



“MORE BIG KID SWINGS!”

Children and young people’s views on the right to play and recreation in the ACT.



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Cover image: Playground with climbing frames, by Annie, age 4

All quotes and artwork in this publication are from children and young people who participated in consultation activities during 2023 on their right to play.

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land on which this consultation took place, while also acknowledging other people and families who have traditional connections to the lands of the ACT and surrounding regions.

We pay our respect to Elders past and present, and also recognise the emerging leadership of First Nations children and young people.

We also acknowledge that First Nations people have lived, worked and played on these lands for over 65 thousand years, and that their rights to this land have never ceded.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the children and young people who spoke to us, wrote their ideas down, drew, built, and created so many fabulous play and recreation spaces.

We would particularly like to thank:

Blue Gum Community School

Forrest Out of School Hours Care

MOCCA

Lanyon High School

Wanniassa Junior School

Introduction

In 2023, the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) inquired into children and young people's access to play and recreation in the ACT. This consultation was grounded in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates that:

1. *States 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 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.*

Over the course of six months, the CYPC spoke to more than 755 children and young people, ranging from preschool to year 12. We asked them the following questions:

1. Are there enough accessible play and recreation spaces for children and young people in the ACT?
2. What do children and young people like about existing play and recreation spaces?
3. What do children and young people think can be improved?

Methodology

An initial scoping of online publications and commentary was carried out to establish what was already known about the accessibility of ACT play and recreation spaces. This literature review showed that children and young people's views are often absent in these discussions.

Depending on the ages and interests of the group we were speaking to, we used a range of methods to illicit responses. We used a quick poll and a message board at CareersXpo, and we also ran small group activities in which we asked children and young people to design their own play or recreation space out of Lego, craft materials, rubbish or by drawing.

We began each session with an overview of children's rights and what it means to be accessible. This session included group discussion about what children and young people value in play and recreation spaces and what some of the barriers are to them going to existing spaces.

Students were consulted in their age groups so that information and activities could be tailored to their developmental stages. Activities were flexible so children and young people could opt to draw, talk, or construct their responses.

Definitions

During these sessions children and young people were asked to ensure their space was accessible. After a brief literature review, and with input from the children and young people themselves, we defined accessibility as follows:

Accessible play and recreation spaces are designed so that EVERY person can use them. If we all work together, we can remove the barriers that might stop someone from being able to join in.

During our discussions we encouraged students to think about accessibility in the broadest terms, so their designs were not only based on physical accessibility, but also on other aspects of inclusion, as you will see throughout this report.

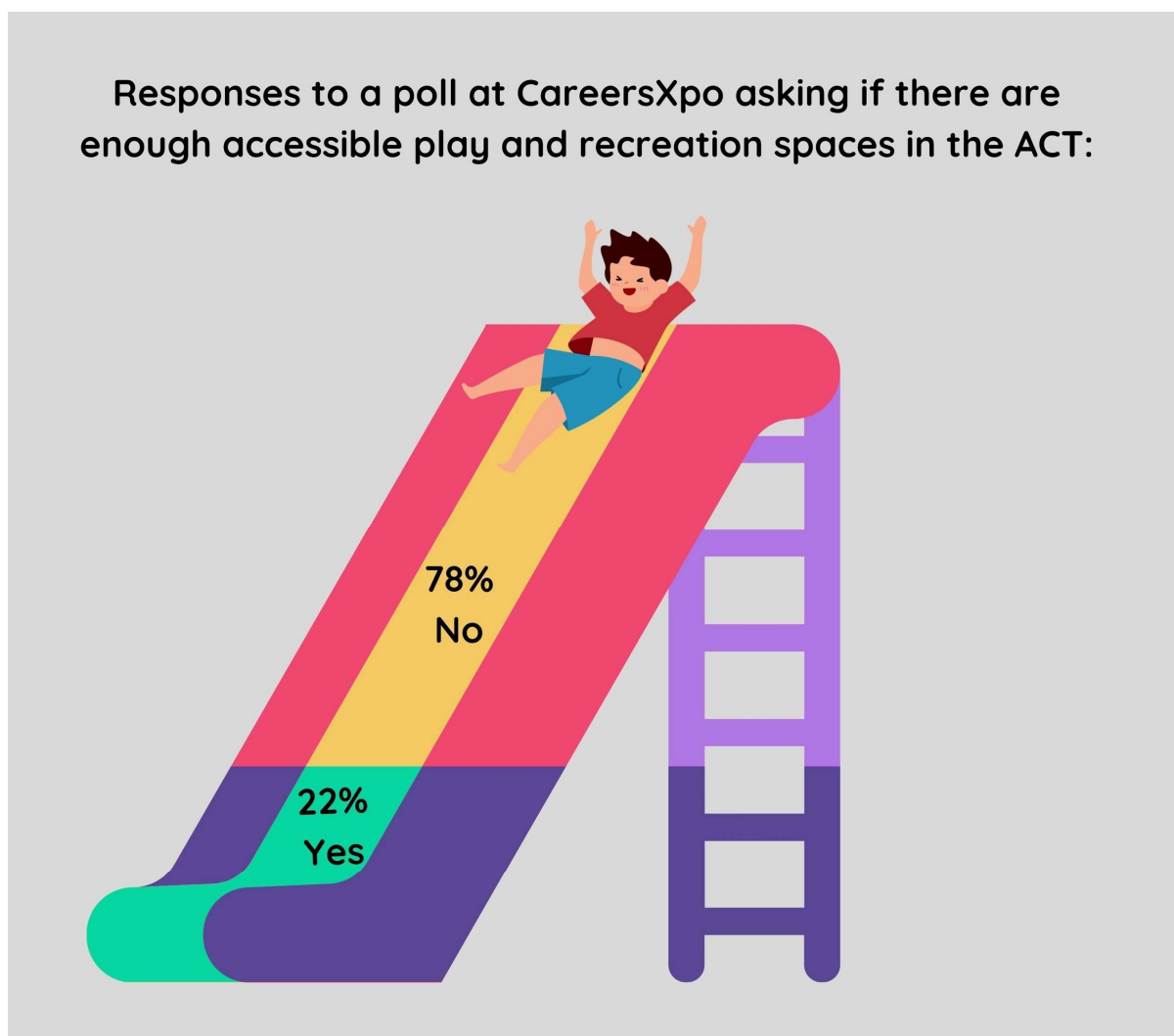
Play and Recreation in Canberra

The ACT prides itself on the quantity and quality of the parks and playgrounds that are available, and with so much green space, there is a perception that places for play and recreation are plentiful. However, children and young people’s perspectives are crucial to this assessment as they are the ones who experience these spaces most directly.

Although there is a lot to celebrate in the ACT when it comes to play and recreation, it is clear there is also considerable room for improvement. In fact, out of the 657 year 9-12 students polled, 78 per cent said there are not enough accessible play and recreation spaces for their age group.

This report aims to amplify the voices of the children and young people who took the time to share their experiences of growing up, playing, and relaxing here in the ACT, and what can be done to improve their access to their rights in accordance with Article 31.

The feedback from children and young people shows there are several areas that require further focus. This report is structured around those themes. Wherever possible, children and young people’s own words were sought, and their quotes are highlighted throughout the report. The analysis and organisation of the report was informed by the CYPC’s Youth Advisors.



Consultation in numbers

Over the course of three months, the CYPC consulted children and young people from two years old to 18 years old. The image below shows how many children and young people engaged with us, and what methods were used.



What is important to children and young people about play and recreation spaces?



"This is my garage. I love it because my scooter is in it and I just love riding my scooter."

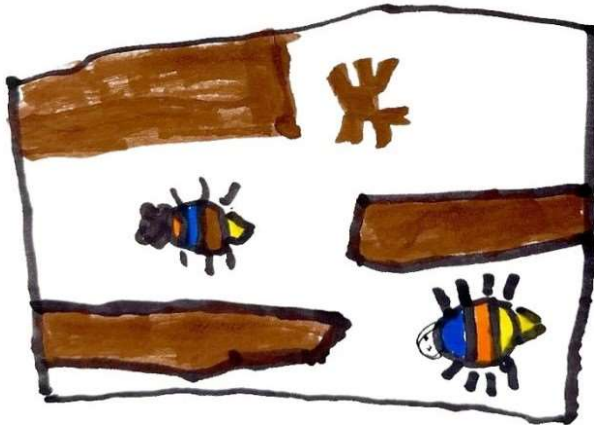
Nature

"I just want more spaces for nature"

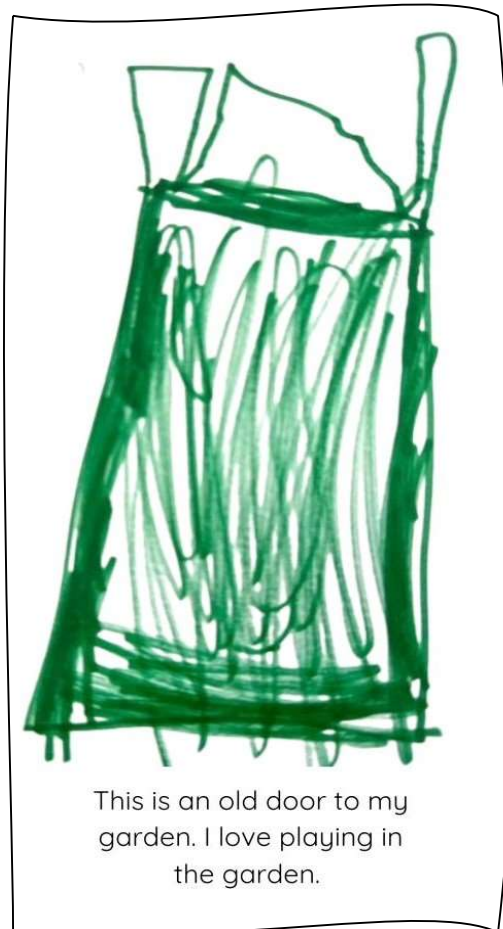
"More clubs, like a bird watching club."

Having access to outside spaces that connect with nature was frequently mentioned across the age groups as being important to children and young people. This was a particularly strong theme among pre-schoolers but was present throughout discussions.

Alongside this was a strong message that more needs to be done to protect nature so that this aspect of recreation continues for generations.



This is the bug house I made for bugs because I love bugs so much. I love making bug houses with my friend.



This is an old door to my garden. I love playing in the garden.

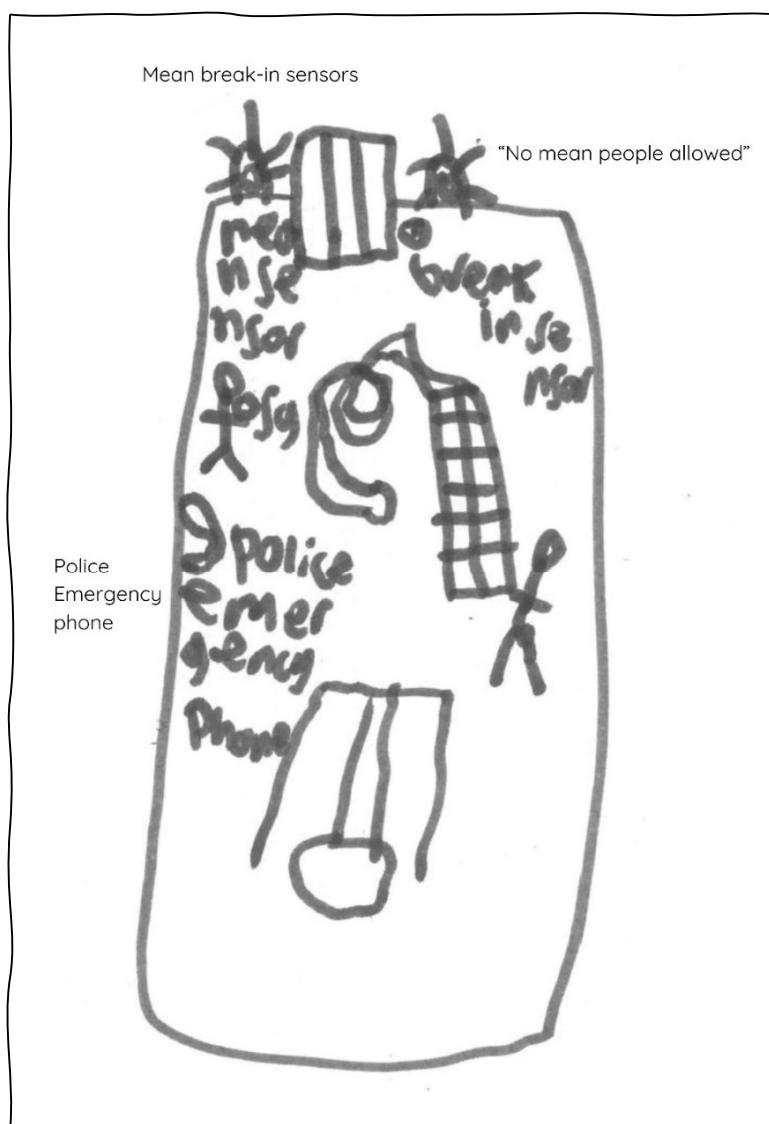
Safety

“To keep kids safe from mean people.”

“Gaming room so you can do multi-play games with your friends not with strangers online.”

A number of children identified safety in play and recreation spaces as their top priority. This tended to be children with a disability, those who identified as LGBTIQ+, girls and young women, and children and young people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Feeling safe alongside adults and their peers while at the play and recreation spaces, as well as moving to and from them was important. Facilities and equipment played a role in increasing safety – such as access to unisex bathrooms and better lighting in the spaces and the surrounding streets – as well as a greater variety of spaces for different age groups. Teenagers felt this most acutely.



Inclusion

“More disability friendly equipment/playgrounds”

Inclusion is an incredibly broad term but captures the overall desire for play and recreation spaces to be safely accessed by all children and young people, as well as other community members. Concerns about disability access tended to dominate conversations with younger primary aged students, and older students began to identify other inclusion concerns such as:

- welcoming spaces for LGBTIQ+ children and young people,
- reducing the anti-homeless aspects of park benches,
- more spaces that older children and young people are welcomed in,
- sensory spaces for neurodiverse children and young people,
- more equality in the quality of spaces in different parts of Canberra, and
- ensuring spaces facilitate racial and cultural inclusion.



Sport

“More sports equipment for public use”

“More Public spaces areas such as volleyball courts”

“More basketball courts”

“More free tennis courts”

Casual sport was a key recreational activity for many children and young people. A number of students identified the need for a greater variety of sports facilities that are accessible to everyone. Students spoke about not being able to access equipment, such as balls, even when they could use a field or court. Others asked for more variety in the type of sports offered. It was clear that those we spoke to did not mean organised sports through clubs, but instead talked about access to sports equipment and spaces they can use together on a casual basis.

*“No matter the colour of your skin
you can all play.”*



An inclusive soccer field for all cultural backgrounds, with BBQ facilities so families can come to watch children play.

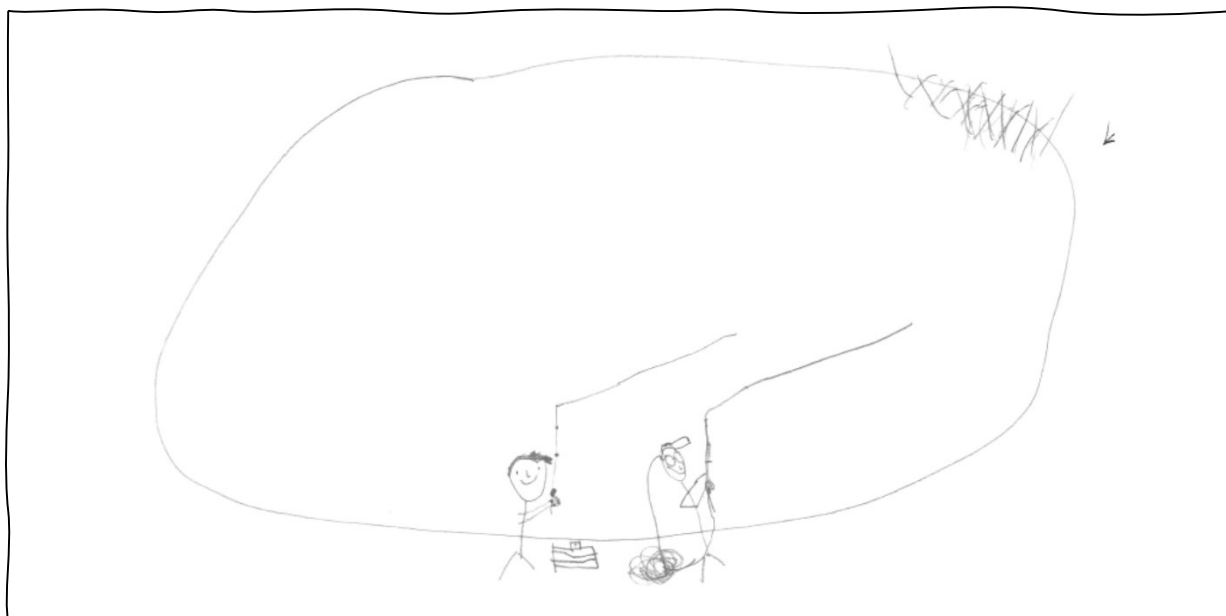
Diversity of possible activities

“There’s nothing for my age group”

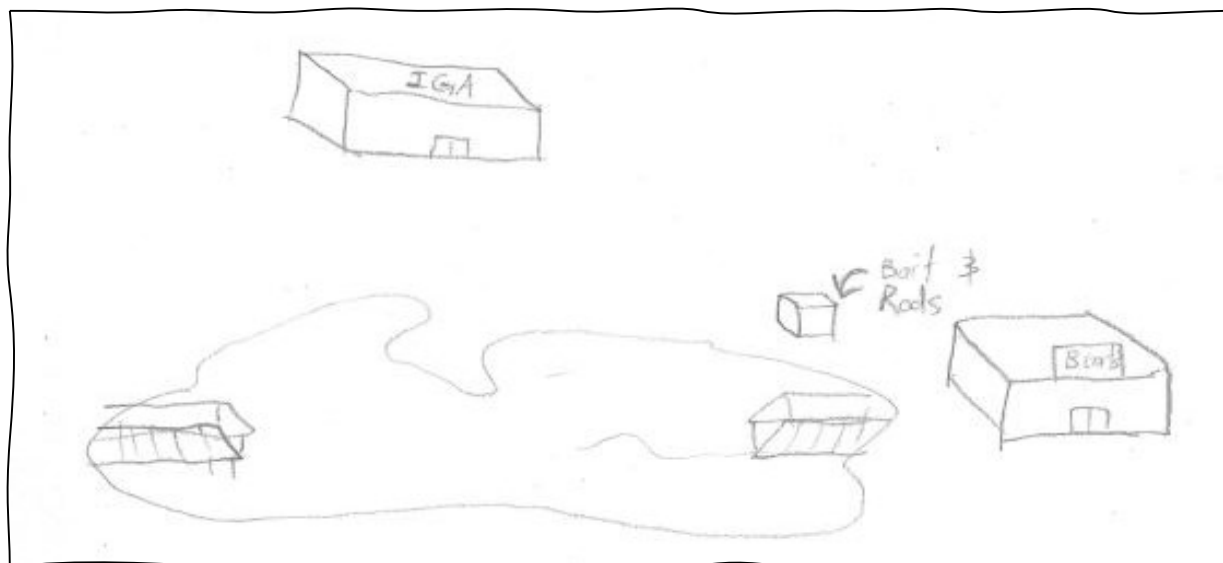
“More age appropriate areas for all ages and abilities”

“Quiet place, but not like a library.”

Many students in years 6 and above spoke of the need for more parks and playgrounds that cater to, or at least more appropriately include, their age groups. Some spoke of the need for them to have spaces to go where they can be children, but in ways that support their developmental stages. Playgrounds with “swings for big kids”, activities with greater risks (such as obstacle courses) and a greater number of youth spaces were all identified as important to their ability to access play and recreation spaces.



Children and young people noted a lack of diversity in the activities offered in play and recreation spaces. Suggestions included ways to better utilise the lakes, including by providing toilets, fish cleaning facilities and jetties around Canberra’s lakes.



What barriers do children and young people face in accessing play and recreation spaces?



"I drew the Lego area because I like Lego. That's me and my friends...we're building a Lego tower but it keeps falling down. And when we build it again, it doesn't even fall."

Feeling unsafe

“Lighting is really poor across all streets in ACT. It is NOT safe for girls to walk anywhere, even from bus stops.”

“For places to be cleaner and safer.”

Lack of lighting in parks and surrounding streets was identified as a barrier to young people using recreation spaces. At older ages, when children and young people are engaging in play and recreation more independently, this became a more widely spoken about theme. Being able to play and relax later into the evening was important for older age groups who may be juggling school, work and family obligations, which limit times they can meet up with friends.

Homophobia and racism were both identified as barriers to children and young people enjoying public recreation spaces. Homophobia, in particular, was raised several times, with a few young people recounting experiences of dealing with homophobic peer groups in some public parks.

A lack of unisex bathrooms contributed to feelings of being unsafe, and unwelcome, in recreational spaces.

“Got yelled at by a mum for being at a park”

Other teenagers spoke about parents of younger children being overtly hostile when they use the same playgrounds. This was an issue for young people around 12-15 years of age who still want to use playgrounds, albeit that these spaces some parents with younger children seem to see these spaces as being exclusively for younger age groups.

The desire for mixed age playgrounds that engage older children, and even adults, in safe and inclusive ways was a strong theme throughout our discussions.



Lack of cleanliness and maintenance

“No toilet paper ‘stinky’”

“Toilets aren’t clean“

“Toilets are yuck”

“Toilets are gross”

Dirty toilet facilities were one of the issues mentioned most frequently across almost all our sessions. Children and young people spoke of the lack of toilet paper, broken facilities, rubbish and unsanitary toilet cubicles. There was concern about ‘pathogens’ and ‘germs’ being spread by lack of cleanliness, and it was strongly stated that this was a barrier to children and young people using some facilities.

This feedback sits alongside criticism of some of the new playgrounds in the ACT having been built without toilet facilities at all. Discussions between parents on social media note this as a barrier to taking children to playgrounds.

Parks ACT has a park finder on its website. It lists only 21 parks with toilets out of 500 registered parks.



Limited transport

“Not easy to go on bikes to playgrounds because of car focus, no footpaths”

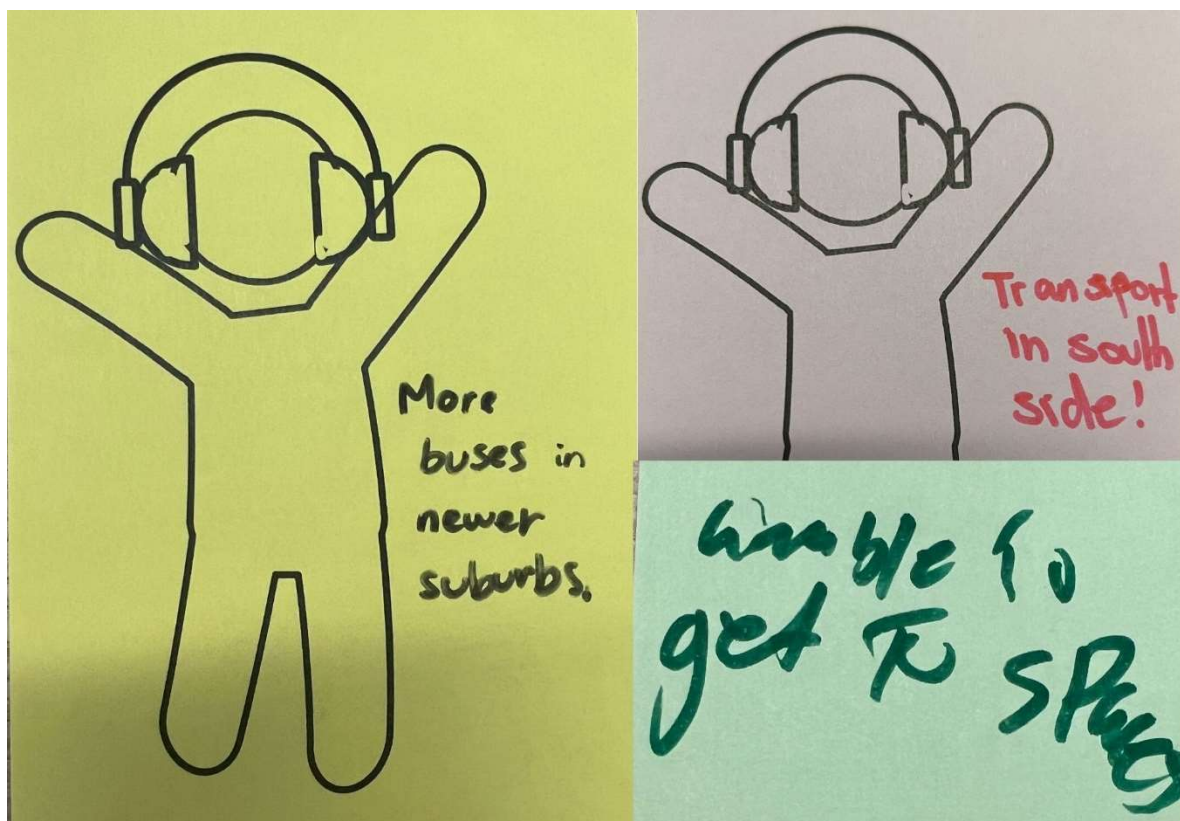
“No accessible crosswalks”

“No disability access- need more disability spots on busses + wider footpaths”

“Unable to get to spaces.”

Transport to and from parks was a concern for older students, from year six up, particularly in some of the outer suburbs. This was echoed by our literature review, which found that a lack of parking spaces can make it difficult for parents to take young children to play spaces.

Coupled with the comments regarding the unequal distribution of various recreation spaces in Canberra, transport options were seen by many children and young people as lacking. This was a key barrier for many young people to enjoy existing spaces.



Limited disability access

“More Things for disabled people”

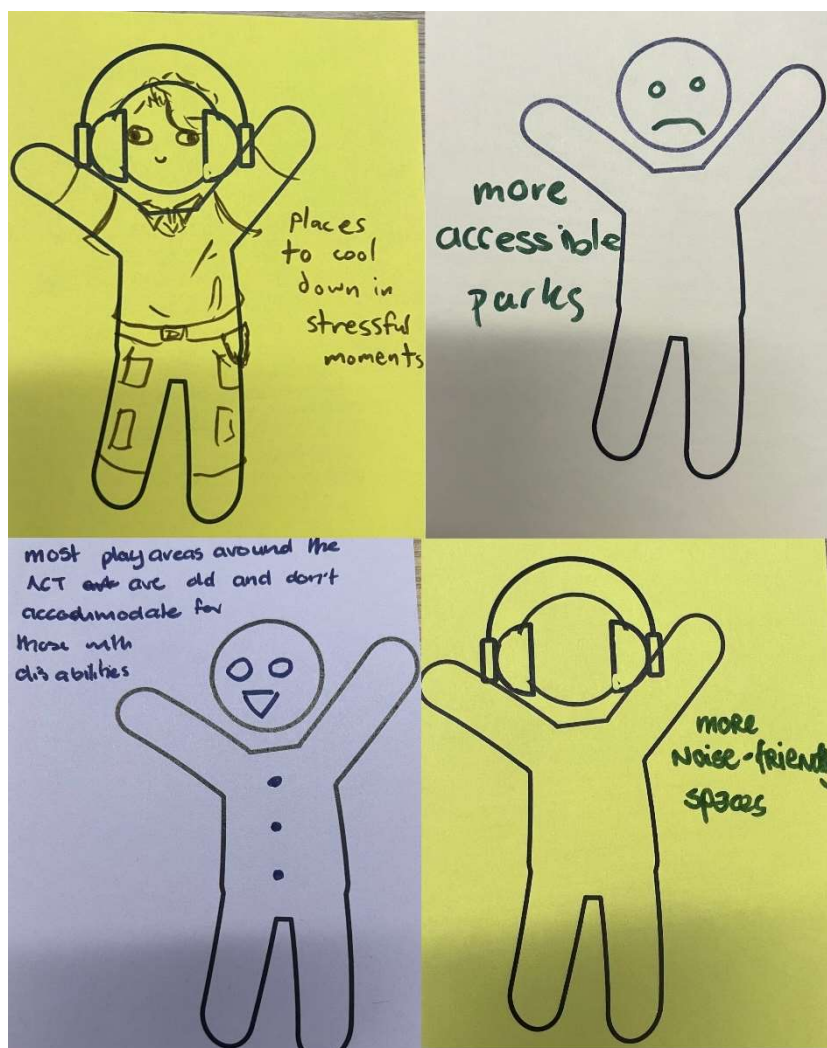
“More accessible for people wiith disabilities”

“Places to cool down in stressful moments”

“More Noise friendly spaces”

A large number of children and young people said there are not enough play and recreation spaces that are accessible for people living with disability. According to our count on the Park Finder website, there are only ten parks that have disability access (either a ramp, wide enough gate or flat entry with no grass) as well as disability accessible play equipment. Where it exists, play equipment for people with disability primarily comprises a swing that accommodates a wheelchair.

The students we spoke to were emphatic that this was not enough. Their ideas were far ranging in how to be more inclusive. These included sensory play spaces, quiet spaces, and spaces with a great mental health focus.



Not enough options for teens

“We’re still children, and we want to play.”

“More teenage spaces”

Many young people identified the lack of spaces they can relax in. Some wished for equipment in playgrounds that was suitable for them, like ‘big kid swings’ so they could also play; others spoke about alternative spaces like skateparks, fishing, sensory spaces and youth centres.

“Making spaces more diverse not just playgrounds. Young people like different things like fishing.”

Although youth centres are available in different regions, some young people said there was inequality in the standard available between regions. This was true of a few spaces, but the community centre and the use of the regional lakes were particularly mentioned.

“Not nice facility here at the community centre compared to Woden which is nicer and feels safer”

“Tuggeranong doesn’t have same lake related activities, no bathrooms, running water etc”

Many of the teenagers we spoke to do not feel welcome in a number of public spaces and indicated that it is difficult to find age-appropriate spaces to play and relax. They liked the idea of mixed-age parks that specifically cater to older children and even adults. They also had many ideas for alternative play spaces, such as legal graffiti walls, indoor recreation spaces and a greater variety of equipment in existing spaces.



A legal graffiti wall

This recreation space was design by a Y6 student and includes a ramp and stairs for access to the art space, as well as basketball facilities nearby.

Playground designs



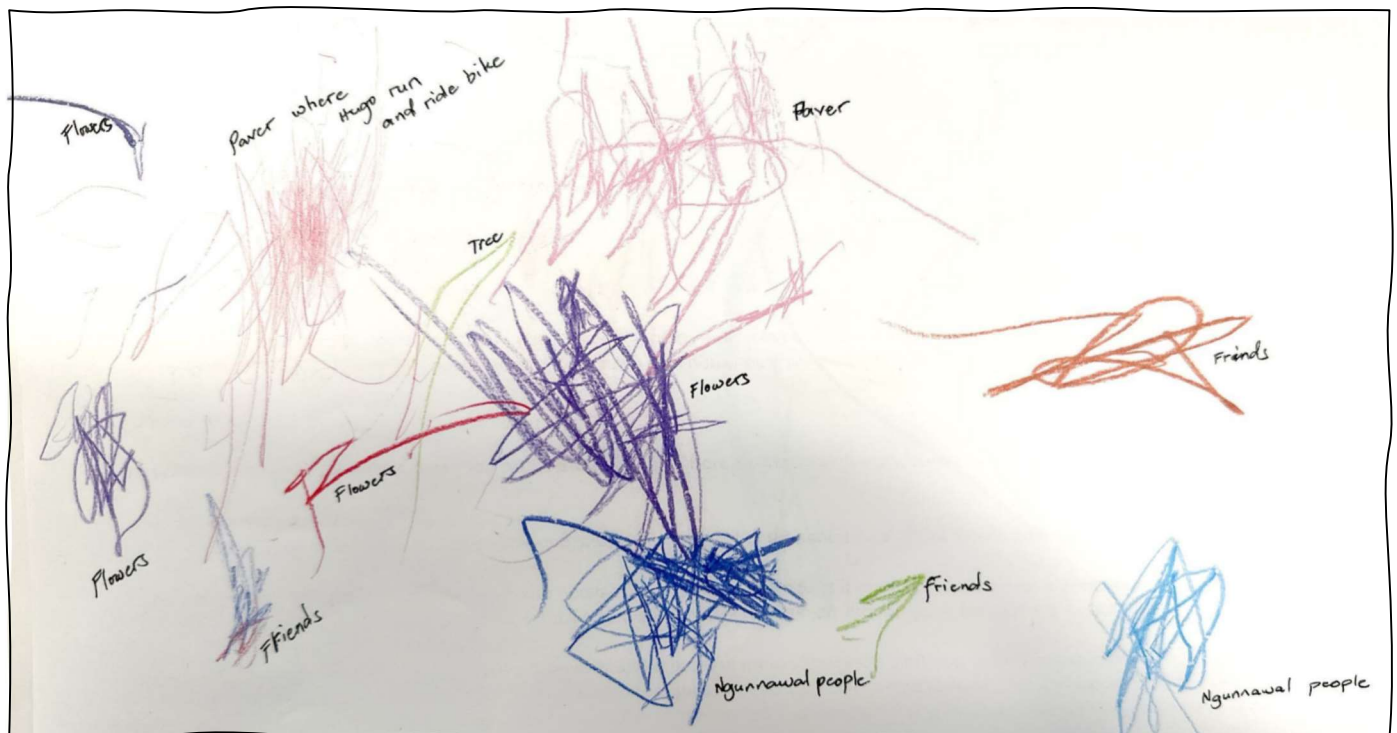
"This is a cat elevator, Lego house with some dolls. I love building with Lego."

Children's designs

We sincerely thank the children and young people who took the time to share their frustrations, ideas, and joy with us when we asked about play and recreation. Their ideas are reflective of their knowledge and experience and should be considered in any conversations about improving play and recreation in the ACT.

Although we have tried to use many of the playground designs that children and young people spent time on throughout the report, we still have many designs that we would like to celebrate.

This section captures as many of the design we received as possible. Some designs have not been included simply because the photo we have of them is not good enough to show the design effectively.





A number of playground designs included alternative activities. In the example on the left, a stage with audience seating is part of a park to enable children who “dream of acting to practice.”





Free access to sports equipment, and a wide range of sports, were incorporated into a number of designs. The ‘mega sports complex’ above would enable many sports to be played informally.



Children were very creative in how they included people with mobility disabilities. There was a wide variety of suggested equipment, far beyond the traditional accessible swing.

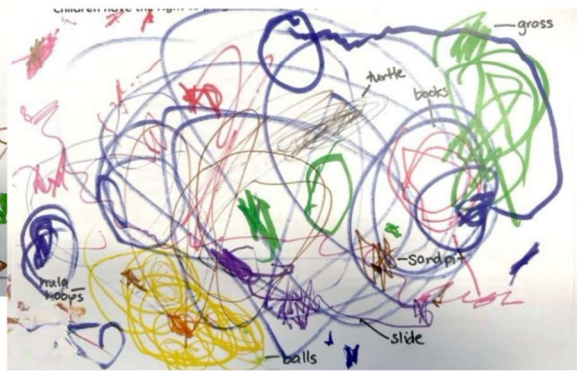
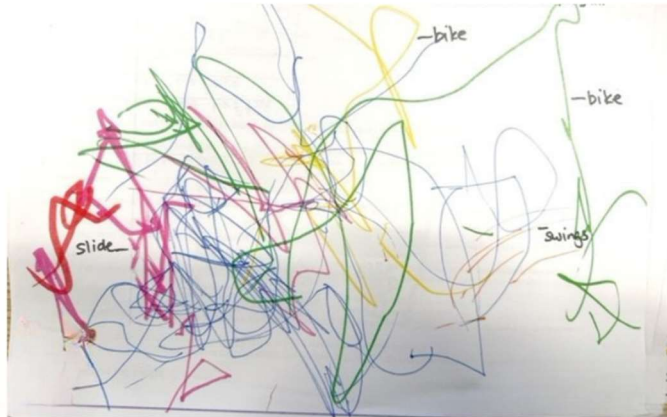


Some designs created spaces that facilitated a range of ages spending time together, such as in the example below with a sports ground next to BBQ areas and gardens.

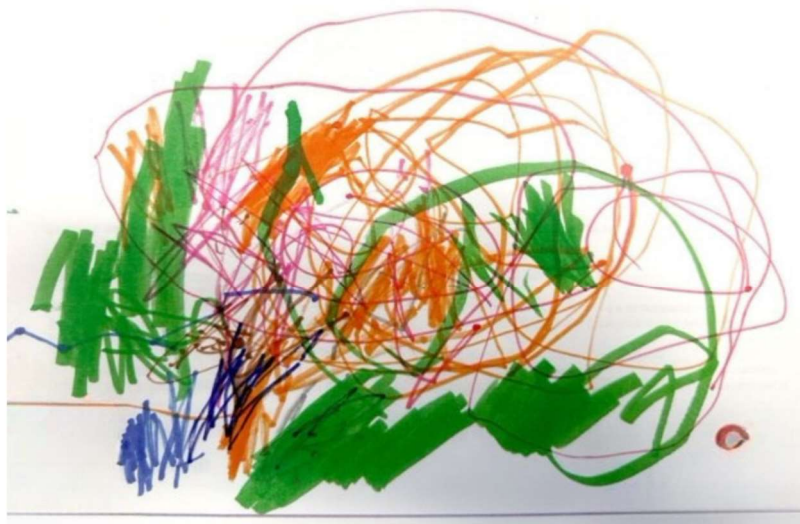


Elements of risk were popular in designs of older primary school students. Obstacle courses and 'Ninja Warrior' style playgrounds were two examples of this.

Spaces where family, friends and nature could all be enjoyed together were particularly important to our youngest designers.



-There's mummy, water and music





Children & Young
People Commissioner
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