

A 360° View of Play

ACTIVATING AND DIVERSIFYING PLAY IN PUBLIC SPACES

An information sheet by the Centre d'écologie urbaine and Metalude

ISBN: 978-2-925522-00-3

The right to play is recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as it is vital to the well-being and development of all children. Through play, children can exercise their right to express themselves freely. The Convention also specifies that children with disabilities have the right to actively participate in community life, a right that can be exercised, in part, through play.

Despite how important play is for children, several factors have led to its decline in public spaces, and municipal play planning has remained largely unchanged since the mid-20th century (Loebach, 2021; Québec en forme, 2013; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2024; Venkat, Fox and Summers, 2023). To put this right and develop a play-friendly territory for all children, **municipalities can develop the play potential of public spaces and support independent mobility for children.**

This information sheet invites municipalities to take a close look at children's play experience on their territory and develop a network of complementary play-friendly spaces. A workbook, in the form of an analysis grid, can be downloaded at the end of this sheet. It is designed to help municipalities begin thinking about play in their public spaces and can be used in several contexts, such as when creating a master plan for parks or a family policy, developing public programming, or designing or assessing a public space.



WHAT IS PLAY?

Play is how children grow and develop each day. It is also a biological necessity. Play lets them explore their senses, interact with the physical and social environment, get to know themselves and come to understand their place in the world. **It is the driving force of their day-to-day lives** and serves no other purpose than having fun (Ferland, 2018, p. 36).

Adults often use specialized terms to talk about what is summarized here as play, such as “child-led play,” “active play,” “free play” and “risky play.” The important thing to remember is that the child’s choice, initiative and creativity are at the heart of their play (Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec, 2023; Naître et grandir, 2021).

Play **contributes** to children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, linguistic and motor development. It also helps regulate their body and emotional system. It has even been suggested that there may be a connection between play, risk-taking, resilience and bravery in childhood and then in adulthood (Gray, 2020, p. 40-41).

Playing outdoors increases these benefits. Outdoor play tends to last longer and be more active and more imaginative than indoor play (Outdoor Play Canada, 2022). Outdoor play also provides an opportunity to be in contact with the natural environment (even in an urban, built-up area) and with society outside of family and school. Public spaces near one another give children more options than a single space, regardless of whether it is public or private.

CHOICE AT THE HEART OF PLAY

Play is a series of ludic choices and decisions shaped by the components in the space and the children’s interpretations of how to use them. For example, a slide allows them to slide down, but also to climb and hide; a bench lets them socialize, but can also be used to balance on and jump off of; a drinking fountain lets them get a drink, but also make magic potions and marvel at the splashing water.

When a space has complementary components, such as a hard surface for ball play or shrubs for hiding in, children can opt to use one or combine them in their games. When nearby spaces also offer different play components—atmospheres, landscapes, furniture, equipment, surfaces or accessibility measures—the possibilities and combinations for play are endless.

Children can have different play experiences according to the components in the public space, their imagination and their play partners.



PLAY EXPERIENCES

The different ways of playing can be grouped into **three broad play experiences**, based on a literature review of the 16 types of play (Hughes, 2006), the eight types of play with risk-taking (Sandseter et al., 2019) and the fieldwork done by Metalude, which has involved child consultations and observation, and proposing ways to encourage play in public spaces.

★ Socializing and world-building

Children's imagination invites them to try things, make mistakes and create. They can immerse themselves in imaginary worlds with their play partners or by themselves. Socialization does not necessarily involve creation or imagination. It can be deeply rooted in reality, as is often the case in adolescence.



♥ Discovering their body and what it can do

Children learn about their body through active play, risk-taking and sensory exploration. Since every body, brain and mind is unique, so are each person's preference and limits.

✿ Developing a relationship with the natural environment

Developing a relationship with the natural environment means encountering living things—from the dandelion growing out of the sidewalk to the wild hare in the wooded area—and finding joy in what the different seasons offer.



HOW TO BRING PLAY BACK INTO PUBLIC SPACES

To counter the decline of play in public spaces, the use of these spaces must be rebalanced and access to play must not be restricted solely to spaces intended for children.

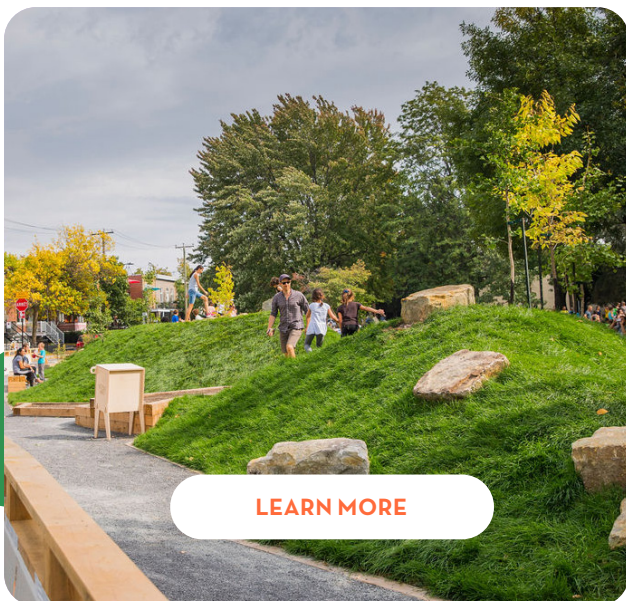
In a perfect world, the three broad play experiences would be supported and possible in all public spaces. That way, children could enjoy each play experience in different ways and in a variety of spaces during their day. For example, socialization could be encouraged by installing a bandstand/gazebo in the

neighbourhood park, a bench in an alleyway and a parklet along a main street. Thus, each public space would be known for the components it offers rather than the single type of play it was designed for.

The first step toward creating this ideal world is to draw up a list of current or desired play components in a public space and its adjacent spaces. This helps ensure a diverse play offer and inclusion of all children living in the area.

INSPIRING PROJECTS

The following inspiring projects show why it is helpful to view public spaces and their adjacent spaces according to the different play possibilities they offer or, in the case of a large park or a space of several hectares, what its different zones offer.



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Credit: Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie borough

L'île aux volcans, a public square

DESIGN: CASTOR ET POLLUX

A public place for children on a street closed to traffic, in the heart of a densely populated residential area.

With its sandboxes, grassy mounds, “volcanic” craters, the asphalt surface of the street and small logs, this space offers a variety of ludic choices that spark the imagination and invite children to be active.

The circular craters encourage socialization for the teens who attend the school nearby.

Adjacent spaces: A community centre with washrooms, drinking fountains and a snack bar; a community garden; a playground

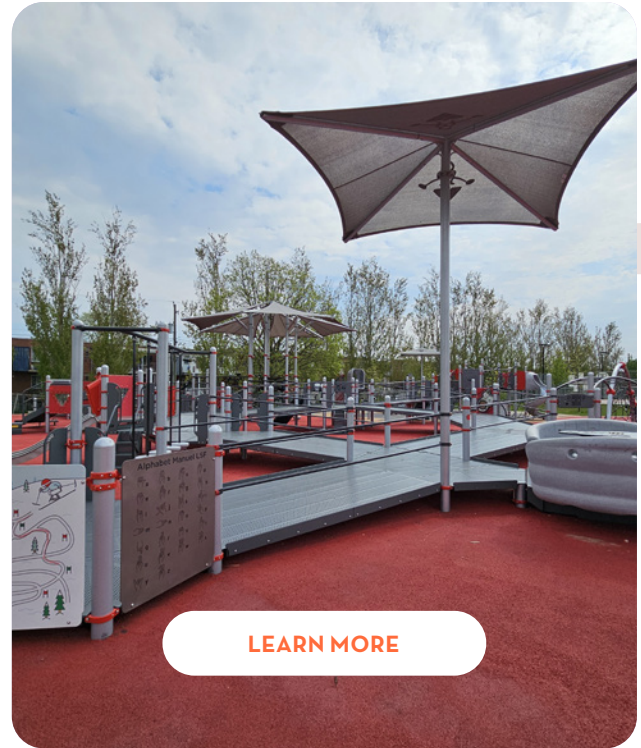
The playground at Parc Julie-Hamelin

DESIGN: LANDSCAPE STRUCTURES

An inclusive space, notably for children who use a mobility aid or have complex communication needs or sensory processing challenges.

This playground offers fun choices and different challenge levels: percussion instruments, hiding places, several types of playground equipment (spinners, teeter-totters, etc.), sensory panels, water games, a large ramp connecting several modules, and several invitations to play (hide and seek, for example).

Adjacent spaces: A picnic area with drinking fountains and a self-cleaning washroom, a basketball court, a green alleyway, Parc Frédéric-Back, the TOHU Cité des arts du cirque, where cultural activities are held, and a loan service for outdoor equipment, including an all-terrain wheelchair



Credit: Centre d'écologie urbaine



Credit: Giant Steps

Parc Angrignon and activities held by Les Amis du parc Angrignon, Coyote Programs and Giant Steps

This sprawling urban park, which can be reached via metro, has no adjacent spaces other than the residential streets of the neighbourhood. However, its 97 hectares offer a number of different zones, including several wooded areas and bodies of water, a community garden, a playground, a dog park, and infrastructure to meet basic needs.

Various activities liven up the park's subspaces, including yearly events such as the Grand Rendez-vous familial, put on by the Service de sécurité incendie de Montréal, and other recurring local activities. Les Amis du parc Angrignon organizes biodiversity, history and park maintenance activities. Coyote Programs, an organization looking to decolonize people's connection with nature, and Giant Steps, a school for people ages four to 21 with autism spectrum disorder, both offer "forest school" programs at the park.

HOW MUNICIPALITIES CAN TAKE CONCRETE ACTION TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S PLAY IN PUBLIC SPACES

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, planning a variety of landscapes and ludic choices, along with play-friendly complementary spaces is a great start. You will need to get an overview of your territory and of the play experiences offered or desired there.

We hope that you will gain useful insights and have fruitful discussions while planning a play-friendly territory in which public spaces foster inclusion and enjoyment.

We have created a workbook to help municipalities with this process. The aim of this tool is not to establish a hierarchy of spaces, play experiences or users, but to ensure that the territory offers complementary and connected spaces that invite a multitude of children to play in different ways.



Download the workbook



Thank you to the advisory committee:

- **Géna Casu**, Project Manager – Physical Activity, Collectif Vital
- **Valérie Ebacher**, Urban Planner, Advisor – Development and Urban Planning, Vivre en Ville
- **Christyne Gauvin**, Educational Advisor, Regroupement des CPE de la Montérégie
- **Seiun Thomas Henderson**, Director of Innovation and Special Projects, Giant Steps School
- **Stéphanie Henry**, Landscape Architect and Designer, Castor et Pollux
- **Thibaut Hugueny**, Circonflexe Project Manager, Sport et loisir de l'île de Montréal
- **Mathieu Point**, Professor, Department of Education Sciences, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
- **Brigitte Soucy-Ferret**, Mobilization Coordinator, Montréal physiquement active network, Montréal – Métropole en santé

For several years now, **Metalude**, through its mission to rethink the public realm with all children in mind and to adapt it for play, in partnership with the **Centre d'écologie urbaine**, notably through the **Levelling the Playing Fields** and the **J'identifie, j'agis dans ma communauté** projects, have been looking at the place children occupy in public spaces. This sheet and workbook are the result of collaboration between these two organizations.

To learn more and consult the references: metalude.ca/360-view-play