

PLANNING AND KIDS

THE POPSICLE TEST



What makes a city or town “child-friendly”? Increasingly, town leaders and planners are looking to “the popsicle test” to help answer this question: Can a child safely walk to a store, buy a popsicle and return home before it melts? According to Tom Gill, of Rethinking Childhood, “It’s a good test, precisely because it focuses on a central idea in child-friendliness: children’s everyday freedoms and choices. And it links this directly to local geography and perceived safety.”

Eric Feldman, planner and urban designer agrees as his professional thinking is being changed by navigating Washington, DC with “a 34-inch sub-consultant” in the shape of his two-year-old daughter. Referring to the Popsicle Test, he notes: ***“The main value is how it illustrates, quite simply and clearly, an underlying truth in city planning: if a neighborhood works for the youngest (and oldest) members of the community, then chances are it will work well for everyone.”***

The presence of a range of destinations close to home and accessible on foot (or bicycle) – is a key element of child-friendly cities. Another way to think of this is “the toddler walkshed” – the extent of safe experiences and amenities within the walking tolerance of a toddler. If a city is friendly to a toddler, it is friendly to people in general.



What My Toddler Taught Me About City Design

“It’s not rocket science but it is a new way of looking at pedestrian-oriented development, You need to ask: When is a walkable community really walkable for a family with small kids?” To create a truly family-friendly community, planners and officials need to address difficult issues— public transportation, child-care access, affordable housing, education. But designing from a child’s perspective could be a good start. “...It could foster a safe, engaging atmosphere for the most vulnerable pedestrians.” -Eric Feldman, Planner



“Children want some similar things to adults – including having fun, spending time with their friends and having some choice and freedom in their daily lives. But parental priorities and choices can work against this. For instance, many parents are attracted to suburban life, perhaps because it seems close to the ideal of the ‘rural idyll’. But for children this can mean they live in a goldfish bowl. Everything is far away, and they are dependent on the parental taxi service to get around.”

- Tim Gill, Rethinking Childhood

PLAYABILITY

Cities and towns across the country are making strides in creating communities that foster walkability and bikeability, but others are going a step further and prioritizing “playability” - making it easy for all kids to get the play they need to thrive. These cities recognize that play is not only good for kids, but also a competitive advantage for attracting and retaining families across the socio-economic spectrum who pay taxes, attract businesses, and care about the health and vitality of their community.



Free range
children



According to a national Urban Land Institute Survey in 2015, twenty-five percent of Americans say that traffic makes it unsafe to walk in their neighborhoods. As a result, the opportunity for kids to play unsupervised and walk to places by themselves has been largely replaced by the practice of driving children from place to place, reflecting a mind-set among many adults that children being alone outside in public is unwise, if not dangerous.

The car-centric nature of so many places has, not surprisingly, contributed to a trend of declining outdoor activity among the young. Nearly 50 percent of U.S. children walked to school in the late 1960s; now, that percentage is just over 15 percent. Obesity rates have more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years. And, at the same time that children are spending less time outside and getting less exercise, parents are more worried about letting them play alone: a 2014 Reason-Rupe poll indicated that most Americans believe that age 12 is too young for children to play unsupervised in public areas.

“We can build our way to healthier neighborhoods—places that are energized by people out and about, people who are better connected to their neighborhoods because they are experiencing them on foot or while cycling, rather than from a car. And by doing so, we hopefully can move closer to a point at which two kids sauntering unaccompanied midday through the neighborhood is not a sign that something has gone wrong, but that something is going right.”

- Patrick Phillips, Planetizen

To Build or Retrofit Communities For Kids and Active Lifestyles:

- Design well-connected street networks at a human scale: provide pedestrian paths to cut through longer blocks and minimize pedestrian contact with surface parking lots and driveways.
- Provide pedestrian-oriented streetscapes: build sidewalks, include well-marked crosswalks and curb extensions to enhance the visibility of pedestrians, and install lighting for trails and public spaces.
- Encourage biking and walking with a system of paths and trails that provide neighborhood-to-neighborhood connections while minimizing contact with automobiles.
- Increase access to nature to improve physical and mental well-being, and stimulate a greater interest in exploring the outdoors.
- Get creative with play spaces in terms of nontraditional features with multigenerational appeal.
- Create community gathering spaces to encourage social interaction and strengthen community ties.

Sources: Urban Land Institute’s [Building Healthy Places Toolkit](#), Urban Land Institute Survey (America in 2015), US DOT, Center For Disease Control and Prevention, Medium.com, TheGuardian.com, NextCity.com, Planetizen,

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