

Healthy Built Environments

Putting Children First

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There is mounting concern about the health of children today. Newspapers and television regularly run stories about childhood obesity and lack of physical activity – spending too much screen time. While some of these reports err on the sensational side, there is legitimate cause for concern.

Children are not as active as they were a generation ago. Research repeatedly reports that the proportion of Australian children walking to school has declined. In NSW, data from the 2010 'Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey' shows that activity levels have continued to fall most recently, and 1 in 4 children surveyed are not in the healthy weight range.



Neighbourhood 'Walk to School' sign links health and environmental sustainability

Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy body weight. Being overweight is a risk factor for chronic disease, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers. A sedentary way of life is also a risk factor for mental health problems, such as depression. It is critical that we encourage children to be physically active, as well as eat healthy foods and interact with others to maintain good physical and mental health.

Planners have an important role to play in ensuring that the places where youngsters grow up, play, move about and go to school support these healthy behaviours. So how can planners create a healthy built environment for children?

The environment needs to support children being physically active and socially connected as part of everyday life. Being able to walk or cycle to school can be an important aspect of this. Planners can work with other agencies to make the route to school safe, fun for exploring and learning, and clearly sign-posted. Physical activity and social interaction are also supported through play spaces and parks.

Indeed, access to green, wild spaces is critical for everyone's physical and mental health. Richard Louv's popular book 'Last Child in the Woods' posits that indoor lives and constant supervision contribute to both physical and mental health problems for children (including obesity, attention-deficit disorder and depression).

Well designed streets and neighbourhoods are supportive environments for active and socially engaged children. Creating such environments involves traffic management, as well as elements that appeal to children exploring their local area. With rising urban population densities, planners face new challenges in creating child-friendly environments.

Claire Freeman and Paul Tranter in their recently published book 'Children and their Urban Environment: Changing Worlds' consider many of these challenges. They provide practical case studies, as well as pertinent research to argue for policies that will ensure children have access to high quality and accessible public spaces in higher density living. Strata title can potentially affect children's well-being if there are overly restrictive



Community gardens can support children's access to healthy food that they have grown and learnt to prepare – being active and socially engaged in the garden are additional health benefits

rules about playing on common property or owning pets. Animals can give a child companionship and, in the case of a dog, be a great walking companion – often in the absence of adult supervision. Planners can help with open space provision that supports dog ownership in smaller dwellings.

A healthy environment for children also supports access to healthy food. Community gardens can engage children in growing and eating healthy fresh produce. They also aid learning about cooking, gardening, composting and recycling. Strategic plans and policies need to facilitate community-led edible landscapes, farmers' markets and other related sustainability neighbourhood practices. Fast food advertising and fast food outlets close to schools are not supportive of healthy eating and planners should seek to regulate such practices.

Useful resources for planners

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (<http://kids.nsw.gov.au/>) has a freely available publication that can assist planners create child-friendly environments. Called 'built4kids', it

identifies three themes that underpin children's well being. These then form the 'Indicator Frameworks' for child-friendly built environments.

Theme one is 'agency' which relates to a child's ability to be independent in daily life. A healthy built environment enables children of all ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds to independently access diverse community services and activities that are relevant to them. Agency is also supported by free movement within communities and involvement in local development processes.

The second theme is 'safety and security'. This relates to children's ability to engage with their communities independently and in meaningful ways, as well as being able to access safe public spaces where they feel a sense of belonging. The third theme is a positive 'sense of self'. This can be actualised in spaces – particularly green natural areas – that are fun and welcoming.

Another great resource is 'Child Friendly by Design' (CFbD) – an initiative of Healthy Cities Illawarra (<http://www.healthyillawarra.org.au/healthycities/>). As well as trialling child-friendly indicators advocated by the NSW Commission for Children, CFbD emphasises the importance of



Creatively designed environments where children can have fun will encourage them to be active

giving children a voice in the planning process. Practical workshops support the dissemination of the CFbD principles – see the web site for details.

It is clear that cities designed for children are good for everyone's health and well-being.

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