

CHOOSING A NEIGHBOURHOOD FOR KIDS



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY



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Introduction

We all know that our children need to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and get enough sleep and physical exercise to grow up strong and healthy. It turns out the way their neighbourhood is built can also have an important bearing on their health. Researchers at the University of Calgary, who have spent decades studying the relationship between the built environment and our health, share a few of their findings about how our neighbourhoods can help build healthy kids.

The kids are alright: Patricia Doyle Baker



When Patricia Doyle-Baker's children were small, she was very particular about the windows in her house. "When my boys were growing up I had to be able to see the backyard and the front yard from the same view point," says the associate professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and an adjunct associate professor in the Faculty of Environmental Design. "My husband thought it was ridiculous but it was so we could see where the kids were."

It makes sense that if you can watch your small children out the window as they're playing, then you are more likely to encourage them to get outside. Small, intuitive design factors like this can make a big difference in our kids' levels of physical activity.

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To encourage more physical activity with your kids, Doyle-Baker suggests looking for these things in your neighbourhood:

Is there greenspace between the sidewalk and the road?

“Having a berm or a row of trees between the road and the sidewalk helps because children can play outside, protected from cars. But when they just have a sidewalk, there’s a bit more danger associated with doing their hopscotch or creating masterpieces with chalk on the summer sidewalk.”

Are there nearby places for your kids to play?

“Think about the area around your house as a sort of amusement park to foster physical activity, imaginative play and independence in your children. As your kids get older, letting them play in the nearby local park helps foster their independence with minimal risk.”

Is it safe to walk?

“When the streets around your house are connected, it provides a safer environment for your children to play outside.”

Are there any hills?

“Having rolling hills in your backyard or in a park nearby gives children an opportunity for all sorts of downhill activities, from rolling down in the summer to tobogganing in the winter.”

Are there trees?

“Trees and garden space help kids play games like hide-and-seek and other creative games.”

As for older kids: Some U.S. research suggests college students walk even less than little children. As part of the HealthyHoods project, researchers are looking at how University of Calgary students get to campus every day. “The data we have currently suggests that many students drive to UCalgary,” says Doyle-Baker. “We would like to understand the factors responsible for this so that more active transport can be encouraged.”

Walking in the neighbourhood: Bev Sandalack



For decades, children routinely rode their bikes or walked to school every day, something that's become relatively rare. Our neighbourhoods are making it more difficult for kids to cycle or walk to school — activities that are “particularly important for children,” says Bev Sandalack, associate dean (academic) of Landscape + Planning at University of Calgary's Faculty of Environmental Design. In [research she presented at Walk 21 in Vienna](#), Sandalack and her colleagues found:

- A lack of opportunities to walk and bike are a matter of daily life for kids.
- Walkshed sizes are smaller in neighbourhoods that have the highest number/density of children.
- The curvilinear block pattern is the least walkable with the poorest quality, however this is the most common current neighbourhood type.

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– *Bev Sandalack*

- A need to link neighbourhood type with walkability for kids, discourage curvilinear block patterns and advocate for more walkable grid or warped grid.
- A need to develop a range of park and play areas in all areas of the city.



Going to school: Gavin McCormack



A child's parents, as well as how close they live to their school, are important influencers on whether a child walks or cycles to school, says Gavin McCormack, associate professor in Community Health Sciences at Cumming School of Medicine and the Faculty of Environmental Design.

Parents determine a lot of their kids' behavior: "There is some evidence to suggest that parents' perception of safety and their confidence in their child to be safe out in the neighbourhood correlates to children's physical activity, in terms of things like active transportation, but also independent mobility, that is a child being able to roam around the neighbourhood by themselves. Parents' concerns about safety from crime and traffic might influence how much opportunity a child is allowed to have to be physically active in their neighbourhood."

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Getting to school and back: “Car culture and lack of time are important factors in parents driving their children to and from school. More cars driven by parents who are often in a hurry to get to work, mixed with children walking and cycling to school in a built environment that prioritizes cars, is a very unsafe situation. Neighbourhoods need to be planned and built with vulnerable populations in mind – children, seniors, and those with disabilities.”

Proximity to school: “Kids are more likely to use active forms of transportation, whether it’s cycling or walking, if they live closer to school. From a planning perspective, to encourage active transportation you want as much of your school population within walking or cycling distance of school, a distance suitable for children, and you want to make sure that the routes between home and school are safe and direct.”