

# Freeing children to contribute: building child-friendly cities in the Asia Pacific region

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**Large sections of many cities in the Asia-Pacific region are effectively out of bounds for children, whose freedom to explore their urban environments is limited by a lack of child-friendly places and transport routes, and a culture of fear about traffic and ‘stranger danger’. In this article Karen Malone, regional director of UNESCO’s Growing Up In Cities project, and Chair of Child Friendly Asia Pacific explores the reasons and some possible solutions.**

In the fast-urbanising majority world countries of the Asia-Pacific region, many governments struggle to provide basic infrastructure for services such as safe water. Children face serious danger from pollutants and pathogens in the air, water, soil or food, and – especially for the region’s millions of street children – traffic accidents. In the region’s higher-income countries, however, the problem is a very different one: a culture of anxiety, depression and stress is increasingly evident.

UNICEF-IRC’s Report Card 7, *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries*, reported that many children feel awkward and out of place in their community. The most striking individual result was the 30% of Japanese children who said they felt lonely – three times higher than any other country. While troubling in itself, this also has equally troubling implications: Palmer (2007: 2) believes the “knock-on effects of this epidemic is the increase in drug and substance abuse among teenagers along with binge-drinking, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide”.

When parents are asked to reflect on their childhoods, they usually

remember having far more freedom than their own children have today. A generation ago, children were far more likely to play independently in their own neighbourhood. So why do today’s children from middle-class families in developed nations in the Asia Pacific region spend so much less of their time playing outside?

Partly it’s because they have less time available, as they are often engaged in more indoor and adult-organised activities such as sport, music, homework or tutoring – a trend to ‘over-occupy’ and ‘over-organise’ children’s lives. And partly it’s due to the erosion and pollution of natural or wild spaces; the loss of parks and playgrounds because of the increasing need of land for housing or industry; increased car traffic, and poor quality public transport.

But in large part it’s also due to an increased fear of violence and crime. Children are more likely to be driven to their adult-organised activities, not only because of the distances involved but also because of the increased fear of both traffic and ‘stranger danger’. I will consider these in turn.

### Traffic danger: breaking the vicious circle

The fear of the danger posed by traffic to pedestrian children is a vicious circle: as parents strive individually to shield their children from danger by driving them, they contribute collectively to the busier roads. In Australia the most prevalent increase in pedestrian accidents for children is when getting in or out of cars or crossing the road outside their school or childcare.

How can this vicious circle be broken? One possible solution pioneered by David Enwright and widely used in the Australian state of Victoria is the ‘walking school bus’ initiative, in which schools coordinate parents to walk their children to school in a group. While initially popular, however, the programme often did not become self-sustaining when the initial funding to a school dried up. Enwright envisaged this programme as a transitional phase which would lead to children walking to school in groups on their own, whereas schools tended to see it as something that they needed to structuralise.

Enwright’s ultimate aim was a cultural shift to get people more used to the idea of children using the streets, but in Australia this is a challenge. Children’s independent mobility, their freedom to explore their own neighbourhood or city without an adult, is low in Australian cities compared to many other countries – and will worsen if car travel continues

to rise. By contrast, when I spent time in Japan I was struck by the evidently strong culture of children’s independent mobility: very young children walk to and from school, use public transport and can access parks and playgrounds close to their homes on a regular basis. Colleagues in Japan were surprised that I found this surprising.

Research is now being done to quantify the differences in cultures of independent mobility, building on the One False Move research of Mayer Hillman, which compared how children’s mobility in the UK and Germany had changed from the 1970s to the 1990s. This work is now being replicated in different locations across Europe, Asia and Africa and data is beginning to come in, which should provide insights into what factors contribute to building a culture of independent mobility.

### ‘Stranger danger’ and social trust

One such factor which is already well understood from Hillman’s initial work is social trust – a sense of shared values. This could explain why relatively homogenous societies, such as Japan and Scandinavian countries, seem to be more comfortable with allowing children to get around independently. The question of how to build social trust in the diverse cities of today’s globalised world is an urgent one if we wish to create a more child-friendly urban environment.

In Australia we are always reminded of the centrality of social trust when we

do research with parents, as ‘stranger danger’ invariably comes out as their top issue – no doubt influenced by media scares about predatory adults and large-scale terrorism making the world feel like a more dangerous place. In one recent study we asked 4-8 year olds in a very safe, low-crime neighbourhood if they were allowed outside their front garden gate. Given their ages we were not surprised that 90% said they weren’t, but we were saddened by some of the reasons they gave:

“You might get lost or kidnapped” – Sara, age 4

“My dad says unsafe” – Michelle, age 5

“Mum is scared I may get hurt” – Hayley, age 6

“May get lost, kidnapped, killed, all those things” – Darah, age 6

“I would like to go outside my garden but I might get killed” – Sally, age 6

As Louv (2006) notes, this culture of fear can be very harmful to children’s sense of connection to the world.

In fact the odds of a child being abducted by a stranger in Australia are 1 in 4 million, less than in previous decades and roughly comparable to the chance of them being struck by

lightning. But merely presenting the statistics seems to have little impact on parents' perceptions. Other ways must therefore be found to encourage parents to overcome their fears about letting their children out to play.

One promising route is to emphasise the benefits of outdoor play in fighting obesity and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These are conditions which also concern Australian parents, so we need to drive into public consciousness the fact that children who miss out on regular

research with over 1000 children in both large and small cities in Australia has revealed that they actually prefer to be playing at the park, playing with friends, or interacting with nature and animals; using technology came low on their list. As Richard Louv argued in his infamous book *Last Child In the Woods*, we need to view exposing children to nature as a matter of health rather than merely one of leisure.

#### **Recognising the value of being 'streetwise'**

We also need to acknowledge that a freedom to move around from a young age allows children to develop important life skills: the capacity to read the urban environment and to assess and manage risk, or, in other words, to be 'streetwise'. If you walk the streets of many majority world countries you are likely to encounter many 'streetwise' children, often engaged from an early age in activities to support their families such as delivering or selling goods, shopping in the local markets or performing other domestic chores.

This tends to offend the sensibilities of adults from developed countries, but we need to acknowledge there is another side to the story: there is a benefit in our children becoming capable and competent and resourceful. A report on street children in the Asia Pacific region West (2003: 12) recently states: "... despite the inherent dangers, many children find life on the street to be liberating. For some, it provides

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exercise because they stay indoors and are driven everywhere are at greater risk of obesity, type II diabetes and other 'lifestyle' diseases. In emphasizing the benefits of outdoor play, we can learn from the UK government's successful Play England initiative that focused on building play environments but also play communities for children.

Parents are often shocked to discover how much their children enjoy outdoor play; they tend to assume that, because their children spend so much time playing with computers and other technology, this must be what they most want to do and not something they do for lack of options. Our

Children without helmets, a typical sight in many Asian cities.

Photo: Karen Malone



the possibility to earn money, eat reasonably well, and do things children usually are not allowed to do at home. The problems of life on the street may become apparent only when they grow older and their perspectives on life change. The notion of street children being 'out of place' may primarily be a perception held by adults. Much depends on individual experience".

It is notable that one of the triggers for the aforementioned Play England initiative was the UNICEF research showing that English children reported the lowest subjective wellbeing of the countries surveyed. These were all rich countries, but this research is now being replicated in the wider world and

this new round of research should give us interesting insights into the kinds of lifestyles that make children happier. It should also offer policy insights for city planners, who unfortunately tend generally to see children only as a 'problem' to be 'solved' by "[tidying them] away behind railings, in parks, in gardens and – best of all – indoors".

There may be more sensible policy alternatives: for example, in a recent visit to the Indonesian city of Solo I found a programme that supported working street mothers and children by providing on-site child care workers in market places to ensure very young children and babies weren't endangered, and mothers and

older siblings could work without fear. Another programme by a city council in Indonesia, which has been anecdotally reported as a great success, is the provision of helmets for parents to borrow as they take their children around on the front or back of motorbikes: this can be a high-risk activity, and this programme offers a way to ameliorate the risks to children without 'tidying them away'.

#### **Indicators by children, for children**

As we devise ways to make cities more child-friendly, it is important to value and respect children (especially young children) as active participants and decision makers in those design

processes. Research on children in cities throughout the world shows that despite diversity of place, children value similar qualities in urban environments. UNESCO's *Growing Up in Cities* used the participation principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to emphasise that cities should be evaluated not merely for children, but by children themselves. The result was a set of indicators of quality of life by children and for children.

The list of positive socio-physical indicators for urban environments

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identified by children in cities includes provision of basic needs, social integration, safety and free movement, peer gathering places and safe green spaces – places where they are protected from crime, violence, pollution and traffic danger, able to meet friends and explore freely. The negative indicators include social exclusion, violence and crime, heavy traffic, lack of gathering places, boredom and lack of political power. For children, a child-friendly city is one which supports social integration, where they feel welcome and are valued as part of a caring community. In contrast places that provoke feelings of alienation, marginalisation, or being

invisible or harassed, are deemed not child-friendly.

While these are features that commonly tend to come out of research with children to develop indicators, there are also variations from place to place, so it is always important for a city to design their own indicators through consultations with their own children. In our recent work with children aged 4-6 years old in Brimbank, Australia, for example, the children designed a set of positive indicators which included places with

animals, places to be creative, and places to relax indoors.

From their suggestions we then compiled a list of 50 child-friendly places in Brimbank, and took children to visit each of them and assess them using the indicators they had developed. Often this revealed that even the most child-friendly places scored well on only a couple of indicators. The city council has embraced the research and is using it to look again at municipal places for children, to see how they can be made to meet more of the children's indicators.

### **Towards more child-friendly cities**

To understand better what is happening in children's lives, we need to strengthen data collection and monitoring with children. As a UNICEF report stated, "often, national averages conceal the adverse health conditions disproportionately experienced by the poor, and a lack of reliable statistical data disaggregated by geography and socio-economic groups makes analysis of the Asia-Pacific region difficult". Decisions need to be made using data that reflects the realities and diversities of children's lives.

The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities ([www.childfriendlycities.org](http://www.childfriendlycities.org)) self-assessment initiative has an important role to play in the development of this data. The principles of CFC emphasise the importance of supporting mayors and municipal councils to work in partnership with communities, families and especially young children in evaluating the quality of their environments. In the Philippines, for example, with the support of UNICEF and the government a multi-sector nation-wide partnership has been set up and a 'Presidential Award' established which awards cities 'child-friendly' status if they can document have they have attained 24 goals/indicators on survival, development, protection and participation, developed within the national plan of action for children.

In addition, cities must present four 'gifts' to children: a local development plan for children; a local investment

plan for children; a local code on children; and a state of the children report. In Pasay City, for example, which regularly scores highly in the Presidential Awards, the city mayor delivers an annual 'State of the Children' address.

As we seek to build more child-friendly cities across the Asia Pacific region, the main focus for many cities will unfortunately still be on ensuring that children survive to their fifth birthday and beyond. But beyond these fundamental questions of poverty and survival, we need also to appreciate that some aspects of life in the crowded cities of the majority world can potentially equip children well with the resilience to cope with the ever changing and unpredictable world of the future.

The challenge is to find the right balance between protecting children and giving them the freedoms and opportunities to engage with their communities and build competencies. While wealthy parents fill their children's lives with activities, intent on giving them the best chance to succeed in life, this can also leave them with no time to "relax, play on their own, or let their imaginations wander". Our research has shown that when given a choice and a voice, children do inherently choose activities that benefit their health and psychological well-being and allow them to make a significant contribution to their community.

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