

'Families are beginning to reclaim city centres'

An interview with Lia Karsten, Associate Professor in Urban Geographies at the University of Amsterdam/AISSR, Netherlands, and Honorary Doctorate in Educational Science at Uppsala University, Sweden

Lia Karsten researches the changing relationship between cities and children. Here she talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about the historical evolution of childhood in cities in The Netherlands, the experiences of children growing up in high-rise Hong Kong, and how urban families are reclaiming city centres, with a growing number of places allowing for 'public parenting'.

How is urban childhood changing in the Netherlands and beyond?

There are two interesting trends. First, my historical research shows that there has been a change in discourses about the nature of childhood. Children used to be seen as resilient, whereas today they are primarily seen as vulnerable. So in the past it was common for children to play outdoors on their own, but nowadays it is seen as good parenthood to supervise your child in urban public spaces.

Secondly, families are beginning to reclaim city centres. Cities and children have long been seen as mutually exclusionary concepts. Cities belong to the public sphere, whereas children are seen as belonging to the private sphere – that is, the family and the home. When you think of cities, you think of concrete; when you think of childhood, you think of green spaces. And so on.

That is changing with the rise of 'YUPPs' – young, urban professional parents – who are actively choosing to live in city centres, rather than taking the traditional route of moving out to the suburbs as soon as they have children. In response, you see services for children springing up across urban areas: bars and restaurants which traditionally catered only to child-free clientele are now providing play areas for children; there are stores that cater for children; there are leisure centres where families can go together or children can go after school. These establishments are on the rise in cities across Europe and also in parts of North America.

Is this reclaiming of the city centre largely a middle-class phenomenon?

It is effectively only middle-class families with two incomes who have the disposable income to frequently

outsource the domestic tasks of shopping, cooking and washing up by going to a restaurant. Interestingly, when you look at urban families eating out together and the growth of leisure areas for urban children, you can see an echo of the old feminist ideal of communal kitchens and local childcare – but these have gone from being feminist ideals to expensive lifestyle choices. Cultural capital is giving way to economic capital.

Despite working-class parents being indeed more limited in the activities they can afford to do with their children – and sometimes also being more time-pressed – they are not immune to the first trend I mentioned, of supervising their children more and limiting their freedom of movement. I found in my latest research (publication forthcoming) that working-class parents, too, are spending more time with their children than they have ever done before.

What are the effects on children of spending more time in the company of their parents rather than playing without supervision?

One unfortunate consequence is the weakening of social capital. As children spend more time socialising in the company of their parents, and in settings chosen by their parents, the other children with whom they come into contact tend to have parents who are from the same kind of class and background. In contrast, children of previous generations, playing unsupervised in the streets, would encounter a broader social range of their peers. This has been criticised by many scholars in the field of children's studies, including myself.

Having said that, I believe that as researchers it is our task to explore not only what has been lost, but also the positive aspects of what has become new practice. It is sometimes overlooked that it's not only children's ability to form relationships with their peers that we should care about. The ability to form intergenerational social relationships, with parents and other family members, is important too. Taking care of your child in public has come to be seen as a way to establish an identity as an involved parent, construct a sense of family identity and cement family ties through public parenting.



In the Netherlands families are beginning to reclaim city centres. Photo • © Stephan Gabriel/Lineair Fotoarchief

You use the phrase ‘public parenting’ – what do you mean by that?

For example, consider the bars and restaurants in gentrified urban areas that cater for families. In a recent study my colleagues and I observed how families behaved in ten such restaurants in Amsterdam (Karsten *et al.*, 2013). We found that parents use the opportunity of mealtimes in a public place as an opportunity to demonstrate to children how they should behave. Good behaviour during the meal – sitting down, taking part in conversation – is rewarded by parents allowing their children to play in the restaurant’s play areas or, for example, on an iPad. The parents in turn use this time to talk, or to check their smart phones. Fathers are as likely as mothers to be involved in public parenting.

As well as your studies in the Netherlands, you have also recently looked at middle-class urban childhood in the high-rise environment of Hong Kong. What did you find?

I did my research (Karsten, 2014a) specifically among English-speaking middle-class families in Hong Kong, where the high-rise environment is combined with both parents typically working and a parenting style that is very much focused on achievement and preparation for a highly competitive jobs market.

What I have found is that the children of these families hardly play outdoors. Of course, in large part that’s because high-rise Hong Kong is not the easiest place from which to get access to the outdoors. But there are some differences in how the built environment facilitates outdoor access. Children are more likely to play outdoors if they live in smaller, enclosed estates with good facilities. Even then, children are normally supervised rather than allowed to play on their own. Usually they are accompanied by a domestic helper employed by parents who are both working full-time.

Another reason why there is so little outdoor play, however, is that middle-class parents in high-rise Hong Kong typically see their children's personal achievement as being extremely important, which leads to children of primary school age having a heavy burden of after-school extracurricular lessons and activities. These leave no time for 'just' playing.

Did you find that parents in Hong Kong don't appreciate the value of play for young children?

On the contrary, many of the parents I spoke to during my research were concerned not to be seen as overly demanding parents, putting their children under too much pressure. But they also explained that children need to develop a 'portfolio' of achievements to stand a chance of getting accepted by a good school, and playing doesn't count. So what parents often do is define the after-school lessons as being 'playful', to try to legitimise to themselves the heavy schedules their children have.

The aspects of life in Hong Kong that you've mentioned – high-rise living, competitive parenting – look likely to become more common as the world continues to urbanise and with the growth of middle classes in the emerging markets. What advice would you have for city governments?

I believe this is an area where further research is necessary, especially including the perspectives of children themselves, which unfortunately I was not able to do in my Hong Kong study; sadly, the children and parents were just too busy to schedule any time to participate in the research together. Which illustrates my first recommendation – that encouraging work-life balance for children should be high on the agenda of global cities.

Secondly, also high on the agenda should be the creation of green, open play areas that entice children to want to be outdoors. To take an example from close to home, in recent years the district of Amsterdam where I live, Middenmeer, has become much more child-friendly in its public spaces in response to demand from families: the neighbourhood park has been renovated, and there are new playgrounds and broad sidewalks. I showed in a recent study (Karsten, 2014b) how these locations have

become extensively used by middle-class families to demonstrate public parenting, bringing private family life into public space.

While this is a positive trend, the danger is that living in neighbourhoods with such pleasant public spaces soon becomes unaffordable except for relatively wealthy professionals, and urban gentrification benefits only kids with middle-class parents. So my third piece of advice is that we have to look for ways to reclaim the city for children of all social backgrounds, and repair the weakening of social capital that comes from the increasingly class-based segregation of how urban children socialise with their peers.

References

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