



# PLAY WOLLONGONG

BACKGROUND RESEARCH REPORT  
Adopted by Council 23 June 2014

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose of Play Wollongong**

Play Wollongong will provide the direction for the future of play in the City including the planning, development and management of play spaces based on a set of agreed principles within the resource allocation.

It is recognised that play can occur in a range of places, takes many forms and that people of all ages engage in play. Play can be facilitated through facilities such as public parks, natural areas, beaches, public swimming pools, playground equipment, outdoor exercise equipment, skate facilities, youth precincts, public art, ball courts, civic centres, and bicycle tracks. The quantity and variety of these play opportunities are largely afforded to the unique natural landscape of Wollongong, which distinguishes the City, as a regional platform for play.

As a Local Government Authority, Council is in a unique position to enable, enhance and promote play through a commitment to the provision of quality facilities and associated supporting infrastructure.

## UNDERSTANDING PLAY

### What is Play?

Wollongong City Council concurs with the International Play Association's (IPA) definition of 'play' as:

**“PLAY**, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter and education, is vital to develop the potential of all children.

**PLAY** is communication and expression, combining thought and action; it gives satisfaction and a feeling of achievement.

**PLAY** is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.

**PLAY** is a means of learning to live, not a mere passing of time.”

Play is recognised as a fundamental human right in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which states that the child has a right to leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities.

IPA reinforces the benefits of 'play' as being:

- an essential aspect for the physical and mental health of the child;
- a part of education;
- essential to social development, family and community life;
- vital for the development of a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and enjoyment; and
- a useful tool that enables interaction between children and people of all backgrounds.

### The Importance of Play

In recent years there has been a huge shift across European countries in recognising the importance of quality play opportunities for children and the benefits that this has on the holistic development of children. Currently European countries are leading the way in the delivery of innovative play spaces that offer stimulating and challenging opportunities. Government funding streams are supporting many trailblazing projects such as Playbuilders and Pathfinders (UK), and as such are setting precedents for other countries to follow in an attempt to ensure all children have access to quality provision of play opportunities within their communities. Trends across Australia are beginning to be influenced by these European play innovations and as time moves on, these world-leading findings will become best practice for all agencies associated with children across the world.

### Benefits of Play

Play facilitates the learning of life skills and offers a wide range of physical, social, and intellectual experiences. For this reason the provision of quality outdoor play spaces is vitally important in local communities. Through play, children develop the qualities necessary in adulthood, such as:

- problem solving;
- independence;
- self-esteem and self-awareness;
- respect for others and social skills;
- creativity and capacity to learn;
- resilience;
- spatial knowledge;
- flexibility and ability to deal with change;
- the ability to exercise choice and self-control;
- exploration of risk taking; and
- healthy lifestyles.

## Threats to Play

Access to autonomous independent play opportunities has decreased over the decades and continues to be compromised by social factors and adult perceptions. In comparison to the social environment of previous generations, today's society has changed and increasingly offers a reduction in opportunity for children to engage in play. This is for a number of reasons which include:

- Where previously children may have enjoyed a variety of play opportunities from within their own sizable backyards, the reduction in available backyard play space has established greater value on public open space as a vital environment for the facilitation of play, physical activity, community cohesion, health and wellbeing.
- Contemporary design of the suburban mega-house internalises activity. There is less regard for outdoor play space and the allocation of large amounts of internal space to passive recreation (ie home theatres, lounges, rumpus and computer rooms, courtyards and oversized garages for the storage of adult 'toys'). The lack of outdoor space leads to children being transported to formally organised activities and sports clubs.
- Sedentary entertainment like television, computer games and mobile electronic devices is felt to have a detrimental effect on the development of children's social skills and their ability to play. This is linked to the decreasing amount of physical activity undertaken by children and reflected in an increase in childhood obesity and poor mental health.
- The availability of open space is continually under pressure from development such as large shopping precincts and retail outlet sites with vast expanses of car parking competing with public open space in the use of land.
- Parental and societal fears for children's safety also means that children are over-protected from experiences that will support the development of their self-esteem and resilience. Through play, children are able to manage their own risks and acquire life skills.
- The media's tendency to broadcast instances of child abduction and harm to children has increased over the years and this has led to parental perception that cases have soared. Research shows that the percentage of cases has not increased in approximately 60 years, however the perception and fear of abduction and risk of harm inhibits parents from allowing their children to roam freely within the community.
- The increase in parked cars and traffic circulation in residential areas has further decreased children's opportunities to access play spaces near their homes. Busy roads limit children's safe access to play through creating impassable boundaries.



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## IMPLEMENTING BEST PRACTICE IN PLAY

### Best Play Objectives

When planning and designing play spaces there are a number of considerations. 'Best Play' which was the result of a research project carried out on children's play in 2000, still forms the foundation of the basic elements to include when aiming to offer play opportunities that focus on the benefits that children gain from their play. The objectives consider children's needs and wishes in relation to their play and suggest the following:

- Extend the control and choice that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.
- Recognise children's need to test boundaries and respond positively to that need.
- Manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.
- Maximise the range of play opportunities.
- Foster independence and self-esteem.
- Foster children's respect for others and offer opportunities for social interaction.
- Foster the child's wellbeing, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

### Play Space Design

Best practice in planning and designing play spaces ensures that children's play can meet the above objectives. In 2008 the UK Government recognised the importance of and need for quality play spaces and commissioned Play England to write a document that would provide guidance to create imaginative, innovative and stimulating play spaces to support children's play.

The principles for designing successful play spaces ensure that play spaces:

- 1 Are 'bespoke' (uniquely planned to reflect the needs of the local community, varied to promote community cohesion;
- 2 Are well located;
- 3 Make use of natural elements;
- 4 Provide a wide range of play experiences;
- 5 Are accessible to children of all abilities;
- 6 Meet community needs;
- 7 Allow children of different ages to play together;
- 8 Build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge;
- 9 Are sustainable and appropriately maintained; and
- 10 Allow for change and evolution.

*(Source: Design for Play: A Guide to Creating Successful Play Spaces, Play England 2008.)*

## The Future is 'Play Spaces'

It is recognised that play may occur at any location and does not necessarily require the formal designation of a site or the infrastructure historically used. Current literature is turning more towards the adoption of a play space approach which supports a shift from structured play and explores the benefits of unstructured and informal play opportunities. An emphasis is on the natural landscape and how it can offer a unique setting for children to gain valuable life skills through play that activates and explores the five senses.

Best practice guidelines adopt an approach of 'play spaces' in preference to 'playgrounds', recognising that children have the ability to engage in play in any natural environment (eg passive park areas, sportsgrounds, nature reserves) and do not necessarily require designated equipment and spaces of play, such as the more traditional playgrounds.

## Defining 'Play Space'

A play space is one where children's active play is a legitimate use of the space. Play Spaces are based on playability which in some cases is the result of fixed play equipment and in others, a feature of some parks, recreation grounds, natural areas and other types of public open space. Playability is not just a matter of the physical characteristics of a space, it can also be influenced by social and cultural characteristics.

*(Greater London Authority 2008.)*

## Nature Play

There is clear and consistent evidence about the benefits for children and the wider community from exposure to and engagement with nature. Research from the UK (Gill), Denmark (Neblong) and the US (Sobell) all highlight positive links between access to natural play areas and the diverse challenges that they offer, with a marked reduction in mental health issues and behavioural conditions.

Internationally, many public and private playground equipment providers are moving to enhance the playground experience by including planted landscapes and/or natural play elements into playground designs, or by giving children the opportunity to play in natural and semi-wild spaces. This further highlights the need to shift from 'playgrounds' to 'play spaces'.

### ***What the research says about Nature Play...***

- Children who play regularly in natural settings are sick less often. Mud, sand, water, leaves, sticks, pine cones and gum nuts can help to stimulate children's immune system as well as their imagination.
- Children who spend more time outside tend to be more physically active and less likely to be overweight.
- Children who play in natural settings play in more diverse, imaginative and creative ways and show improved language and collaboration skills.
- Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other.
- Bullying behaviour is greatly reduced where children have access to diverse nature-based play environments.
- Symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are reduced after contact with nature.

*Source: Children's Nature Network/Kids Safe NSW*



## Designing with Natural Elements

Play spaces may incorporate nature through:

- Wet/dry creek beds – these can be created using sand or gravel, smooth rocks, reed-like plants and a slight slope or gradient. Providing water using a closed water system creates further sensory dimension.
- Bridges and tunnels – these aspects can complement creek beds, and work well with mounds to support imaginative play.
- Mounds/slopes – using an existing gradient or creating a mound can create many natural play options. Slopes covered in soft lawn are great fun to climb over or roll down. Mounds can be created over a tunnel or a bridge. Slides can be embedded into a mound.
- Sand/mud pits – sand or mud pits and digging patches provide opportunities for many different types of play. Small children will explore the texture and quality of the material. Older children will create or participate in more complex imaginative or constructive play, making mud pies, tracks for cars and trucks or dinosaur gardens.
- Plants – trees, shrubs, grasses and ground covers can play a number of roles in a play space. They can provide shade, wind breaks, semi-hidden quiet spaces or be used as teaching tools. They offer a variety of different textures, scents, colours, forms and sounds and are a great addition to the play infrastructure.
- Trees to climb or swing from – using existing trees, swings and tree climbing opportunities add to natural surroundings and bring additional benefits to children’s risk assessment and management skills.



## Play Value

Play ‘value’ is the measure of ways in which a play space or play item can be played with. Play spaces which offer a variety of equipment that children can use to swing, climb, slide, spin, etc can be deemed of high play value. However there can be other factors that influence play value including: accessibility, inclusiveness, the environment and site maintenance.

Play value can also be measured by available space and natural elements that are included within the play space, as play value is often increased through the opportunity for children to encounter activities that offer challenge and risk taking whilst in a hazard-free context.

## Inclusive Play

All children do not need to access play spaces in the same way but they are all fundamentally entitled to go out to play. Good design, location and variety in public play spaces is needed in order to make this possible. Each child is different – not every piece of equipment in a play space needs to be accessible to every child but access to the social experience of play is important.

A key goal in delivering best practice in play is to provide accessible play spaces that promote social inclusion and participation for families and their children. This includes providing access to play for children with all abilities, including disabilities.

The principles of Developing Accessible Play Spaces – A Good Practice Guide tackle the issue of the inequity of access to play spaces in the UK and is supported by Kidsafe's Accessible Play Grounds. The research concurs:

“Play is vital for children and all children have the right to play in meaningful ways. Access is more than physical access to the playground. It means ensuring all children can participate and play with or amongst peers at a play space. Questions to consider in the design of new play spaces are:

- *Does the design offer the opportunity for all children to be included meaningfully in playground activities?*
- *Are children able to interact socially with other children?*
- *Are they able to have a meaningful role in the game or activity?”*

Best practice in play space design for inclusive play considers the elements of physical access, reach ranges, visual impairment, sensory elements and catering for parents and carers.

**Physical Access** – Use appropriate walkways, ramps, hand rails and landings to assist children with mobility issues in accessing play equipment.

**Reach Ranges** – The reach of children in wheelchairs should be considered when designing a play space. All equipment should be reachable to children who are in wheelchairs. Often play equipment requires a child to sit front on to the activity. This can make it difficult for a child in a wheelchair to participate. Consider equipment that has knee room underneath so they can sit comfortably front on to the activity, for example, cubby shop counters or raised tables or benches.

**Visual Impairment** – Provide appropriate ground surfacing to help children and adults with visual impairments find their way to and around play spaces. For example, to indicate stairways, roads, car parks, bus stops, overhead hazards, ramps, or changes in direction of the pathway.

**Sensory Elements** – Include a variety of sensory elements within a play space to stimulate multiple senses and enhance the diversity of the environment. Landscaping can include plants with diverse textures, colours, scents and sounds. Diverse materials can be used for paths and other surfaces to provide different textures to explore and experience.

**Parents & Carers** – Children with additional needs may require extra adult assistance or close supervision to safely enjoy outside play opportunities. Support parents and carers in this role by providing seating near key play spaces and room for them to assist children without impacting on other play activities.

Accessible play activities include:

- Various types of movement possibilities.
- Different degrees of challenge and scale within the play activities (rather than a distinct age/ability separation).
- Creative and sensory play.
- Opportunities that foster social interaction and imaginative/role play.
- Accessible play equipment and access is not hindered through physical barriers (fences, gates etc).
- Artistic and natural elements.
- Opportunities to manipulate the environment.
- Appropriate parking, shelter and toilets.

## Informal Play

As highlighted, there is an increased recognition of the value of informal play. The conventional approach to providing play opportunities for children has been to provide formal playgrounds. However recent research (International Making Cities Liveable, Lamine Mahdjoubi, Bristol, UK) tells us that funds and resources could be better placed in improving informal play spaces. Informal spaces near the home and in the street need to be encouraged; it is here that greater opportunities exist for social interaction and creative, active, challenging and stimulating play.

Development plans for areas of family use should consider how elements can be introduced for informal play. An example of this may be a shopping centre that may include rock or water elements that are designed as a feature for all community members to enjoy. Naturally, children find ways to play in all situations and environments, as such the concept of how children can utilise such areas must be included as part of the planning process of civic areas as well as recreational ones.



Examples of informal play spaces include:

**Unfurnished/Natural Green Space** areas that offer open space with natural seating and shade can accommodate the needs of all members of the community. A lunch spot for busy workers, a picnic space for families and a play space for imaginative and energetic children and young people.

**Ball Courts** which are free for community use and do not support training for sports teams allow children and young people to ‘turn up’ and join in activities. It may not necessarily be a team game and different areas of the court can be used by various groups and activities at one time. This supports socialisation, physical play and also the improvisation of the resources to support lone play.

**Public Art** is often ‘guarded’ as an item on show. However cleverly designed public art can also offer children an informal climbing structure or place to play.

**Shopping Centres/Malls/Civic Centres/Community Squares** that include natural rock, water and socialising furniture or elements that can create the ideal play space. Cleverly designed areas of interest can attract use by a range of community members to support community cohesion and integration.

**Youth Areas** offer a play space specifically designed for use by children and young people 10 years and up. These spaces often include a ball court facility, and limited equipment that offer activities which are appropriate in size and excitement to the needs of young people. Youth shelters and seating provide supporting infrastructure vital in creating a suitable place to meet, reflecting the high emphasis on socialising at these ages. It may be best to segregate young people from families, who sometimes find young people’s boisterous play and language intimidating.

**Older Peoples Play Spaces** suit many groups in the community and provide activity similar to an outdoor gym. These facilities allow people to enjoy open spaces and exercise freely in a social context. There are now many play equipment manufacturers that design and install this type of 'play' equipment. There is opportunity to explore this form of play space, recognising the onset of an ageing population and the importance of social contact in the later stages of life.

**Outdoor Play/Exercise Trails** can offer a varying range of natural experiences and manufactured equipment for community members to enjoy. A mixture of equipment and materials can be strategically located in large park areas promoting the wider use of such facilities. People are able to stop and enjoy stations of activity around a trail and design their own fitness challenge accordingly.

**Bike/BMX Tracks (not cycle paths)** may be considered a more formal play/community resource, although it is the ways in which these areas are utilised that lead them to be categorised as part of informal play. Lending themselves to variable uses at different times of the day, these resources do not determine how children or young people 'have' to use them. This allows flexibility and a higher level of socialisation and experimental play.





## MANAGING RISK IN PLAY

Ideally, play spaces should encourage the development of gross and fine motor skills and offer a stimulating play environment which presents children with manageable challenges, through which they can find and test their limits. In order to provide these challenges, a balance must be found between risk and safety.

Within the industry, it has been identified that there is a growing need to ensure that children's play is as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible.

### Australian Standards

The Australian Standards for Playgrounds and Play Equipment provide a minimum benchmark and guide the design, installation and maintenance of playgrounds and play spaces in Australia. They are not intended to provide totally risk free environments but form the basis of Council's risk management approach.

The relevant Australian Standards (AS) are:

AS 4685. 1-6	2004	Playground Equipment This Standard has six parts: Part 1 General Safety Requirements and Test Methods Part 2 Particular Safety Requirements and Test Methods for Swings Part 3 Particular Safety Requirements and Test Methods for Slides Part 4 Particular Safety Requirements and Test Methods for Runways Part 5 Particular Safety Requirements and Test Methods for Carousels Part 6 Particular Safety Requirements and Test Methods for Rocking Equipment
AS/NZS 4486.1	1997	Playgrounds and Playground Equipment Part 1 Development, Installation, Inspection, Maintenance and Operation, Standards Australia
AS/NZS 4422	1996	Playground Surfacing - Specifications, Requirements and Test Method, including amendment No 1, 5 May 1999

### Play Surfacing and Soft Fall Principles

There are a number of soft fall materials available to meet the specifications of the Australian Standards with each material being best considered in relation to the local environment (ie topography, drainage etc).

The main categories of soft fall are solid surfacing and loose fill. Both are installed to meet the Australian Standards in relation to play equipment's critical fall height (which varies to cater for the needs of different aged children), and includes depth and breadth calculations for areas surrounding specific items of equipment.

The level of impact absorption relates to the impact attenuation (the degree to which the surface deforms and reduces the impact of the falling object/child) of the type of soft fall. Key points in relation to soft fall are:

- Wet pour and artificial/synthetic grass are both solid surfaces. They are the most expensive of the soft fall surfacing initially, however once installed requires minimal maintenance.
- Play bark, sand, recycled rubber tyres are all types of loose fill. These are cheaper alternatives to the solid surfaces but require regular maintenance (turning and raking) and replenishment. Due to the displacement of loose fill surfaces, a lack of maintenance can lead to the high risk of areas where the fill does not comply with the Australian Standards.
- Grass (or rubber grass matting) is not currently considered an impact absorbing surface in Australia, although it is being utilised more widely across European countries since a change in the European Standards in 2009.

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## Play Equipment Inspections

The ongoing inspection and maintenance of playgrounds is fundamental to ensuring ongoing safety and compliance. The Royal Society for Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) has recently been asked to help work towards introducing guidelines to assist the reduction in the number of children injured on playgrounds in Australia and New Zealand. RoSPA are focussing on the establishment of inspection regimes and the training of inspectors. According to RoSPA, "Australia and New Zealand do not have an internationally recognised standard for playground inspection and inspectors". The injury rate on their playgrounds is 500 to 700 per cent higher than countries such as the UK where RoSPA has been training and accrediting inspectors for many years.

Wollongong City Council is committed to annual inspections of all play equipment and annually engages an external specialist to undertake a review of all its playground equipment.

RoSPA also recommend that post installation inspections are carried out prior to the authority adopting spaces from developers as part of Section 94 Agreements. This ensures that any safety measures that are necessary have been implemented before Council becomes responsible for the site.



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## PLANNING FOR PLAY

There is a number of planning and design factors that if carefully planned, enhance play spaces and should therefore form part of the overall planning process.

### Community Engagement

Research emphasises the importance of community engagement to ensure the needs of the community are met with developments and improvements. Community engagement must include direct consultation with children and young people, as evidence shows that they are best placed to inform on their needs.

Evidence from previous engagement projects tells us that communities are far more receptive to change when they are aware of what is happening. We recognise that the level of engagement will vary according to the project size and scope.

There is growing evidence that shows us that where engagement projects capture the needs of children specifically, and this information is translated into service delivery; there is a reduction in misuse and increased levels of ownership and 'caretaking' of these services.

Over the last five (5) years, Council has implemented a process of engaging with children in relation to play space developments (eg Belmore Basin Play Space, Botanic Gardens All Abilities Play Space, Towradgi Park Play Space, Thirroul Beach Reserve Play Space, Bruce Park Play Space), with the success of each project further supporting the need to incorporate children in the planning of their play spaces.

### Age Appropriate and Play Flow

Play *flow* is important in an area that caters for the mixed age and ability of children. Play *flow* is the strategic design and placement of equipment and furniture to support and facilitate imaginary and other play types. This way of designing also supports the range of and stage that different children develop and removes the fear of intimidation by having equipment for very young children and young people furthest from each other.

### Addressing Vandalism in the Early Stages

Given that play spaces are often accessible at all times throughout the day and night, the risk of vandalism needs to be considered. General misuse and vandalism can be reduced through a sound understanding of community need and age appropriateness with regard to the design and location.

Active and meaningful engagement in communities where there is a history of a high level of vandalism and misuse of play equipment is pivotal in reducing future vandalism occurrences. Experience shows that where children and young people are able to influence the planning and designing of such areas, there is an element of 'ownership and care taking practices' that naturally reduce the levels of vandalism and anti-social use of play spaces and the equipment in them.

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) is another key method to reducing vandalism and using the CPTED principles as a guide to planning for play spaces will aid in reducing the occurrences of anti-social behaviour within a community, enhancing safe play. As a general rule, all play opportunities should be positioned in a manner which ensures natural surveillance is offered by adjoining residences and/or businesses.

### Shade Provision

Providing sun protection at playgrounds can make a significant contribution to the prevention of skin cancer as:

- Children and parents use play spaces throughout the year, with heaviest use generally occurring during the summer months, particularly during holidays and in the middle of the day when UV radiation levels are most intense.
- The sun exposure children receive while they are young increases their risk of developing skin cancer as adults. Protecting children from UV radiation will reduce their risk of skin cancer in the future.

The provision of shade can be managed in a number of ways. This is dependent on the size, location and availability of natural shade in the area. Probably the best source of shade is the use of existing natural shade given by trees and other plant materials.

The typical approach in relation to shade is:

- 1 Consider maximising existing shade as a first priority;
- 2 The utilisation of landscaping (eg planting mature trees) strategically located within the play space as the next priority;
- 3 Review play equipment materials and the sighting of equipment within a play space; and
- 4 Consider the installation of shade cloth as a last priority noting the significant costs associated with shade cloth installation and the potential for such infrastructure to be targeted by vandalism. As a guide, shade cloth should provide at least 94% UV protection (UPF 15 or more). A UPF of 40-50+ is rated as an excellent source of shade, blocking more than 97% of UV radiation.

It is important to consider the types of activity available within a play space and the frequency of use. Where children are witnessed to congregate frequently, it may be necessary to provide scattered shade, whilst providing shade where parents and carers are seated is equally important.

The installation of mature trees to complement new play spaces where there is an absence of existing shade should be a key consideration in the planning stages.

## Landscaping Considerations

Using a variety of tree and shrub species will help to create a more interesting environment. Natural shade should be a major element of shade at a play space and trees with dense foliage and wide spreading canopies provide the best protection. It is important to choose species that suit the local soil and climatic conditions as well as the character of the location.

In the design of new play spaces, it is important to avoid the use of shrubs and trees that:

- Are toxic
- Have seed pods or stone fruits
- Attract bees
- Have spikes or thorns
- Are known to cause adverse health effects such as asthma or skin irritation
- Drop their branches





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## Enclosure of Play Spaces

In general, play spaces should be open to allow for a greater play experience and independent access by children.

The fencing of play spaces should only be considered in certain circumstances where the safety of children may be compromised. The inclusion of fencing has a number of disadvantages:

- A major disadvantage of fencing a play space from the rest of an open space is the limitations on the scope and variety of children's play, it effectively 'cages' play into a contained space.
- Fencing and child-proof locks restrict access, making it virtually impossible for wheel chair users to enter fenced spaces.
- Maintenance and repair costs are high and experience tells us that gate systems regularly fail in public spaces.
- The installation of fencing has huge implications on capital and maintenance budgets and therefore should be fully considered before being included in play space areas.
- Fences can remove important parental responsibility.

There are some circumstances in which fencing may be considered as a suitable option for the safety of play space visitors. Such circumstances may include:

- Where the location of a play space is in close proximity to water or a main road and where all other alternatives have been explored.
- A need to provide a few 'enclosed' play spaces so there is a variety of options for parents whose children require additional security.

When enclosed play spaces are deemed necessary, consideration should be given to the following:

- Whether there is a need to incorporate a fence or natural barrier.
- The need for and type of fence/barrier will be considered as part of the early design principles.
- Where possible an alternative to fencing, and natural barriers such as hedges (or another type of planting or design feature) will be used.

## Smoking in Play Spaces

There is substantial evidence linking exposure to second-hand smoke with a range of serious and life-threatening health impacts including heart disease, cancer, asthma and other respiratory problems. Children exposed to second-hand smoke are at an increased risk of asthma, acute respiratory infections and other health issues.

Community attitudes towards smoking have changed over time due to the mounting evidence showing the harmful effects of passive smoking. Council has a role in advocating better public health for its residents and Council's adopted Smoke Free Recreation Areas Policy assists in reducing the risks of children and adults being exposed to passive smoking while recreating in play spaces through the prohibition of smoking within 10 metres of play spaces.

## Park Furniture

It is evident from national research that public open spaces present opportunities for individuals to interact with other people, increase their levels of physical activity and foster participation in sport and recreation activities. Public open space contributes to improved mental health as the provision of natural, green spaces where people can rest and relax and is known to alleviate stress levels.

Vital to enhancing the visitor experience of public open space and play spaces, is the presence of park furniture. Regional level play spaces should be complemented by adjoining picnic shelters,

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barbecues, bubblers, bicycle racks and adequate seating. At the local level, simple park benches significantly assist parents and carers with their visit to a play space.

### **Supporting Infrastructure for Regional Play Spaces**

It is important to look beyond the immediate vicinity of a play space and consider aspects such as parking and accessible paths of travel to support community use of a space. At higher level play spaces (ie regional) where vehicle transport is expected, pathways should offer a suitable linkage from car parks to play equipment and amenities. Ease of navigation throughout a play space enhances the experience for children and families.

While in regional destination play spaces, where families are likely to spend longer periods of time, drinking water and toilet facilities will need to be provided.

### **Play Provision in New Land Release Areas**

New land release areas provide an ideal opportunity to deliver innovative and creative play spaces for children and young people from the outset. A set of guiding principles within Play Wollongong should guide the delivery of all play spaces in new land release areas and should be considered in the planning phase.

The location of play spaces should be well-integrated with the surrounding community and provide safe access for children. The designated open space should be adequate in size with the capacity to support appropriate play infrastructure for the community. The siting of all play elements is critical and should be consistent with both the Guiding Principles and Crime Prevention by Environmental Design Principles (CPTED). The design of the play space should consider the long term needs of the community, be appropriate for a broad range of abilities and ages and consider the ongoing maintenance of the space to maximise community use.

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## A REVIEW OF LOCAL CONTEXT

### Wollongong 2022: Community Strategic Plan

In order to achieve the community vision for Wollongong, six interconnected goals are identified:

- We value and protect our environment
- We have an innovative and sustainable economy
- Wollongong is a creative, vibrant city
- We are a connected and engaged community
- We are a healthy community in a liveable city
- We have sustainable, affordable and accessible transport

Play Wollongong should assist in achieving these goals through encouraging a sense of community ownership of local places and spaces and through the provision of appropriate and affordable recreational opportunities that meet the needs of the community both now and in the future.

### Planning People Places

In April 2006, Wollongong City Council endorsed *Planning People Places* to guide the provision, development and management of open space and recreation facilities in the City of Wollongong.

*Planning People Places* includes Action 3.2.2, which recommends the ongoing review and upgrade of play spaces to improve their quality and diversity. This includes reviewing playgrounds to determine if all playgrounds are required, whilst maintaining an appropriate spread of play spaces. The action also recommends the development of some higher level play spaces linked to key recreation destinations.

### Existing Council Policy

Following the adoption of *Planning People Places*, in 2007 Council commissioned Suter & Associates Leisure & Tourism Planners to audit all playground facilities and once complete, provide a framework to identify priority works for the provision and enhancement of playgrounds. Through this document the four levels of hierarchy was proposed as a guide to define the provision, management and development priority for three districts within the Local Government Area. This guide was adopted by Council during 2008, in the form of a *Playground Provision, Development and Management Policy*.

The objectives of Council's *Policy for Playground Provision, Development and Management* allow for Council to:

- strategically plan for, develop and manage playgrounds and play spaces consistent with the Child Friendly Cities principles and in accordance with action 3.2.2 of *Planning People Places*;
- provide and develop playgrounds within a hierarchy framework, including higher level regional and district playgrounds as a key focus, as well as neighbourhood and local playgrounds;
- ensure the appropriate allocation of resources and strategically review playgrounds that are in poor condition, are poorly located or are not required by the community;
- ensure Council's Asset Management responsibilities are clearly defined;
- ensure the needs of children and young people are considered and incorporated in the design of the designated play area, park or recreational space;
- cater for a range of age groups and abilities through diverse, challenging and fun play opportunities, balanced with Council's commitment to safety in accordance with Australian Standards;

- contribute to establishing highly valued recreation destinations at key locations through the provision of high quality and innovative regional and district playgrounds and play spaces; and
- reduce Council's exposure to public liability claims (*adopted by Council 2008*).

## Child Friendly Cities

The physical environment in which children grow up sends all types of obvious and subtle messages to children about how they are valued and their place in society. Wollongong City Council is currently working towards the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) initiative of becoming a recognised *Child Friendly City*, committed to fulfilling children's rights at the local level.

This includes the need for Council to ensure its policies, resources and governance reflect the rights and needs of children in an equitable way; and that environments are provided that nurture the development of children of all ages, stages of development and abilities and the right of children and young people to participate in decision making is upheld.

Play Wollongong will demonstrate Council's commitment to creating a *Child Friendly City*, particularly addressing the following Articles of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

### UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

#### Article 31 (Leisure, Play & Culture)

1. States that 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.
2. States that Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

#### Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child)

1. When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.

## National Preventative Health Strategy

Australia's *National Preventative Health Strategy: Australia – the Healthiest Country by 2020* was developed in response to the need for urgent action to be undertaken to prevent Australians dying prematurely as a result of the effects of obesity, tobacco and alcohol. It highlights the pressures such issues have on health and hospital systems, as well as Australia's workforce. The key message from the strategy is one of primary prevention and the realignment of a currently inequitable balance of health in communities.

With particular regard to childhood obesity, Local Government Authorities can assist in reducing the onset of childhood obesity through the planning, promotion and management of services and facilities which encourage physical activity. Play spaces are pivotal in the establishment of healthy, active and resilient communities.

In progressing this National Strategy, *Healthy Spaces and Places*, a unique collaboration between the Australian Local Government Association, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and the Planning Institute of Australia, and funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, was established. Play Wollongong will consider the key principles promoted through *Healthy*

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*Spaces and Places* in the design and creation of sustainable communities that encourage healthy living.

For example, a key principle of *Healthy Spaces and Places* is one centred on the distribution of equitable and accessible recreation opportunities, within walkable catchments of 400 metres and located with other community facilities to enable dual use. In developing Play Wollongong, existing play spaces will be reviewed in relation to walkable catchments within a 400 metre radius.

Additionally, the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living promotes the incorporation of active living principles into the design and planning for communities. Objectives include:

- To provide a range of public open spaces within walking distance from dwellings.
- To design open spaces which are flexible, providing the opportunity for a variety of uses and activities to occur (such as community events), and responsive, to the diversity of the surrounding community (ie catering for different ages and social groups).
- To clearly define walking and cycling routes that pass through open spaces and to incorporate these routes into the broader walking and cycling network.

Play Wollongong will assist in delivering these objectives through thoughtful design of spaces, engagement of communities and the promotion of physical activity opportunities.

### **Working Towards Sustainability**

Play Wollongong will be developed with regard to the key findings of the Review Today 2007 Report '*Achieving Sustainable Infrastructure, Services and Finance*'.

Play Wollongong will provide Council with a transparent approach to the provision and management of play spaces working towards the delivery of recreation opportunities in a financially sustainable manner. This may include the rationalisation of existing play spaces where local data warrants it.

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## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY

### Wollongong Local Government Area (LGA)

Wollongong is Australia's ninth largest city with an estimated population of 203,487. Located 80 kilometres south of Sydney, Wollongong covers 714 square kilometres and occupies a narrow coastal strip bordered by the Royal National Park to the north, Lake Illawarra to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the east and the Illawarra escarpment to the west.

### Our Community Profile

When planning for play opportunities, it is important to understand the current and projected demographics associated with an area. Once the target group/s has/have been determined, effective planning involves the distribution of appropriately proportioned play equipment or play items and the grouping of play opportunities into zones reflective of the age group/s.

It is also important to integrate the interests and concerns of the local community with the role of the proposed play space, and to develop a shared vision and objectives for the new play space. Effective play spaces are designed with due consideration of the interactions associated with surrounding land uses.

### Past Engagement

Through examining current play theory regarding the ability and participation levels of children of varying ages and comparing this to the outcomes of recent consultation with children in the Wollongong area, we are able to add clarity to the key principles that need to be adopted in the planning and management of play spaces.

### Pre-School Children

Children in this age category are accompanied to play spaces by parents or carers to encourage social play and engage in physical play opportunities that are not available to them at home. Children of this age are still developing basic physical skills and enjoy equipment that can offer a range of experiences. From past consultation we know that these experiences include sliding, swinging, climbing, rolling, riding, jumping, and digging. Visual concepts to promote imaginative play and pre-school sized furniture (picnic tables) were important to support their desire to have picnics and family barbecues in these areas.

### Primary Aged Children

Once children start school their use of play spaces starts to change. Children at the younger end of the age range will still be accompanied to the park, however as children age they will either dismiss the park as a place of interest or use it as a social place where they can meet friends unaccompanied.

Generally the play of primary aged children becomes more boisterous as their skill level, confidence and independence develop. Consultation identifies that primary aged children recognise the need for more age appropriate equipment for their age group and environmental features are of more importance. Feedback from this age group indicates that they enjoy space to run, bigger slides, activity areas, huge flying foxes, roundabouts and large climbing nets. They further identified that a lack of trees for shade, a lack of toilets, seating and tables, bubblers, lighting and the presence of litter and graffiti as being environmental issues that detract from the play experience. Specifically, these children have highlighted their need for 'bigger' age appropriate and more exciting play experiences.

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## Young People

Young people are more socially stable and independent. As such their use of play spaces is very different to the primary years. Young people's interest is more focused on social gathering, competitive games and impromptu challenges that they may task one another with. Image and style is important to young people, as they prefer not to be identified with young children, however their need to 'play' remains evident.

Youth play spaces provide more for young people, are age, activity and image appropriate and are separate from other children's play.

Local consultation supports this theory listing that young people like places to hang out and chill, skate ramps, active/sporting facilities such as a batting cage, half bowl, basketball court and soccer net. Previously engaged young people commented on lack of seating, lighting, shade/shelter, picnic areas and toilets as detracting environmental factors.

## Adults

In play spaces for younger children carers like to be able to supervise with minimal participation. Through the provision of multiple seating areas parents are able to enjoy the open spaces whilst children play. Parents prefer play spaces that offer equipment for a variety of ages so that the whole family can play together, although provision for young people should be kept slightly separate as the behaviour of groups of young people can sometimes be viewed as intimidating, especially for much younger children. A key issue identified by most parents relates to a lack of toilets and shade at many play spaces.



## REFERENCES

### Review of Other Council's Approaches

In the development of this document, a review was undertaken on other Council approaches to the delivery and management of play spaces and it was noted that a number of best practice approaches are being implemented across Australia, particularly in Victoria. Play strategies from the following Councils contributed to this research:

- Warringah Council
- City of Whitehorse
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Gosford City Council
- City of Greater Dandenong
- Auburn Council

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