



# DeCID Thematic Brief N° 3

## Child Development and Participation in Urban Displacement

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Co-designing social infrastructure with children affected by displacement (DeCID).

The DeCID project aims to develop a new approach for the participatory design of social infrastructure for children in urban areas affected by displacement.

In partnership with humanitarian actors, local communities, municipalities and academics, the DeCID team will develop a practical toolkit to support those involved in the co-design. DeCID is a project led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (UCL) and CatalyticAction, and funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund.

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Photo cover: girl painting the wall of an innovative child friendly space in Bouday (North Bekaa, Lebanon), by CatalyticAction

Design and layout: Ottavia Pasta

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## KEY POINTS

- While there has been a surge in interest in urban childhoods, the topic is not new;
- Studies have pointed towards the built environment's impact on children's wellbeing, their mental health, self-worth and ability to learn, but more research is needed;
- Child-friendly cities include infrastructures for children that go beyond schools and playgrounds;
- Setting up child friendly spaces is especially important in contexts of crises, as they can provide children with protection, psychological support and contribute to wellbeing;
- When working with child participation, the diversity of children needs to be taken into account;
- It can be argued that through children's participation, decision makers that engage in such processes will be able to make better informed choices, leading to better outcomes.

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The United Nations estimated that by 2025, 60% of the world's children will live in cities, which means that the everyday life of millions of children will be shaped by their urban environments. Cities can provide a stimulating setting for childhood, but at the same time present specific risks to the healthy development of children, especially for children affected by displacement in cities with poor services and infrastructures.

A recent surge in interest in the lives of children in cities has made the participation of children in urban design an increasingly discussed topic amongst urban professionals. 

## BACKGROUND

The past decade has seen the emergency of a growing number of initiatives on the topic of design with and for children in cities. Despite this recent growing interest, the discussion is not new. Some early initiatives include:

- In 1976, UNESCO conducted a project called Growing up in Cities (GUIC) with the city planner Kevin Lynch, which project placed young people from low-income families at the centre of the planning process, with the aim of making cities more liveable.
- In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was formulated by the United Nations and outlined the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of all children everywhere. The CRC influenced many agencies in shifting their focus on children as rights bearers, thereby actively engaging children in decision making processes.
- During the 1980s and 1990s, childhood-related research peaked and focused on many childhood issues, including the relation between space and child development (Freutel, T., 2010).
- In 1996, UNICEF founded the Child Friendly Cities Network (CFC), now known as Child Friendly Cities Initiative, promoting children's participation as the best approach to create more sustainable cities. More recent research projects include Urban95 (an initiative of Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2017), UNICEF's handbook on child-friendly cities and communities, 'Shaping urbanization for children. A handbook on child-responsive urban planning' (2018), and 'Cities Alive: designing for urban childhoods' by Arup (2017). 

## CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Child development involves the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur between birth and adolescence. The early years of a child's life (0-8 years) are a particularly critical stage of development because this is the period when the foundations for health and well-being throughout life are laid. The key areas of development comprise cognitive, social and emotional development, speech and language, and fine and gross motor skills. The ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) recognises that children's development is influenced by the context in which development occurs. These contexts can be family, friends, school, community and neighbourhood (Christian, H. et al., 2015), making it important to understand the role of the built environment and its influence on child development.

Neighbourhoods are key environments in which children develop. Socio-economic composition (e.g. concentration of poverty) and safety (e.g. vandalism, crime) are some of the neighbourhood qualities known to be important to young children's mental health and development.

Some evidence on the relation between the built environment and child development points to aspects such as housing density, neighbourhood destinations, green spaces and nature, and traffic exposure (Villanueva, K. et al., 2015). Such features are “win-win aspirations for health and the environment, but direct links with child health have been difficult to show” (Clark, H. et al., 2020).

**Although the diversity of country, contexts and measures used limits the comparability of different studies, research has shown a correlation between the built environment and children’s wellbeing.**

A recent study concluded that “neighbourhood built environment may be important for reducing mental health difficulties and increasing mental health competence in young children” (Alderton, A. et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there is a need for further evidence-based research that demonstrates the impact of neighbourhood built environment on children’s mental health (ibid.).

On the other hand, a Save the Children report indicates that spaces that encourage children to play, express themselves, and socialise may be key in reducing stress, improve resilience and positive development (Bartlett, S. and Iltus, S., 2006). Several studies indicate that having nature and public open space in a neighbourhood is important for mental health competence and its association with lower mental health difficulties (Alderton, A. et al., 2019).


There is also literature in support of the role that the built environment plays in relation to children’s ability to learn (Bartlett, S. and Iltus, S., 2006). For a young child’s brain to develop well, it must be stimulated by “colours, textures, shapes, by the chance to watch, touch, imitate, experiment, and explore. A safe, stimulating environment is fundamental in ensuring that children have the play opportunities that they need, so that every day is a chance to learn” (ibid., p. 6).

Furthermore, there appears to be a relationship between the built environment and children’s sense of self-worth (Chawla, L., 2001). For instance, research from around the world shows that children see deprived elements of the built environment as a humiliating reflection of their own value as people (ibid.).

More evidence can be found in research showing the benefits of physical activity for children’s cognitive and psychosocial development. This is well documented in the literature on play and its benefits for children’s wellbeing. In fact, data from the fields of neuro-psychology and psycho-pharmacology reveal that clear changes in the brain happen as a result of play, and that both social behaviour and the capacity for learning are affected (Hughes, B., 1999).

On the other side, the link between poor living environments and poor child development is particularly evident in contexts of crisis, where children often live in long-term encampments which lack educational and play facilities. Informal settlements are characterised by poor structural quality of housing and lack of basic services. Since forced evictions are very common, poor households often construct their homes with mainly recycled building materials, which are often very flimsy (Amorós Elorduy, N., 2017). Furthermore, these houses usually lack natural light and ventilation, thermal properties, privacy and have inadequate indoor and outdoor spaces.

Some studies suggest that the sensitivity of young children to poor living environments can cause irreversible physical and mental damage (Gordon, D. et al., 2003). Therefore, in contexts where children are deprived of opportunities for social learning, a supportive and safe built environment can make a substantial difference to the children's quality of life. Moreover, where the presence of children in the public realm is encouraged, the perception of safety tends to increase, attracting people and enhancing opportunities for social interaction (Bartlett, S., 1999).

However, built environment practitioners frequently fail to consider the possible impact that the spaces they design and build will have on children's wellbeing. There is often an implicit wrong "assumption that improved conditions for a community at large will affect children in the same way that they affect everyone else" (Bartlett, S., 1999). 

## CHILD-FRIENDLY APPROACH

### Child-friendly cities

According to UNICEF (2018), a child-friendly city is a city, town, community or any system of local governance committed to fulfilling child rights as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Brown et al. summarise what a child-friendly city looks like: "It respects children's rights; it is safe; it has space for play; it enables a strong connection to nature, it fosters nurturing child-caregiver interactions and independent mobility; and it includes children in the processes of urban policy making and design" (2019).

While all public realm has the potential to play a positive role in children's wellbeing, in urban settings, children are normally placed in child-specific places (e.g. schools, playgrounds) which socially isolates them from the adult world. In order to achieve a safe, stimulating and pleasant urban environment, it is not only necessary to build playgrounds, but also other

Boulder's "child and youth-friendly city initiative" is a program of the University of Colorado Boulder's Community Design and Engagement Center (CEDaR). It began in the spring of 2009 as a partnership between the University of Colorado, the City of Boulder, Boulder Valley School District, former State Senator Dorothy Rupert, local non-profits and businesses, and children and youth from ages 0-18. Growing up Boulder (GUB) works with children to include their input in local government decisions, focusing on projects such as the design of public spaces, transit systems, housing, and resilience planning.

Growing Up Boulder's vision is to make Boulder an exemplary child- and youth-friendly city. Growing Up Boulder's mission is to empower Boulder's young people with opportunities for inclusion, influence, and deliberation on local issues that affect their lives.

#### Spotlight on...

Case study:  
Growing Up Boulder  
(Boulder, Colorado,  
United States – 2009/  
ongoing)

[www.growingupboulder.org](http://www.growingupboulder.org)

urban spaces such as town squares, paths, sidewalks, signage, etc. that children can interact with (Giraldi L. et al., 2017). This is defined as the “fourth environment” by Willem van Vliet (1983), i.e. the complex of places that go beyond the traditional childhood places of home, school and playground.

This extended network of infrastructure for children is well described in the literature on child-friendly cities. Arup’s (2017) *Cities Alive, Designing for urban childhoods* describes ‘everyday freedoms’ and ‘children’s infrastructure’ as the most important features for a child-friendly city. There are many inspirational examples of child-friendly design and interventions around the world, most of them available on the Child Friendly Cities Initiative UNICEF platform<sup>1</sup>.

## Child friendly spaces

Child-friendliness is often overlooked in contexts of displacement. In 2013, The Committee of the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) expressed concerns regarding children in situations of conflict, humanitarian and natural disasters: “The rights provided for in article 31<sup>2</sup> are often given lower priority in situations of conflict or disaster than the provision of food, shelter and medicines. However, in these situations, opportunities for play, recreation and cultural activity can play a significant therapeutic and rehabilitative role in helping children recover a sense of normality and joy after their experience of loss, dislocation and trauma” (2013).

In contexts where children no longer have opportunities for play and/or social settings, child friendly spaces (CFS) take on an important role in addressing some of the challenges linked to child development. CFSs are spaces where psychological support is provided to children through learning and educational activities led by child protection personnel who have been trained in psychological counselling (Chatterjee, S., 2017).

Implementing CFS is increasingly seen as important as they provide opportunities to:


- protect children from abuse, exploitation and violence
- provide psychosocial support to children
- mobilise communities around the protection and wellbeing of children.

In addition to this, CFS can provide a space for children with shared experiences to socialise (ibid.).

**The implementation of CFS also provides opportunities for community and child participation.** Children and their families can provide valuable input into the design phase, and as a result they can feel empowered<sup>3</sup>, respected and included (UNICEF, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

<sup>3</sup> Empowered definition: having the knowledge, confidence, means, or ability to do things or make decisions for oneself.

Despite this, CFS are often set up by Child Protection personnel even though it is often the case that CFS are located in structures (i.e. tented settlements) that have been designed and implemented by other humanitarian professionals, such as those working on shelter. This highlights the need for professionals involved in the design of such structures to better understand the impact of the built environment on child development and child protection (Amorós Elorduy, N., 2017). 

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN

### Child participation

Development agencies generally involve only adults as participants in development projects but from the early 1990s (following the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child) child-focused organisations became increasingly interested in the participation of children.

There are multiple aspects to consider when implementing participatory processes with children, particularly their diversity. Facilitators of participatory processes should ensure that all different groups (e.g. boys, girls, children with disabilities, disadvantaged children) are given the opportunity to participate equally. This in reality is hard to achieve, and as Roger Hart, pioneer of children's participation, wrote: "I do not propose that programmes of community participation be designed to take account of each possible age group or every different kind of personality or behaviour problem" (1992). Hart explains that facilitators should rather consider diversity and aim to "enable different degrees and different types of involvement by different persons and at different stages in the process" (ibid.).

There is a common trend in the literature that describes the need for context specific analysis and a high level of participation in order to reach sustainable, practical and innovative solutions. Innovative solutions are in fact reached "through the combination of both designers' and users' competence" (ibid.).

Another important aspect to be considered for the effectiveness of the participatory process with children, is the selection of appropriate methodologies. This is key as each methodology will have a significant influence on the project's outcomes. There is extensive literature around participatory processes, with many toolkits for use in different contexts.

#### Steps to engaging young children in research

This guide was developed to support researchers to include young children in research. It provides a six-step process for designing research and systematically identifies and describes a range of methods that have been used with young children in diverse contexts around the world. It provides guidance on what the researcher might include in their research when considering each step and provides an overview of the types of methods that could be applied with young children, key strengths and weaknesses of these methods and a consideration of the potential contextual, ethical and capacity issues which may arise through the use of such methods.

#### Spotlight on... Toolkit example

Steps to engaging young children in research. Vol. 1: The Guide; and Vol. 2: The Researcher Toolkit Edited by Vicky Johnson, Roger Hart, and Jennifer Colwell. Founded by Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2014



## Benefits of participation

Empowerment may be achieved through participation, but only through a meaningful participatory process. Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's participation (1997) can help to identify three levels of users' participation: empowered, consulted and included; with the first being the most impactful participation (Hussain, S., 2010).

At the 'included' level, decision makers only conduct observation or simple interviews, whereas at the 'consulted' level children have more opportunities to share views on their needs and desires. At the 'empowered' level, children also take part in design activities, increasing their ability to influence decisions. (ibid.)

Participatory processes should be understood and implemented as a tool to build local human capacity, rather than only as a process to identify solutions to a problem. This contributes to the sustainability of the end product, which will therefore not be dependent on external input (e.g., for maintenance, replication) once the participatory process is successfully completed (Hussain, S. et al., 2012).

The literature outlines the multiple benefits of engaging with children in participatory processes. However, most of the research on youth participation focuses on the benefits that participants gain from engaging in these processes, rather than the contributions that they make (Derr, V. et al. 2013). Children's participation is valued as an effective approach to improve self-esteem, become empowered, learn new skills and develop into more active and responsible citizens (Sabo, K., 2001).


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## Through participatory processes, designers can learn about users' culture, society, and living conditions.

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On the other hand, children's participation does not only have positive outcomes for children but also for those who engage with children. In fact, through participatory processes, designers can learn about users' culture, society, and living conditions (ibid.). This is particularly important when working with underprivileged children as the "cultural gap between designers and the target group will usually be large in such projects" (ibid.).

Therefore, it can be argued that through children's participation, decision makers that engage in such processes will be able to make better informed choices, leading to better outcomes.

Nevertheless, in order to sustain, replicate and institutionalise children's participation it is necessary to develop strong methods to measure what is being done and how it is impacting children's lives. Only by doing so, it will be possible to argue "the case for continuing investment in strategies to promote participation, and indeed, to build and share understanding of what constitutes effective participation" (Lansdown, G. 2005). 

## CHALLENGES IN CONTEXTS OF DISPLACEMENT


There are several challenges when working with children affected by displacement. Funding is often limited as donors focus on more measurable outputs rather than the long term benefits of participatory processes, which are harder to measure. Participatory processes can often take longer than expected, so to ensure adequate allocation of time and funds it is necessary to educate donors organisations about the value of these processes.

In many cases, children face further challenges to engaging in lengthy participatory processes. For example, vulnerable children might not have the time to engage in participatory activities that may last several days, especially children who contribute to the household income.

Moreover, when working in vulnerable situations, children often lack independence and self-direction<sup>4</sup>, which can be simply an “appropriate socialising response to their parents who have little freedom themselves in their daily lives” (Hart, R., 1992).

Another aspect to be considered when working with displaced communities, is that there is often a strong desire to return home or move to a country where asylum is assured. This aspiration to move to a better place, often results in little emotional investment in the host community and a lack of willingness to participate in local projects (Boyden, J., 2001).

As Jo Boyden highlights “when children cannot fulfil their social and economic responsibilities and can no longer learn the life skills of their community, it is hard to imagine how confining children’s participation to educational, sports and recreation activities can be very meaningful in terms of child development and wellbeing.” So, to ensure positive impact on child development and wellbeing, there is perhaps a need to focus children’s participation on an important aspect of displacement which is the loss of responsibilities; an aspect often overlooked by the relief community (ibid.).

Despite the limitations, it is important to always attempt to engage children in participatory processes, and to investigate any possibilities for them to influence the project and children’s opportunities for becoming empowered (Hussain, S., 2010). 

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