymnastics on the monkey bars or using obstacle courses. Whilst developing various skills, many children also enjoyed being challenged in their play. Common elements of this were ramps and jumps at skate parks, or being challenged to get out of the maze.

**Risk taking**

Risk taking was a predominant theme that emerged throughout the children’s drawing/telling. From the children’s responses here, a continuum of risk taking activities emerged, with a wide range and levels of risk-taking evident in what the children shared.

The continuum ranged from minimal risk activities involving equipment such as swings, slides and see-saws, which were predictable in their movement; controlled risk play such as on the ‘dizzy whizzy’, where the child could control the speed, or height of the equipment and thus the level of risk; skilled risk for example, on balance beams and monkey bars; and at the high risk end of the continuum, children nominated climbing walls, high slides, high diving boards at the pool and flying foxes. A wide range and levels of risk-taking was evident in what children shared.

**Team games**

Team games were a common theme, particularly in the 8-10 age range, with the inclusion of downball (handball) courts, basketball courts and hopscotch courts being requested in outdoor play spaces.
The Play Environment
The outdoor play space and what this should look like was a major theme, with children showing they had many ideas about the aesthetics of play spaces and how they should be created. Two ideas became apparent in what the children shared in terms of the play environment. These were; physical aspects of the play space and connection with the environment.

Physical aspects of the play space
The children demonstrated their knowledge of a range of physical considerations regarding play spaces. These ranged from the location of play spaces and how accessible they are, to the physical attributes needed to enable the wide range of play activities required by the children to become a reality.

Location
Children shared that the location of the play space was important to them. They reported that they liked to go to the park near to their home, where they could go regularly. They spoke about these parks with a sense of familiarity and security. Some children did refer to play spaces that were a distance away, but in each case this was because the play space had a specific piece of equipment they liked that could not be found elsewhere.

In addition to sharing views about the physical location, the children also shared their views about indoor play. It was noted by some children that they preferred inside play, and one child stated “If I could have my own park I would have it inside”. The weather was also an influence for children here, where the impact of rain on outdoor play was highlighted.

Structured play
When outdoors, children reported that they enjoyed both structured and unstructured play.

Structured play included traditional play equipment such as; slides, swings, merry-go-rounds and dizzy whizzys and see-saws. Various types of climbing equipment were mentioned including climbing frames, monkey bars, climbing poles, climbing ropes, climbing walls and ladders that shake. Equipment such as ramps and jumps for use with bikes and scooters were also referred to as desirable equipment to have in the play space. Less traditional equipment was also requested. This included: chain bridges for riding bikes over, bouncy castles and trampolines, mazes, bungee cords, flying foxes, roller coasters, balancing beams and a broken down car to play in.
Unstructured play
In contrast to play spaces that provided equipment for structured types of activities, the children also had ideas about the need for spaces that lent themselves more to unstructured types of play. Even though these large open spaces were unstructured, in that they didn’t overtly suggest how they may be used, there were still considerations that the children wanted to note in relation to the provision of such spaces.

The request for grass was commonly noted by children, along with naturally occurring areas where they could climb trees and “watch the animals and the birds”, with one child requesting a tree house that could be used as a nature hide. In addition to the grass, children also referred to the need to create smooth, flat spaces, wide enough for learning to ride a bike, or for more experienced stunts such as doing “skids” or “popping monos”!

The addition of tunnels you could crawl through was a request from one 8 year old girl where she could go to watch the spiders build their webs.

Accessibility
The children showed an awareness of the concept of accessibility, both in terms of physically getting to the play space, as well as being able to access play once they were there. This was of particular concern for one child with multiple disabilities who was unable to communicate his thoughts. His older sister was able to share on his behalf, noting the need for wheelchair access, nets on the sides of slides and swings for wheelchairs, so that he could play too. Another aspect of inclusion was raised by a 12 year old girl, relating to people of Aboriginal descent (see Figure 13). This child reported that she would like a park that had

“rolling hills with a beautiful little pond so it’s nice and light blue with a deep blue middle. It’s for everyone and do you know what? I’m going to have Aboriginal people there. People say this place was discovered in 1820 or whatever, but the Aboriginal people were here but we just kicked them out!”
**Water play**

Water in a play space was reported as an important aspect for many children, with the aquatic centre being mentioned as a popular space to play. Here again the children referred to both structured and unstructured aspects of play. The bucket that fills with water then tips over was noted as an exciting piece of equipment, as were the diving boards that are really high and the slide that goes into the water. Playing ball in the water was also a fun water activity. In addition to the aquatic centre, water was mentioned more generally as something that was fun to have both in and near an outdoor play space.

**Connection with the environment**

The natural world was commonly reported by the children as being integral to their play, both in terms of the use of natural materials in the making of play equipment and also elements of nature that enrich a space and create a sense of playfulness.

**Natural materials**

Children commented that they liked certain equipment, such as the maze, that was made out of wood, and they liked grass because it felt nice to walk on without shoes. The sun shining was also mentioned in relation to having fun in outdoor spaces. For example, they reported using trees and bushes as soccer posts and as great places to play hide and seek, they also referred to climbing trees and wanting tree houses. One child commented on liking the bushes because they are “at an angle” and playing in the bushes ‘is cool!’

**Nature in the play space**

In addition to the use of natural aspects of the environment to support play in traditional ways, a common theme for many children was the way in which nature could enrich the play experience as a whole. These responses gave a sense of connectedness with the natural world. A good example of this is the child previously mentioned who likes to watch the spiders in the tunnel. Another child liked to spend her time in the park looking for ladybugs, whilst another liked to look for acorns. Many commented on the aesthetic feel of the play space, with the need for flowers, rocks and trees.

Trees were seen as an important aspect of an outdoor play space for a range of reasons. One child noted that trees ‘give you fresh air to breathe’, whilst another recognised trees as homes for the monkeys and the birds. This idea was taken up by another child who said it was important to have trees in the park ‘because when you are playing you can hear lots of birds and things’.

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**Figure 14 Water play was popular**

**Figure 15 A tree house**

**Figure 16 Looking for ladybugs in the park**
Many children commented that they would like to have animals in their play space. Monkeys were regularly cited (but this is not unusual since the park where the data was collected has a monkey enclosure). Children also said they would like to have ducks on a pond, with one child noting the need for a bread dispenser so that they could be fed. Fish swimming in a pond was another aspect of the environment reported as important. The aesthetic aspect of water was recognised here also, with a fountain and ponds being commonly mentioned.

In addition to feeding the ducks, one child referred to a vegetable garden with a range of vegetables and drew apple trees with apples that were ready to eat.

The environmental theme was one that resonated through many of the comments from the 93 children who shared their thoughts, demonstrating how important this sense of connectedness to nature and the environment is for children whilst they are engaged in play.

Safety

Whilst reporting what was important for them in play, many of the children recognised the need for safety during play and reported various aspects of safety and ways to keep safe during play.

There was recognition of the need to cater for different age groups, with children reporting the need for equipment that met the needs of all children. Some sought wider spaces for their trainer wheels so they could ride their bikes safely, whilst others noted the need for low diving boards, as well as high diving boards. Older children desired spaces to play where only the under 13s were allowed, so that the ‘bullies’ would not be there, whilst others suggested places just for the babies.

Some of the children told us how play equipment can enhance their sense of safety, with one child noting, “I like the swings with the buckles, they make me feel safe”. One 6 year old girl referred to two different pieces of equipment that provided handles to hold onto. Other safety requirements noted were slides with sides and netting “to keep you safe”. Whilst sharing her enjoyment of walking barefoot on the grass, one child gave a cautionary comment to “be careful of broken glass”.

The weather and its impact on play equipment was also noted, with children referring to equipment being dangerous when wet and also being damaged when there was a storm.

The need for water fountains and also toilets near to the play area were recognised so that children could keep healthy and safe whilst playing.
The relationship between wellbeing and the children’s views of play

We have described the children’s responses under four major themes that emerged from the children’s drawing/telling about play and play spaces. A closer analysis considered children’s views in relation to the five dimensions of wellbeing as articulated by DECS (2007). The table below shows how the dimensions of wellbeing relate to the four emergent themes.

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<td>Physical activity, safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interactions</td>
<td>- Family relationships - peer relationships</td>
<td>-understanding the play needs of others</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Inclusivity, inviting aboriginal people into the play space.</td>
<td>-safe to play, away from bullies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of play</td>
<td>Team games to support -relationships -Moral reasoning</td>
<td>-authentic play to support self-development and autonomy -risk taking</td>
<td>-challenge self to build skills, ie balance beam/climbing wall -use of different media/creativity -risk taking</td>
<td>Team games to support -morals -ethics -build a sense of self</td>
<td>-active play to maintain physical health and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The play environment</td>
<td>-accessibility (the needs of others)</td>
<td>-location (security) -accessibility</td>
<td>-use of structured play equipment, mastery</td>
<td>-Unstructured play spaces ‘time in nature’ -water -use of natural materials</td>
<td>-location familiar and safe play spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>-awareness of safety of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-recognition of need for appropriate equipment such as buckles in swings and nets on slides</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All dimensions of wellbeing were clearly represented in the themes which emerged from children’s views. Accordingly we find that recreational play has a significant role in children’s lives.
**Play is critical to children’s wellbeing**

What became evident in the children’s views was the demonstration of the dimensions of wellbeing: social, emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual. The children in this study identified with all five dimensions of wellbeing as articulated by DECS (2005), each of which were clearly represented in the children’s ideas about what was important for their play.

**Social wellbeing**

Play spaces are predominantly social spaces and this was certainly acknowledged by the children. Having spaces where children can build and strengthen positive social relationships is important, since these relationships, both with family members and friends are seen as necessary for healthy development and adjustment (Bukowski, 2003).

A strong theme that emerged was the sense of play spaces being family spaces, with children requesting equipment large enough for adults and for all family members to use together. Family relationships are important from a social perspective, since it is here where children begin to develop their understanding of themselves, to learn to self-regulate and to build a sense of security needed to explore the world (Cox & Harter, 2003, Pollard & Davidson, 2001).

Playing with friends was another strong theme in the data. Peer relationships are necessary for psychological growth and the development of a positive self-concept. It is in play situations with peers and siblings that moral reasoning, conflict resolution and social understandings can be developed and promoted (Volling, 2003). Thus opportunities for play spaces that nurture relationships with both family and friends are important since social wellbeing can be seen in the presence of such relationships.

Throughout the study, the children demonstrated empathy in the way they considered the needs of others. A good example of this was the recognition of different spaces for different age groups. Empathy related behaviours are seen as an aspect of social wellbeing, because they promote positive interactions and relationships. However, they can also be articulated under the dimension of emotional wellbeing.

**Emotional wellbeing**

Emotional development and wellbeing is strongly related to the environment in which the child is situated (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). It is during experiences such as playing with family and/or friends in the park that emotional wellness can be developed, since emotions “acquire meaning from social contexts” (Halle, 2003, p. 134). The notion of emotional wellbeing was a dominant theme throughout the children’s responses.

Children talked about aspects of play that enabled them to build a positive sense of self, to recognise themselves as learning important skills for life. Here children recognised that they were not only using play time to master such skills, but having done so they were able to pass on these skills, as a competent teacher. One child mentioned a playground with an old car that she could polish. Another child talked about training her dolly on the obstacle course.
Risk taking in play is aligned with emotional wellbeing, as it can be seen as the ability to cope with the environment. Coping can be defined as the capacity to “constantly change cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The types of risk taking play reported, reflect the development of a sense of self and also competency, where coping with the management of an external environment is significant to developing emotions and wellbeing.

**Cognitive wellbeing**

“Cognition refers to the processes of perceiving, remembering, conceiving, judging, and reasoning, in order to obtain and use knowledge” (Zaff et al., 2003, p. 26). Cognitive wellbeing according to DECS (2007) can be seen in children’s curiosity, mastery motivation, persistence, thinking and intelligence when engaged in activities such as play. The children in this study referred to the importance of play that supports such functioning. Imaginative play, where curiosity, “the capacity to energise behaviour and the power to control its direction” (Wentworth & Witryol, 2003, p. 281) was recognised by many children as a desirable activity. The request for a range of equipment, such as trains, space rockets forts and tree houses, where such play could be supported acknowledges the significance of this area of wellbeing for children.

Mastery motivation, “an intrinsic desire to master one’s environment” (Jennings & Dietz, 2003, p. 295), was referred to by most of the children in various ways. They talked about building their skills on climbing walls, balancing beams and also in unstructured spaces such as jumping ramps for bikes and scooters.

**Physical wellbeing**

Physical wellbeing is evidenced by “the measurement of health status, functional outcome, or quality of life” (Conner, 2003, p. 65), and by being fully involved in physical activity without restriction. Indicators of this can be seen as physical activity, safety and security (DECS, 2007). A major theme that emerged from the children in this study related to the many ways in which they enjoyed being active and involved in active play. They shared a long list of activities they liked to engage in when in outdoor recreational spaces.

Safety was also an important consideration for children. They recognised the need to be safe, describing aspects of equipment design, such as handles to hold whilst climbing and safety straps on swings. The children also acknowledged another aspect of safety and security, where they referred to wanting play spaces where there were no bullies. Here they offered suggestions for a solution with age restrictions being applied in certain play spaces.

**Spiritual wellbeing**

The concept of spiritual wellbeing is a challenging one to define, however it became a major theme throughout the children’s drawing/telling. Dimensions of spiritual wellbeing include; beliefs, values, morals and ethics, a sense of meaning and purpose, altruism and a sense of connectedness to something larger than oneself (DECS, 2007). Whilst not overtly mentioned by the children, the development of many of these characteristics can be seen through aspects of play such as during team games, where children need to develop a sense of fair play and abide by rules. Children have been shown to change their behaviours to match the expectations of their peers (Bukowski, 2003) and thus development in this area will naturally grow through such play. The development of dispositions, such as values and morals also builds towards a developing sense of self, discussed earlier.
The most obvious reference to spiritual wellbeing could be seen in the children’s desire to be connected to the natural environment. Wolfe (1996) states that spirituality “calls us to a sense of awe and wonder characterised by a reverence for the earth and all creatures and a desire to live in harmony with all of nature” (p. 11). This could clearly be seen in the children’s drawing/telling, as they referred to the feel of the grass on their bare feet, colourful flowers and the need for sunshine and water. They also desired animals to be a part of their recreational play spaces; fish in the ponds, birds in the trees, and opportunities to observe the ladybirds and spiders. Children referred to the use of the natural environment in their play, with mention of tree houses for imaginative play and using trees as goal posts.

There was a clear sense of altruism identified in the response from one child who wanted to ensure inclusive spaces, places ‘for everyone’ and more specifically, where aboriginal people would feel welcome. This demonstrates the child’s sense of agency but also recognises how being involved in her ideal play space would support spiritual wellbeing for herself and others.

It has been suggested that different wellbeing dimensions will have more value for some children than others, with each child having her or his own unique wellbeing profile (Stephenson, 2012). This certainly seemed to be the case in this study, with children reporting how they enjoyed play and play spaces in very different ways. If this is the case, then no one play activity or even play space will meet the wellbeing needs of every child. Children will venture into play spaces with their own unique wellbeing profile and will interact with the environment in their own way to support and extend particular dimensions of wellbeing.

This means that recreational play spaces within a community should not all be the same, but that spaces should be provided with dimensions of wellbeing in mind. Some children have a preference for play that utilises specific equipment and recreational features that a skate ramp will provide, whilst others may desire a setting where they can connect with nature. It is important to state that, whilst children may have a wellbeing profile that values one dimension more than another, wellbeing is recognised as being a dynamic construct and therefore children’s needs will change. What is important is the opportunity for children to engage with the play environment in ways that are relevant for them at that moment in time.

**Limitations**

The research study forming the basis of this report was conducted at the Children’s Expo in City Park in 2013. This was a free event, promoted to Launceston families and therefore provided a forum for accessing the views of many children from local areas. The geographic distribution of children participating (Appendix 1) reveals that at least 23 suburbs were represented in the study. However it should be noted that the views of some of Launceston’s children were not well represented. For example, only one child with a disability joined in the research activity. Also, it is not possible to speculate on whether views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included because the demographic information for the study did not provide for such identifying data. It is known that some populations in Australia face greater degrees of social disadvantage. Children with disabilities and children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage are two such populations and special effort is warranted in future Child Friendly City research activity to ensure that their voices are represented and that the process is an inclusive one.
This study had a focus on recreational play spaces, such as parks and natural environments, and was undertaken in a park space. Whilst the children were free to imagine and share their thoughts about any play spaces, the venue for data collection may have influenced their thinking. We did note that children mostly drew on their personal experiences of recreational play in Launceston and elsewhere to draw and tell us about what they liked to play.

**Recommendations**

Analysis of the children’s views and examination of the literature related to children’s recreational play and wellbeing highlighted several points for consideration by those interested in contributing to ‘Launceston as a Child Friendly City’ planning, decision-making, and related activities. These are summarised in the following recommendations:

- The play that occurs in recreational play spaces has been shown to have a positive impact on children’s wellbeing. However, children look to the play environment to offer opportunities to enhance particular dimensions of wellbeing that are valued by them at any one time. Thus, it is recommended that the 5 areas of wellbeing, social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual, be considered when the planning and development of play spaces are undertaken. The children’s drawings and narratives described in this report under particular dimensions of wellbeing may serve as a point of reference for play-scape designers, recreational facility decision-makers, community members and parents.

- Children’s focus on particular forms of play and remarks about playing in localities close to home highlight the need to provide recreational play facilities in communities throughout the city, and in ways that promote diverse play opportunities in different locations. It is recommended that the planning and development of play spaces occurs as a ‘contextual enterprise’ ensuring that elements of wellbeing fostered in a location reflect the community being served.

- The need for natural play spaces was evident in the literature and in the children’s views. It is recommended that the planning and construction of community play spaces prioritises the establishing of natural play environments that promote the 5 areas of wellbeing through; structured and unstructured play, the use of natural materials and elements; inclusion of open and closed spaces and some ‘risky’ elements.

- Children also identified natural spaces that encouraged animal and bird habitats and prioritised access to, or views of, natural elements including trees, rocks and water. While these priorities may be difficult to accommodate in the short term, they can be taken into account when identifying spaces for children’s recreational play, and for re-designing and maintaining existing spaces.

- Intergenerational play and care responsibilities were featured in the literature and the children’s views. It is recommended that considerations about how to facilitate rich intergenerational play and care relationships be prioritised when creating play scapes and play equipment. The children provided some examples from their experiences elsewhere. These examples might provide a springboard for alternative creative intergenerational play designs in Launceston parks.
• Children’s ambivalence to, yet concern for having adults located nearby require some consideration in the design of recreational play spaces. The need for adult proximity to young children’s play, while at the same time recognising children’s need to develop their independence and agency, may be reconciled through strategic placement of a range of seating options for adults. Other basic care requirements, such as drinking fountains and protection from the weather, were identified by the children and these too may be placed strategically to accommodate multiple purposes.

• Some consideration for mixing and separating children of different ages and the types of play was evident in the children’s views and in the literature. It is recommended that play spaces be designed in ways that clearly indicate how mixing and separating of age groups might occur when children first enter the larger play setting. Breakout zones and busy zones should be easily identified with naturally occurring pathways leading to the various ‘zones’ for play. Considerations of age-related play spaces should consider the need for appropriate play surfaces and safety considerations.

• The children who took part in this study demonstrated that they were experts in their own lives. As such, they had significant knowledge to share with adults about what is important for their wellbeing when playing in recreational play spaces. This information could not be found elsewhere. It is recommended therefore, that children need to be recognised as experts who have a significant role to play in consultative processes. It will be necessary to create appropriate consultative strategies throughout the design, construct and evaluation phases of new and re-designed recreational play spaces to ensure that children are involved as valued and knowledgeable citizens.

• Issues arising from this study are accessibility and inclusivity. The limited number of children who identified as having disabilities that limited their play activity does not diminish the need to construct recreational play options for these children. It is recommended that due consideration be given to those children and their families who may be marginalised in some way, so that play spaces are accessible and inclusive environments. Consultation with these children and families is a priority.

**Conclusion**

The children who participated in this research study offered insights into what makes play important for them. Their insights showed that, as adults, we can only come to understand what children think is important if we ask them to tell us. This type of knowledge cannot be sourced in any other way. It cannot be observed or assumed. The children clearly demonstrated that they are indeed the ‘missing piece of the puzzle’ when seeking to understand childhood.

This is significant for adults who have the responsibility to make decisions on behalf of children particularly in relation to areas that impact on children’s lives. The acknowledgement of childhood as a ‘time of being’, where children have rights in relation to how they experience life as a child means that children need to have a voice. They also need to have that voice heard if understanding what ‘child friendly’ actually sounds like, looks like and feels like so that recreational play spaces which nurture the development of children’s wellbeing are created. Children, as young as 3 years of age, had relevant and important knowledge to share about play and play spaces, knowledge that had not been accessed from other sources. However, further work in this area needs to be done,
both to ensure that the voices of children from differing backgrounds and with differing experiences are represented.

Our findings, taken from children’s perspectives, indicate that there are many similarities in the ways in which children play and what they enjoy doing in recreational play spaces. Importantly, our findings also reveal that children are unique individuals who, from time to time, place more emphasis on certain activities than others and that these emphases can be related to particular dimensions of wellbeing (social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical). Interactions that occur between the outdoor play environment and the child are important for the development of wellbeing. Thus, we have recommended that the 5 dimensions of wellbeing (DECS, 2007) be considered in the design and development of new and existing outdoor recreational spaces for children. We anticipate that how, and how well this occurs will impact on Launceston’s children now and in the future. It will be important to share the findings from this study widely so that a focus on children’s wellbeing can be incorporated into planning priorities for children’s recreational play spaces. It is envisaged that doing so will create positive change both for the people of Launceston, and for the city itself.
References:


Appendix 1

Suburban distribution of the children who participated in study