

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

ARE THERE SOCIO-ECONOMIC VARIATIONS IN THE PROVISION, QUALITY AND PERCEPTIONS OF OUTDOOR PLAY AREAS IN GLASGOW?

Researchers

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Aims

To investigate the health benefits of outdoor play and socio-economic variations in the provision, quality and perceptions of outdoor play areas in Glasgow.

Project Outline/Methodology

A mixed methods approach was undertaken. A comprehensive literature review was conducted looking at how play areas may be beneficial to physical and mental health. The location of all children's play areas in Glasgow was mapped and the density of provision was analysed by area deprivation. The aesthetics and safety of 100 play areas were assessed using an objective checklist and results were explored in relation to deprivation. Children's and adults' views and experiences of local provision were investigated by 7 interviews with play area maintenance workers, 1 focus group with parents, 4 focus groups and 38 drawing and writing worksheets with children aged 9-10 years.

Key Results

The literature suggests that outdoor play is beneficial to children's mental and physical health. Although there was greater provision of play areas in deprived areas of Glasgow compared to areas of lower deprivation, the safety and aesthetics were poorer in deprived areas; for example, there was more likely to be litter, glass, inadequate safety surfacing and rusty or broken equipment in playgrounds in areas of high deprivation. Both children and parents experienced barriers to using play areas which included the lack of safe provision and a fear of threats from other users, and children felt that play areas were boring and often designed for younger children. Maintenance workers complained about youth disorder and the misuse and vandalism of play areas, attributing these problems to the social class and culture of people living in deprived areas. In general they spoke negatively about their roles and had low job satisfaction.

Conclusions

Whilst the provision of play areas may be greater in deprived areas, the quality of these facilities may be poorer and this may impact upon their use. It is not clear whether the greater provision in deprived areas is enough to combat the lower incomes and poorer garden access in these areas, and so it is important that play areas remain open and well maintained. Further research about the barriers to using play areas and methods to combat misuse needs to be conducted to support the creation of facilities that parents and children are happy to use.

What does this study add to the field?

This research adds to the growing literature on the location of resources that facilitate a healthy lifestyle. The findings suggest that it is not only the provision of play areas that is important, but also their quality. Children and parents face a number of barriers to using play areas, and the design of play areas may not be suitable for children of this age-group.

Implications for Practice or Policy

In the current context of childhood obesity, it is vital that opportunities to be physically active such as play areas remain open, well-maintained and inviting for users. However, since providing play areas does not mean that they will be used, it is important that barriers to their use are investigated further in order to promote suitable facilities to parents and children.

Where to next?

The checklist used to audit play areas is being adapted for use by policy makers from Glasgow Housing Association to help them make informed decisions regarding play area refurbishment or investment.

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