

# Healthy environments <sup>[1]</sup>

Early Childhood in Focus, No. 8

**Author:** various

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## AVAILABILITY

Full issue in pdf <sup>[2]</sup>

### Description:

The 8th publication in the Early Childhood In Focus series, published by BvLF and the UK's Open University, looks at the topic of Healthy Environments. It includes discussions of the challenges and opportunities bringing up children in urban areas, and the design of "child-friendly spaces". Early Childhood In Focus offers advocates a clear and accessible summary of the current state of knowledge and research.

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### Excerpts:

#### The social production of children's spaces

We cannot think of space as a neutral, physical surface upon which social action takes place. Children's spaces are produced by many actors, including caregivers at home and teachers in schools, with different explicit or implicit ideas about childhood, what activities children should engage in, how they should relate to one another, and how they should relate to adults (Hart, 2002). Since the mid-nineteenth century, more and more spaces have been planned and 'designed' with children in mind (Woodhead, 2009), notably schools and playgrounds, as well as children's bedrooms and playrooms, at least in homes able to afford to segregate child-specific spaces. Of course, children also have their part to play in these processes.

Schoolyards are a useful example. Until relatively recently, most schoolyards all over the world were simply flat, hard, open surfaces, reflecting a traditional belief that children's learning takes place in the classroom, under the direction of teachers. Outdoor areas were at most spaces for children to burn off excess energy before going inside for the important work of learning. When educators recognise that young children learn through play and social interactions, then outside spaces look more diverse. Play equipment to encourage climbing, swinging, jumping and sliding reflects beliefs in the importance of physically active play. Sand, water, tools and all kinds of loose parts to enable children to engage in other kinds of exploration and construction reflect a broader recognition of the multiple opportunities for learning and development. Incorporation of a garden in school design is yet another extension of the vision.

The contrast between spaces for school-age children and those designed for young children clearly demonstrates the influence of pedagogic philosophy on space. Early childhood spaces typically show greater recognition of children's needs, rights and agency as learners, although with considerable diversity in how this is expressed (Miller et al., 2003). In short, we can read a great deal about how an institution thinks of children and their learning and development by reading the environment.

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### Policy questions:

- What images of the young child - their needs, rights and personal agency - underpin the design of dedicated early childhood centres?
- How can children's rights to education, to rest and leisure, to play and recreational activities be fully realised in ways that are open to the young child's inherent playfulness, and caregivers' sensitivity in interpreting these rights in locally appropriate ways?
- How can early years experts most effectively contribute to the provision of safe spaces for young children and caregivers following disasters and emergencies?
- How much progress has been made towards ensuring early

childhood centres are truly 'inclusive'? What further steps are needed? Who is best able to strengthen inclusiveness?

- What are the risks of viewing early childhood centres mainly as childcare businesses or as downward extensions of the school system? What are the opportunities strengthening their function as important public spaces, as a focus for fostering and practising participatory democracy?
- Young children's capacities to participate in the design of early childhood spaces are well proven. How can they be embedded more fully in practice?

**Region:** International <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[4]</sup>

health <sup>[5]</sup>

physical environment <sup>[6]</sup>

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/physical-environment>