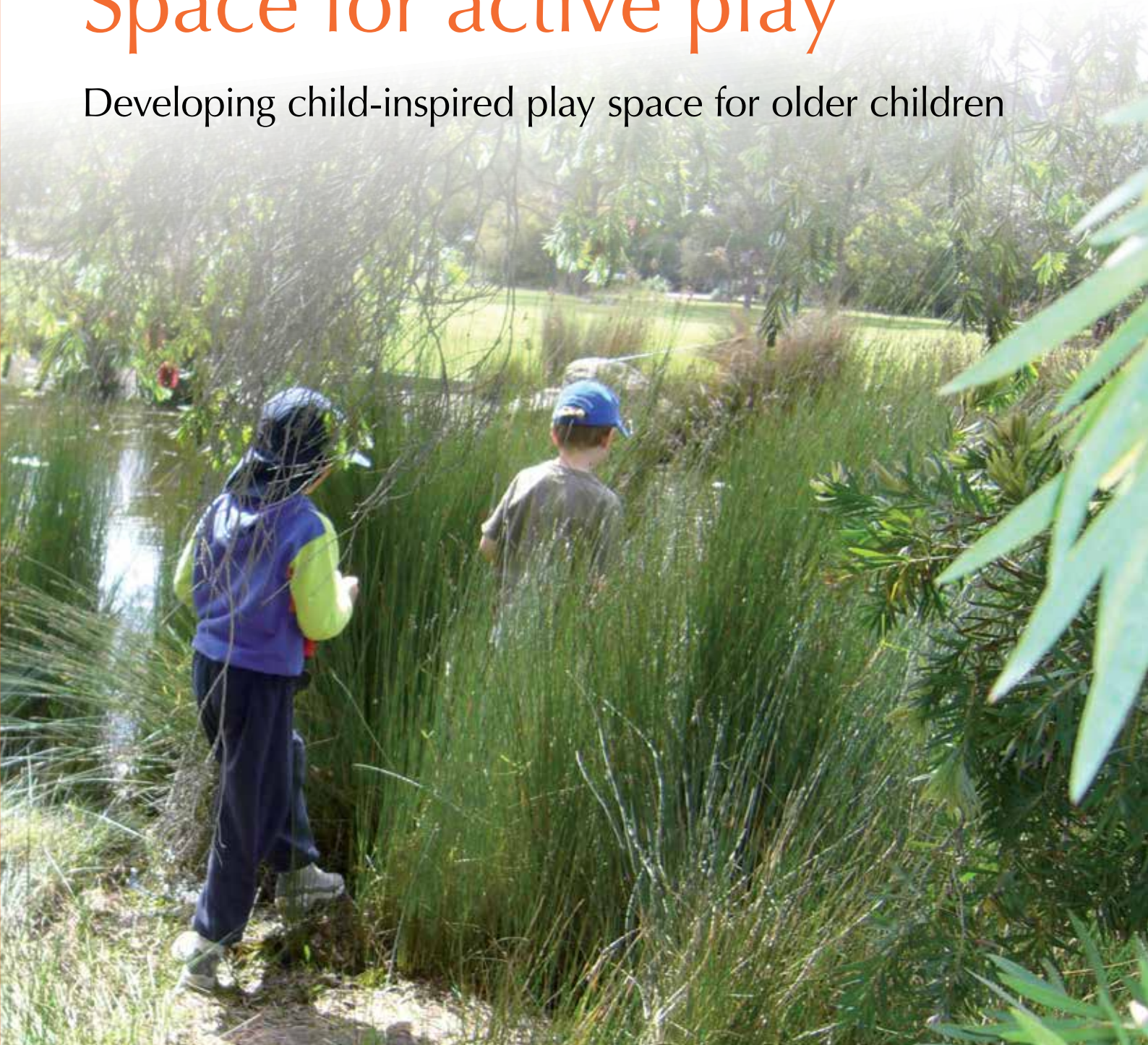


Space for active play

Developing child-inspired play space for older children



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Introduction

The *Healthy by Design* guidelines were developed by the Heart Foundation in Victoria to assist local governments in undertaking 'healthy urban planning'.¹ With society becoming more technology-focused and car-dependant, the urban environment can play an increasingly important role in providing opportunities for people to be more active and adopt healthier behaviours.²

Space for Active Play — a four site Melbourne based demonstration project — came about in response to the need for children in Australia to become more physically active. This project has built on *Healthy by Design* by engaging local governments in the development of active play space for older children. The project incorporates four of the seven *Healthy by Design* considerations:

- Open space: the provision of accessible open space for recreation and leisure.
- Walking and cycling: the provision of well planned networks of walking and cycling routes.
- Local destinations: the provision of local amenities and services within walkable distances.
- Fostering community spirit: engaging the community in planning decisions that affect them.¹

In particular, *Space for Active Play* has focused on the design of play spaces for the 8–12 year age group. This is an important age group as children are pre-adolescent and it is commonly the time when many children, particularly girls, begin to drop out of organised physical activity and become less active.³ Children of this age are at a stage in life where supporting them to play outdoors will encourage a life-long pleasure in being outdoors and active.

Additionally, this support is important as engaging in regular physical activity can significantly improve cardiovascular health and prevent disease.⁴ Recent studies have found that just over 30% of Australian children aged 9–16 years are not active enough to maintain good health.⁵

The project set out to investigate the play needs of older children by asking them what they would like to see and do in a local play space due for redevelopment near their home and then by evaluating the constructed play space find out whether enhancing the outdoor environment had encouraged them to play outdoors more often.

Space for Active Play attempts to address one of the broader determinants of health — the built environment — to improve its capacity to engage older children by providing them with enticing and innovative places to play.



Taking a child-centered approach

Central to the project was the development of a robust consultation model that engaged with local children, the wider community and interested professionals about the design of a local play space. It involved several key partners including Parks Victoria, Frankston City Council, Brimbank City Council and Moonee Valley City Council, working closely with the Heart Foundation to design and develop the project. In addition to this, each individual site included the participation of a multidisciplinary steering group often involving external parties.

This document is designed to inspire an inclusive child-orientated way of working for those planning and designing open spaces for children. While primarily written for local government — social planners, land use planners, recreation and leisure staff, children's services, community development workers, health promotion workers, and landscape architects — its findings can provide valuable insights for community organisations, health agencies and others.

Transport, health, open space and social planners, landscape architects and urban designers are perfectly positioned to make decisions that can significantly and positively increase children's levels of physical activity and social connection, thus promoting their immediate and long-term health and wellbeing.

The project is aligned with the guiding principles of Child Friendly Cities, an initiative of UNICEF.⁶ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a convention to which Australia is a signatory, expresses the importance of play for children:

State 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. (Article 31)⁷

The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities initiative provides a framework that can support the realisation of these rights. A Child Friendly City upholds children's rights, including the rights to:

- influence decisions about their city
- express their opinions on the city they want
- walk safely in the streets on their own
- meet friends and play
- have green spaces for plants and animals.⁶

The *Space for Active Play* project's key feature was to involve children aged 8–12 years in exploring and generating ideas to feed back to council about the redevelopment of a local play space. As the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child attest children are citizens that have a right to be involved in democratic processes that affect them.⁷ This project takes that to heart and starts with the basic premise that children know what they want, and that their voice is a valuable one that should be sought out and listened to.



Project elements

The *Space for Active Play* project focused on five key elements:

- active play
- natural play spaces
- the needs of older children (8–12 years)
- independent access to parks and play spaces
- the application of the Child Friendly Cities framework.

Active play

Although physical activity may be undertaken in a variety of different forms, the *Space for Active Play* project focused on the provision of environments that enable children to participate in unstructured active play. Unstructured active play is free play. It is imaginative, creative and has no set rules⁸, other than those determined by the participants.

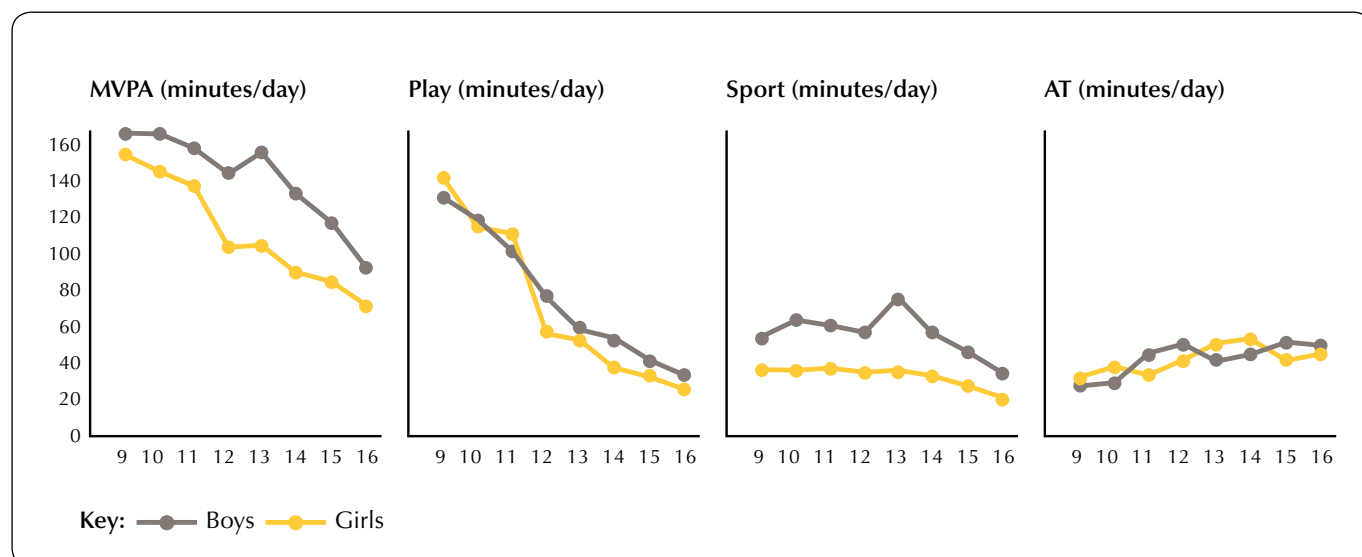
Active play is free, unstructured, spontaneous and involves children following their own interests and ideas. It can take place in many different places, from designated play areas to green open spaces, woods, beaches, the streets where children live and on the way to places where they go.⁹

This type of play provides valuable learning and developmental opportunities, as well as many physical, social and emotional benefits. As children age the time they spend playing drops severely (Figure 1). This is concerning, as active play has the potential to make a major contribution to children's health and wellbeing.

"It could be argued that among primary school-aged 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".¹⁰

For good health, it is recommended that Australian children participate in a minimum of one hour and up to several hours of physical activity per day.¹¹ *Space for Active Play* was developed with a view to increasing the uptake of physical activity in the 8–12 year age group, thereby providing them with a means to meet the national guidelines for physical activity.

Figure 1 Time spent on moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and some of its components, free play, sport and active transport (AT), by age and gender⁵



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Natural play spaces

As a general rule, outdoor play is active play. When children are outdoors they are more likely to be active. Instead of simply promoting active play, a focus in this project has been the provision of natural play spaces. Providing an engaging natural environment, rather than a focus on traditional fixed-structure play equipment, can allow for greater creativity and the development of more challenging possibilities in active play.¹²

Natural play spaces bring children closer to nature, afford a greater variety of terrain and seasonal change, as well as the availability of a variety of loose materials for children to use in play. Increasing the opportunities for children to participate in creative and invigorating play in the natural environment may be helpful in addressing the trends of declining physical activity levels and the escalating levels of sedentary behaviours. There are also positive mental health benefits of contact with green spaces.¹³

The play needs of older children (8–12 years)

Many traditional fixed-structure playgrounds cater well for children under the age of 6 or 7 years. However, once children progress past this age there is often limited provision for their needs.^{3,14,15} This middle years age group, between young childhood and adolescence, is under-resourced in play space provision, perhaps as a result of this group falling through a policy gap — between early years and adolescent focused strategies and funding.¹⁶ It is therefore important to ensure that activities offered in local open spaces are suitable to the developmental needs of this age group, and challenge their skills appropriately.¹⁷

Independent access

In order to play outside more often, children need to be able to have independent access to parks and playgrounds — that means without adult supervision. For 8–12 year olds, independent means of transportation include walking, riding, skating, scooting or using public transport.

Consulting with children and young people is essential to well-planned neighbourhoods that allow children to walk, cycle and play. This approach helps to identify the routes they take to access a site, the modes of transport they use and any specific safety concerns or other barriers to walking, cycling or taking public transport.⁹

When considering the location and infrastructure surrounding play spaces, the child's ease and safe access to the site should be a major consideration, the way to the park can also be a play experience from a child's point of view.

For children there is no clear distinction between play and active travel. Walking and cycling provide excellent play experiences in themselves as well as allowing children and young people to get to play spaces and recreational facilities under their own steam.⁹

Figure 1 illustrates the potential for children's active transport levels to be increased, and since parks are a key destination for children they could benefit from improved levels of accessibility to support independent mobility.

Child friendly cities

The aims of the *Space for Active Play* project are consistent with the Child Friendly Cities framework and the participation of children was a key component of the project.^{6,18}

The benefits of consulting with children

Children and young people are the experts on their own lives. It is important that they are not only viewed as the end users of a play space, but also as the creators. They are insightful, creative and they know what they like and want.

Involving children provides a unique insight and understanding of their needs. It results in play spaces that are well-designed, suited to local children's needs and ultimately attract children to be outdoors and active. Local children will feel ownership of the play space, resulting in the area being well looked after and respected, therefore reducing vandalism.

Talking with children also presents an opportunity to educate them on the democratic mechanisms in their community. It introduces them to the concept of participating in the wider community, in planning and local council processes.

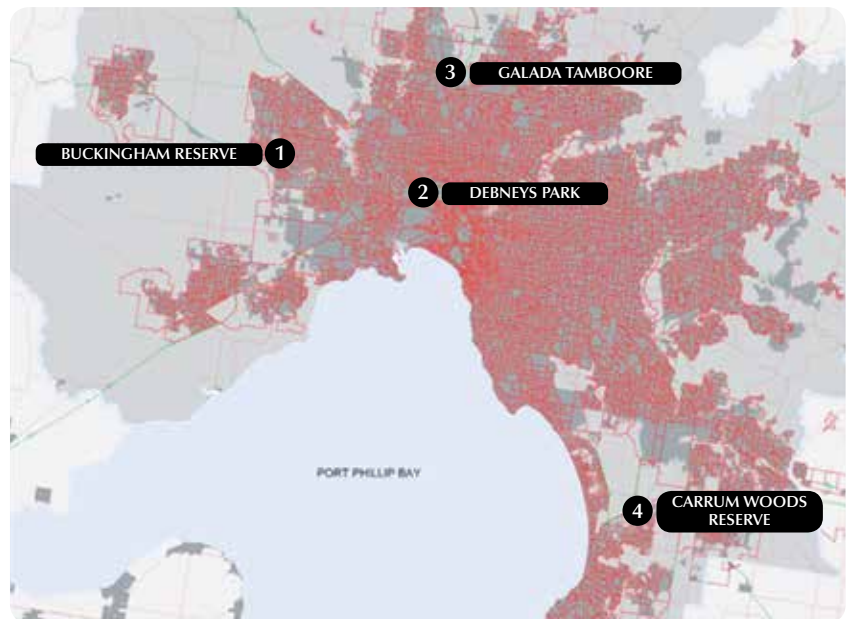


Illustration by Jenny Donovan

Project methodology

Site selection

After publicising a registration of interest process in 2008, four sites were selected to participate in the project.



These were:

1. Buckingham Reserve, Brimbank City Council, a regional park upgrade
2. Debneys Park, Moonee Valley City Council, a regional park upgrade



3. Galada Tamboore, a new state park being developed by Parks Victoria in Campbellfield, City of Hume



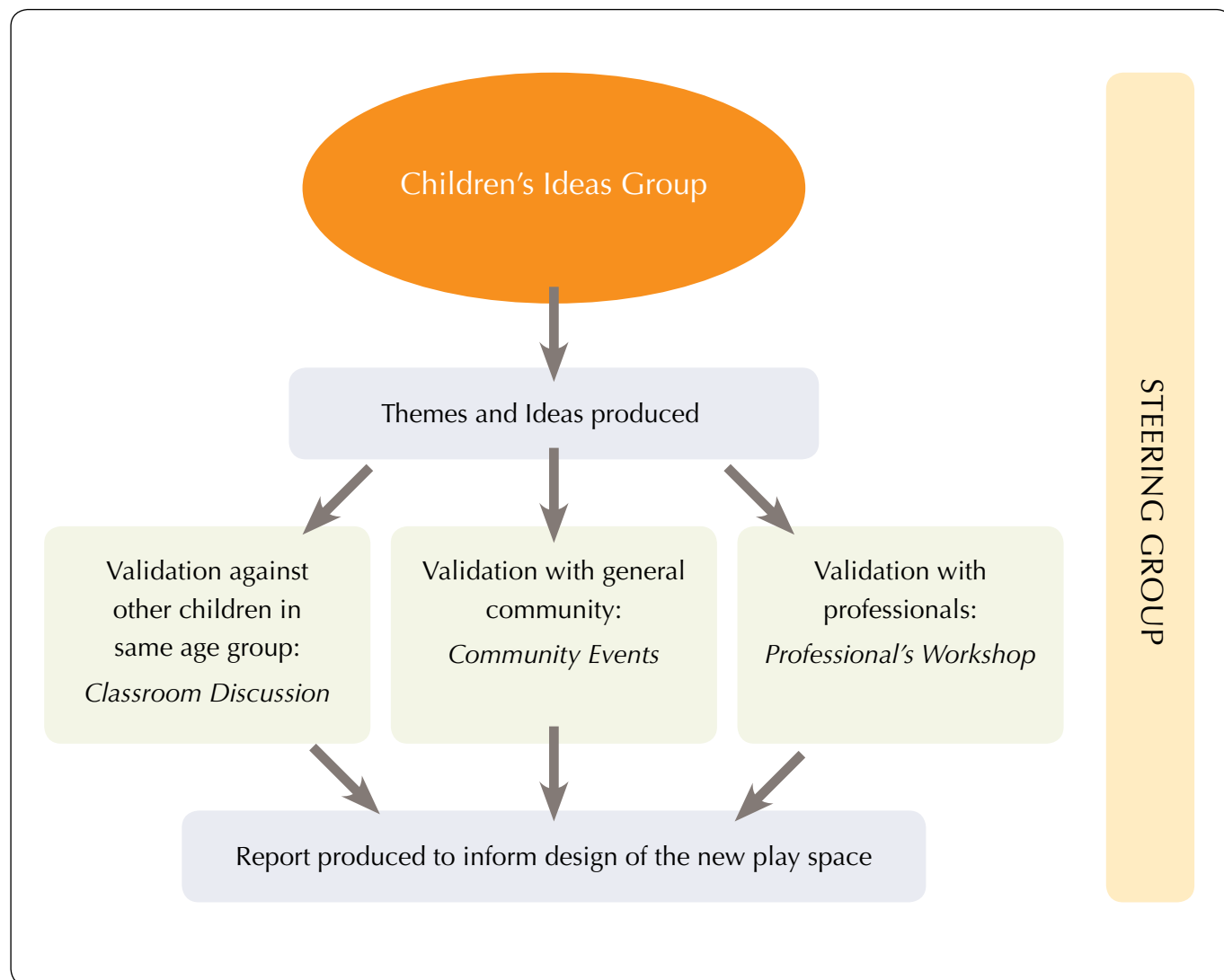
4. Carrum Woods Reserve, Frankston City Council, a local neighbourhood park upgrade



Consultation model

The Space for Active Play project consultation model consisted of five key components for each site. An overview of the project model is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Space for Active Play Consultation model^{19,20}



1. Forming a steering group

A steering group was formed to oversee the development and implementation of the project. Membership was broad ranging and supported the concept of integrated planning. These groups were variously made up of council representatives from various departments (open space, community development, recreation, parks and gardens), community-based organisations (community health, primary care partnerships, community centre) and primary school representatives.

The *Space for Active Play* steering groups were the driving force behind the children's consultation process for each site. They engaged in project planning, decision making and took responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the consultation process.

Taking an integrated planning approach facilitated through this group enabled the sharing of local expertise, knowledge and resources, cross-sector communication and project support. An introductory presentation about unstructured play and its importance provided a good starting point to get the group united and on the same page.

"The Carrum Woods Reserve project was greatly enhanced by knowledge sharing across professions and disciplines within Frankston City Council. Having a steering group helped the project partners build working relationships — and this included colleagues from a variety of council departments who hadn't worked with each other before. This project saw a move away from traditional static play equipment, towards innovative, integrated design outcomes which provide for unstructured active play. Developing these working relationships meant that there was a core group of professionals heading in the same direction. The work the steering group has done on this project brought to the fore how critical it is that children have a voice in the design of their play spaces. The process the group underwent meant that they developed a wider understanding of contemporary issues facing children and their families."

Landscape architect, Frankston City Council

Project example — Carrum Woods Reserve Steering Group

Frankston City Council looked broadly at who could provide useful input into a child-focused consultative process when developing their steering group. The steering group included the following:

- Urban designer, landscape architect, community development worker, park planning and development coordinator, recreation development coordinator, health promotion officer — Frankston City Council.
- Physical activity health promotion officer — Frankston City Community Health Service.
- Assistant Principal — Carrum Downs Primary School.
- President, Carrum Downs Community Group/ Parents and Friends Committee representative
- Heart Foundation representatives (as deliverers of the children's consultation).





Carrum Woods Reserve Children's Ideas Group

2. Children's consultation and validation

Children's ideas group (CIG)

A group of local children was formed and asked what they would like to be able to 'see and do' in a new play space. At three of the locations this took place via a local primary school that engaged directly with the project, and in the fourth it was through a holiday program at a local community centre. In all cases the children self-selected either through classroom-based ballots or, in the holiday program site through a community call out via community and school newsletters.

The children who participated in the CIG's participated in six sessions in total. Five sessions had an experiential learning component and a reflection and discussion component, the first of which was a site visit to the open space for which a new play space was being planned. The CIG groups were each given opportunities to experience a variety of open spaces through visits to different locations – eg CERES environment park, Ian Potters Children's Garden, Cranbourne Botanical Gardens, the beach, state parks and sanctuaries.

The experiential learning that took place involved a number of immersion activities, where the children became engrossed in 'doing' and were hands-on and involved in the experience, as opposed to observing or visiting in a passive way. This resulted in a rich play experience that the children could reflect on.

Sometimes activities were organised for them – environmental experience activities (pond watching, natural treasure hunting, bush walks), ephemeral art, constructing sand sculptures, hut building or mud brick making but each visit also allowed time for free play and discovery. A cycle ride was incorporated into one of the activity sessions.

At each session the children had available to them a sketchbook and disposable camera. They were encouraged to photograph things they saw, and to draw or write down ideas and reflections. At the end of each session time was set aside for reflection and group discussion.

The final session involved developing themes and ideas that encapsulated what the children felt the designer needed to consider when designing the new play space (this was a draining process for some of the younger children and for that reason may well be best split between two sessions). As well as noting down ideas on what they would like to 'see and do' the children also selected images and photographs from their own drawings and photographs that they felt represented the themes and ideas they had come up with. From the outset it had been made very clear to the children that they were not the designers of the site, however they knew that their ideas would inform the designer prior to the site design beginning. They were also made aware that designers have to work within budgets and this can limit the number of ideas they can take on board, even if they liked them very much.

Their themes and selected images were turned into large consultation books which opened with text on one page and images to illustrate the text on the facing page. These were used in the validation process for others to look at and consider, and they easily converted into a wall mounted display.

Classroom-based children's consultation

To ensure the ideas generated by the CIG were representative, they were presented to and validated by, 8–12-year-old classroom based children from a local school or schools. This provided an opportunity for broader consultation with local children.

The CIG's ideas were presented to each class via large versions of the themes made into a pictorial wall display. They were asked to vote on the ideas (using coloured stickies as 'votes'), discuss them and answer a brief questionnaire.

Some notes on how to engage with schools regarding consultation are included in Appendix A.

Using this system meant that clusters of support or dislike could be seen in a very visual way, and themes that attracted conflicting opinions were also clearly illustrated. In the community consultations all age groups participated in the voting - even eager under 5 year olds who could barely reach the display boards! It also transcended language barriers and was inclusive, as well as breaking down barriers to engagement. This system was used in all the validation exercises to engage the audience, kick start discussion and invite feedback.

Sticky-note voting system

A voting system known as the 'sticky-note voting system' was used in secondary consultation sessions to gauge the popularity of ideas that had arisen out of the Children's Ideas Group.

1. Each theme was presented using verbal, written and pictorial explanations.
2. Colour coded sticky notes were given to the people being consulted, with each person having 11 votes to place, as outlined below.

Yellow was used to vote for a favourite idea (1 vote per person).

Green was used to vote for a good idea (5 votes per person).

Pink was used to vote for a bad idea (5 votes per person).

3. People were required to place a coloured sticky note next to the ideas shown on the display that they thought would be most appealing to, or at least favoured by, older children.

Consideration: Having a vote for a Favourite idea as well as votes for Good ideas complicated the voting system. In latter consultation sessions the voting system was amended and the Favourite vote was omitted for classroom consultation but retained for adult consultation.

3. General community consultation

This project took community play space consultation beyond the standard postal questionnaire or public meeting normally used to gauge feedback to a local open space upgrade, and attempted to use some more inclusive forms of engagement. The engagement methods used highlight the fact that consultations need to be affordable and be scaled to the size of the proposed development. A large district park warrants broader consultation than the redevelopment of a small local park space for instance.

Connecting with the local community

The consultation model varied for each site and in the main revolved around utilising existing community events and facilities to seek feedback from the general community on the CIG's themes. Local residents participated through community celebrations and activities involving schools, councils and community organisations. The consultations were an effective way of exposing the wider community to its local *Space for Active Play* project and a useful means of exploring the intentions for each upgrade.

The community consultation exercise for each site had to consider the many groups and individuals in the community that may be affected by the project. This can be a time-consuming and challenging task, but if done well can lead to greater community ownership and support. Elements that helped to garner community feedback in this project included:

- Council staff and community organisations that have strong relationships with the local community such as community development, community centres/neighbourhood houses, community health and health promotion officers. These people had invaluable links to individuals and representative community groups. They, could also offer important guidance on who needs to be communicated with and the most appropriate ways to consult.

- A range of groups were invited to participate in the consultation exercises. These varied from site to site but included: residents' groups, bicycle user groups, church/faith groups, ethnic community councils, schools (management and parent/carers associations), community health agencies, 'friends of' groups, migrant resource centres and existing formal and informal users of the open space that is going to be developed.

4. Professionals' and stakeholders' workshop

For each site a workshop was held for a group of local professionals and key stakeholders working in related areas - such as children's services, health promotion, community development, park maintenance, safety officers, recreation, planning, urban design and parents and friends groups. The group was given information about the project and was presented with the themes and ideas developed by their local CIG group to seek their feedback. Again the pictorial wall display was used with sticky note voting and then discussion around how the votes had clustered and what was liked/not liked.



Community consultation at Debneys Park

Community consultation methods

A number of methods of consultation were used in this project. These included:

A library display— Buckingham Reserve, Brimbank City Council

The local community was consulted on the redesign of Buckingham Reserve via a consultation morning at the local library in Sunshine. Community members were asked to provide their feedback via sticky note voting on the CIG themes which were provided as a wall mounted display. Because the display was of a pictorial nature it helped to make the information accessible to the large number of local people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Suggestion sheets were also provided if people wanted to provide further input but these were not as well used.

Joining in with another celebration — Debneys Park, Moonee Valley City Council

The local community was consulted on the development of Debneys Park at *Flemington Multicultural Children's Day* held at the park, as part of the Children's Week celebrations.

Being a very multicultural community it was important that the information presented was accessible and able to be understood. The themes from the CIG were displayed using photos with the text translated into four languages.

Interpreters were present to assist community members in providing feedback on not only the children's ideas, but any other suggestions the community members had about the redevelopment in general.

A fun day out in the park – Carrum Woods Reserve, Frankston City Council

Residents within a 500 metre catchment of the reserve and families who attend Carrum Woods Primary School were invited to attend. The day involved circus performers, free popcorn and fresh fruit icy poles, and a display about the play space redevelopment that included the CIG group's theme and photo montages. People attending were consulted on the redesign of Carrum Woods Reserve, and asked to place votes against the themes and ideas and provide any additional comments on the themes and ideas presented.

The community day exposed the broader community to the project and engaged them in expressing their views and opinions on what they wanted to see as part of the Carrum Woods Reserve redevelopment.

A stall at the school fete – Carrum Woods Primary School, Carrum Downs

The school fete was used to put up a stall about the parks redevelopment plans, and engage with the school community about the prospect of the park being upgraded and improved. Plans and aerial photographs were available for parents and children to peruse, and notice was given of a family day that would be run to further garner their thoughts on the play space and what it should look like.



An interpreter discussing children's themes with community members at Debneys Park

Evaluation methodology

Evaluation was a key component of the *Space for Active Play* project. A process evaluation was undertaken with data collected through: (1) focus groups with each site's steering group; (2) feedback questionnaires returned by the CIG groups, classroom teachers and professional workshop attendees; (3) a review of the site reports.

An impact evaluation was undertaken at the three sites that were constructed – Debneys Park, Carrum Woods Reserve and Buckingham Reserve, to determine how well the new play space had used the children's ideas in their design and how effective the new play spaces were in attracting older children. The play spaces were evaluated using a three pronged approach, for each site – (1) a small group of children from a primary school local to the play space were taken to the site. The children used PhotoVoice activities, using photography and

reflection to generate thoughts on how the site fulfilled their play needs pre and post construction; (2) a classroom based questionnaire was filled in by children in the 8-12 year age bracket who were familiar with the site, and (3) observation of the site was undertaken pre and post construction. One site (Debneys Park) did not do pre-construction observation due to the construction having already started by the time the evaluation was ready to begin. Parent consultation was however included via interpreter led interviews prior to construction being completed and via a focus group once the site was in use. Additional parent consultation at the other two sites using school distributed questionnaires proved unsuccessful in relation to Carrum Woods Reserve and not applicable in relation to Buckingham Reserve.



What do older children say they want in a play space?

Space for Active Play provided an insight into the desires and motivations of children aged 8–12 years old regarding outdoor play. The consultations clearly showed that children want to move, experience nature through exploration, and express their creativity. They also want to be challenged by their play spaces — even be a little frightened sometimes!

It is interesting to note that while the CIG group children provided a broad range of themes generated by the designers to take heed of, where natural play was concerned they were keen to share






the joys they had experienced playing in the natural environment. However, they expressed concerns that their friends would not know how to play in the natural environment and that special instruction on how to play in a more natural ‘untamed’ environment may be required.

Table 1 is a synopsis of the main themes generated by the CIGs with commentary from the classroom-based children’s consultation across all four pilot sites.



Illustration by Jenny Donovan


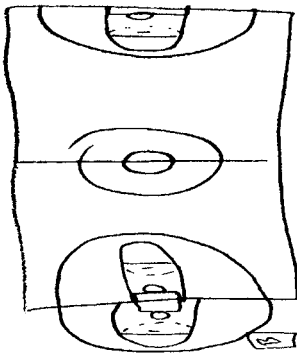


Table 1 The main themes from the children's ideas group^{19,20,21,22}

Desire: Action & adventure	
Themes	Recurring elements
Bike riding	<p>Bike riding was very popular — the children want to be able to independently and safely access their parks by bike, but they also want to use their bikes for play. They want interesting and challenging bike paths, paths that curve, go over small and large hills, include jumps of different sizes, have different surface textures. Some also wanted shared paths clearly marked to avoid collisions with pedestrians.</p>  <p><i>'Bigger tracks for us to ride on, and lights and markings for the bikes.'</i> Debneys Park, child's response</p> <p><i>'I like to ride my bike somewhere quiet.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'I ride my bike a lot and there aren't any jumps nearby.'</i> Carrum Woods child's response</p>
Skate boarding and scooting	<p>Skating was popular with older boys especially, clearly wanting a small scale area where they could practice and hone their skills with ramps, steps and grinding rails. It was thought that these facilities would also be good for scooters.</p>  
Paths	<p>Children wanted to see paths made more interesting (e.g. paths with stepping stones for jumping across, or interesting surfaces such as mosaics). Paths incorporating nature with colorful plantings alongside them or paved areas around trees were also suggested.</p>   <p><i>'Great places to have different kinds of races, e.g. bike race.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because I usually go there and I take my bike, but when I'm there I can't ride it.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> <p><i>'A path with kids hand prints.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p>

Desire: Action & adventure		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Hills	 <p>Children wanted hills that provided a variety of terrain to roll, run, slide and cycle up and down. They wanted to interact with the environment with added excitement and adventure.</p> <p><i>"Hills — the big hills and the small hills — the big hills so you can ride your bike so high and then come back down, the small hills so you can do your tricks and jump up and down."</i> Debnays Park, child's response</p> 	
Trees and plants	<p>Mature trees were very popular for the climbing opportunity they offered and as a location for tree houses.</p> <p><i>"I like tall trees because they are good for climbing and they are beautiful and green".</i> Galada Tamboore, child response</p>  <p><i>'Plants and climbing — well, it will make our parks attractive and fun in heaps of ways.'</i> Debnays Park, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because a park is not a park without trees and kids love climbing.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p>	
Climbing	<p>The desire to be challenged many times by the children especially through the action of climbing. They want to climb high trees, scramble over rocks and into tunnels. Climbing up and down a spider's web was very popular. Numerous reasons were given for supporting this theme – to hide, spy, build cubbies and tree houses, and have a place of their own.</p>  <p><i>'I like climbing and have a challenge while climbing.'</i> Debnays Park, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because I like to explore places and climb up trees to take a good view.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> 	

Desire: Action & adventure		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Exploring & hiding	  <p>Trees, bushy plants and mazes were all popular as hiding places. They liked the idea of being able to hide and get away to a quiet spot. They also favoured tree houses, cubbies and secret hiding places. They liked the idea of getting lost (as long as they could be easily found), and discovering things in the park such as interesting plants and unusual insects.</p> <p><i>'I like exploring because I don't get to do it much.'</i> Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'I love imagining and I love hiding and sneaking around.'</i> Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Hiding in the trees – because I like natural stuff.'</i> Debneys Park, child's response</p> <p><i>'Exploring – hunting for treasures, because it's fun to explore and find interesting things.'</i> Debneys Park, child's response</p> <p><i>'Hollow trees/logs because you can hide in them and climb them.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because you can hide and jump out and scare people.'</i> Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</p>	
Desire: Opportunities to be creative*		
Building & construction	  <p>The concept of natural play was eagerly embraced by the children. They wanted to build things — tree houses, cubbies and make caves under bushy trees. Children want to see natural debris such as fallen branches, bark and leaves left in the park so they can construct and create things from them.</p> <p><i>'They're [natural constructions] more interesting to play. You get to make your own hut.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'I like building cubbies because it's like your [sic] living in it.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> <p><i>'I would like to make a hut and make it my secret house.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Hiding in the trees – because I like natural stuff.'</i> Debneys Park, child's response</p>	

Desire: Opportunities to be creative*	
Themes	Recurring elements
Ephemeral art	<p>Children like to utilise natural debris such as stones, sticks, leaves, gumnuts, coloured berries and flowers for creative play.</p> <p><i>'So everyone can use their imagination' Galada Tamboore, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'I like it because when kids are bored they can make things.' Galada Tamboore, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'I like this theme because it's creative and might attract more people to the park' Galada Tamboore, child's response</i></p>    
Sand	<p>A sandpit with permanent buckets and digging tools was suggested as were providing recycled water for sand sculpting, sand sculpting workshops, using sand as a long jump pit and having sand around play equipment.</p> <p><i>'Build cool things' and 'so you can make different stuff' Carrum Woods Reserve, children's responses</i></p> <p><i>'Kids can have fun and get dirty.' Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'So everyone can use their imagination, sand pits can be creative in any way a child uses it.' Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</i></p>   

Desire: Traditional play		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Sports & games	<p>Children still want space for traditional sports and games. They want areas to cater for football, tennis, handball, basketball, netball, table tennis and, cricket where they can play with friends. They also wanted space for informal games such as marked out areas for hopscotch and ball games, and space to play 'tiggy'. And these needed a variety of surfaces such as concrete and soft grass surfaces.</p> <div>   </div> <p><i>'A soccer goal because it is the sport I like to play with my friends and family.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> <p><i>'In sport areas you can exercise and also have fun with your friends.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p>	
Play equipment	<p>Traditional play equipment has a role to play as part of the design jigsaw. Children wanted equipment that generated some thrills – climbing, swinging and spinning were all popular requests. Suggestions included a spider net, a rock wall, long curved slides, swings, spinning wheel and flying fox.</p> <div>   </div> <p>Commenting on a spiders net 'you can race up it', <i>'It would be fun running and climbing'</i> (Debneys Park, children's responses and you can 'act like a monkey' (Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response)</p> <p><i>'Because you can climb very high and it gives you strength'</i> Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</p> <p>On a spinning wheel <i>'because it's a type of thing that friends could play with together and to have fun'</i>. (Galada Tamboore, child's response)</p> <p><i>'A flying fox to get to the other side [of the stream]'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p>	

Desire: Aesthetics & nature		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Public art	<p>Children strongly favoured the idea of art in their play space. They like the idea of arts projects involving the community and a space for legal graffiti (although that attracted both positive and negative support). The use of sculpture was popular, especially to climb through and on. Children saw art as a colourful way to brighten up paths and furniture (eg using mosaic decoration) and a way to make the parks more aesthetically pleasing.</p> <div>   </div> <p><i>'Lots of people and kids have a huge passion for art, so it would be great to have that.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because it will give the community and myself something beautiful.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because you are allowed to sit and jump on the artwork.'</i> Galada Tamboore child's response</p> <p><i>'Because it really bright[sic] out the park and kids get very attracted to it.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p>	
Trees & plants	<p>Children want trees for shade, and as a place to relax and rest in and under. They also have a keen interest in experiencing a variety of plants, flowers and foliage. They highly value plants and trees for their beauty and majesty and for the natural debris they can provide. Community gardens and edible plants were also favoured.</p> <p><i>'Trees, plants and grasses — I like this theme because it would be nice if you could look around at some plants and nature.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> <p>On trees - <i>'it provides shade if it's a sunny day, you can relax and have your own quiet time.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'I like 'Nature' because you can hide and play around plants and wild life.'</i> Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</p> <div>    </div>	

Desire: Aesthetics & nature		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Attracting animals	<p>Learning about, exploring and observing wildlife was frequently requested. Children would like to see an environment that encourages the presence of animals, insects and birds. Ideas included bird and possum boxes in trees, old trees with holes for animals to live in, logs to look under and the provision of native grasses and trees for animal habitats. Though there were some reservations in the secondary consultation around attracting spiders and snakes.</p>  <p><i>'A watching place so we can see the kangaroos'. Galada Tamboore, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'I like 'Nature' because you can hide and play around plants and wild life'. Carrum Woods Reserve, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'I love animals and animals help us and the environment'. Buckingham Reserve, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'I like this idea because it might attract wild live[sic] like birds, etc.'. Buckingham Reserve, child's response</i></p> 	<p>Water was a popular element that came up in many forms. Children wanted water fountains for getting wet in and squirting people. They liked the idea of a lake or a pond or trickle stream with ducks, insects and wildlife. The children talked about using recycled water.</p>    <p><i>'Water — I like the idea of splashing people!'. Debnays Park, child response</i></p> <p><i>'I would like to have a little river or fountain going through the park'. Buckingham Reserve, child's response</i></p> <p><i>'Look at different bugs – look how bugs move and different things'. Debnays Park, child's response</i></p>
Water		

Desire: Function & independent access		
Themes	Recurring elements	
Public facilities	<p>All the children were very aware of the practical needs of themselves and their families when playing outdoors. Providing toilets and drinking water would allow the children to be able to play for a longer duration. Many wanted shade (provided by trees), barbeque facilities, interesting seating and regularly emptied rubbish bins.</p>	  <p><i>'Public facilities are good if you die out of thirst.'</i> Buckingham Reserve, child's response</p> <p><i>'I like drink taps and water so we can play longer.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p> <p><i>'Because when people have to go to the toilet they don't need to go all the way home.'</i> Galada Tamboore, child's response</p>
Getting to the park safely**	<p>Children recognised quickly that safe routes and crossing places were required on roads, creeks and over railways to enable them to access play spaces independently. The children were also very astute at identifying barriers to access and suggested appropriate wayfinding signage, bike parking, public transport stops outside parks and the provision of disabled car parking.</p>	 <p><i>'I'd go down Barry Road to get to Galada Tamboore, I'd also put in a bridge that crossed the Hume Highway.'</i> Galada Tamboore child's response</p> <p><i>'We should mainly/important put in signs to give directions....'</i> and <i>'because sometimes I get lost and there's nothing to help me so I hope that there [are] signs.'</i> Buckingham Reserve children's responses</p>

*There were several suggestions for 'play workshops' to be held at play spaces intermittently (e.g. during school holidays) so local children could learn new play skills e.g. sand sculpting, cubby building, ephemeral art.

**This was the only 'flagged' topic in the project, and was introduced to illicit comment on how the children intended to access the park space.

Consultation feedback on the themes

Classroom based children

Although this group did not participate in the experiential learning visits that the CIG's had, the classroom based children largely understood the themes and ideas presented — even those activities they had never personally experienced. The classroom consultations showed that these children were also keen to experience what the CIG groups had come up with.

However, the classroom based children did show a concern for safety that was not expressed by the CIG children. Negative votes against ideas were often due to fears of getting injured, feeling unsafe around water or of exposure to dangerous insects or snakes.

'I would recommend first aid kit when children get hurt.' Buckingham Reserve, child's response

These fears, possibly due to a lack of familiarity with play in the natural environment, support the CIG's comments that outdoor creative play is something which more children need exposure to and possibly some instruction in.

"Space for Active Play increased students' understanding of the importance of outdoor play".
Teacher, Carrum Downs Primary School

Community feedback

The community responses in some areas differed greatly from the children's.

- The community participants showed a desire for open spaces to play a larger role in the community — as peaceful spaces that accommodated other social needs as well as places for play.
- They supported many of the children's action-based and creative ideas, but were less supportive of themes that were perceived as physically risky such as tree climbing and building tunnels to crawl through or those with antisocial connotations for example, graffiti walls.

- The community was more supportive of nature-focused ideas such as bird houses and bird baths and having special areas set aside for traditional games and play equipment.

A focus on safety and an aversion to risk-taking activities may be a general reflection of societal attitudes today in which these fears are overstated and not backed up by the available evidence.²³ Or perhaps a sign that some adults may have forgotten what it is to be a child and how important (and common) free play had been to them.

The community consultation demonstrated that what adults want in a play space may not be the same as what children want. This result could add more weight to the argument that to get young people outside and active, children's voices need to be garnered as a crucial element in the planning of child-friendly spaces.

Local professionals' workshop

As with the community consultations, the professionals were supportive of many of the children's ideas and could see value in the suggestions that were outside the traditional fixed structure playground formula.

But, they were also cautious about elements that would require high maintenance or encourage vandalism. There were clear areas of conflict around the perception of risk and safety concerns. Some ideas that children saw as exciting, were perceived as risky by some of the professionals, highlighting the reality that legal liability is a careful balance between working within councils' obligations and responsibilities, and yet providing spaces that achieve opportunities for risk and challenge which are essential for children's growth and development.

The *Space for Active Play* project reinforced the value of face-to-face and inclusive consultation with significant stakeholders. It specifically showed that older children have many, sometimes unexpected, ideas to share and that some adults may have forgotten what it's like to be a child.

From desire to design

Consultation feedback on the themes

Consultation report

For each site the consultation process was collated into a report that was reviewed by the steering group and handed to the open space planners and landscape architects working on the play space development at each site. A summation of the children's ideas was incorporated into the design brief for each site.

Design process

The children's feedback sparked the landscape architects' imaginations. They were confident they could come up with design solutions to implement many of the children's ideas and address some of the communities safety concerns. The designers came up with many options on how to incorporate the children's ideas into play spaces and thought community concerns around the hiding and exploring theme could be addressed via good design.

A variety of innovative features were developed across the design of the four sites. Some are noted here:

- a buried dinosaur carcass in a sandpit to aid archeological discovery
- undulating hills for cycling, skating and scooting
- an understated obstacle course to direct children round the more natural periphery of the park
- a trickle stream leading to a cascading catchment pool, incorporating an Archimedes screw, to provide water based play

In addition there was follow up communication between the landscape architects and the children involved in the CIGs at three of the four sites. This contact introduced the children to the planning processes involved in their physical world.

- As work on the pilot sites progressed to the design stage, where possible the CIGs were reconvened and shown the draft designs for the play space that had been informed by their ideas. The children were given an opportunity to question the designers and the decisions that had been made.

- The children readily engaged in the review process, asking pertinent questions about the design and why certain features they favoured had been left out!

It is however important to keep this draft design review session brief and engaging so that the younger children (8 and 9 year olds) retain their interest in what is being presented to them.

Being responsive — Carrum Woods Reserve

The council reconvened the CIG once the designer had developed a concept design.

The designer was well briefed on the *Space for Active Play* process and the central role local children played. The designer presented the concept design to the children in a child friendly way, free of jargon, with acknowledgement of their input. The session encouraged discussion and as with the consultation phase the children were forthcoming with ideas and comments.

The children were delighted to be consulted about the design.

Staff at Frankston City Council drew up minutes from the meeting in a style suited to children. This involved using plain language, including photos of people involved with the project and sketches from the concept design. The minutes were also able to be taken home and shown to parents and carers enabling the children to share what they had been working on.

Site construction

The construction of the three sites took place between 2009 and 2012. Each site implemented the designs that were developed to create a physical upgrade that changed the landscapes of each site. The regional parks resulted in major change. Buckingham Reserve introduced striking play equipment (a rocket or castle turret depending on interpretation), plantings, a trickle stream with water collection point, a sand pit and two large scale flying foxes, a BBQ area, and toilets.

Debneys park created a 'mountain' a major undulation for scooting, skating, cycling around, with various climbing apparatus and play equipment integrated into its hills and valleys. And along side it a 'crater' formation housing a basketball court within and climbing walls without. Contemplative sitting areas overlooking the Moonee Ponds Creek and a large scale flying fox also feature.

Carrum Woods Reserve, a neighbourhood park with a significantly smaller budget made some earthwork changes to create slopes and improved pathways, and enriched the natural environment with balance beams through an adventure forest.

The play equipment on the site was also enhanced and improved, and a small skating area provided. The developments will be ongoing with Debneys park already planning more plantings to fulfil the children's desire for a rich natural environment.



Debneys Park, play dome



Carrum Woods Reserve balancing beams and adventure forest



Buckingham Reserve, water, climbing and flying fox area

Site evaluation

The site evaluation sought to find out if the new play spaces had worked for older children. The feedback showed that the designers had been successful in converting a selection of the children’s desires into their designs, though the natural features were less developed than the constructed features.

It should also be noted that all the sites were quite new when the post-construction site evaluation took place. Planting programs and natural enhancement reliant on seasonal planting and growth will inevitably develop and mature over the coming years.

Importantly, the sites had very different budget allocations - two of the sites had investments that ran to multi-million dollar budgets (Debneys Park and Buckingham Reserve), while one had a budget of less than \$100,000 (Carrum Woods Reserve).

Park attendance

Participation rates were examined for two of the sites with the following results (see Figure 4).

Pre-site observation was not possible for the third site as initial works had begun by the time evaluation funding was secured.

Figure 4: Site attendance figures

Site	Increase in older children’s participation post construction
Carrum Woods (neighbourhood park, small budget, Frankston)	55%
Buckingham Reserve (regional park, large budget, Brimbank)	370%



Newly constructed Buckingham Reserve, Brimbank

Reception to original desires

The evaluators explored whether the articulated desires of the children, as interpreted by the site designers (within budget allocations), had in fact

resulted in older children playing and interacting with those elements. A synopsis of the results are provided below in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Desire translation and outcome

Children's desire	Outcome
Action and adventure	Opportunities for action and adventure were variously provided via pathways, hills, flying fox, high climbing equipment (spiders webs), and at one site a very high slide. This desire was met to a large extent by new equipment/infrastructure rather than natural environments. All three sites have provided improved facilities for those on bicycles, scooters and skateboards. One of the sites had removed a large old tree that was favoured by the children for climbing on, and the children commented on its loss.
Opportunities to be creative	There was little evidence of the active use of site material as an opportunity to build or construct, and little evidence of loose materials available for that use. Though one site had a new sand pit that children engaged with and another had loose debris under bushes and small trees that the children enjoyed interacting with. The language children used to describe the reasons they enjoyed the parks did however indicate that the play spaces stimulated their creativity. There was much more creative play following the upgrades in terms of imaginative role play, games and interactions than the children used previously to structure their play.
Traditional play	All sites saw an increase in use of the fixed structure play equipment, the fixed equipment was a strong feature of two of the sites and was a big attractor to the older children. Two of the sites had provided brand new equipment, one had enhanced established equipment.
Natural features and aesthetics	In all sites the natural features of the park had been enhanced and would continue to be enhanced in future stages of development (and plant growth). The appearance of the play space, and the cleanliness and general aesthetics of each site mattered to the children, and in all cases the parks were improved in this regard. Trees and the natural environment were given a high priority especially where climbing trees or using bushes to engage in playful hiding or creative play was possible.
Function and access	This includes the provisions of new rubbish bins, water fountains, link pathways, car parking, shaded areas, toilets, and picnic or BBQ areas. This has laid the foundations for varied use of the sites, with provision for more family groups to enjoy them.

Planning for active play

Space for Active Play gave local children the opportunity to influence decisions that can significantly affect their physical, emotional and social health. Listening to children, validating their ideas with peers, community members and relevant professionals has shown that children have an important role to play in informing play space design.

Through the various stages of this project the following conclusions became clear:

- Children have clear ideas about what they want to 'see and do' in play spaces and they want to be included and consulted.
- Older children crave adventure and action — they want to explore, hide, climb and feel the wind in their hair while riding their bikes.
- For many children a lack of familiarity with diverse outdoor environments may mean they need to be 'taught' how to play in more natural environments.
- Children want to get to play spaces by themselves or with their friends and are aware of the issues associated with independent access to local open space. Walking, cycling and integrated transport strategies can complement play space redevelopment and are an important means of increasing children's access to parks. (see Appendix B for further details and an explanation of the 'petal parks' concept)
- Children can also make a significant contribution to evaluating new play spaces once they are constructed.



Debneys Park redevelopment and new play space, Flemington



Galada Tamboore state park, Hume

Involving children provides a unique insight and understanding of their needs. If children's desires are incorporated into play space design the result is play spaces that are more suited to older children's needs and ultimately attracts them to be outdoors and active.

'I would love to have a playground that is unique, different and unusual.' Buckingham Reserve, child's response

As each site and community will be different, involving local children to tap into their ideas and desires is an important first step in the project development process. The *Space for Active Play* process of consultation is an attempt to provide a genuinely children influenced play space. It attempts to facilitate children's sense of empowerment and agency in their local community. And the results have shown that children have a very valuable and insightful contribution to make to both the design and site evaluation process.

Other applications of this process could include:

- To influence the development of a child friendly cities strategy or council play strategy.
- To give more credence to the needs of children in the middle years age bracket, use locally generated children's ideas and apply them across a number of park developments, by discussing the themes produced with classroom based children in the vicinity of each park.

It is hoped that the results from this project will inform future play space design and planning. The challenge for commissioners of new play spaces is to consult with those who need and want to play most – the children. And then, be brave enough to convert these ideas into innovative, adventurous play spaces that will provide benefits and opportunities for children now, and for generations to come.

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Useful websites

CABE SpaceShaper	www.cabe.org.uk/spaceshaper
Child Friendly Cities	www.childfriendlycities.org
The Good Play Space Guide	http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/39183/Good-Play-Space-Guide_2011.pdf
The Heart Foundation	www.heartfoundation.org.au
International Play Association	www.ipaworld.org
London Play	www.londonplay.org.uk
Love outdoor play	http://loveoutdoorplay.net/
Participation Works	www.participationworks.org.uk
Play Australia	http://www.playaustralia.org.au/
Play England	http://www.playengland.org.uk/
Streets Ahead	http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Physical-Activity/Active-transport/Streets-Ahead.aspx
Smogbusters way to School	www.waytoschoolkit.infoxchange.net.au
Somerset Play and Participation Service	http://somersetoutdoorplay.org.uk
Sustrans	www.sustrans.org.uk
TravelSmart schools	www.travelsmart.gov.au/schools
Victoria Walks	www.victoriawalks.org.au

Appendix A

Tips for working with schools

Accessing children for consultation is most easily done via local schools. Many schools are actively looking at ways of engaging with their local communities and are often open to proposed collaborations. All schools have different demographics, priorities and methods of engaging, but the following suggestions may be helpful when seeking to partner with schools:

- A steering group member such as a health promotion officer or community development worker may already have established relationships with local schools or have colleagues who do. The ground work may have already been done within council.
- When making initial contact with a school send an email to the generic email on the school's website — with 'Attn: Wellbeing/Welfare Coordinator' (often the Assistant Principal) in the subject line. Follow emails up with a phone call. If you don't hear back straight away don't be disheartened. It does not mean the school is disinterested — just busy! Follow-up phone calls to the right person can work well.
- Once contact has been established, suggest that the project become an agenda item for the Junior School Council, a student body. The project could prove an interesting item for their agenda and is a great way of feeding information back to other students within the school and generating more interest. The Junior School Council also reports to the School Council, so has reach through to parents/community members.
- The best time to phone schools is after the morning rush at about 10 am or after the students have left for the day.
- Ask to speak with the curriculum coordinator to ascertain any complementary links with your project and the school's learning outcomes. It could be of particular value as part of an 'inquiry learning' project, or by integrating into studies of society and environment (SOSE), maths, art or health and physical education curriculum areas.
- Late in Term 4 is a good time to approach a school about a project happening the following year. Make contact at this time. If meeting with the principal schedule a meeting for late January, before the pupils are back at school. This is a good time to have an uninterrupted meeting. If you are unable to make this timeline aim to give at least 6 months notice — this will provide an opportunity for your project to be included in the grade level planning cycle.
- Plan around the school terms and the seasons — be familiar with when these start and finish. Autumn (Term 2) and Spring (Term 4) are good times for outdoor play exposure.
- Provide updates and share the designs with the school contact — the school will be interested in progress and this information can be shared with the pupils and parents.
- Invite the school and students to the opening of the play space!

Appendix B

The importance of independent access to parks

Children's independent access to a play space is an important consideration in play space development. Child friendly forms of transport include walking, riding, skating, scooting or using public transport. There are numerous benefits:

- Children are able to build a sense of place in their own community and understand where their home is in relation to a number of other locations including the local park.
- Children learn local routes, landmarks and meet neighbours along the way. This makes children feel more confident in their own neighbourhood.
- Children build road safety and street smart skills.
- The experience builds children's resilience and independence.
- Children become less reliant on adults timetables in order to organise to go outside and play.
- It allows the play space to be a place where children have freedom to explore.

Independent access to the play space needs to be included in the consultation process with children. When asked, the children highlighted significant access issues, and provided astute solutions to address them.



Independent access is a key site selection and design issue. Things to consider include:

- **Connect to the broader walking and cycling network:** connect walking and cycling routes within parks to adjacent walking and cycling routes external to the parks. It may be possible to create circular child-friendly routes that children can use to leave the park for small adventures and then return again. Some of these may be off-road cycle routes or shared paths so that traffic can be completely avoided. Such parks could be described as 'petal parks' where there are a number of 'petals' the children can follow that take them beyond the perimeter of the park and back again – for instance, following a creek path, linking to another local park, taking them to the sea, etc. A park could then be described as a 'two petal park' or a 'five petal park' depending on the number of circular routes available. This allows children to establish a larger roaming range than simply home to park and back again. Wayfaring signage and pictorial maps can assist in promoting these possibilities.
- **Pedestrian crossings:** are zebra crossings clearly marked? Do light-controlled signals allow enough time for children to walk across safely?
- **Walking paths and footpaths:** ensure an even, safe surface and keep paths free of any obstructions such as vegetation.
- **Pedestrian bridges over creeks/canals:** provide these at logical access points to avoid these features becoming barriers to children visiting the play space.
- **Bike paths:** consider the need for children to use their bicycles, scooters and skates for play once they arrive at the play space. Shared paths catering for through traffic should be sufficiently wide, clearly marked, and encourage users to keep left. Separate paths can be incorporated into the play area to provide an invitation to play. They might for instance provide varying widths and squiggly line markings or have inbuilt undulation to add play value to the walking or riding experience.

- **Bike parking facilities:** once children reach the play space safely they will need somewhere to leave their bikes, skateboards and scooters. This should be taken into account at the design stage, bike parking should be located in highly visible and central locations. Also consider the desire for children to continue to use these for play once they have arrived, via provision of paths.
- **Integrate park access points with local public transport services:** provide wayfinding signage and pathways adjacent to public transport stops to help public transport users to access the park.



- **Local speed limits:** the use of chicanes, tree planting, pavement bulbing, road markings, bollards, speed humps and the reduction of road widths all help to reduce speed limits. 30kph or less is world's best practise for local roads and is conducive to all road users feeling safe on the street. Refer to *Safe speed: promoting safe walking and cycling by reducing traffic speed*²⁴ for more information.
- **Wayfinding signage:** ensure community members can find the play space easily. Maps or signage could be produced that provide safe routes to the park for walkers and cyclists. Showing the minutes needed to walk the distance to the park from particular local locations is useful. As one child consulted said, signage is important 'To know where we go because it is helpful.'
- **Transport planning:** many councils will have, or be preparing, a walking, cycle or integrated transport strategy. Liaise with council staff involved with these strategies when developing a play space. Investigate how these strategies and play space redevelopment can be integrated in order to improve children's access to the play space.
- **Access audits:** assess the local streets for any barriers to children making their way to the play space independently. Council transport planning staff can assist with the evaluation of the local area.



