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Neighbourhood Safety and Outdoor Play Activities among Urban Children in Shah Alam, Malaysia

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Abstract. Most of the generation born in the 70s to the 80s usually are attached to their memories of bathing and playing in the river, climbing trees, playing slingshot and catching fish in the pond without an adult supervision. Children nowadays do not have the privilege of experiencing the same thing. Today, they no longer have the freedom to roam around and enjoy the outdoors, as there is a high exposure to danger that comes with the development. The aim of this research is to understand the connection of neighbourhood safety with outdoor play activities among urban children. Data were derived from focus group interviews and children's drawings that were gained from a research participatory workshop in a primary school and a day care center in Shah Alam. Children aged 10 and 11 from the school were selected as the respondents in this research. This research found that a stranger harm came out as the most significant issue that affect children's outdoor play in urban neighbourhood. In Shah Alam, neighbourhood safety seems to be related to outdoor play activities. Outdoor play activities may be best encouraged by improving different safety components, rather than focusing one safety aspect such as traffic safety.

1. Introduction

Children development is bound to face plenty of problems in the city, particularly in industrialized and relatively developed cities (Gökmen and Taşçı, 2016). The outdoor environment for many children is very important as their place to play and learn and many research show a marked preference amongst most children for outdoor play. It could be argued that among primary school children, active free play or unstructured physical activity that takes place outdoors in the child's free time may potentially be the major contributor to children's physical activity (Burdette et al., 2004).

Janssen and LeBlanc (2010) determined that a physical activity during childhood is important for psychological benefits. The concept of Child Friendly City shall encourage local governments to make decisions that are in the best interests of children and promote children's rights to a healthy, caring, protective, educative, stimulating, non-discriminatory, inclusive and culturally rich environment (Malone, 2001; Riggio, 2002).

Moreover, the relationship between the neighborhood and outdoor home physical environment and early child health and development may be mediated by 'behaviors' that facilitate early child health and development such as play, physical activity, social interaction, exploration and stimulation. Reviews of the correlates of children's physical activity and outdoor play indicate that built environment features such as walk/bicycle paths, presence of cul-de-sac roads, access to parks, recreational facilities, other local destinations and public transport are positively associated with children's physical activity, while high traffic exposure and crime are negatively associated with children's physical activity (Davison and Lawson, 2006). Nevertheless, they provide as a guidance to the pathways through which the built environment influences child development. For example, neighborhoods characterized by high street traffic and a lack of local attractive parks may restrict children's opportunities for play and interaction with other children in common play spaces such as the front yard and local park. This leads to where the children are imprisoned at their houses or their



friend's houses and playgrounds offered by commercial spaces (Mc. Kendrick, cited in Gökmen and Taşçi, 2016).

2. Research Method

In order to understand children's perceptions interactive data collection is considered beneficial to gain real life responses. For this study, the research approach has been adopted in the form of a case study in Section 7, Shah Alam, Malaysia. This approach was selected for this research as it focused on a unique case that requires the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The justification of this adoption lies in the fact that the research needs the value of depth over quantity. This research approach works at delving into social complexities in order to truly explore as well as understand the interactions, processes, lived experiences and belief systems that are a part of individuals, institutions, cultural groups and even the everyday (O'Leary, 2010). The research data gathered via focus group interviews and drawings of 40 children aged 10 and 11 from a research participatory workshop in SK Seksyen 7 and Transit NurKasih, Shah Alam.

Table 1. The List of Participants

Age	Sekolah Kebangsaan Seksyen 7, Shah Alam		Transit NurKasih, Seksyen 3, Shah Alam	
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
10	7	7	3	3
11	7	7	3	3
Total	40			

Table 2. The Code Number of Participants

Code No	Gender	Age	Code No	Gender	Age
BA1	Boy	10	GA1	Girl	10
BA2	Boy	10	GA2	Girl	10
BA3	Boy	10	GA3	Girl	10
BA4	Boy	10	GA4	Girl	10
BA5	Boy	10	GA5	Girl	10
BA6	Boy	10	GA6	Girl	10
BA7	Boy	10	GA7	Girl	10
BA8	Boy	10	GA8	Girl	10
BA9	Boy	10	GA9	Girl	10
BA10	Boy	10	GA10	Girl	10
BB1	Boy	11	GB1	Girl	11
BB2	Boy	11	GB2	Girl	11
BB3	Boy	11	GB3	Girl	11
BB4	Boy	11	GB4	Girl	11
BB5	Boy	11	GB5	Girl	11
BB6	Boy	11	GB6	Girl	11
BB7	Boy	11	GB7	Girl	11
BB8	Boy	11	GB8	Girl	11
BB9	Boy	11	GB9	Girl	11
BB10	Boy	11	GB10	Girl	11

For children under the age of 11, visual technique has been proven to be very helpful in the questioning process. This is because of pictures make the subject much clearer than the verbal representation alone (Robinson, 1986). Discussion with individual children about their drawings and notes on the drawings were recorded. To understand how children felt about their neighbourhood and the outdoor play activities, the focus group interviews were conducted. In this activity, participants were required to draw the map of their existing neighbourhood based on what are provided around their houses. These include the things that they like, as well as what they dislike. Regardless of what facilities have been provided within the neighbourhood, the participants had to try their very best to express them in the maps.

The participants could always ask the facilitators if there were anything that they were not sure of. As all these children have different styles of drawings, some of the drawings were neat and can be easily understood, however, some of the drawings were difficult to be deciphered. However, regardless of the outcome, each of the drawings has been included as part of the data obtained in this study.

Having done that, at the end of the session, together with the facilitators, the author interviewed each and every participant, in order to interpret the maps drawn by them, as well as to ensure that there were consistency in what was understood with what the participants intended to express.

In the focus group interview, the questions were highlighted on how the children feel about their neighbourhood safety and outdoors play activities; who they usually play with; what make them enjoy and be happy; what they are scared of, and where favourite places are for them to play and how good their neighbourhood safety condition is.

3. Results

A good street design is central to socially well-functioning neighbourhoods. The prime factors influencing sociability at the street level are scale and safety. Scale is in the size of buildings and their relationship to the street and safety as in pedestrian safety (Freeman & Tranter, 2011). This echoes the study done by Hart (2008), through which he discovered that residents living on heavy traffic streets tend to have 75% fewer friends on the street than those living on similar streets with less traffic. Families on heavy traffic street limit their children's time outdoors and tend to have fewer social connections.

The focus group discussion were revolved around their feelings about living in their neighbourhood, through which the participants have expressed their likes and dislikes, as well as the reasons for those. For example, **BA3** have expressed his dislike for his neighbourhood due to constantly feeling unsafe when playing outside his home, even in front of his own house. His fear was mainly attributed to the fact that his house was located near the main road, with constant traffic moving in and out of the area. He felt that it exposed him to the danger of being hit while playing.

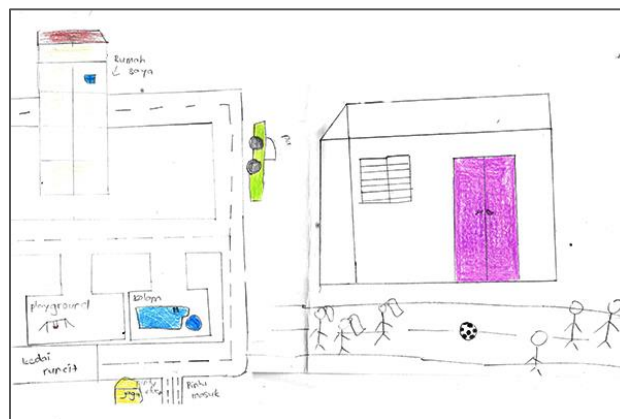


Figure 1. Drawn by GB7

GB7 lived in the fifth floor of the Kristal Apartment. From what has been portrayed, though there were a playground and a swimming pool located within the area, she still felt lonely because she had no friend. As seen in one corner of the map, there were three boys playing a ball game and three girls playing in an area. When asked, she explained that the children belonged to the area of the link houses, just opposite where she was living. She often saw other children playing on the street in front of their house. But, she never plays down there because it is too dangerous and parents did not allow her to go.

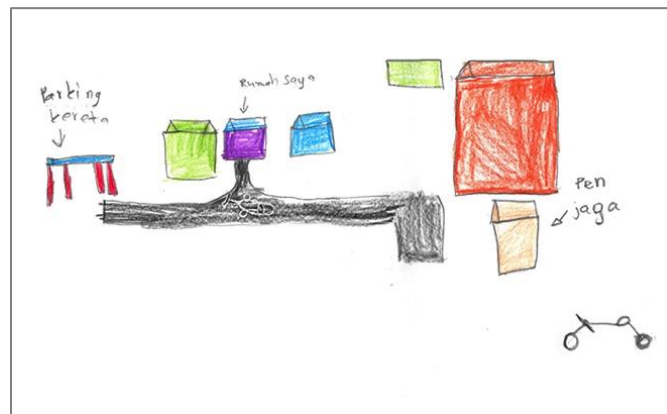


Figure 2. The neighbourhood map as drawn by BB5

However, **BB5** thought that he was lucky because he lived in a government's quarters. The security guard is provided in the quarters (see Figure 2). He can freely cycle within his neighbourhood during weekends.

I love outdoor play because the space is wide, has fresh air and what more exciting is that I can cycle too. Normally, I will spend time outdoor during weekend evenings. (Translated by the author)

When looking into the children's perspective, the author discovered that children wish to play freely without the presence of strangers. They have been taught to always be suspicious to anybody that they have never engaged with. These strangers are not specific to some children, but they include all men, women, teenagers, adults, old people and even those at their age. What they know is that they cannot simply trust anybody except their parents, siblings and family members. From the focus group interview, it can be seen that parents nowadays worry about the environment because of the increased crime rates. No doubt that sometimes, the publicity of these dangers is often exaggerated. Nonetheless, parents are anxious and do not want to lose their beloved children. As mentioned by **GA9**:

Well, mama let me out but not too far from home because the bad people may be outside there. Fortunately, I don't really like going out alone unless for outdoor play with friends. (Translated by the author)

Satisfaction related to the built environment is often linked with perceptions of the neighborhood (McCulloch, 2012) including safety (Buys & Miller, 2012). Neighborhood safety concerns may influence family practices and parental restrictions, thereby affecting children's opportunities to play outside (Molnar et.al 2004) and interact with others locally (Carver and Timperio, 2008). When talked about these strangers, **BA8** mentioned that:

I'm staying in the flats... The playground and the field are just nearby...But. I feel much safer playing indoor because I think my neighbourhood is not so safe. I heard about burglary cases in my neighbourhood. I'm scared of these bad people. (Translated by the author)

The girls on the other hand preferred to have their parents to accompany them, as they feel safer that way. The issue of stranger harm seems to be a concern here even though the evidence illustrated that there are little likelihood for stranger danger encounters. This may just be a residue of a 'cultural' fear of strangers pervading Malaysian media.

Passive surveillance is also reduced by low sense and connection with the community. Thus, a strong sense of community among the residents could increase the sense of belonging amongst the community and to the place itself. Since most of the parents here may be living far from their relatives, therefore, the strong sense of community amongst the residents is very important. Having a loving family, caring and friendly neighbours are the greatest support in a child friendly neighbourhood environment. On a more detailed level, features that promote a safe and nurturing environment for children to play and move freely are positive parents and community support.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the opportunities for children in urban neighbourhoods to join in safe play are decreasing. The data from both focus group interviews and the children's drawing from the workshop illustrated that issues about stranger harm are more than the issues of traffic danger with children in Section 7, Shah Alam. This has affected the children's social life, particularly their outdoor play activities. The majority of the children have expressed that they want to be with their friends outdoors. However, in most of their neighbourhood, the distance between the places of interest for children such as park, school, and homes of friends is generally very big. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to study the type of housing setting that best suit for children that they would enjoy the outdoor play activities.

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