

## Kidsafe Playground Conference

19-21 April 2010 Perth

Child's Play: Reinvigorating our Parks & Playgrounds

Expert Workshop Summary

Facilitators: Dr Lisa Wood, Dr May Carter and Dr Karen Martin

### BACKGROUND

One of the conference options on the afternoon of the first day was a participatory workshop on children's play spaces. The discussion centered on good play spaces, factors that facilitate and hinder quality play spaces and playgrounds, and defining strategies for addressing barriers and providing creative play spaces.

**Specifically, the workshop aims were to:**

1. draw out perceptions and experiences of 'good play spaces for children';
2. identify "real world " factors that facilitate or hinder development and reinvigoration of quality play spaces and playgrounds;
3. gather views on how to counter some of the barriers (real and perceived) to providing more creative play spaces; and
4. enable experience from the field to contribute to an understanding about children's play spaces.

The workshop also sought to provide the gathered experts with the opportunity to identify issues to be explored in research relating to opportunities and barriers (real and perceived) to creative play within parks and playgrounds (UWA Child's Play grant). There is a lack of research and literature to date capturing some of the real world issues that arise in communities relating to play spaces for children. Moreover, the views of children and those working with children in settings in which they play (including schools, child care centres, parks) are often overlooked in research.

This document provides a summary of the workshop discussion and the themes and issues that emerged.

### WHAT IS PLAY?

The initial workshop discussion focused on the definition of play, and key ideas associated with the term play. Discussion resulted in identification of three main play concepts including; 1) definition- the physical and emotional role of play, 2) the relationship between play and social interaction, and 3) the setting or environment in which play takes place. The mixed range of participants enhanced this discussion – for instance those involved in early learning or child development offered a different perspective to those involved in the design or provision of playgrounds.

The following figure summarises the elements of play identified and highlights the multi-faceted nature of children’s play; as such, there was discussion around the need for play spaces that accommodate and encourage the multiple physical and emotional attributes of play.

Description	Social interaction	Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Freedom</li> <li>•Fun</li> <li>•Imaginative</li> <li>•Creative</li> <li>•Exploratory</li> <li>•Discovery</li> <li>•Challenge</li> <li>•Adventure</li> <li>•Stimulating</li> <li>•Exciting</li> <li>•Moving</li> <li>•Fantasy</li> <li>•Investigate</li> <li>•Experiment</li> <li>•Unstructured</li> <li>•Leisure</li> <li>•Curiosity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Roleplaying – own, group</li> <li>•Self chosen</li> <li>•Self directed</li> <li>•Meet others</li> <li>•Sharing</li> <li>•Socialising with friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Secret place</li> <li>•Variety of environments</li> <li>•Experimenting with nature</li> <li>•Play as work</li> <li>•Exercise/physical</li> </ul>

Figure 1: What is play?

### DO WE HAVE A BUBBLEWRAP GENERATION?

Workshop participants were asked indicate (on a physical ‘continuum’ within the room) if they felt that today’s child generation were hindered in their play opportunities by parental and societal fears or treated the same way as previous generations. As summarised below, there was a wide spectrum of views along this continuum.

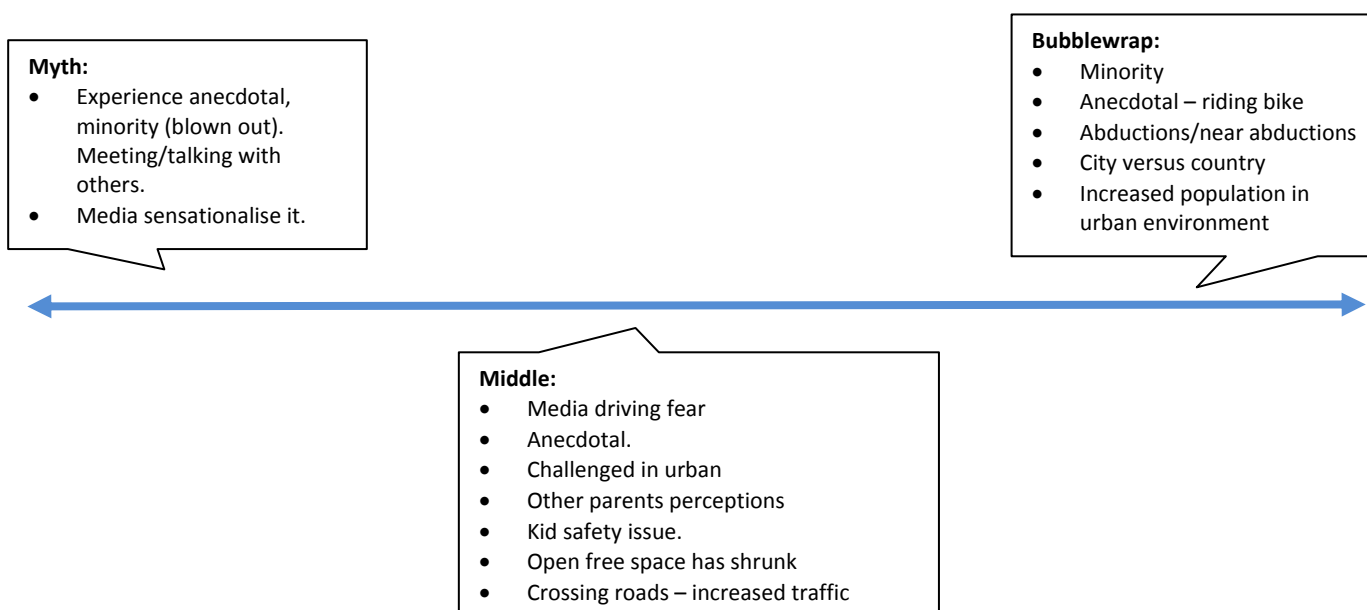


Figure 2: The Bubblewrap continuum

## PARANOID PARENTING AND CHILDREN'S PLAY- WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Factors potentially influencing the onset of the 'bubblewrap' generation were considered. The main issues for parents identified during discussion included fear of child injury, bullying, and stranger danger. The role of the media in developing and allaying the fears and ideas to reduce paranoia and increase park safety was raised and discussed (see Figure 3)

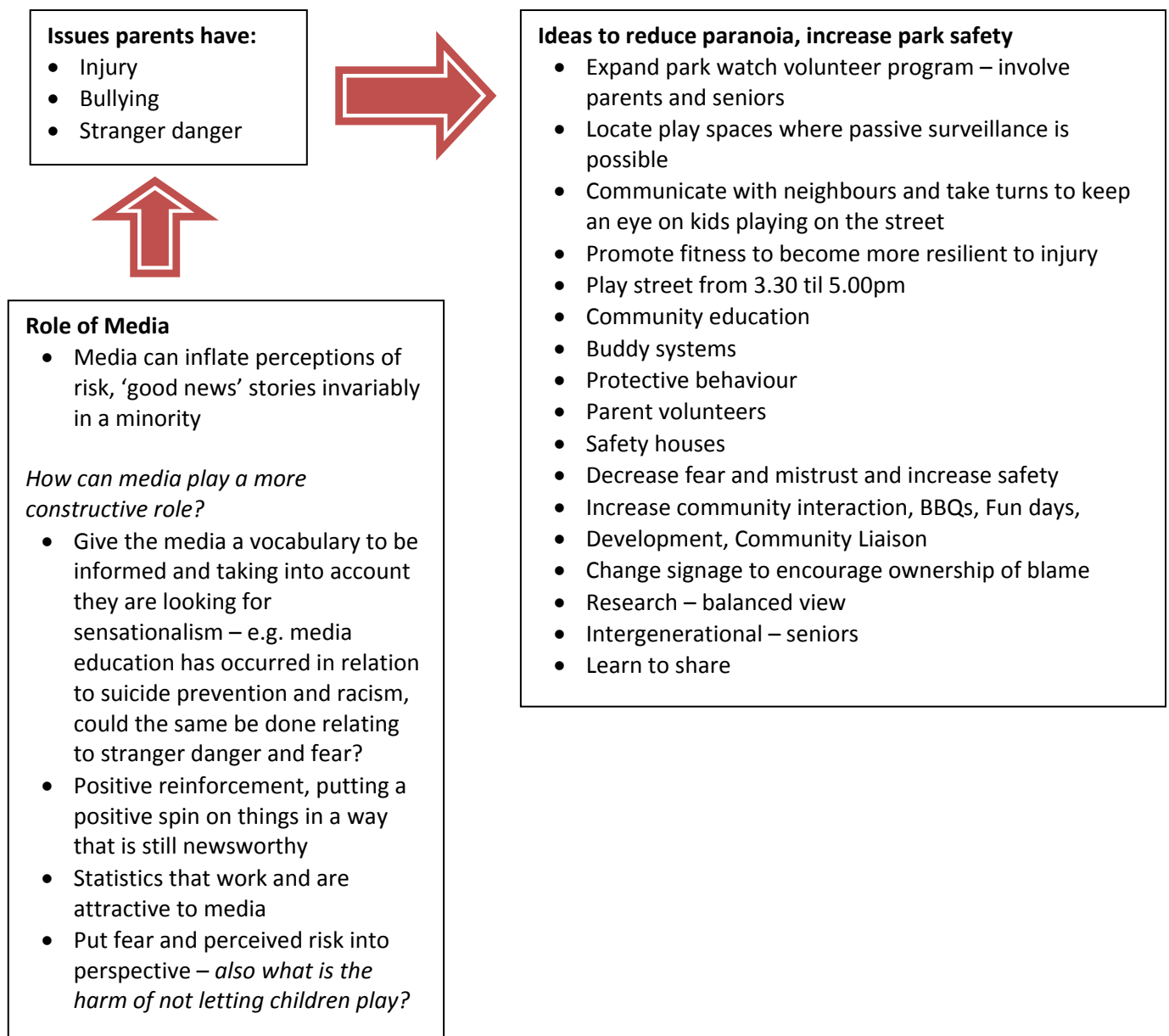


Figure 3: Reducing parental fears in childhood play

## WHAT CHARACTERISES 'IDEAL', 'GOOD' AND 'BAD' PLAY SPACES?

A group activity involved participants reviewing a selection of photographs and images to identify characteristics of 'good' or 'bad' play spaces.

### Characteristics of the most ideal play spaces include:

- Being accessible to all
- Having different levels to explore
- Having good visibility
- Containing natural elements
- Possessing a large variety of spaces for play
- Possessing a large range of activities
- Appealing to different senses
- Encouraging social play
- Being made from natural colours and materials
- Being inviting and enticing
- Having interaction with water
- Not being controlled but being open
- Being vibrant, dynamic
- Having moveable elements
- Being unique
- Including trees to climb
- Appeals to a variety of ages
- Contains hiding holes, sand, boulders and trees to climb

### Other characteristics or features of good play spaces were those that:

- ✓ Are vibrant and have organic and moveable elements
- ✓ Are exploratory
- ✓ Possess natural environment, all wood, moveable parts, trees, bush, different elements
- ✓ Have a path to follow
- ✓ Provide imaginative play opportunities and some risk taking
- ✓ Contain moveable loose materials, natural timbers, balancing challenges, pathways, contrast with surrounds
- ✓ Include a sense of discovery and adventure
- ✓ Incorporate a range of activities
- ✓ Are unique
- ✓ Provide for active play, e.g. skate park, bike tracks, basketball hoop

### Play spaces considered to be less than ideal were those which:

- ✗ Were too safe
- ✗ Had no shade and could become hot
- ✗ Were close to a main road/s
- ✗ Had single use or were restrictive and included limited tasks
- ✗ Were all open and flat, exposed
- ✗ Were unattractive, bland and unimaginative

### CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO MORE ACTIVE AND NATURE BASED PLAY

Throughout the workshop a number of challenges and barriers were identified – these included:

*Becoming a more litigious society* – Councils and Schools increasingly concerned about litigation relating to playground injury or incidents. Even though there have been very few incidents of councils or schools being sued in Australia, there is a perception of risk and this fosters more cautious and sometimes boring play environments

*Stranger danger and cotton wool kids* – as outlined above, this is also an area in which perceptions of risk can differ from the reality but perceptions nonetheless matter and impact on where and how children can play. The role of the media in fuelling this anxiousness was discussed

*Inadequate opportunity for natural play* – some participants felt that there is not enough access to places where kids can play in a more natural setting within the metropolitan area. Related to this is the fact that children have less opportunity than past generations to create things from nature eg log and stick cubby houses, playing in creeks, playing with stones and other natural objects etc

*Parental availability and attitudes* - the busyness of families and working parents was noted as a factor contributing to less time spent by children in parks and playgrounds. Parents often also want some downtime for themselves when they take children to a park/playground – hence the popularity of those with cafes! The website letting parents know where you can buy coffee near to particular parks was mentioned as a creative strategy related to this.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

*Participants with further comments or queries relating to issues explored in this workshop are welcome to contact:*

Dr Lisa Wood                    [lisa.wood@uwa.edu.au](mailto:lisa.wood@uwa.edu.au)  
Dr Karen Martin              [karen.martin@uwa.edu.au](mailto:karen.martin@uwa.edu.au)  
Dr May Carter                 [mayc@upnaway.com](mailto:mayc@upnaway.com)