



RECREATION INSIGHTS

Play – it's power, place and potential

Recreation
Aotearoa
Te Whai Oranga

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1 Introduction

The insights series

The first Insights reports were published in 2018, in response to the need for current, action focused information. A total of 47 Insights reports have been produced. A list of these is included in the appendices.

Working with experts both within and outside the sector, Lumin was contracted to produce monthly reports (later, every 2 months). The aim was to report on key topics of relevance to the sector, and further develop issues emerging from conferences and webinars. Where it became necessary - for example during the Covid lockdown of many facilities - the reports could provide fast responses and up to date information for the membership.

Information and Case studies were sought from the membership; overseas research and practice; sector experts at conferences; articles and research, and from examples of good practice. As topics emerged they were prioritised according to urgency or importance. Some Insights reports then informed themes and topics for regional meetings, conferences and webinars.

Key themes

Key themes that emerged included:

- **Engage communities** by collaborating with target groups and audiences
- Leverage the **contribution of play and recreation to wellbeing** including the positive impact of recreation on mental, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing
- Value the contribution of recreation participation to **social wellbeing**.
- Understand the **diversity of population** in NZ, and identify needs according to age, gender, previous experiences. Consider the impact of cultural heritage and ways of being; disability, poverty and other factors.
- Consider **sustainability and climate mitigation** in design and management approaches
- Assess the **impact of poverty and disability** on participation and ways to address this
- **Optimise spaces and places**, making the best use of facility retrofits, creative programme design and the importance of play
- Ensure that places and **spaces are accessible** - beyond physical accessibility

2 About the authors

Robyn Cockburn, Fellow Recreation Aotearoa, ARPro

Robyn Cockburn has more than 40 years' experience working as a consultant researcher, strategist, facilitator and educator. She is the Director of Lumin working with a team of people in the sport, arts, education and recreation sectors and is a recognised thought leader and strategic developer.

She works at national, local and community levels with organisations and individuals, and uses creative, people centred approaches. Robyn is an experienced governor across the arts, recreation and education sectors. She is also leading work integrated learning for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington and is an Adjunct Professor – Teaching for the Museum and Heritage Studies programmes.

As a playcentre parent, she developed and applied a child-centred approach to play, which she's now enjoying with her granddaughter.

www.lumin.co.nz

Lucy Atkinson

Lucy has worked in the recreation sector for over 30 years including time with local authorities, the YMCA and YWCA, CCS Disability Action and Ara Institute of Canterbury. She is now an Associate with Lumin.

She has a post-graduate Diploma in Disability Studies, and co-wrote the Disability Strategy for Sport NZ with Robyn Cockburn. She has delivered a number of presentations to Lincoln University students and Outdoor recreation personnel on recreation and neurodiversity.

Robyn and Lucy researched and wrote the Insights reports for Recreation Aotearoa.

James, her son aged 34, has autism and ADHD. He loves the outdoors, tramping, biking and travel around NZ when provided with the right support. Understanding the recreation and play needs of young people on the autism spectrum has expanded her view on what play might look like, how and where it might occur.

Figure 1 A young person wearing a purple jacket and turquoise pants stands beside a tree looking towards a sports field. In the background, several people playing near a soccer goal. Houses and trees visible in the distance. Accessed from: <https://medium.com/@UNICEFNZ/decision-17-ending-child-poverty-in-nz-d0064d07e81c>



Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play.

Article 31 of the UN Convention

3 Understanding play

3.1 Defining play

Play (Tākaro) is a vital part of children's development¹,

Play is defined² as activity that is engaging, with high levels of involvement, engrossment and intrinsic motivation. Play is imaginative,³ creative, and non-literal; voluntary or freely chosen, personally directed (often child-initiated)⁴ and free from externally imposed rules. Play can be fluid and active but also guided by mental rules and high levels of communication about communication which give it structure. It is process-driven rather than product-driven, with no extrinsic goals.⁵

In essence play is spontaneity, freedom and fun. When playing we may get so involved we lose sense of time and place, but at the same time, we learn through play.

3.2 Principles of play

The Right to Play and Leisure

Every child has the right 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 of the UN Convention⁶

The right to play is embodied in the UNICEF initiative Child-Friendly Cities, including three principles that are key to providers in Aotearoa. Child-Friendly Cities⁷ are places where children:

- Have access to green spaces.
- Meet friends and have places to play and enjoy themselves.
- Express opinions and influence decisions that affect them.

In supporting children's right to play, it is important to pay attention not simply to the external expressions of play, but to the conditions in which 'playfulness' thrives.

Everyone, whether adult or child, has the right to adequate time for rest and for the pursuit of leisure activity.

The World Leisure Charter⁸, Article 1 endorsed by the United Nations.

¹ <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/learning-development/play-your-childs-development>

² What is Play and why is it important for learning? The Education Hub. Accessed from <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/what-is-play-and-why-is-it-important-for-learning/>

³ <https://www.pentagonplay.co.uk/news-and-info/why-pretend-play-is-important-to-child-development>

⁴ <https://dcs.leicester.gov.uk/media/2273/child-initiated-play-print.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.verywellmind.com/differences-between-extrinsic-and-intrinsic-motivation-2795384>

⁶ International Play Association. Ibid

⁷ <https://www.childfriendlycities.org/>

⁸ World Charter for Leisure: <https://www.worldleisure.org/text-of-the-wlo-charter-for-leisure/>

Equity of access to play

Every person has the right to equal opportunity, access and participation in cultural life, leisure and sport. This right is enshrined in legislation.⁹ So why do we continue to see people excluded? We need to think more holistically about the impact of inequalities on wellbeing.¹⁰

Spatial justice¹¹ assesses who gets what and is based on ***“the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them.”***¹²

There are high levels of deprivation, poor health and isolation in much of our social housing. Almost one third of NZ children live in poverty¹³ and Māori, Pacifica and disabled children are much more likely to be doing it tough. Addressing equity of access is an imperative for providers of space and the opportunity to play.

3.3 The value of play

There are also immediate benefits [for children] from spending time in nature, such as higher positive affect, increased energy, and less anger...time outdoors may also promote pro-social behaviours.¹⁴

The benefits of play¹⁵ include: Wellbeing, both physical and mental health, academic and cognitive benefits.

Play supports exploratory skills and discovery, the use of abstract thought and symbols, communication and oral language skills, verbal intelligence, imagination and creativity.

The social and emotional benefits of play include social skills, and the ability to build resilience.

The physical benefits of play include - large and small body muscle development, motor skills; the physicality of play impacts on cognitive function, behavioural and cognitive control.

⁹ Sport and Recreation NZ Act 2002. Source: <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2002/0038/16.0/DLM157169.html>

¹⁰ Child Poverty Report 2024, source: <https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/child-poverty-in-nz/child-poverty-report-2024.pdf>

¹¹ <https://ludicology.com/store-room/play-sufficiency-a-case-study/>

¹² Soja, E. (2009) The city and spatial justice. Spatial justice, n° 01 September 2009, <http://www.jssj.org>.

¹³ Child Poverty Monitor. Source: <https://www.childpoverty.org.nz/>

¹⁴ Soja, E. (2009) The city and spatial justice. Spatial justice, n° 01 September 2009, <http://www.jssj.org/>

¹⁵ <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/what-is-play-and-why-is-it-important-for-learning/>

3.4 Wild play

Children's entitlement to space and time for outdoor play is a matter of values, not just evidence. It is one example of what has been called spatial justice, or "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them."¹⁶

Tim Gill, rethinkingchildhood.com



Figure 2 A young child is smiling, sitting on a large fallen tree trunk in a natural outdoor setting. The child wears a hat, short-sleeved shirt, and overalls. The background is filled with dense foliage and vegetation. Photo: T. Atkinson, Wellington

The wild play movement

We know that play is vital for children's development. But do children get enough opportunities to play in ways adults consider 'risky'? And what are the benefits? This section explores the Wild play movement and the benefits of 'risky' play.

"We don't want kids to die! But hurting themselves is a good thing. Kids can take a lot of cold, wet, mud, murky, and they seem to thrive on it. They're OK."¹⁷

Anxious to encourage more parents to get children outside, British dad, David Bond, made an award-winning film called Project Wild Thing¹⁸ in 2012. The film led to the creation of The Wild Network¹⁹ – a global movement of more than 30,000 people with the goal of getting kids to lead nature-rich lives. "A free wonder product: The outdoors" he claims in the film.

In NZ research²⁰, parents in general lacked the confidence to allow their children to engage in risky play and were fearful of being judged as bad parents. But psychologist and researcher Peter Gray says children need and love risky play.²¹

¹⁶ Source; <https://rethinkingchildhood.com/>

¹⁷ Play facilitator in "Re-Wild the Child" documentary. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIKhp6CFP9Q>

¹⁸ Vimeo available from here; <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/projectwildthing>

¹⁹ Rewilding childhood, accessed from <https://www.thewildnetwork.com/>

²⁰ Jelleyman, C. et al (2019) A cross-sectional description of parental perceptions and practices related to risky

play and independent mobility in children: The NZ State of Play Survey. Doi: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/2/262>

²¹ Gray, Peter., (2014), Risky Play: Why children need it and love it; source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/freedom-learn/201404/risky-play-why-children-love-it-and-need-it>

Around 85% of NZ's population live in urban centres so local access to natural neighbourhoods²² is vital, in particular for children from lower income families. As well as anxiety about the impact of the digital age there are other stealth threats to free outdoor play.²³

An intense focus on 'safety' in children's environments influences attitudes²⁴ to perceived risk in playspaces. Imposing too many restrictions on children's wild play may hinder their development. We should be talking about keeping children "as safe as necessary" not "as safe as possible" say researchers.²⁵

Play spaces such as The Land²⁶ in Wales allow children to experiment with 'risky' play, with a playworker on site.

3.5 Conditions for play

Conditions for play to occur include explicit permission from parents/caregivers, with opportunity for imaginative and creative play. Unstructured time is also important, - children's lives are increasingly programmed and managed, yet play is a spontaneous activity that happens in free time. Another requirement is space (indoors or outdoors) where play is explicitly allowed (any space is a play space), and facilitation by parents/caregivers or expert play facilitators.

²² Freeman, C, Van Heezik, Y., Stein, A., Hand, K., (2015) Natural Neighbourhoods for City Children: Report on Research Findings.; University of Otago.

²³ McCarthy, C., MD (2020) 6 Reasons Children need to play outside; Harvard Health Blog, source: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/6-reasons-children-need-to-play-outside-2018052213880>

²⁴ Copeland KA, Sherman SN, Kendeigh CA, Kalkwarf HJ, Saelens BE. Societal values and policies may curtail preschool children's physical activity in childcare centers. *Pediatrics*. 2012 Feb;129(2):265-74. doi: 10.1542/peds.2011-2102. Epub 2012 Jan 4. PMID: 22218842; PMCID: PMC3269117.

²⁵ Brussoni M, Olsen LL, Pike I, Sleet DA. Risky play and children's safety: balancing priorities for optimal child development. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2012 Aug 30;9(9):3134-48. doi: 10.3390/ijerph9093134. PMID: 23202675; PMCID: PMC3499858.

²⁶ Westervelt, E. (2015) The Value of Wild, Risky Play: Fire, Mud, Hammers and Nails published online on nprEd. Source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/04/03/395797459/the-value-of-wild-risky-play-fire-mud-hammers-and-nails>



The new play area recognises the nature of play and uses design principles that give children the feeling that the world is full of things to explore

Figure 3 Three people are in a wooden treehouse nestled in the branches of a large tree. One person hangs from a branch, while the other two are on the platform—one standing and one sitting. Sunlight filters through the leaves, creating a bright and cheerful atmosphere. (from left) Finn Krishnan, 8, and his sisters Ava, 6, and Zara, 3, from Pt Chevalier. Photo / Doug Sherring accessed from <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/bringing-risk-back-into-childrens-lives/MGZBCDLRVCBZLZBBNVSJAPQ7I/>

4 Play Spaces

4.1 Making good play spaces

Greater understanding of the vital importance of play in the lives of children, has changed play area design away from the 'static and sterile' to something more flexible and reflective of how children actually play.

The new places recognise the nature of play and use design principles that accommodate a variety of space and landscapes, natural features, different heights, a range of flexible and variable materials, access to the elements. They contain a collection of loose parts with which children can experiment freely, creating an environment that gives children the feeling that the world is full of things to explore and where space and resources can be adapted to what is needed at the time.²⁷

Dr Wendy Russell, an expert in Play and Playwork, researches play sufficiency and spatial justice,²⁸ considering 'how' children play over what they play and where. She notes that play has value for children's *wellbeing*; that we need to attend to the ways children find time and space for playing in everyday life-

and lastly to cultivate the *conditions* for play.

In Wales, through relevant legislation, every local authority has to complete a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years. This includes assessing whether local areas offer children enough opportunities to play, and secondly, securing opportunities for children to play in the under-resourced areas, where possible.²⁹

4.2 Changing built environments

"Along with good social policy, the built environment can have a profound effect on the health, wellbeing, and happiness of our youngest citizens..."³⁰

(Natalia Krysiak, Architect, Cities for Play]

Increased urban density, the impact of poverty or poorly resourced areas means that many New Zealanders live without access to play spaces. For our health and wellbeing, people need access to play places within a 10 minute walk from home. Well-planned housing developments that involve communities can lead to planned spaces³¹ for creative play, walkable cities and green spaces.

²⁷ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide, The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation

²⁸ <https://www.childinthecity.org/2017/11/06/play-sufficiency-is-a-question-of-spatial-justice/>

²⁹ <https://play.wales/play-policy-legislation/play-sufficiency/>

³⁰ <https://play.wales/play-policy-legislation/play-sufficiency/>

³¹ Migliani, A. (March 2020) Where Will the Children Play? How to Design Stimulating and Safe Cities for Childhood. accessed from <https://www.archdaily.com/934599/cities-for-play-how-to-design-stimulating-and-safe-cities-for-children>

But often the need for play is overlooked.

“There’s still a gap in our knowledge about the optimal housing density in diverse Aotearoa (sub)urban settings to guarantee positive health outcomes for residents. [we need to] align urban transformations with the genuine needs of residents, fostering flexibility, innovation, and inclusivity in our urban planning approaches”³²

Miriam Schindler, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington

The Hamilton City Council is aiming for 80% of all households to have access to a park or open space within 500 metres of their home.³³

4.3 Understanding Space

“[People] are welcome in the places we designate for them; they’re only welcome elsewhere if they play by our rules.”³⁴

Wendy Russell, Senior lecturer in Play and Playwork, University of Gloucestershire,

The planning and provision of space is a highly political process and often prioritises the needs of some groups over others. Putting this in context, space has multiple dimensions - it is not always what it seems to be.

When considering the design of space, we need to think about:

- what the space is designed for – eg bus stops enable commuting
- what we believe the spaces are for – eg waiting, shelter
- how the spaces are used – eg book exchange, mural, social places to hang out.³⁴

When people are using spaces in ways that don’t conform with expectations, some people find that threatening.

Consider the fair provision and use of space. Reflect on the following:

- How is space provided?
- Who decides how spaces should be used?
- How can we increase the range of uses for spaces?
- Whose voices are heard?

³² Schindler, M. (22 January 2024) The problem with large-scale housing developments. Newsroom. Accessed from <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/01/22/the-problem-with-large-scale-housing-developments/>

³³ Hamiltonians love their parks article. Source: [https://hamilton.govt.nz/your-](https://hamilton.govt.nz/your-council/news/community-environment/its-official-hamiltonians-love-their-parks)

[council/news/community-environment/its-official-hamiltonians-love-their-parks](https://hamilton.govt.nz/your-council/news/community-environment/its-official-hamiltonians-love-their-parks)

³⁴ Simon Briercliffe, Using Lefebvre’s Triad. Source: <https://simonbriercliffe.com/2015/01/23/using-lefebvres-triad/>

4.4 Insights into action: play spaces

Insights	Action
Consider a child's perspective	Use play advocates to facilitate engagement with tamariki and rangatahi Value the way that children already use space
Value unstructured play	Provide & promote play resources
Balanced perception of risk	Influence play providers – including parents
Equity of access	Promote discussion on play equity ³⁵



Figure 4 A public park with a shallow water feature where people are wading and playing. A large, open metal structure provides partial shade over the water. The background includes trees, grassy areas, and buildings under a clear blue sky. The Wind Tree Accessed from: <https://www.yourwaterfront.co.nz/news-feed/2019/3/22/water-water-everyw>

³⁵

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21594937.2019.1684145?journalCode=rjip20>

A close-up photograph of a person's hand pouring sand from a blue plastic cup onto a weathered wooden log. The sand is falling in a thick stream, creating a small pile on the wood. The background is blurred, showing an outdoor setting with greenery and a wooden structure. The text 'decisions made in the design process have social consequences' is overlaid in a white box with rounded corners.

decisions made in the design process have social consequences

Figure 5 A person wearing a blue shirt and white shorts pours sand from a blue cup onto a wooden structure. A red bucket sits nearby, suggesting active, tactile play in an outdoor setting. Image by Markus Spiske on Unsplash.

5 Facilitating Play

5.1 Enabling play in urban settings

Play can emerge whenever conditions allow, it is interwoven into everyday life, mo(ve)ments that feel alive, where anything is possible. Three out of four New Zealanders live in urban areas of more than 10,000 people with half concentrated in 4 cities. At a recent Green Pavlova conference, Dr Kate Bishop, co-editor of *Designing Cities with children and young people (2017)*³⁶ outlined the challenges for providers of quality play spaces. Childhood increasingly occurs 'indoors and in private spaces', and children have less contact with natural environments. We are still learning how to design nourishing environments.

Urban renewal projects don't generally cater for children, who occupy 'leftover' real estate to create their own fun. Children need champions for the cause of play.

'Design is a social act – outdoor space is an active physical envelope and decisions made in the design process have social consequences'

Dr Kate Bishop

Designers and providers need to understand:

- The people: consult or co-design with children and young people³⁷
- The characteristics of the place
- How the people and place do or might interact - what the possibilities are.

5.2 Facilitating play

People: parents, teachers³⁸, caregivers, siblings can facilitate play.

Playworkers³⁹ provide passive oversight and support where necessary.

The following may all impact on children's opportunities to play freely:

- Attitudes and valuing play impact on children's access to opportunities
- The weighing of benefits of play vs perceived risks⁴⁰
- Community tolerance of children playing is vital⁴¹
- Playtime at school is freely chosen and therefore valuable
- Parental attitudes to nature and outdoor play⁴²

³⁶ Bishop, K & Corkery, L (Eds), (2017) *Designing Cities with Children and Young people*.

³⁷ Carrol, P & Witten, K. (2025) *Child's play: Involving kids in the design of public spaces*, Architecture Now.

³⁸ Sport Canterbury, *Being active-parents and caregivers*. Source: <https://www.activecanterbury.org.nz/being-active/parents-and-caregivers/>

³⁹ What is Playwork? The Playwork Foundation. Source: <https://playwork.foundation/what-is-playwork/>

⁴⁰ International Play Association- Declaration on the Importance of Play. Source: <https://ipaworld.org/ipa-declaration-on-the-importance-of-play/>

⁴¹ Sellgren, K, *Fear of Intolerance Stops Children 'Playing Out'*; BBC News online (2013) Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-23588941>

⁴² McFarland, A. L., Zajicek, J. M., & Waliczek, T. M. (2014). *The Relationship between Parental Attitudes toward Nature and the Amount of Time Children Spend in*

Environments impact on play:

- Design of the built environment, [eg] streetscape, playgrounds and parks⁴³
- The existence and accessibility of natural environments including water, bushland and open space⁴⁴
- Mara Hūpāra, [See Case Study below] developed with guidance from Harko Brown, incorporates traditional Māori play elements.⁴⁵

Outdoor Recreation. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 46(5), 525–539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2014.11950341>

⁴³ Child-friendly urban design - Observations on public space from Eindhoven (NL) and Jerusalem (IL) Published in Issuu on May 24, 2018. Source: https://issuu.com/bernardvanleerfoundation/docs/child-friendly_urban_design

⁴⁴ Hoffmann E, Barros H, Ribeiro AI. Socioeconomic Inequalities in Green Space Quality and Accessibility-

Evidence from a Southern European City. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2017 Aug 15;14(8):916. doi: 10.3390/ijerph14080916. PMID: 28809798; PMCID: PMC5580619.

⁴⁵https://wavesouthcanterbury.co.nz/media/4693/tmg_harkobrown160120.pdf



a sensory design methodology in playspace design to achieve a truly inclusive space

Figure 6 Two children are in a playground with various equipment including slides and climbing structures. Both children are using mobility aids; one is seated in a specialised stroller, while the other is standing with the help of a walker. Accessed from <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/kapiti-news/news/inclusive-and-accessible-swing-gifted-to-kapiti-playground/JZZMJFQHH6YVPCPTLNZRCEKWMY/>

6 Play in specific conditions

6.1 Enabling inclusive play

A number of factors may exclude groups from participation in play. These can however be addressed.

Barrier	Enabler
Lack of provision for disabled children	Good access Toilet facilities Co-design with user groups
Lack of provision for children with invisible disability	interpretation panels, understanding of how to use materials social stories
Child poverty - impacting on access, transport, etc	Equity of provision across urban areas On transport routes Promote free, accessible and local play opportunities
Lack of fundamental physical skills	Understanding that everybody comes to play with a wide range of physical skills Provide opportunities that span the range
Cultural barriers or lack of information (especially for migrants and refugees)	Information – visual or translated Provide opportunities for all-family events with play Work with communities to establish needs

⁴⁶ Source: <https://allplay.org.au/allplay-move/>

⁴⁷ Source: <https://www.playscapecreations.com.au/lions-park-gladstone/>

⁴⁸ Source: <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/accessibility-and-inclusion-case-studies/>

Allplay⁴⁶ is an initiative creating new pathways to inclusion, with a focus on children and young people typically not included in mainstream play activities. Based on extensive collaborative research, the programmes offered includes AllPlay Footy, AllPlay Dance and AllPlay Learn.

Design can also influence who uses spaces and how they are used, as evidenced in the Gladstone Lions Park, Queensland, using:

*..a sensory design methodology in playspace design to achieve a truly inclusive space – beyond accessibility...And at night the space becomes a sensory wonderland again, with motion activated lighting and misting allowing for increased use of this destination playspace.*⁴⁷

6.2 Inclusive play

CASE STUDY: Inclusive design for play - Laura Irene Reserve Playground⁴⁸

Promoting designs⁴⁹ that enable all children to play is an integral part of good playground planning.

Lorna Irene Reserve playground on the Kapiti Coast is a revamped playground that is truly accessible to children of all abilities. Designed after consultation with potential users, communication experts, and

⁴⁹ Source: <https://parksupplies.co.nz/2025/04/embracing-neurodiversity-in-playground-design/>

community, one of the key elements is the provision of Communication Boards, or Coreboards.⁵⁰ These meet the need for non-verbal or neurodiverse tamariki and rangatahi to make 'meaningful use' of the playground.

Coreboards enable children to understand and make use of the playground using communication styles they know. The Coreboards feature both English and Te Reo along with symbols.

The playground also includes:

- an in-built ground trampoline
- musical equipment
- accessible playground equipment
- a variety of sensory elements like mirrors, windows, musical walls, and ground games. [Sensory play is particularly important for children with high sensory needs including many neurodiverse children]
- wheelchair accessible seesaw, roundabout, and tower and swings.

The full Sport NZ Case Study is available on their website under Accessibility and Inclusion case studies.⁵¹

Case Study: Sensory experiences at The Southern Centre⁵²

The Centre is a unique multi-sensory environment for people of all ages and abilities, aimed particularly at people with learning differences, cerebral palsy, autism⁵³, multiple disabilities, anxiety or stress-related problems. Sensory options at the Centre are all aimed at stimulating an individual's senses through smell, touch, light and sound.

Insights into action: Inclusive play

Insights	Action
Co-design	Work with community of users/family and whanau, Experts in relevant field (communication, access)
Multiple modes of communication	Coreboards, descriptions, videos, stories relating to what equipment, materials are available opportunities for sensory play
Equity of access	Physical access Play opportunities that suit the child's needs and abilities Interpretation
Facilitation	Expert play facilitators with understanding of different 'modes' of play

⁵⁰ Source: <https://cornerstonetherapy.co.nz/the-coreboard-explained/>

⁵¹ <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/accessibility-and-inclusion-case-studies/>

⁵² <https://recandsport.ccc.govt.nz/play-sport/southern-centre-multi-sensory-experience/>

⁵³ <https://www.seashelltrust.org.uk/how-do-sensory-activities-help-autism/>

6.3 Play in urban settings

Case Study: Changing the rules to enable play

Play streets have been happening informally since 2019 and in 2021 Waka Kotahi piloted 20 play streets⁵⁴ programmes across seven Councils.

Play Streets allow communities to open quiet local streets for a few hours at a time for neighbours to spend time together and for children to play. Community organisers can apply to councils to temporarily restrict traffic to make these events possible and safe.

Regulatory changes⁵⁵ announced in July 2023 gave councils the ability to support Play Streets through a provision called Community Streets. Play Street Guidelines can be found on the NZTA website.⁵⁶

“The Play Streets pilot showed us the benefits of empowering residents to use their local street spaces as play spaces. These resident-led events also helped neighbours get to know each other, creating stronger community ties.”⁵⁷

Ali Filipaina, Chair, Parks, Arts, Community and Events Committee Auckland City



Figure 7 Image accessed from <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/kapiti-news/news/inclusive-and-accessible-swing-gifted-to-kapiti-playground/JZZMJFQHH6YVPCPTLNZRCEKWMY/>

⁵⁴ Waka Kotahi and Sport New Zealand, alongside councils, regional sports trusts, Healthy Families NZ, and other organisations, have been working together since 2019 to support Play Streets in Aotearoa. Sport NZ Play Streets. Source: <https://sportnz.org.nz/get-active/ways-to-get-active/play/play-streets/>

⁵⁵ NZ Transport Agency Play Streets. Source: <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/roads-and-rail/play-streets/>

⁵⁶ NZTA Play Street Guidelines. Source: <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/resources/play-street-guidelines/>

⁵⁷ Auckland Council, Whānau and tamariki supported to reclaim streets for play published online April 2022. Source: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2022/04/whanau-and-tamariki-supported-to-reclaim-streets-for-play/>

Case Study: Wynyard Quarter Auckland

The re-development of Wynyard Quarter⁵⁸ on Auckland's waterfront transformed an industrial service area to a medium density, mixed use zone (retail, business, hospitality, housing) that benefits everyone. One goal was to enable recreation.⁵⁹

Key elements include:

- Play elements⁶⁰ built into the environment – balancing, water play, swimming, playgrounds, basketball courts,
- Rain garden network including native plants and green spaces
- Limited vehicle access and no curbs enabling a shared space approach.⁶¹

Insights to Action: Play in Urban Settings

Insights	Action
Having a vision	Weave play into all public spaces – from design to management.
Integrated planning	Work collaboratively with different stakeholders – urban design, housing developers, traffic engineers, parks planners, play advocates
Create space close to where people live	Prioritise play space for those in high density housing as a foundation for healthy and happy communities Design activity-friendly streets
Every space is a play space	Include a range of different play types in space development – water, movement, sound, green, artistic, observational, individual, group, bats and balls Allow a wide variety of places to be used for play

⁵⁸ Global Designing Cities Initiative, Case Study: Jellicoe St.; Auckland, New Zealand. Source: <https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/global-street-design-guide/streets/special-conditions/post-industrial-revitalization/case-study-jellicoe-st-auckland-new-zealand/>

⁵⁹ Case Study Jellicoe Street Auckland. Accessed from <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/roads-and-rail/play-streets/> [https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/global-street-design-guide/streets/special-](https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/global-street-design-guide/streets/special-conditions/post-industrial-revitalization/case-study-jellicoe-st-auckland-new-zealand/)

[conditions/post-industrial-revitalization/case-study-jellicoe-st-auckland-new-zealand/](https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/global-street-design-guide/streets/special-conditions/post-industrial-revitalization/case-study-jellicoe-st-auckland-new-zealand/)

⁶⁰ Our Auckland News published 2023 online: 8 Fun ways for kids to play at Wynard Quarter. Source: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2021/11/7-fun-ways-for-kids-to-play-at-wynard-quarter/>

⁶¹ Architecture Now, published July 2012., Jellicoe Street, North Wharf Promenade and Silo Park. Source: <https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/jellicoe-street-north-wharf-promenade-and-silo-park/>

6.4 Wild play

Case Study: Unlocking potential Wild play in Pōneke⁶²

Wellington City Council Urban Ecology Manager Daniella Biagio is well travelled but still believes Pōneke is the best place in the world to raise her kids because the city is teaming with biodiversity and an extensive network of nature reserves.

“We get to have it all. From hiking in Khandallah Park in the morning to enjoying free play at the beach by evening. My kids walk barefoot in the grass, climb trees and swim in the ocean – all free of serious threats like spiders or snakes.”

Many people believe that play is confined to formal play areas. Yet Wellington’s parks, reserves, and beaches are perfect play spaces in disguise, filled with biodiversity, sounds, textures and secret spaces waiting to be found.

“In our inner city, I think about our beaches, city parks, murals, sculptures, curious alleyways and climbing trees — all perfect for inviting playful moments.”

Case Study : Te Mara Hūpāra

Te Mara Hupara Playground⁶³ in Auckland offers a return to traditional Māori games in a natural physical environment .

...after interactive workshops with local school children, it became apparent that a ngā aro tākaro playground was an ideal fit with the restoration of Te Auaunga Awa.

Mark Lewis, Boffa Miskell landscape architect

For a detailed case study on Te Māra Hūpāra, See Sport NZ Case Studies.⁶⁴

Insights into Action: Wild Play

Insights	Action
Value unstructured play	Provide and promote play resources
Balanced perception of risk	Influence play providers –including parents
Child-friendly communities	Activity-friendly stress Wild play places
Urban Design	creating informal spaces children can use
Equity of access	Promote discussion on play equity

⁶² Source: <https://wellington.govt.nz/news-and-events/news-and-information/our-wellington/2024/11/unlocking-wild-play-potential-in-poneke>

⁶³ NZ Institute of Landscape Architects, News, Published 2019, Mara Hupara playground - a return to traditional Māori games. Source:

<https://nzila.co.nz/news/2019/04/mara-hupara-playground-a-return-to-traditional-mao>

⁶⁴ Sport NZ Case Study (2023), Te Māra Hūpāra Playground. Source: <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/te-mara-hupara-playground/>



When I think about the perfect outdoor space, there is always safe access to water, moveable parts and lots of space...

Figure 8 Two boys building a teepee out of sticks and some fabric.
Accessed from <https://wellington.govt.nz/news-and-events/news-and-information/our-wellington/2024/11/unlocking-wild-play-potential-in-poneke> image from Chantelle Gibbon

6.5 Play in disasters

During disasters the routine of children's lives is totally disrupted, with every day bringing new challenges. Schools are often closed, the family home may be affected, and the normal everyday events that bring feelings of safety and security often cease abruptly. At times like this; during floods, earthquakes or other natural disasters, recreation centres and their staff may play an important role in offering support to families, distributing necessary everyday goods such as clothing and bedding, and eventually becoming a temporary setting for a local school.

Case study: Wairoa Community Centre: after Cyclone Gabrielle:

“trying to cope after a cyclone, is different from anything else”

Sara Bird, Centre Manager

In Wairoa, a small town of around 8,500, the people know far too much about managing after a disaster. Sara Bird, from Sport Hawkes Bay, is manager at the Centre, and generously shared her story.

“The river came up, water had gone right under the facility, there was silt and stuff under the building, power and communications were out. There was nowhere to go, the town was cut off.

At the beginning, we spent hours and hours at our own families', friends' and relations' homes digging silt and ripping out the insides of houses. Physically, mentally, and emotionally it was really draining.

When we returned to work (2 weeks after the cyclone) we all came together, and one of our worker's brothers cooked yummy kai, and we tidied up the facility, and shared our thoughts and feelings. Normality for people is going to work, and people need normality.”

But Sara had checked first. “Are you Ok to come to work?” Because if not, she wasn't going to open the Centre.

“... [as staff] you need to be ‘present’ if you are to give something happy. So, the focus was all about ‘How do I support my staff?’”

Sara Bird, Centre Manager.

The Centre soon became a distribution centre for clothing and bedding, with spaces dedicated to different purposes. An ex-staff member distributed donations from Raglan.

The staff put their focus on supporting schools, many displaced and without any equipment. They welcomed in Nūhaka School [which is 30 km away, and], they a classroom in the function room.

Nūhaka School was in their temporary classroom for several months.

Staff applied for funding on behalf of schools through the Sport New Zealand Tū Manawa fund to assist schools with replacement of lost equipment, and to purchase new equipment.

Now, the gymnasium has netball night leagues and pickleball running.

Community events for whanau let people see what services might be able to help and creates a safe place for people to chat to others. Sara and her staff are still in recovery mode, and it will be a long road, she said.

The story reminds us how staff roles change in response to people's needs. It highlights the focus on mental wellbeing as a priority for exhausted people; and how valuable practical, hand-on support can be.

'We contacted every school we could, to find out what the needs and wants were. I told the staff "Don't worry about your contract, worry about our teachers and our staff, and support [them] how you can." We ran a Fun Day alongside Wairoa schools for students and staff. In one school, 70 children were from families displaced by the events. They needed some normality.

Insights into action; Play in disasters

Insights	Action
Places - multi-use, equipped for a range of uses, community hub	Design multi-use adaptable facilities with spaces that can be used for a range of purposes. Be equipped to manage and support displaced people and the preparation of food. Create welcoming spaces where people can meet, connect, and reaffirm their sense of community. Have flexible, portable equipment that supports play and informal recreation.
People - mental wellbeing	Make staff and their whanau welfare a higher priority than work. Focus on family, housing safety and wellbeing first. Offer practical support. Train staff in effective active listening skills and approaches.
Communities – focus on those most in need	Place focus in the places most in need of support. Ask 'what's most needed now?'
Communication and Relationships - stakeholders, communities, networks etc	Access existing community networks. Use recreation networks as a foundation for community connections.

6.6 Rangatahi and play

We often make the mistake of assuming that play stops suddenly as children become young adults, but play is a lifelong activity - all that changes is the nature of the play.

Young people want to be able to have fun and be playful in a variety of ways. But some lack confidence, doubt their competence, are too busy and tired. What can we do to ensure that all rangatahi participate in activities that bring them joy?

Rangatahi participate in unique ways. Sport NZ have produced some great insights in one of their Active NZ Spotlight series.⁶⁵

Participation time and range of activities declines as rangatahi get older with fewer meeting the physical activity guidelines.⁶⁶ Rangatahi participate for fun, fitness and health. Being active makes young people happy⁶⁷ – and increased participation correlates with increased happiness.



Figure 9 source: Young woman hanging by her hands on play equipment, swining from one hoop to another. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/childrens-play>

⁶⁵ Sport NZ Spotlight on Rangatahi, source: <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/spotlight-on-rangatahi/>

⁶⁶ Smith M, Ikeda E, Hinckson E, Duncan S, Maddison R, Meredith-Jones K, Walker C, Mandic S. (2018). New Zealand's 2018 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Auckland, New Zealand: The

University of Auckland doi: 10.17608/k6.auckland.7295882

⁶⁷ Bailey-Michigan, L. (2018) Exercise fights depression, but what about if you're happy? Published online in Futurity. Source: <https://www.futurity.org/exercise-and-happiness-1724592-2/>

Case Study: Young Muslim women in outdoor recreation

Through the Women's Organisation of the Waikato Muslim Association (WOWMA) project and First Step Outdoors⁶⁸, young Muslim women are participating in culturally safe outdoor programmes that include climbing, abseiling, archery, and ziplining.

First Step Outdoors, Waikato worked collaboratively with Aliya Danzeisen, Lead Co-ordinator, WOWMA and National Co-ordinator of the Islamic Women's Council of NZ to develop the WOWMA Youth Programme.

“Many of these first-generation New Zealanders had protected lives, and hadn't experienced camping, cooking outside, swimming in rivers and other ‘typical Kiwi experiences’ “

Kate Parr, MD of First Step Outdoors.

Key elements of the programme include:

- an all-female staff and no outside people or males allowed on site
- programming around prayer breaks
- taking care to ensure appropriate halal food is provided
- supporting the girls with things that are challenging, especially relating to body image.

Mothers and Daughters camps reassured the mothers who were then

more willing to allow their daughters to participate.

First Steps Outdoors, Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand, Women's Organisation of the Waikato Muslim Association, Education Outdoors New Zealand, Recreation Aotearoa and Sport New Zealand have developed Good Practice Guidelines (GPGs) for organised outdoor activities that aren't currently covered by the Adventure Activities Regulations or the associated Activity Safety Guidelines (ASGs).

The full guidelines on Increasing Participation of Muslim women and girls, are available online.⁶⁹



Figure 10 Group of young Muslim women wearing hijabs with yellow lifejackets are standing beside an orange canoe on the banks of a river. Several are holding paddles.

<https://www.firststepoutdoors.com/activities.html>

⁶⁸ <https://www.firststepoutdoors.com/activities.html>

⁶⁹ <https://www.supportadventure.co.nz/assets/GPG-Increasing-Participation-of-Muslim-women-and-girls.pdf?vid=6>

6.7 Insights into Action: Rangatahi

Insights	Action
Enhance sense of Identity as a strength	Listen to young people; and act on what you hear Work with strengths and knowledge of young people Be educated/aware about culture, sexuality and gender, disabled rangatahi.
Tailored programmes for rangatahi	Target programmes/initiatives to those missing out Co-design with the specific needs of a group to deliver quality experiences Develop partnerships with knowledgeable groups
Take the initiative	Approach, ask, offer Reaching out to minority groups Create welcoming spaces and places

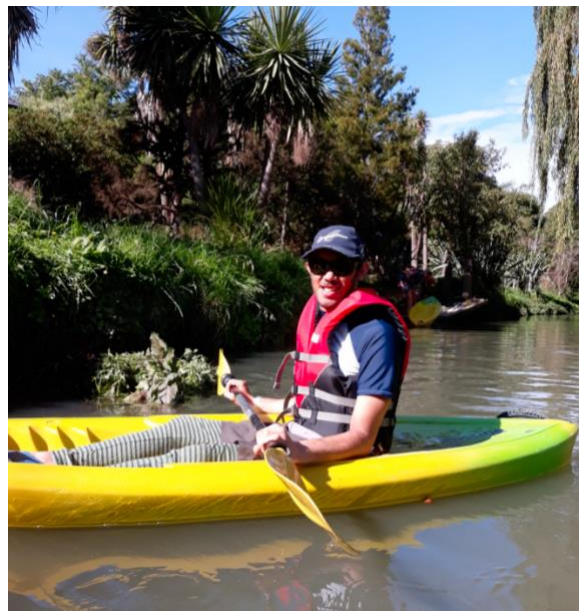


Figure 11 Young man wearing a red lifejacket, smiling at the camera. He sits in a bright yellow canoe on a river with bush in the background. learnactive.co.nz

7 Insights to action

The following insights to action are presented at the different levels of the socioecological model –individual, relational, community and societal.

7.1 Individual

Insights	Action
Imaginative and creative	Children direct their own play Other children are available to play with (or not) Children can access natural materials to play with
Free time	Children have free time Children can choose to play outside
Managed risk	Opportunities to learn through risk and failure

7.2 Relational/whanau

Insights	Action
Permission from parents and caregivers	Adults support and facilitate and actively give permission and time for children to play Value unstructured play Provide resources
Facilitation	Adults who support and assist communication Use play advocates to facilitate engagement with tamariki and rangatahi
Consider a child's perspective	Value the way that children already use space Listen to children's voices on play

7.3 Community

Insights	Action
Integrated planning and Co-design	Work collaboratively with different stakeholders – urban design, housing developers, traffic engineers, parks planners, play advocates Work with community of users/family and whanau, Experts in relevant field (communication, access, etc)
Urban Design: Every space is a play space	Include a range of different play types in space development Allow a wide variety of places to be used for play; activity friendly streets Create spaces close to where people live
Facilitation	Expert play facilitators with understanding of different 'modes' of play

7.4 Societal

Insights	Action
Policy	Policy and legislation that promotes and allows for play
Equity of access	Promote discussion on play equity ⁷⁰ Consistent play opportunities across neighbourhoods Addressing barriers to play at all levels
Remove structural barriers to participation	Create accessible playgrounds, urban scapes, parks and open spaces with facilities
Mental models of play	Expand the view of play by showing alternative models of what play is, where it can occur, who is entitled to play

⁷⁰

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21594937.2019.1684145?journalCode=rjip20>

8 List of Insights Publications

Issue	Title	Publication
1	Outdoor Recreation in a super diverse NZ	November 2018
2	Active NZ 2017 – high level analysis	December 2018
3	Living Standards Framework	January 2019
4	Fight or Flight in the Red Zone	March 2019
5	Developing a Carbon inventory	April 2019
6	Aquatic Facility Design in the 21st Century	May 2019
7	Community Led Development	June 2019
8	Child's Play	July 2019
9	Invisible Disability	September 2019
10	Active Advocacy	October 2019
11	Celebrating Green Havens: Green Flag Awards	November 2019
12	Equity and Leisure	December 2019
13	Family Harm: Workplace Safety and Care	January 2020
14	Retrofitting Facilities	February 2020
15	Active Response I	March 2020
16	Active Response II: Level 4 Recreation	March 2020
17	Active Response III: Working from home	April 2020
18	Active Response IV: Cems and Cems	April 2020
19	Active Response V: Delivering Recreation online	April 2020
20	Active Response VI: thinking forward	April 2020
21	Neighbourhood Niche	April 2020
22	Wild Play	June 2020
22	Delivering Recreation online	April 2020
23	Check up: How's your facility performing?	December 2020

Issue	Title	Publication
24	Youth & Wellbeing	February 2021
25	Environmental Sustainability	March 2021
26	The Futures Project	April 2021
27	Older adults and recreation	June 2021
28	Urban Refuge	August 2021
29	Rangatahi & Active Recreation	October 2021
30	Te Tiriti Approach	December 2021
31	Re-creating recreation post-pandemic	April 2022
32	Mental Wellbeing Mindsets	June 2022
33	Recreation and Climate change	August 2022
34	Remember recreation	December 2022
35	Recruitment and Retention	March 2023
36	Recreation and Disasters	April 2023
37	Principles of Inclusion	July 2023
38	Essential Service: local government	October 2023
39	Water Safety	December 2023
40	Spatial Justice	February 2024
41	Recreation and AI	April 2024
42	Managing for Mitigation	July 2024
43	Making Facilities Hum	August 2024
44	Recreation is a social investment	December 2024
45	Creating Space for Girls and Women	February 2025
46	Aotearoa's Changing Face	April 2025
47	Enabling Benefits for all	July 2025

