Welcome back to Canada! As an immigrant myself, I often find myself comparing Canadian cities and communities to others I’ve known around the world. And because I also have a background in community planning, I like to look at the design reasons behind how we experience our communities. So, while I can’t tell you where to live, I can tell you a bit more about the benefits of children living in cities and how to start thinking like a designer when critiquing whatever community you choose to call home.

**The Health Benefits of Good Neighbourhoods**

I am lucky enough to rent a house in a diverse urban neighbourhood that faces onto a park and playground. I didn’t know how much it would affect my life when we moved here, but it has been transformative. Both my children have friends they have met at that park and the two of them will go and play out there without me. I can look out the window and see that they are okay, and continue my work. Because the playground is surrounded by other homes, artists’ studios, and even a few businesses, I know that there are always neighbours around to help, if needed, and continue my work. Because the playground is surrounded by other homes, artists’ studios, and even a few businesses, I know that there are always neighbours around to help, if needed, as well. And I like that in this park they meet children and adults that look very different from them and for whom English is not the primary language spoken. It feels like a traditional neighbourhood – once common in Canada, but now the exception.

The very structure of how our communities are designed in North America now makes it rare to find a neighbourhood or town where the majority of children walk or bike to and from school on their own, play unsupervised with other children in the park and know most of their neighbours. Not only does this mean we wouldn’t leave our babies alone in strollers, it may be affecting our health. People who live in traditional, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented communities like I just described are more likely, says Dr. Kevin Leyden, “…to know their neighbours, participate politically, trust others, and be socially engaged.” This is called having “high social capital” and people who have it tend to “live longer and be healthier physically and mentally” than their counterparts in more car-dependent suburban communities, according to Leyden’s research published in the American Journal of Public Health.

In North America we often think that having kids necessitates moving to the suburbs. Yet, the Leyden study isn’t the only one suggesting we may be better off doing the opposite. Research published in the Journal of Development and Psychopathology suggests that middle-class kids in the suburbs are at a greater risk of illicit drug use, depression, and bouts of misbehaviour than their inner-city counterparts. If suburbs are failing to provide families the health, safety, and community they want, then how do we get more from our cities and towns? You design for kids!

My family just moved back to Canada after a few years living in Iceland. While we are happy to be back closer to our families, I really miss the quality of life we had there. I used to leave my baby sleeping in her stroller while I went into a shop! Everybody did. Life seemed safe and, in some ways, easier. Now we are living outside Toronto, trying to figure out where to settle in Canada, and I crave someplace to live that feels that safe and family-friendly here.
This is according to Dr. Rae Bridgman, Professor in the Department of City Planning at University of Manitoba, where she teaches a class on designing kid-friendly cities. One undeniable example of this comes in the form of transportation design. "Kids don't drive cars. They can walk and take bikes. Our cities need to accommodate all these forms of transportation," says Dr. Bridgman. What can work for youth can also work for the elderly as well. "A parent navigating sidewalks and busses with a stroller gets a tiny taste of the complexity of navigating life with a wheelchair or walker. While one may not see the elderly as often riding bicycles, in a system of bike lanes that accommodates parents with kids is one that can also attract older riders as well as provide safe routes for electric powered wheelchairs. As well, providing an interconnected system for pedestrian access to patches of green space, waterfront parks and playgrounds means that children and the elderly will be able to access, use and feel safe in spaces that might otherwise be under-utilized.

Even though kid-friendly transportation design is so inherent to creating vibrant, accessible communities, it seems that most are failing to do it. Kids used to walk to school on their own and ride their bikes to the corner store. Indeed, when we were young, almost 60 percent of us walked or rode to school. Today, however, only 28 percent of kids do this, according to Active Healthy Kids Canada. They give Canadian children a failing grade overall when it comes to maintaining a healthy amount of active movement.

Creating opportunities for children to be active and playful amid daily life – such as safe walking routes to school, accessible playgrounds for all ages, and accessible transit – is essential to having communities that feel child-friendly. And the changes don't always have to be big. Dr. Bridgman gives an example that one of her graduate students is working on called "Play Finding." The idea is to create way-finding strategies to help kids navigate and explore their community. Less studied, but also impactful, are the benefits of seeing these kids will be challenged physically and appropriately – high climbing structures, suspended equipment and obstacle courses. "A place where kids can run and that is sensory, motor and attachment rich.""  

Public Spaces That Encourage Play Are Disappearing

The most conspicuous examples are playgrounds and play spaces for older children. In Ontario, a group of nonprofits, researchers, and other institutions have joined forces to create Play Works whose goal is to bring back the power of play to Ontario youth and to advance the conversation in the political realm about the importance of play for teenagers. Louv points out that access to public play spaces and safe routes for kids to get around is an equity issue. It shouldn't be. It might be the children of one ethnic group, class or even those who have parents who simply value nature more, that get to experience daily play as "sacred". Indeed, the sense of place.

Rowan emphasizes that there needs to be places in communities for all children to play and that encourage age-appropriate play – the kinds of environments that support the development of a child – for ages 0 to 3, 4 to 7, 8 to 12, and 13 to 18. Once parents start looking around with the "critical eye of a designer," as Dr. Bridgman calls it, they quickly come to the same conclusion that experts such as Rowan and the Play Works people have: there are almost no age-appropriate play areas for youth over the age of eight. This means places where they will be challenged physically and appropriately – high climbing walls, 40 degree angles, bars and hanging equipment. Rowan also recommends exercise equipment for adults located near the little kids play areas so that adults are moving while they are watching children play rather than zoning out on mobile phones and interesting food served hot in every school and childcare facility. Sometimes, it's just simple things that stand out like the newer stairs and buses in some cities that make sure it's easy for parents to ride without unloading their kids from the stroller or the groceries on the cart. Some cities have begun to include children in participatory processes; one such example is Vancouver, who just invited youth to sit on the city council's Children, Youth and Families Advisory Committee. And then there is Toronto, the world's #1 Youthful City. While this list may seem disparate – from maternity leave to youth councils – all are examples that put the well-being of youth at the center of decision-making.

Trading Play for “Safety”

Encouraging play, and thus challenging the growing culture of "safety paranoia," also known as "risk aversion," is essential for creating healthy childhoods, say a growing number of child development experts such as Rowan. In her own research, she finds that both adults and children are essential in developing language and math skills and in developing "executive function," which is a greater indicator of a child's future academic success according to Dr. Bridgman. The adults benefit from play. It can be as effective as Ritalin for treating ADHD and experts such as Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods, suggests that unstructured play in nature can have a curative effect on children suffering from all sorts of issues – even mental illness. Rowan says a well-designed playground will benefit most children's learning. For others, it will also help with every aspect of healing, relationship building, and creating community. Less studied, but also impactful, are the benefits of seeing how can a Parent Tell if a Community Is Kid-Friendly?

There is nowhere else you keep a master list of great, kid-friendly cities, says a growing number of child development experts, and experts such as Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods, suggest that unstructured play in nature can have a curative effect on children suffering from all sorts of issues – even mental illness. Rowan says a well-designed playground will benefit most children’s learning. For others, it will also help with every aspect of healing, relationship building, and creating community. Less studied, but also impactful, are the benefits of seeing how can a Parent Tell if a Community Is Kid-Friendly?

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