

Parents, housing and children's contact with nature in the city – presenting four “outdoor perspectives”

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Why study children's contact with nature in an urban context?

Playing outdoors in natural settings is one important feature of a 'good childhood'. Beside this commonly held belief, a growing body of research shows that contact with nature during upbringing can support healthy child development (Faber Taylor & Kuo 2006). Meanwhile work within the field of children's geographies highlights that spontaneous play outdoors is an endangered phenomenon, reflecting both changes in the socio-physical (and technical) environment and attitudes concerning childhood (Holloway & Valentine 2000; Skår & Krogh 2009).

Urbanisation is here to stay. This means that the first surroundings in life will likely provide proximity to people, shops, schools and traffic, but what about access to the green and blue spaces? With children having 'a small daily prism' (Hägerstrand 1970), the qualities and resources of the neighbourhood in general stand out as highly important for them. Facilitating children's encounters with nature is particularly challenging in the larger metropolitan areas.

Leaving the apartment in a medium and high density setting for a house in the suburbs with less traffic, and more gardens and open spaces is a prevailing norm among families with small children in a Swedish urban context, and elsewhere. Now there are signs that apartments in densely built inner-cities are growing in importance as places for families to live (Carrol, Witten & Kearns 2011; Karsten 2009). This development raises questions about the opportunities for children to spend time in and experience nature nearby their homes, in different parts of the city? While the compact city is prioritized in policy agendas, being put forward as an ideal form for reaching a more sustainable urban life, questions concerning open spaces and qualities of children's everyday life in the city is likely to be continuously debated. The study presented here provides to this debate giving insight to families reasoning about their everyday life in the city and possibilities for children's activities outdoors.

The following paper focuses on urban families and how parents view the importance of children's contact with nature. What opportunities have children coming in contact with natural settings, playing outdoors and moving independently where they live in different parts of the city? Is children's nature contact something that is sought-after by parents and does it affect housing preferences or how satisfied they are with their current neighbourhood?

Method

This paper draws from a study carried out within a dissertation work published in Swedish concerning urban children's relationships with nearby nature. In this study 29 parents of a total of 60 children were interviewed. The average age of

these children was 9 years. About half of the parents lived in inner city apartments in Gothenburg and the other half in suburban houses on the outskirts of Gothenburg, which is Sweden's second largest city with a population of more than half a million. This comparison is made with the aim of highlight differences and similarities in parents' views of two urban environments that, apparently at least, are distinguished in terms of accessibility to nature. On the whole the households in the two samples in the parental study are homogenous with regard to their ethnic background (they are predominantly Swedish) and their educational levels (the majority are highly educated).

Results and discussions

Although the parents generally speak in positive terms about children playing outdoors they still hold somewhat different views on why and how children's contact is important and on the kind of contact with nature they want to encourage. Their expressions are sorted into four typologies that partly also reflecting parents' views on their dwellings and their surrounding in relation to children's whereabouts and possibilities to reach nature.

- A *city-social outdoor perspective* characterized by 'drinking coffee in the park, or in the close yard, while watching the children play at the playground'. The city and its cultural life are very much sought after and if the parents like it there, they believe that their children also will.
- An *urban-eco outdoor perspective* characterized by 'taking the children on outings where they can build dens and watch birds. Contact with nature is important for creating a feeling of belonging and understanding environmental problems'.
- A *rural related outdoor perspective* characterized by 'children picking blueberries outside the yard and having their own horses. The area in which they live is not a randomly chosen suburb but likely also a place where the parents have family connections, maybe there own childhood grounds'.
- An *activity based outdoor perspective* characterized by 'boating during summers and downhill skiing during winter, it is important to let the children try different activities'.

The rural related outdoor perspective could be as seen as latent in the other perspective, especially among those living in the inner-city (mostly parents representing the first two perspectives) and is given vent to during summer visits to the second home. This results points at the importance of changing environments, not at least for the sake of children. The fact that the Gothenburg inner city is generally

perceived as a socially stable environment makes it an attractive milieu to live in with children. Access to different environment qualities such as snow, sun, warmth, less traffic, open space and calmness could temporarily be achieved in a society characterised by high levels of mobility. However of course this presupposes parents with financial resources. Contact with nature surrounding the second home has the potential to wake the interest of outdoor recreation among children, but these areas can not be discovered independently on an everyday basis, while most of the time still is spent in the neighbourhood. The parents also, therefore, stress the importance of local qualities such as patches of green, access to a semi-enclosed yard and parks in the inner-city, as well as a more active planning of spaces where children can come together in newly developed suburbs.

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