

## The Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty: Priority 7 - Safe Play Areas

We recommend that all local governments ensure that their parks, playgrounds and public spaces are safe and welcoming for children and that free leisure and recreational activities are available, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

This recommendation comes directly from children. During the consultation children and young people living in poverty spoke of the importance of having a safe space to play with friends. Research (Wager et al., 2007) indicates that community space has great significance for poor children. Public space compensates children for a lack of space at home. The quality of space and security within their home neighbourhood is important for children who experience poverty (Sutton et al., 2007).

Participants referred to areas where they live, or nearby areas, as unsafe. They described them as 'scary places' and many had experienced or witnessed aggression, drunkenness or harassment by adults or gangs of older youths. Children would like their local councils to do more for children, including providing more free activities and facilities.

### Action Statement from Workshop focus group:

The 4 strategies required to meet this priority, were decided by the focus group, after the walk around/ market place. We waited until this point in order to ensure we were creating strategies that were valued by other members of the forum. The two ideas, most honoured by the others were:

1. Ensuring all local governmental decisions are underpinned by the UN rights of the child.

2. Having groups of children involved in the development and care of local parks, play grounds, and public spaces.

When our focus group met again, we saw that these two ideas had at least four times the number of stickers next to them than the others. We decided these would be the best place to begin creating strategies for priority 7, as they had the most support. We thought of 4 concrete actions to help make the larger goals happen.

1. UNICEF is able to take responsibility for providing information around UNCROC to governmental agencies. They are also able to provide information around Child impact assessments. However, they said an external agency would need to carry out the assessments and work with the children, this is where I suggested the company I work for (Applied Theatre Consultants) which has a very successful track record of working with youth both nationally and internationally.

2. Network/ Database that centralizes organisations who work effectively to consult with youth and children. Ideas for the different places who could create/ host this database included:

- MYD
- Recreation NZ
- Sport NZ
- The University of Auckland
- Children's Commissioner
- Inspiring communities

The reason behind the creation of this database is to ensure policy makers, governmental agencies, and other organisations, who want to consider the voices and opinions of children, are able to do so. By creating this centralized database, the voices of children can be heard and collected by people who are experts at working with children, rather than by groups of well intending adults who actually may have no expertise in the area.

3. The desire for an enhanced presence of monitoring, immediate maintenance, repairs and upkeep of playgrounds, within low socio economic areas. This is to ensure the physical safety of youth. The members of this discussion group were very aware of the discrepancies between playgrounds in low, versus high, socio economic areas.

Differences included lighting not being replaced, graffiti, hang out areas for teenagers and gang members, broken equipment, stolen equipment, and drug/ alcohol paraphernalia being left around. The group discussed these issues may be present in all playgrounds and parks, regardless of demographics, however the frequency of them being cleaned up in low socio economic areas is far less. The awareness for where members of the public can turn to in the event of discovering such damage/ behaviour also needs to be raised.

The ideas for targeting this problem included:

- School groups being responsible for cleaning up their local parks
- Council taking more action
- Iwi groups responsible for the caretaking of the spaces
- Local business funding of caretaking groups
- council auditing and reporting system

4. MYD and Council staff to go into schools to discuss with children how they can write submissions to council for their annual and 10 year plans. The lady who spoke within our focus group was from the council, and she said the involvement of youth via submissions was vital in order to affect major decision planning. Also within our focus group, we had 2 girls from Massey High School who suggested a way this could be done effectively. In most schools, there is a buddy system, where the younger children are assigned an older student who is often known as a buddy. The older students would be taught by young council staff about how to complete their own submissions. These students could then work with younger children/ their buddies, and help them to write their own too. That way, young children are growing up knowing how to participate democratically.