

DESIGNING CHILD & YOUTH-FRIENDLY PARKS & OPEN SPACES

To deliver on the promise of the Auckland Plan, we must create public places which accommodate the desires and needs of our young people. The purpose of this hot topic article is to provide an introduction to developing youth and child-friendly parks and open spaces. To accomplish this, we define child and youth-friendly parks, outline why they are important, and provide suggestions for how to design high-quality parks for our children and young people.

What are child & youth friendly parks?

Youth and child friendly parks are open spaces where our young people:

- feel welcome and safe
- have access to a range of facilities and amenities that appeal to them
- have opportunities to participate in community life with respect and dignity.

Why are they important?

The Auckland Plan sets out the transformational shift “to increase the prospects of children and young people with a focus on those most in need.” It also establishes the priority to “put children and young people first.”

Those under 25 make up almost 40% of Auckland’s population; with as many as 52% in some areas. There are almost 500,000 children and young people living in Auckland today. By 2040, Auckland will be home to an additional 100,000 children. Children and young people are big users of local authority services and facilities; especially parks and open spaces.

Young people need to have easy access to local places away from home, where they can meet up with their friends, hang out and play. Parks and open spaces offer a legitimate place for them to be, and provide opportunities for children to learn about nature, each other and the world they live in. Parks are important places where children can explore, be active, relax, socialise, play and learn. They affect child health, welfare and development; and broaden and enrich the lives of our young people. Parks are also an invaluable tool in developing strong thriving communities.

Process Tips

Designing child and youth-friendly parks means engaging with young people to understand their wishes, and thinking about them in every aspect of a park’s design. Do you have drinking fountains at different heights so that the small ones can get a drink? Do you have interpretive signage at child eye level? Are you providing activity areas for a range of ages and both genders? The best way to go about answering these questions and designing places which appeal to our children and youth, is to talk to them. The more involved young people are in the design and planning phase of a public space, the more creative and inclusive the space will be.

“The more we can involve kids in celebrating wild spaces and integrating nature into urban places, the better they will be for all.”

We must put young people first by engaging with them as early as possible in the park design process. Designers need to invite their participation on their terms, listen to and

respect their views, and implement their ideas. Wherever possible, we should involve children and young people in decision-making, and create opportunities for youth leadership. It is important to always communicate openly and honestly with children and young people, and always consider the impact your decisions will have on them.

Engaging children and young people is important, not only because it will improve the quality of the final design, but because it also encourages kids to feel invested in the place and have a sense of ownership of it, which has been proven to reduce antisocial behaviour. When kids are engaged in the design process, and even co-design parts of parks, they use, value and respect them more.

For more consultation tips, please [click here](#) to access the Child & Youth Consultation Guide.

Design Objectives

Good design will integrate how young people view the world. Designers must listen to, interpret and incorporate their ideas. A successful child-friendly design process, supported by appropriate goals, will help create successful parks and open spaces for everyone.

Parks which are the most successful for children and young people have the following characteristics. The most successful spaces are:

- **Welcoming, Modern & Fun** – creating a sense of belonging and making young people feel welcome
 - incorporate and celebrate local identity, sense of place and history in the design
 - create attractive, playful and engaging environments that stimulate the imagination and are fun
 - use colour, ground coverings, furniture, and lighting to make the place feel inviting
 - consult with young people to see if they have fresh new ideas for the park to make the design modern and exciting
- **Multi-functional** – offering a range of opportunities and experiences
 - provide variety, activities for different ages and flexible spaces
 - incorporate moveable furniture
 - make the best use of the available space
 - reflects the wishes and needs of the whole community
- **Social** – giving children and young people a legitimate place to hang out and socialise
 - locate social spaces where kids are free to be noisy
 - provide places where young people can meet each other and hang out
- **Wild** – providing natural areas and natural elements for experimentation and spontaneous play
 - offer acceptable levels of risk and adventure
 - provide access to nature
 - incorporate natural elements such as: plants, logs, water, sand, mud, hills and trees
 - use the natural landscape and terrain to offer play opportunities
- **Inclusive** – providing opportunities for safe and healthy enjoyment for all ages and abilities
 - apply universal design principles
 - offer opportunities for movement and physical activity

- provide amenities, furniture and facilities at a scale that is comfortable and accessible for children
- provide a comfortable physical environment (shade, shelter, winter sun)
- **Educational** – providing learning, discovery and exploration opportunities
 - use interpretative elements
 - offer hands-on sensory experiences
 - encourage children to manipulate materials and use tools
 - use contemporary media tools (e.g. QR codes)
 - foster the child's well-being, growth, development, knowledge, understanding, independence, self-esteem, creativity and capacity to learn
 - foster
- **Connected** – offering safe and legible movement routes
 - Ensure parks are accessible and link in with public transport services
 - ensure young people can get where they want to go easily and safely; away from traffic
 - connect to the surrounding area, local shops, schools and transport hubs.

Questions Designers Should Ask Themselves:

1. Goals - How did this project come about? What are the primary and secondary goals?
2. Context - Where are the children living? How do family lifestyles affect usage of public open space? What demographic information is pertinent to the design of the open space? What cultures/ethnicities are present? What ages? What diversity of facilities and activities are already provided in the area?
3. Planning - Will the park serve a local, neighbourhood or suburb catchment? What gaps in service and opportunity can the new space satisfy? What are the key elements we need to provide? What ages will be served? What different spaces and activities for different genders and ages? What provision will be made for parents and caregivers?
4. Community desires - What values, needs and preferences do those different groups have? What role does the public open space play in the community currently? What role does the community want it to play? What activities would children like to take place here?
5. Constraints - Are there other policies or frameworks in place that we must work within? What are the possible constraints for the spaces? What is the budget for the design and construction? Who else wants to use the space (competition)?

Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Not applying Universal Design Principles
2. Using a playground manufacturer rather than choosing an unbiased designer or consultant
3. Choosing equipment that does not meet the developmental needs of children
4. Not incorporating trees, bushes and plants
5. Creating only large, flat open spaces rather than areas for different scales of play
6. Putting too much money into climbing equipment while ignoring other types of play
7. Not providing storage for equipment
8. Not involving teachers, parents and children in the design process
9. Under budgeting.

<http://www.whitehutchinson.com/children/playgroundmistakes.shtml>

Good Examples

- Blaxland Riverside Park - Sydney, Australia
- Youth Factory – Merida, Spain
- Sculptural Playground – Weisbaden, Germany
- Chase Palm Park – Santa Barbara, California, USA

Tags:

Children, Youth, Teenagers, Teens, Child, Young people, design, urban design, inclusive design, consultation, engagement, process, placemaking

Images/Captions:



This shared path is wide enough to enable kids to enjoy riding scooters, bikes and trikes.



Flying foxes provide children with an element of risk and challenge that makes play fun.



When properly designed, public places give youth a legitimate place to just hang out with their friends.



It's important to give children and youth a say in the design and management of their local parks. Young people have valuable ideas to contribute and deserve to be heard.



Ambury Farm Day offers kids a unique educational opportunity to interact with farm machinery and animals.



Kaipatiki Chinese New Year Celebrations – kids make use of a civic space for fun and games.



Auckland Domain Winter Gardens – kids delight in the wonder of discovering new and foreign plants.



Waitawa Regional Park – sometimes the best design is to just allow kids to interact with nature and make their own fun.

Resources:

Child and youth consultation guidelines

APA- Help Children Learn

CABE – What would you do with this space?

Built 4 Kids

Shaping Neighbourhoods: Children and Young People's Play

Relevant Links:

<http://www.nzrecreation.org.nz/Files/AWD12--RDCYouthSp-Nom.pdf>

<http://www.sustainableschools.sa.edu.au/files/pages/PromotingNaturalOutdoorLe.pdf>

<http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/design-for-play.pdf>

<http://www.naturalearning.org/content/natural-play-and-learning-area-guidelines-project>

http://naturalplay.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/naturalplay_infopacket_small.pdf

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-05062011->

[114155/unrestricted/Parsons_AE_T_2011.pdf](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-05062011-114155/unrestricted/Parsons_AE_T_2011.pdf)

<http://www.whitehutchinson.com/children/articles/playgrndkidslove.shtml>

<http://www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/278-6-keys-for-playground-design>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/09/playground-and-park-design-getting-our-children-to-exercise/245666/>

<http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/helpchildrenlearn.htm>

<http://vimeo.com/20769216>

<http://flavorwire.com/284670/15-amazing-playgrounds-from-all-over-the-world>

<http://www.yapa.org.au/yapa/policy/ACTivate.pdf>
[http://www.catchcoalition.ca/Resources/Documents/CFC/CYFC_Getting_Started\[1\]\[1\].pdf](http://www.catchcoalition.ca/Resources/Documents/CFC/CYFC_Getting_Started[1][1].pdf)
http://www.redland.qld.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/Planning_Building/Social_Studies/CYFC-Design-Guide-Web-Edition.pdf
http://www.redland.qld.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/Plans_Reports/Studies_Reports/Social/RCC_Child_Youth_Friendly_City_Report_080811.pdf
http://www.planning.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=648&Itemid=584
<http://www.urbanecology.org.au/topics/childfriendlycities.html>
<http://www.impactabby.com/pdf/ChildYouthFriendlyStrategy.pdf>
<http://www.nzrecreation.org.nz/Files/AWD12--RDCYouthSp-Nom.pdf>
http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/conferences/2008-youngpeople/cook.pdf