

Children's Right to Play:

Hong Kong's Obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (OHCHR, 1996-2018) states that

“Every child has the right 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.”

Play is essential in promoting interaction and cultivating social values that influence the shaping of society. In a city with small private homes and some of the world's most densely populated urban areas with crowded streets, Hong Kong Government policy has fallen short of providing a sufficient amount of urban recreational open space.

Based on findings of the qualitative and quantitative survey conducted by Playright and The University of Hong Kong Social Science Research Centre¹, “the number of playgrounds should be increased in residential areas to reduce the travelling times for children with disability to accommodate the maximum travelling time to reach playground of 30 minutes accepted by most parents.” The study also found that it is important for a playground to have recreation play equipment to meet physical, sensory, and social experience needs of children with disability.



Photo credit: Leisure & Cultural Services Department.

Best Practices

The utilization of play space has three aspects: accessibility, quantity, and safety. Below are benchmark practices proposed by different countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Accessibility of a play space has two definitions: location (such as distance to travel and means of transportation needed) and design (which caters to the needs of people with different abilities) as shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Accessibility benchmarks²⁻⁵

Age groups		Walking distance
< 5	Local	100m
5-11	Local Equipped	400m
≥ 12	Neighbourhood Equipped	800-1000m
Design		Wheelchair routes
Ground-level access		1524 or 1525mm
Elevated play components		ramps or transfer

Quantity includes the amount and size of play spaces, and the number and variety of play components (see Table 2). Decision of quantity should take into account the local population demographics, as well as the needs of children with different abilities.

Table 2: Quantity benchmarks²⁻⁵

Play space	Amount per 1,000 population
Outdoor sport	1.6 hectares (16,000m ²)
Children's play	0.8 hectares (8,000m ²)
Area of Play	Size
Local	100m ²
Local Equipped	400m ²
Neighbourhood Equipped	1000m ²
Play components	Number
Ground-level	≥ 1 of each type on an accessible route
	Relative to elevated play components
Elevated	≥ 50% must be located on accessible route; ramps preferred to transfer systems

Safety is to avoid unnecessary risks but to offer gradual challenges according to age and abilities. A safe play space should enable children to play freely in a secure environment with age appropriate play equipment (see Table 3) that should also include elements of risk and challenge to promote personal development of children.

Table 3: Examples of age appropriate play components⁶

6–23 months (toddler)	2–5 years (preschool)	5–12 years (grade school)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple slides • spring rockers • swings with full bucket seats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • merry-go-rounds • climbers • horizontal ladders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arch climber • overhead rings • vertical sliding pole

Types of Play Space in Hong Kong

Public play space in Hong Kong is provided by three major organizations, namely Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), Housing Authority (HA), and Housing Society (HS).

Play and recreation facilities for children in public parks and open space are primarily provided and managed by the LCSD for about 70 percent of the public play space provision. The other 30 percent is provided in non-LCSD venues, such as in public rental and subsidized ownership housing estates managed by HA and HS. It should be noted that play spaces provided by private residential developments are not available and not included in this study.

LCSD Managed Play Space

The LCSD manages 634 outdoor and 34 indoor play spaces. The outdoor play spaces vary a great deal and are typically grouped by size of the venue and nature of play. The indoor play spaces are provided in municipal services buildings or sports centres at no cost to the public.

The size of an outdoor play space includes the total play space area and its surrounding informal play areas serving other recreation purposes, such as park, garden, promenade, sitting-out area, etc. An outdoor play space can cater for more active (physical, locomotor, social) or passive (sensory, imaginative, and solitary) kinds of play. An active play space contains more play equipment whereas a passive play space emphasises the natural setting and contains more non-play facilities like benches, trails, or plants. Some outdoor play spaces, such as parks and beaches, contain both active and passive elements.

Each indoor playroom can carry a theme (such as Circus, Deep Ocean, City, etc.) and ranges between 60-400 sq.m in size with a carrying capacity of 10-50 children⁷. These indoor playrooms are mainly designed for use by children aged between 4 and 9 and not exceeding 142cm in height. Children under the age of 4 must be accompanied by parents or guardians inside the playroom.

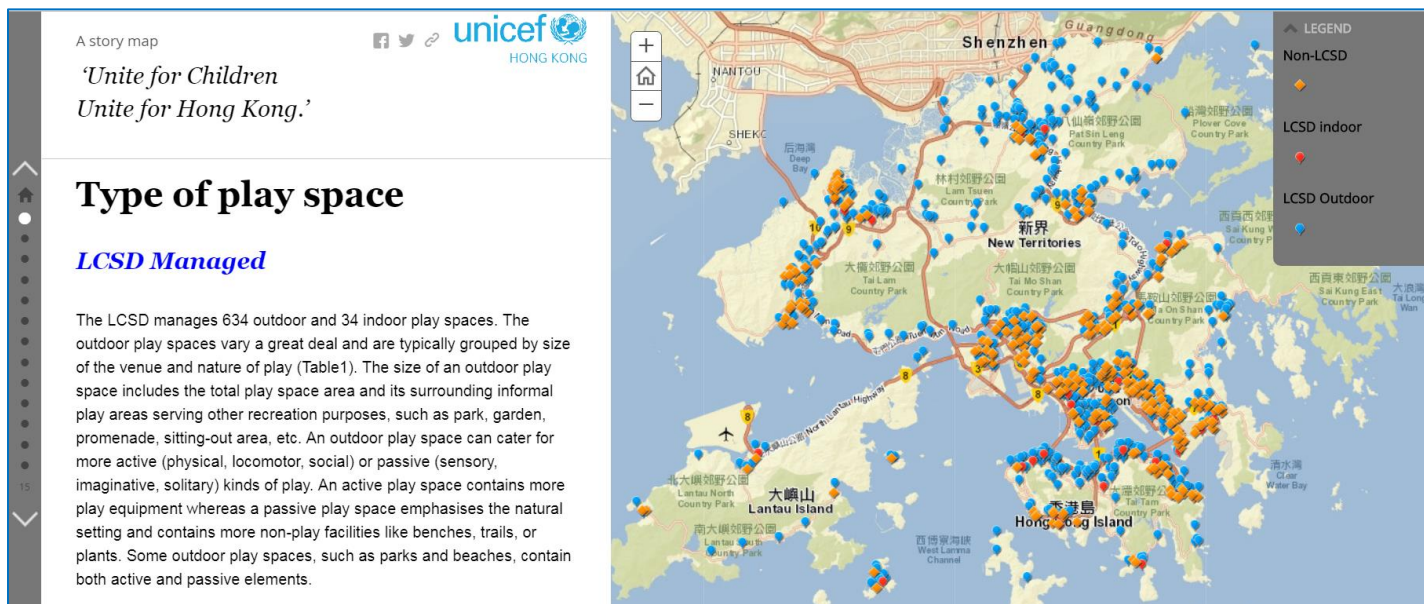


Figure 1: Types and locations of play space in Hong Kong

Data source: UNICEF. (2015). Child Rights Advocacy Project website. Available: <http://arccg.is/9z0Wn>.

Non-LCSD Managed Play Space

Records of non-LCSD play space managed by individual housing estates are incomplete. It is particularly difficult to determine the size of play space which is not regulated and may be scattered randomly in multiple open areas within a housing estate. Moreover, some play equipment for children are installed in close proximity to or amidst fitness equipment for adults and the elderly.

A Digital Inventory of Play Space

There is currently no comprehensive inventory of play space provision in Hong Kong. Information about the play space (size or area, carrying capacity, age groups) and play equipment (key attraction, number, and variety) are incomplete for both outdoor and indoor facilities.

Figure 1 shows the locations of play space in 2016, compiled from various sources⁷⁻¹⁰. It can be seen that play areas are generally situated nearby residential areas although some play areas appear to be scattered sparsely in the New Territories within low rise residential developments.

Quantitative Analysis of Play Space

It is believed that children with and without special needs will learn to have comfortable social interactions with each other through playful interaction. As existing play areas may not be an all-access play facility, children with special needs are sometimes unable to join in regular play.

Convenience of Play Space

Without considering physical barriers to accessing a play space (such as slope, staircase, and narrow pathway), playgrounds are found within a reasonable walking distance to residents in most districts. About 75 percent of playgrounds are located within 300m from neighbourhood residence (or 10-30 minutes of walking distance¹¹ because of winding pathways).

A higher percentage of residential buildings in Hong Kong Island (except the Southern district) and Kowloon compared with districts in the New Territories are found within 500m of a playground (see Figure 2). These playgrounds are deemed more accessible by nearby residents.

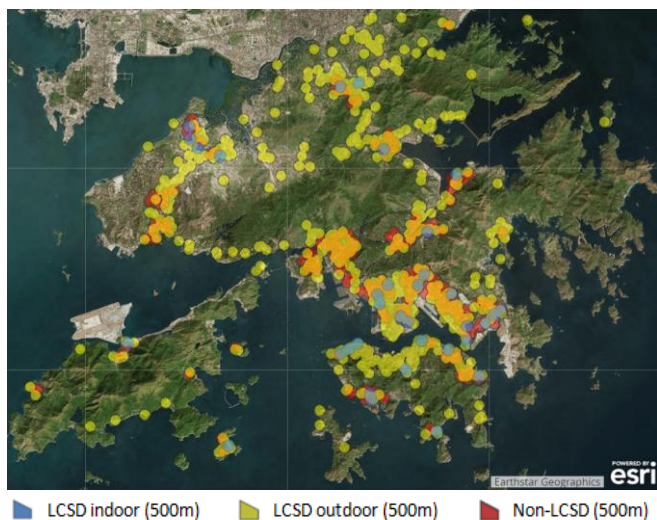


Figure 2: A 500m radius circular buffer was drawn around each playground.

Sufficiency of Play Space

By considering the average numbers of children per playground (disregarding the size of the playground) by 18 districts of Hong Kong, our study shows a mismatch between playground provision and children population. In general, playgrounds in Kowloon (especially Sham Shui Po and Wong Tai Sin) and New Territories East (Shatin) are more crowded while others are not so much (see Figure 3). Children living in three districts (especially North, Central & Western, and Islands) are served by more playgrounds than their counterparts.

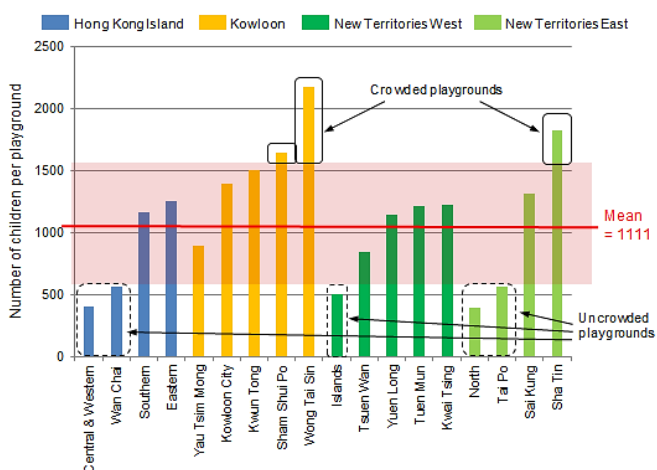


Figure 3: Number of children per playground by districts of Hong Kong, 2016

Safety in Access

A significant proportion of play space is located near busy or main roads and posing potential risks in access by children. 41.6% (264 out of 634) of outdoor playgrounds are situated within 50 m of a busy road thereby requiring supervision of children around roads to keep them safe. Access to playgrounds located in districts within Hong Kong Island (Wan Chai, Eastern, and Central & Western) and Kowloon (Wong Tai Sin, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, and Yau Tsim Mong) are seriously impaired by their proximity to busy roads.

A significant number of existing play space suffers harmful air pollutants emitted directly from vehicles (see Figure 4). 26% (163 out of 634) and 19% (121 out of 634) of outdoor playgrounds are found within 50 m of roads with heavy traffic flows, defined as top 33% of maximum and average of 2016 Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) respectively.

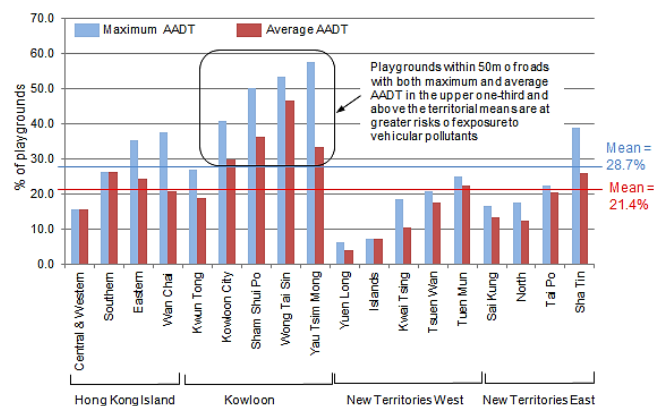


Figure 4: Playgrounds near roads with high traffic volumes by districts of Hong Kong, 2016

User Perception of Play Space

In examining the issue of inclusivity of public play areas, the study administered a questionnaire survey to 11 special education schools to obtain data about perception and user needs of play space. The questions focussed mainly on visitation habits, attitudes, and play preferences. A total of 175 parents of children (6 to 15 years old inclusive) participated in the surveys conducted in group-

based settings, where adults and their children completed the questionnaire together.

Our survey indicated the following problems faced by parents/guardians in accessing public playgrounds: lack of shelter (24%), steps (22%), uneven surface (13%), steep slope (10%), and narrow/winding pathway (9%).

Case Study: Kwun Tong Playgrounds

Site surveys were conducted for selected playgrounds in the Kwun Tong District given its high concentration of children population. Three public playgrounds were selected: Ping Shek, On Tak Road, and Yuet Wah Street. User feedback and environmental audit of these selected playgrounds reveal different kinds of physical challenges for users in gaining access to the playgrounds, as illustrated in *Figures 5*.



Obligations & Aspirations

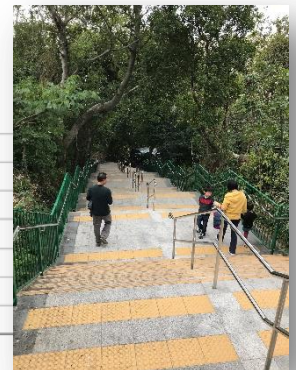
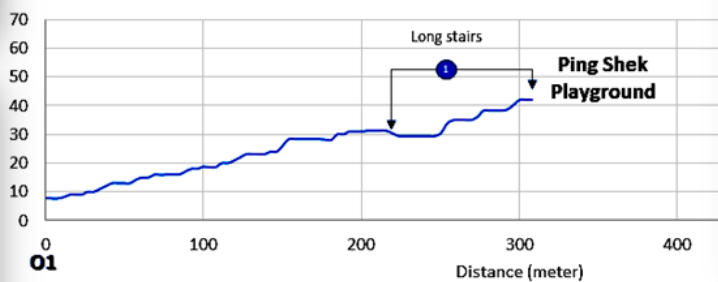
In our attempt to examine the convenience of play space for children of Hong Kong, we note that the living environment is largely a product of planning policies that rarely cater to the real needs of children. It is not sufficient to just meeting benchmark standards of open space, say 2 sq.m per person as stipulated in the planning guidelines of Hong Kong. While the size requirement of the services should be given first consideration, the location and distribution of various services must be considered in whole as opposed to doing piecemeal adjustment and filling in the gaps.

Sufficient ecological considerations are needed in the design, construction, and maintenance of play areas wherein play areas should be:

- located within convenient walking distance of residences, schools, and commercial areas
- safe, pollution free, barrier-free (all inclusive), and accessible for enjoyable physical activities and exercises
- exciting and offer a variety of play experiences

Site 1:
Ping Shek Playground

Ping Shek Playground: Route 1



Ping Shek Playground: Route 2

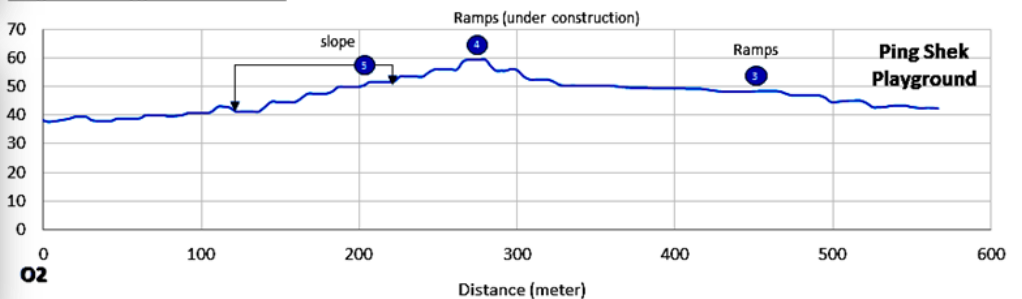


Figure 5: Access issues to Site 1 – Ping Shek Playground in Kwun Tong

Recommendation for the Hong Kong SAR Government

Play space planning: There is a need for the government to make functional commitment to raising the standards of play space in Hong Kong.

1. More creative approaches and designating play space in future land use development (as opposed to passive planning) is needed to improve the situation. The current practice of 2 sq.m per person of open space (which includes play space) is far behind 5.8-7.6 sq.m for major Asian cities like Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, and Singapore.
2. There is a need to increase the supply of play space in select districts (such as Sham Shui Po, Wong Tai Sin, and Shatin) given the large children population but low levels of playground.
3. 10-30 minutes (or catchment radius of 300m from residents' homes) is the maximum recommended travelling time to reach a play space. An average of 25 percent of residences in Hong Kong is not within target but the percentage may be lower if playgrounds provided by private housing estates and indoor playgrounds have been accounted for.
4. More effort should be put into locational siting of play spaces with consideration of health threats to children. Spatial analysis results of this study show a large proportion of playgrounds are situated within 50m of busy and polluted roads.
5. More diversified play space and opportunities are needed across a community. Play space should encourage physical, sensory, and social play. Results of questionnaire survey of parents and children reveal almost all playgrounds are monotonous in design (e.g., provide one kind of slide or swing) and do not offer variety such as grass cover, sand pit, or water bodies to enrich the sensory and social experience.

Inclusive play: There is a need to rethink play space for social inclusion through better planning and design policies based on a strongly child-centred approach.

6. At least one inclusive neighbourhood playground within convenient access is needed for each district of Hong Kong. Although the LCSD claimed that 70 percent of its public playgrounds offer diversified inclusive play equipment, results of this study indicate a lack of suitable facilities for disabled children.
7. Improved access for users with disabilities (i.e., no environmental or physical barriers) to play space must be addressed. At least one of several access routes must be barrier free for playgrounds to be inclusive.

Data transparency: Essential statistics about play space provision should be collected and released to the public.

8. The number and capacity of outdoor and indoor play space should be valued, measured, and updated at least once in every five years, during census and by-census years.
9. Detailed figures for public and private play space, preferably at the level of individual housing estates and developments, are needed. The website inventory resulted from this study can be further expanded to account for missing data.
10. There is a need to take an inventory of play equipment and facilities offered by each play space for better appreciation of current holdings and varieties to enable future assessment of spatial equity and diversity in service provision.

Policy Implications: Even with Hong Kong's efficient road and transport networks, children are more likely to use play space within walking distance of their place of residence. Better provision of quality play space can be achieved by:

- providing a clear definition of play space similar to that practiced in the United Kingdom¹²
- keeping a good account of play space, both indoor and outdoor, in terms of quantity and quality
- regularizing the provision of play space by considering demand (children population) and locational factors (e.g., accessibility and health risks)

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For full research report, please contact adv@unicef.org.hk.

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Related article:

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