

LEE LIMING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Recreational Spaces
for Older
Population¹

Senior Parks and
Intergenerational
Playgrounds

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Senior Parks and
Outdoor Fitness
Equipment

Few factors bring about successful ageing as having a physically active lifestyle.² Being physically active is a vital tenet of preventative health strategies and findings have shown that environmental context and design are effective in supporting this behavioural change. This understanding and health-consciousness in

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² D Warburton, C Nicol and S Bredin (2006) Health

benefits of physical activity: The evidence, Canadian Medical Association Journal 174(6):801-809.

today's generation of older adults may have engendered a recent rise in outdoor senior parks and playgrounds as a means to encourage physical activity in elderly people. In the USA, Asia and Europe including China, South Korea, Portugal and Spain, outdoor fitness equipment (OFE) in parks has become very popular. Senior parks present an alternative setting for older adults to exercise and to socialise – they are located outdoors, usually in or next to natural environments and comprise of different types of apparatus for exercise variety.

A Study on OFE from an Elderly's Perspective³

A qualitative study was conducted by Chow (2013) to gather the older adults' perception of OFE in parks. The study was conducted with semi-structured interviews with 55 senior fitness equipment users in two Taiwanese parks. The study demonstrated that besides physiological health benefits such as continued use and increased range of kinaesthetic motions, increased heart function and reduced joint and muscles aches, there were also social and psychological benefits in using OFE including mood improvement, enjoyment from interacting with other users and building friendships.

OFE in urban areas are an important setting for older adults to form social ties with neighbours, improve emotional well-being and a sense of community integration. Pragmatically, the upkeep and placement of the equipment that takes into consideration the long-term installation, local climate and context is also vital for use of the equipment. Additionally, instructional signs indicating equipment use, user types and age-specific restrictions are useful in encouraging appropriate use. Box 1 summarizes the study's key findings.

Box 1: Perspectives, experiences and suggestions of elderly that use OFEs in the two study parks:

A supplementary activity and an additional feature in the park

OFEs were not the main reason for visiting the park but as a 'supplementary activity' when they came for group exercises or to walk. Perception was that OFE were 'additional features' in the park and fun to use, hence, some saw OFE as a 'playground' rather than an exercise equipment.

For enhancing health and as a past-time

Primary function of OFE is to exercise and improve health, it also offered a way to pass time and relieve boredom. OFEs were

³ H Chow (2013) Outdoor fitness equipment in parks: A qualitative study from older adults' perceptions,

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-1216.pdf> accessed 15 August 2015.

perfectly located in parks, which allowed respondents to enjoy the natural environment while they exercise. Respondents were not able to identify specific physical improvements from using OFE, but they agreed that it led to better health in general as they were exercising.

For stretching, rehabilitation and to improve mood

OFEs were used to stretch to reduce muscle stiffness and soreness, from chronic pains in shoulders and back. Some respondents reported using OFE to treat injuries or provide rehabilitation, e.g. to regain lower-limb strength after a car accident. Respondents reported feeling good and happy after using the equipment.

OFE area as a social setting

Respondents chatted to others and developed friendships with other people who regularly visited and used the OFE.

To implement more OFEs (requires more space)

Respondents felt that more equipment may be needed during peak hours of use, as it was embarrassing to ask people using the equipment to give up their turn. While the need for more equipment is identified, there is a recognition that there is a limited space and that equipment cannot be placed too close to one another.

Concerned for safety and suitability for children (but not a critical concern)

Overall, the respondents did not feel unsafe using the OFE apart from some concerns about falling. However, some felt that it was very dangerous for children to use the OFE.

Maintenance and management

This is a huge concern for respondents. Regular maintenance was needed to lubricate equipment and prevent rusting. Equipment on uneven ground did not provide stability and caused water accumulation after rain. Some respondents felt the equipment should be located under trees to provide shade and relief from the summer sun.

Operation of equipment: seniors have developed an individual style

When there is no instructions, seniors tend to make up their own way of using the equipment. They believed that so long as there is physical movement there would be health benefits.

Case Study: Taavetinpuiisto Park and Lapsett⁴

Taavetinpuiisto Park is a senior-friendly park in Helsinki, Finland, that provides older adults an outdoor place for low-impact exercise and a

specialising in play and have been developing playgrounds globally in Europe, Asia and the USA, with 600 sets of senior-friendly parks in Spain alone.

4 Lapsett Senior Sport Active Ageing, <http://www.lappset.com/global/en/Products/Sport/Senior-Sport---Active-Ageing> accessed 15 August 2015; Lapsett is a Finnish company set up in 1970,

social gathering space. Exercise equipment engages balance, muscles, reaction speed and joint mobility and are suitable for those with limited mobility or are wheelchair-bound. A 500m long, illuminated barrier-free access route around the park, lined with hand rails and granulated-rubber surfaces have been designed with senior's needs and safety in mind.

Lappsett, the developers of the park, implemented their trademark *Sona* interactive game system that consisted of a brightly coloured rubber platform, the 'Sona Arch' with motion-sensors and built-in speakers for music, dance and play. *Sona* at Taavetinpuisto Park was installed with age-appropriate music that catered to their elderly visitors. The park was realised in collaboration with the Miina Sillanpää Foundation (which promotes activity amongst Finnish seniors) and the City of Helsinki. The Foundation organises regular guided exercise sessions for senior park users, which provide an added element of sociability in the park.

In order to achieve an optimal park design, besides the exercise equipment, details such as materiality, outdoor furniture, trash bins and layouts are considered in design plans for a holistic look at a senior outdoor recreational space. Examples of Lappsett's design recommendations include the introduction traditional elements such as barbeque pits that

can reinforce neighbourliness (this is particular to the Finnish culture, traditional elements have to be assessed contextually), seats with armrest at comfortable height to ease sitting and getting up, community flower beds as an aesthetic or functional element, use of bright colours to create a more accessible park and to segment the park for those with seeing limitations, suitable equipment heights to prevent falls and the use of wood as a versatile material that feels comforting and warm.

Intergenerational Playgrounds

In traditional designs, playgrounds are targeted at a younger demographic and tend to segregate the ages when the setting is ideal in providing a play space for all ages and to bring the community together. Currently, children's playground welcome older adults to sit, supervise and socialise (passive involvement). How can we re-design playgrounds to encourage the older adults to engage in active play as well?

Evidence suggests that the physical challenges of playground use significantly help older adults improve balance, coordination, speed and regain confidence in their bodies. According to playground manufacturer, Goric, intergenerational playgrounds and shared play

can offer a multitude of physical and less tangible benefits to young children and their older adult guardians such as ‘appropriate autonomy, physical exercise, sensory stimulation, expressing empathy (adults) and learning how to express feelings (children), social engagement and play (adults) and learning through play (children), sharing stories and values (adults) and increasing cultural knowledge (children)’⁵.

*Case Study: Lauderhill Community Playground*⁶

Lauderhill community playground (Florida, USA) is a 2500 square feet community-designed and built intergenerational play area. The playground provides an inclusive place to play for more than 1200 children, their parents and grandparents, where all ages and abilities can engage in physical activity. It comprises a 600m walking trail dotted with stand-alone exercise stations (targeted at adults and senior citizens) that curves around a play structure for adults to keep a watch out for their children while they work out. The updated play structure is developed with experts from KaBOOM! a national non-profit dedicated to

‘saving play’, which ‘recognises the growing problem of today’s children spending less time outside than any past generation, a fact that is detrimental to their health, achievement levels, and well-being’; these consequences also have a trickle-down effect on their older adult guardians.

The playground includes other communal park elements such as picnic table, benches, shaded areas and enhanced walking paths. Elderly park users have reported that the playground got rid of their excuse of not having time to exercise themselves because they had to watch the children. Instead of placing kids in front of the television, while they busied themselves at home, the caregivers (and older adults) chose to bring the children outside, where they could get exercise alongside their children.

*A Study on Elderly’s Perspective on Playground Use*⁷

A qualitative study was conducted by Mitchell et al (2007) to gather the older adults’ perception of using playgrounds. The study was conducted with semi-structured interviews

5 Intergenerational playgrounds promote common ground for kids ages 1 to 99
<http://goric.com/intergenerational-playgrounds-promote-common-ground-for-kids-ages-1-to-99/>
 accessed 15 August 2015.

6 Playgrounds for Adults
<http://www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/info->

03-2012/new-playgrounds-older-adults.html accessed 15 August 2015.

7 V Mitchell, E Elton, L Clift and H Moore (2007) Do older adults want playgrounds?
<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/2970/1/PUB502.pdf>
 accessed 15 August 2015 accessed 15 Aug 2015.

and discussion groups involving 125 older adults aged 58 to 100 in Leicestershire, UK. The study demonstrated that there was considerable interest in the idea of using playgrounds, even though the respondents may not already be using playgrounds. A number of social barriers to playground use were identified (Box 2); it is highlighted that an ‘all-inclusive’ playground has to consider more than ‘hardware’ (age-friendly design and sturdy equipment) but also understanding the social and psychological context and needs of older adults and their younger dependents in using playgrounds.

Box 2: Factors that encourage and discourage playground use for elderly

Barriers that discourage use:

Fear of youth, vandalism and dirtiness of parks

Fear of rowdiness or bullying from youths was a key deterrent. General upkeep, tidiness and organisation of the park amenities and playground had to be in place before use was even considered.

Risk of potential injury and distrust of benefits

Fear of falling was a major concern. Consequences of getting hurt, possible ‘long-term loss of independence was a risk respondents were not willing to take’. Those already physically inactive were also less inclined to believe the benefits from using playgrounds.

Perception of playground as for ‘kids’ and feeling of embarrassment

Perception of playground as for children only and that adults was prohibited, even if it was allowed; there was a sense of embarrassment to use it. Fear of accusations of paedophilia, particularly towards men and towards those not accompanying children.

Factors that encourage use:

Controlled supervised environment

Presence of a playground supervisor or someone of authority was viewed as important. Playground would be looked after (clean and tidy) and users can be instructed how to use equipment with or without the company of children.

To use playground when accompanying children

Older adults shared that using the playground was their means of participating in activity with grandchildren and that they would think to use a playground only under this intergenerational context.

Organised visits and activities

These would provide the context, social connection and inspiration to use the playground, especially when not accompanying children. These would also decrease fear of youths, embarrassment and suspicion (especially towards male users). A group leader who would motivate people was also emphasized as an important factor to encourage use.

Suitable play equipment and supporting amenities

Suitably challenging equipment has to be provided for a range of physical abilities. Where senior friendly play equipment is available, an encouraging atmosphere through the use of positive or instructional signage, and supporting amenities such as seats and toilets should be provided.

Source: D Warburton, C Nicol and S Bredin (2006) Health benefits of physical activity: the evidence, Canadian Medical Association Journal 174(6):801-809; Y Michael, M Green, S Farquhar (2006) Neighborhood design and active aging, Health and Place 12:734-740; H Chow (2013) Outdoor fitness equipment in parks: A qualitative study from older adults' perceptions, <http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-13-1216.pdf> accessed 15 August 2015; V Mitchell, E Elton, L Clift and H Moore (2007) Do older adults want playgrounds? <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/2970/1/PUB502.pdf> accessed 15 August 2015; KaBOOM! <http://kaboom.org/> accessed 15 August 2015; Intergenerational playgrounds promote common ground for kids ages 1 to 99, <http://goric.com/intergenerational-playgrounds-promote-common-ground-for-kids-ages-1-to-99/> accessed 15 August 2015; Playgrounds for Adults <http://www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/info-03-2012/new-playgrounds-older-adults.html> accessed 15 August 2015.