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## **The Impact of Urbanization on the Child's Right to Play**

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# The Impact of Urbanization on the Child's Right to Play by Rita Shackel

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**Introduction** Urban regions around the world have undergone dramatic social and economic changes over the past few decades (UN Centre Human Settlements, 2001). Some of these changes are the result of long-term fermentation, others reflect reactive responses to situations of crisis and other changes are still currently unfolding before our eyes as urban hubs around the world adjust to political unrest, natural disasters and financial uncertainty. These changes have had, and continue to have, a profound impact on the way people are living their lives including how children are being raised and the priorities accorded in rearing children and measures used to judge children's well-being. Changes in urban lifestyles have seemingly influenced an attitudinal shift towards children's play and their recreation and leisure activities. Unfortunately, the child's right to "play" is not being given adequate priority by communities, governments and other social institutions around the globe (UNICEF, 1998, p. 420). This paper discusses the impact of recent trends in urbanization on policies and attitudes to children's play and examines some of the key factors that may be contributing to a contemporary undervaluing of children's play and their relaxation.

**Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** This article specifically protects and promotes the right of the child to engage in play and recreational activities. It also ensures the child's right to rest and leisure. Article 31 provides that: States Parties shall '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.' This provision highlights that such activities should be "appropriate" to the child's age. The intended aim of Article 31 is to promote and protect the child's development within the context of the child's community as well as the child's school and family (Detrick, 1999). The UNCRC is the first legally binding international human rights instrument to expressly recognize the right of the child to engage in play and recreational activities (Detrick, 1999). Article 31 of the Convention is of critical importance because it expressly addresses the child's right to play, which is sadly often a "forgotten right" (UNICEF, 1998, p. 417).

Article 31 distinguishes between "play" and other "recreational" activities. Recreational activities embrace a wide range of activities undertaken for pleasure. The Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child published by UNICEF defines "play" as activities which are not controlled by adults and which do not necessarily conform to any rules (UNCRC, Hodgkin & Newell, 2007 p. 469). Play is distinguished from recreational activities on this basis.

Article 31 begs the question: What constitutes "age appropriate" play and recreation? In considering the impact of urbanization on children's play the following questions also

arise: What are the perceptions within urban communities of what constitutes age "appropriate" play? Have perceptions of "age appropriate" play changed over time and as a consequence of changes in urban lifestyles? Undoubtedly, there are differences between urban communities within and without each country as to what is considered "age appropriate" play. However, some common trends may nevertheless be discernable across urban centers despite cultural and geographical differences.

One such trend is an apparent tendency in many urban communities to undervalue and trivialize children's play, particularly when compared to other activities such as academic pursuits and competitive physical and sporting activities, which tend to be perceived as more important than simply "playing." Playing just for the sake of playing is often viewed as a waste of time both for children and for adults. As the Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights "the haphazard, anarchic nature of play contributes nothing to the nation's economy or international profile" (UNICEF, 1998). Accordingly, neither politicians nor the broader community seem to regard children's "play" as important. This view fails to recognize the importance of free form play in children's physical, social and intellectual development (Children's Rights in Canada 2011 Working Document: Right to Play, Background Research).

The undervaluing of play in urban communities (and arguably even across societies more generally) is reflected in the erosion of both structured and free playtime in formal settings such as schools where there is now greater emphasis on formal instruction, testing and assessment of children from the very early stages of kindergarten (NAEYC, 2000; 2001). The trend emerging in many countries is of more formalised instruction and testing coupled with the elimination of free playtime. Even in preschools and child-care facilities, the focus of daily activities is frequently on educational objectives rather than recreational, relaxation and creative time. This approach to children's learning often extends into out of school time and into extra-curricula activities. It is not uncommon for children to be shuffled from one-after school activity to another e.g. enrichment classes, soccer training, ballet classes, piano lessons, and gymnastics. Some of these activities may be recreational activities but they do not constitute play and often are incongruent with the child's need for rest. Unfortunately, many teachers, parents, policy makers and other adults are increasingly failing to recognise this fundamental distinction. Play is unstructured and free from adult direction (although it may be facilitated and overseen by adults) (UNICEF, 1998, p. 420).

Therefore, a very important question that needs to be addressed is: When do children simply get time to PLAY in this array of very busy and highly structured schedules? Also, very importantly when can children play simply for fun? Unfortunately, within an urban setting the answer to these questions may increasingly be: not often enough. This view is supported by research data. For example, United States data collected in 1997 as part of the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics showed that children were spending less time engaged in free play in the nineties than they did in the early eighties (Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001). This data revealed that children spent about three hours less a week in unstructured play and outdoor activities in 1997 than they did in 1981. Further, over this period, time spent studying increased by

almost 50% per week. Similarly, the time spent in organized sports more than doubled in the period 1981-1997. More recently, researchers at the University of Michigan found that American children in 2004 were spending about 7.5 hours a week more on academics compared to children aged 6-17, 20 years ago (Juster, Stafford & Ono, 2004).

**Characteristics of Urban Living that may Undermine Play** What characteristics of urban living have led to the undervaluing of children's play? The following factors may be influential.

*The Social Focus of Urban Living:* The social focus and context of urban living may be an important influence on people's attitudes to children's play. A principal focus for people who live in urban communities is often, trying to gain a competitive edge in a fast paced world. Adults may be transferring such lifestyle priorities to their children. Furthermore, the social context of urban life highlights three inter-related factors that may be impacting on changing perceptions towards children's play:

- A competitive social hierarchy
- A "fast paced" way of life
- A degree of social isolation.

These factors may have undermined the perceived importance of children's play as a legitimate and meaningful activity and inhibited play opportunities for children.

*Changes in Traditional Family Structures:* Another important factor that may be influencing family life and consequently children's recreational and play activities is changes in traditional family structures. First, the role of the extended family has been eroded in many cultures (Indralal De Silva, 2005). One reason is that increasingly families are living in different urban centers and are more geographically dispersed compared to previous generations. Secondly, families tend to be more fragmented in urban communities today than in years gone by. Divorce and marital breakdown is a frequent event. In Australia for example, between 1986 and 2001 the number of one-parent families increased by 53% (ABS, 2003). In many cities around the world, close to half of all marriages end in divorce (Americans for Divorce Reform, 2005). Following marital breakdown, custody and care of children is often shared between parents (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004), sometimes in estranged circumstances. Joint custody arrangements, while often in the best interests of the child in terms of preserving ongoing contact and a relationship with both parents, may lead to inefficiencies and duplication in children's use of time. In effect, a child who is a member of two households may be expected to contribute equally to both. Indirectly, this situation may further restrict a child's free time for play and recreation. More research needs to be conducted into the impact of joint custody or care arrangements on children and their use of time.

*Parental Employment Patterns & Advances in Technology:* Another factor that may be having an impact on children's playtime is changes in parental employment. In urban areas many families have two working parents (ABS, 2003; Statistics NZ, 1996). Parents

also are often working long hours (ABS, 2003; Major et al., 2002). This situation coupled with the heavy schedules that children themselves often have at school and with extra-curricular activities is likely to curtail the amount of time left for free and unstructured playtime.

Although more parents are increasingly working from home both on a full-time and part-time basis, due to technological advances many are spending longer hours in front of the computer (ABS, 2003). The computer is increasingly becoming a focal point for all members of the household. Advances in technology have seen changes in the way children spend their time. Research shows that children are spending a large proportion of their free time in front of the computer or television. In Australia, the most common leisure activities for children are watching TV or videos and playing electronic or computer games (ABS, 2003). Over 50% of children in Australia spend 10 hours or more a week watching TV or videos. Brazil in its Initial report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child reported that children spend over 2 hours of the 3 hours of free time they have in the day in front of the television screen (UNICEF, 1998, p. 421). On weekends and holidays they spend 4 of their 7 hours of free time in this way. Some of this time may be described as playtime, but "television, though providing culture and entertainment, must also be seen as sometimes inimical to play and recreation "appropriate to the age of the child.""(UNICEF, 1998, p.421).

***Changing Attitudes to the Use of Public Space:*** Another factor that may be impacting on children's play is the space available for play in urban settings. In some urban communities less public space is available for play areas that accommodate play equipment for children. This has arisen from the increased cost of living in such communities where the price of land often comes at a high premium. Not only are individual families more often moving into smaller homes such as apartments and town houses, which have less land attached to them for children's play but also less land is available for communities as a whole in the form of public parks and other areas.

In some big cities, the price of land has increased to such an extent that public land has been sold off to private developers by governments trying to take advantage of increased values (see e.g. Protectors for Public Land). The property boom such as has consumed several cities in Australia, is changing community views to public space and land; public space and land are increasingly being viewed in terms of their monetary value rather than a community resource for public enjoyment. Paradoxically, the need for public land for recreational purposes is heightened as the density of living increases in many cities.

***Increased Crime Rates and Fears for Personal Safety.*** Increased crime rates in some urban communities may also impact children's playtime. Crimes statistics in many cities show increased rates of crime committed against the person (ABS, 2002). Children and young people are increasingly becoming the victims of violent crimes (AIC, 2002). There is also a reported increased fear of crime in many urban communities (Indermaur, 1996). As a result of increased crime rates and increased fears concerning personal safety in urban communities, children are often discouraged from outside play particularly if it is away from direct adult supervision. Because parents have less time for closely supervised

playtime, some forms of play may no longer be viable for children. Further, the risks associated with high levels of traffic in urban communities may also be a factor that restricts children's play in the neighbourhood and outside the family home.

***Litigious Trend:*** Finally, another factor likely to have undermined play opportunities for children is the impact of increased litigation in our society. Governmental bodies, schools, and private organizations are acutely aware of the potential for litigation resulting from a child's injury during play. However, rather than addressing the deficiencies that may be the cause of such injuries fear of legal action sometimes leads to simply restricting children's play in order to minimize such risks. Frequently, the costs of rectifying design flaws and modification of play areas so as to improve children's safety during play is a disincentive. This may result in play areas that inappropriately restrict children's play but serve to minimize the risk of any physical injuries (Chancellor, 2003). Alternatively, simply eliminating play opportunities all together is sometimes considered the best and "safest" course of action. Such actions undermine children's opportunity for developmentally appropriate play.

***Conclusion:*** Communities around the world (developed and developing) need to better understand and promote the benefits of unstructured play in children's intellectual, physical, social and emotional development. Play in a child's life is critical for development of a healthy, confident and well-adjusted individual. Governments, parents and child advocates need to work together to ensure that the child's right to play is protected and not eroded by other agendas or misinformed views about the needs of children.

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