



Focus Group Input





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Focus Group Summary

Background

From May 17th – May 20th 2011, focus groups were conducted with community stakeholders in the City of Alexandria catering to young children ages 2 – 5. The aim was to gain insight into thoughts about spaces for play and come up with recommendations for good playspaces in Alexandria.

Audiences

Focus group interviews were conducted with:

- 3 playgroups that included both parents and child care providers
- 1 family child care provider group
- 2 partner groups that included service providers, parks and transportation planners, public housing representatives, public schools, and the police



The playgroups and family provider group provided information about the perceptions and experiences with playgrounds in the City of Alexandria along with ideas for new playgrounds. The play groups and the family day care provider group represented a diverse set of ethnicities, and included a number of first generation immigration families. The partner groups provided information from a wide range of community perspectives.

Methodology

Focus groups were used to generate concepts and ideas for playgrounds and get a better understanding of the current community perception of playgrounds in the City of Alexandria. Focus group moderators asked questions designed to stimulate in-depth discussions. The questions were:

- Where do your children play? Why do they play there? How often?
- Do you know of places to play that families use a lot? Why are these places used a lot?
- What are reasons you and your family avoid using a play space?
- Do you know families with young children that do not use play spaces? Why don't they?
- Do you worry about safety where your children play? If yes, in what ways?
- How can we improve safety at play spaces?
- Can you examples of play activities and other things you find important in a good play space for young children?
- How could play spaces for young children 2 - 5 be improved in Alexandria?
- How can we help you learn more about play spaces in Alexandria?

The partner groups were also asked to identify funding opportunities.



Focus Group Input

Benefits from playgrounds

The importance of playgrounds was acknowledged in all focus groups. According to participants, playgrounds are valued because they are a place for both kids and adults to make friends. They offer a great opportunity for kids to be active and to explore environments in self-directed play. A high-quality playground should offer contact with nature, age appropriate play equipment, and be an engaging, creative space. One respondent summed it up in the following way: “A playground is a space to have fun and learn about the world.”

Perceptions of playgrounds in the City of Alexandria

The focus groups identified specific positive and negative perceptions of the playgrounds in the City of Alexandria. The following is a summary of the comments heard:



ACCESSIBILITY AND SAFETY

Focus group respondents felt that playgrounds are too far away from where people live in the City of Alexandria. “*Young children can only walk so far.*” Participants said that when they walk to playgrounds with small children they have to cross busy streets, highways, and freeways. Playgrounds are often located in areas with lots of traffic, and may be too hard to find. The walk to the playground is a great way to be physically active but when it is considered unsafe it becomes stressful, and people may choose not to go. School playgrounds cannot be accessed during school hours, which limits places to take young children during the day. Lastly, some playgrounds are located in isolated areas where people may feel unsafe.

MAINTENANCE

Participants said that well-maintained playgrounds are more inviting. Concern was expressed that some playgrounds are not being cleaned adequately. They felt that many playgrounds lack maintenance. For instance the lack of fresh woodchips makes the ground too hard for young children. At the same time, because toddlers put loose items in their mouth, a preference was expressed for other types of surfacing. The desire is for more areas with specialized artificial surfacing materials that are appropriate for young children when they are practicing their emerging walking and running skills. Concern about illegal activities like drugs at some places was reported. A respondent expressed her concern for the condition of playspaces the following way: “*People from the city should go on a tour and look for themselves. They should go and judge themselves what the surfacing, and play equipment look like. They should then make it better and institute some safety rules.*”

PLAY EQUIPMENT

Participants felt that there are not enough play spaces for small children. Many existing playgrounds do not have age appropriate equipment for young children. The playground equipment was described as either too high or too difficult. The play equipment available for the younger age group is often one-dimensional. Instead it needs to be more imaginative to support more types of play, for instance pretend play and exploratory play which are both favorites among young children. Also, participants said that most playgrounds lack relevant activities for older kids, who then intrude on the younger kid’s areas.





AMENITIES: FENCES, RESTROOMS, COVERS

Many participants were concerned about the lack of playground fences. They felt that fences are needed in order for young children to explore the environment of the playground more freely. They said that fences can be designed and built in inventive ways. The lack of restrooms at some playspaces decreases their use. Most playgrounds lack covers for sun or rain, which also decrease their use on really warm and sunny days - as well as when it rains.

NATURAL ELEMENTS AND MORE VARIED PLAY ACTIVITIES NEEDED

Natural elements were identified as lacking on many playgrounds. Participants suggested a number of ideas that would benefit children: age appropriate play equipment, climbing elements for physical activity, play houses for pretend and social play, a variety of things to encourage activity, natural features, planter and bucket gardens, sand boxes, rubberized surfacing to run around on, play and literacy symbols on surfacing, tracks on surfacing, water play spray features, shade, storage options, and a box with toys and other loose materials.

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- *“I came here a few months ago...with no family or not knowing anyone. This playgroup was heaven sent...this one helped me and connected me and my daughter with others.”*
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Many respondents stated that the schools have some of the better playgrounds. John Adam’s school was singled out as having a very nice playground with surfacing, spinning things, a garden, and a bear that inspires children to play pretend bear. Playgrounds with natural features were mentioned positively as well, as long as they are perceived to be safe.

PLAYGROUP MEETINGS SPACES

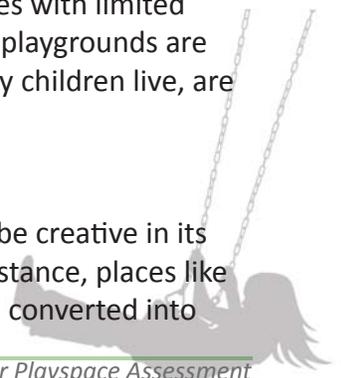
The participants really like the organized playgroup meetings and feel that the staff for these is fantastic. Parents in families of new immigrants were grateful for the social and emotional benefits of the playgroups. They often have difficulty knowing where to take their children to play and playgroups are an important source of such information. The participants would like more playgroup meetings. It is obvious that the playgroups serve a very important social function for immigrant families in particular, as well as nannies, and mothers and their children. However, some of the respondents explained that the community centers lack adequate accommodations for the playgroups. Because of space constraints, a common complaint expressed was *“Children should not be eating and doing their activities on the floor.”*

LIMITED PLAY SPACES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN APARTMENT COMPLEXES

The partner groups pointed to similar issues as the play and provider groups. They said that many potential users with young children live in apartment complexes with limited play spaces. They also commented that they do not know how much the playgrounds are actually used. It was acknowledged that these environments, where many children live, are not supportive of play and physical activity for young children.

PLAYGROUNDS NEED TO BE PART OF ALL NEW DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

The partner groups also pointed out that the City of Alexandria needs to be creative in its approach to providing play spaces in locations for redevelopment. For instance, places like small parks, existing rooftops of parking lots, and fitness centers could be converted into





play opportunities. The West End Potomac Green area was discussed as such an area where playgrounds could be designed with innovative approaches. Making playgrounds part of the plan from the beginning when new areas develop was felt to be important.

Special Playground Concerns for the City of Alexandria

All focus groups brought up several critical concerns that they would like to see addressed and resolved. In a non-prioritized order they were:

Play Groups Requests

Need more space for some of the playgroups and more meeting times.

Apartment owned playgrounds

Respondents living in some apartment complexes pointed out the lack of maintenance of playgrounds. The following statement sums up the state-of-affairs: *“They say they will fix broken equipment but they never do. We need regulations so that playgrounds at apartments are safer – kids are on the streets, cars are all over and it is not safe.”*

Brent’s Place – an apartment high-rise building needs help

This apartment high-rise building was identified as needing special attention. It has no play spaces except in hallways and stairs; it was stated that 60-80 kids live there without a play space. It has a natural area in the back that, with funding, could be made into a play space. The whole outside area needs to be improved and made safer for kids to live.

Economic Status and play options in the City of Alexandria

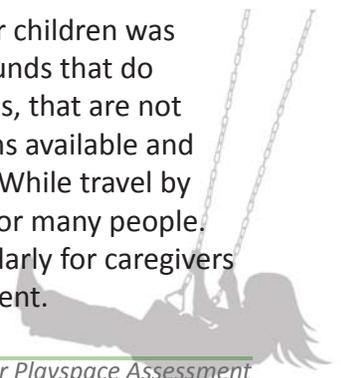
This included concerns about the equity of access to play between wealthy and poor children. Perceptions about political and economic divisions were expressed. The general consensus in the partner groups was that the City of Alexandria needs to improve play spaces for all kids. One respondent stated: *“We have a lot of kids in low income areas. A lot of single family homes have big yards – but community playgrounds for all kids are important.”*

Focus Group Conclusions

Several themes can be identified from the focus group input. These themes suggest ways in which opportunities for play can be expanded and enhanced. This information was incorporated into the Recommendations section of this report.

Access

The distance required to travel to a playspace that suits the needs of younger children was a concern for many of the focus group participants. There are many playgrounds that do not serve the needs of ages 2-5, and many others, such as school playgrounds, that are not available to the public during the daytime. This limits the number of locations available and forces people to travel farther to get to a place where the children can play. While travel by car is possible throughout most of Alexandria, it may not be a viable option for many people. Travelling by public transportation is not always a good option either, particularly for caregivers with groups of children. Walking is a preferred option if it is safe and convenient.





Amenities

The need for shade, seating, restrooms, and other conveniences was expressed. The presence of such things encourages people to visit a playspace more often and stay longer, resulting in more playtime and beneficial activity for the children. Providing more features that serve the full range of needs for younger children was expressed repeatedly.

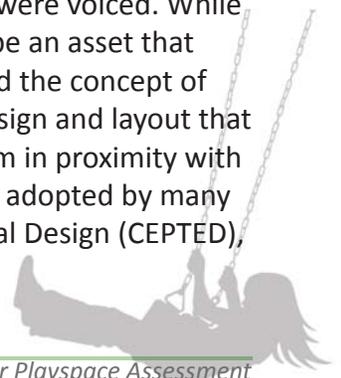
An interesting finding from the focus groups was the importance of the surfacing for playspaces serving children ages 2-5. Toddlers in this age group are learning to walk and are particularly prone to falling down, so the surface must be suited to this. Also, because children in this age group spend much of their time on the ground, they tend to come in contact with the surface and interact with it a great deal. They will pick up loose matter, such as sand or wood chips and play with it or put it in their mouth. While this may be good from an intellectual development standpoint, it causes some concerns about safety and sanitation. For this reason, a rubberized mat-type surface was preferred. Unfortunately, surfacing was not inventoried as a separate item, so statistics on which playspaces have this type of surfacing were not collected, but this could be a focus item for future studies.

Related to the surfacing issue is the need for playspaces to be accessible for people with disabilities, including both the children who play there and the caretakers who accompany them. This study did not include an assessment of the compliance of each playspace with the Americans with Disabilities Act, however, this was factored into the evaluation for Ease of Access in the modifiers. Making playspaces universally accessible will not only allow more people to use them; it will also make them more “stroller-friendly”, thereby encouraging people to walk to them and visit more frequently.

Maintenance and Safety

Perceptions of poor maintenance and unsafe conditions were prevalent among focus groups, although in general the inventory showed playspaces throughout the city to be relatively clean and safe. Older or outdated equipment is not uncommon, but in general it is well maintained and safe, including in the HOA-maintained and private facilities. Further investigation may be needed to get at the root causes of these perceptions, but it should be noted that one bad experience can override many good ones. The evaluation team spent a very short time at each playspace, but the people in the focus groups spend a lot of time there and may see things that affect their perceptions. One or two negative experiences with trash, graffiti, or other such elements leave a lasting impression, even if these are cleaned up and addressed promptly. (Note that in the inventory, only 46% of the playspaces were rated as “easy to find and inviting”, but 60% were rated as “clean, attractive, and appealing”. Only four playspaces were rated as run down, poorly maintained, or unappealing.)

Concerns about the presence of older children and teenagers at play spaces were voiced. While this is understandable, in some cases the presence of more people can also be an asset that improves safety and security simply through the presence of more “eyes” and the concept of safety in numbers. In some cases this might be addressed through proper design and layout that avoids placing facilities for different groups too close together, yet keeps them in proximity with clear sightlines and attention to the concepts of defensible space. A concept adopted by many public safety agencies referred to as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CEPTED),





which is aimed at reducing the occurrence of criminal acts, can also be applied to the design of play spaces. Extensive literature is available on this from a variety of sources, including the internet.

Social Benefits

It is apparent from the focus groups that a portion of Alexandria’s population is highly mobile and there are many residents who are new to the area and for whom English is not their primary language. For these people, finding a place for their children to play can be challenging. They often depend upon word-of-mouth from others to learn about play places and opportunities for play. At the same time, play for their children can be an important means of developing relationships and a network of friends and a support group within the community. The role of play in creating a sense of community and belonging should not be ignored, and in fact can be leveraged to build stronger connections among all residents of Alexandria. With this in mind, the City of Alexandria would benefit from having one or two “destination playgrounds” that can bring children and their families together across cultural and economic divides and raise awareness of the importance of healthy living and physical activity and provide an opportunity to bond. This concept is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report.

