

# Parks as a Space for Children's Outdoor Play in Urban Areas: A Case Study

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## **Abstract**

Play is an indispensable part of childhood. Rapid urbanisation has negatively impacted children's play, especially outdoor play. To tackle this issue, city planners and policymakers developed parks that allow children to play freely. Therefore, this study explored how parks create space for children for outdoor play and the factors that influenced the same. The study adopted an instrumental case study approach. The case for the study was the Saket G block park in Delhi. The data was collected through a year-long participant observation and interactions along with three days of complete non-participant observation. Thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method for the study. The major findings from the study were that, firstly, the park included children from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. However, it was not disability inclusive. Secondly, the older children engaged in Games with Rules, while the younger children were involved in creative and locomotor play. Thirdly, the utilisation of play space by children in the park was determined by the available provisions and features offered by the space. Fourthly, the interactions of children who came in groups were limited to their respective groups. However, those who did not belong to any group interacted with others by finding means and shared interests that can provide an opportunity for interaction. Fifthly, there existed gender differences in the nature of play of children. Boys were more involved and engaged in physical play than girls. Lastly, adults influenced children's play by controlling the game or situating children's play around their activities in the park.

**Keywords:** outdoor play; urban areas; parks; children; adults' role; gender; social interactions

## **Introduction**

Play is considered to be an inseparable part of a child's life. Growing research and evidence has shown the value of play in children's holistic development (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Kim, 2018). Moreover, Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly mentions children's right to play. Outdoor play has an indispensable role in play. The famous early childhood educationalist Friedrich Froebel pointed out the importance of outdoor play. According to him, children are curious, creative, and active beings who best thrive in stimulating environments, which outdoor play can provide. The outdoors facilitated the children's practical hands-on experience, which was lacking in indoor play. Therefore, it was pertinent to create adequate outdoor opportunities for children to play. Rapid urbanisation has posed significant challenges to the outdoor play of children. The lack of space, the risk aversion attitude of parents, the rise of visual media, institutionalisation, and over-scheduling of children's daily lives are some reasons that limit outdoor play in urban areas. Javadekar (2015) quoted Moore and Marcus and argued, "Accessibility to rich, diverse, accessible sustainable landscapes in the

residential districts where children live and the lack of independent mobility and rich environmental experiences at a neighborhood level” (Moore and Marcus 2008, p. 155) greatly inhibit children from having direct experiences of being in an environment that offers a wide range of play materials to freely explore, manipulate and learn about the world that they live in” (p. 8). The city planners, designers, and policymakers have realised this issue and have attempted to tackle the problem by building playgrounds and parks. For instance, institutions like the National Institute of Urban Affairs and government commissions like the Delhi Urban Art Commission have created guidelines to create play spaces and parks in cities. Thus, parks have become vital in encouraging outdoor play in urban settings. Therefore, this study attempts to understand how parks enable a space for outdoor play in an urban setting and the factors influencing it.

### **The Rationale for the Study**

The rationale of the current study is to explore the play patterns and various aspects that influence children’s play in parks. The Delhi Urban Art Commission, in their city-level project report on Park Design Guidelines (2020), specified the importance of having such studies. According to the document, these studies should be done “to understand activity pattern, user behaviour, ownership and participation within parks and on its peripheries” (2020, p. 15). They could aid in identifying the areas of concern with respect to park planning, zoning of activities, individual elements, operation, and maintenance. In this case, the study would help identify various factors influencing children while playing in the park. Thus, providing the city planners and policymakers with adequate information needed for creating more outdoor play-friendly parks. The study also demonstrated the role parks play in facilitating children’s outdoor play in an urban setting. Moreover, it attempted to identify the factors in parks that influence children’s play. These could contribute to existing literature on the play culture of children living in urban areas.

The major questions the study attempted to answer are:

1. Who are the children coming to play in the park?
2. How does the physicality of the park affect/ influence children’s outdoor play?

The first question is to examine the social, cultural, and economic background of children using the park (space) and how it intersects. The second is to understand the relationship between the park’s space/equipment and the nature of children's play. Identify the factors influencing children's outdoor play in the park, including access and participation by different age groups and genders.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Importance of Outdoor Play**

Play is an inseparable part of a child’s life. It is like a staple for children’s development. Research shows the paramountcy of the same (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Anderson-McNamee, 2010; Atmakur-Javedkar, 2015). From the early nineteenth century onwards, attempts have been made to understand play and its relation to children’s development. Mellou (1994) divided these attempts into classical and modern theories. While classical theories explored the purpose of play, modern theories examined the role and influence of play on children’s development (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). For some classical theorists, play was a means to manage energy (Spencer, 1878; Lazarus, 1883). For others, it was to harness instincts either to equip themselves for the future (Groos, 1901) or project the ancestors' instincts (Hall, 1908). However, modern theorists went beyond the purpose of play and explored its impact on children. Their work contributed towards play’s role in physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and

language development. For instance, Freud's (1938) psychoanalytic theory discussed the importance of play in emotional development as it provided a medium for children to manage their emotions and past traumas. Piaget (1962) believed that play reflected the amount of cognitive development that happened to a child. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1967) observed how play facilitated cognitive development within the social context.

The theories help one to understand its vitality in children's lives. However, play does not happen in one form. Various investigators classified them differently (Parten, 1933; Piaget, 1962; Hughes, 1996). Parten (1933) categorised play into social categories depending on the number of playmates and their interactions. These kinds of play were solitary play (playing alone), parallel play (two or more children play side by side without interacting), associative play (when children with different ideas and goals play together), and cooperative play (when children with share goals and ideas play together). Meanwhile, Piaget (1962) divided play into cognitive categories- sensorimotor (when children use sense to explore), symbolic (when children use objects to represent different meanings), and games with rules (play with already set rules). As children cognitively develop, they transition from one form of play to another. Furthermore, Hughes (1996) identified fifteen types of play and classified them into four categories. They were function play (which includes rough and tumble play, deep play, locomotor play, object play, and exploratory play), dramatic or symbolic play (symbolic play, socio-dramatic play, dramatic play, fantasy play, imaginative play, and role play). These two types of play were often reflected in younger children (Atmakur-Javedkar, 2015). The next two categories, constructive play (which includes creative play, mastery play, and exploratory play) and games with rules (social play and communication play), were reflected among older children (Atmakur-Javedkar, 2015).

The aforementioned types of play in an outdoor setting are yet another aspect that has captured researchers' attention. Undiyaundeye (2014) discussed the positive impact of the outdoors on children's well-being and development. Outdoors promote physical development as it provides space for children to run around. It gives children first-hand experience, contributing to new information necessary for cognitive development. Moreover, opportunities are there for interaction with others, which aids in social and language development. Moreover, it allows them to explore, use their senses, and be physically active (Undiyaundeye, 2014). These are some attributes needed for play. These attributes enhance play among children. Thus, developmental benefits from the outdoors not only happen through its setting but also through its role in encouraging play.

### **Outdoor Play in Urban Settings**

Studies have shown the importance of outdoor play in the holistic development of children (Edgar & Berkeley, 2016; Bento & Dias, 2017). Edgar and Bentley (2016) examined the impact of outdoor play on children's brain development. Outdoor play gives opportunities for exploration and natural experiences. This aids children in acquiring basic knowledge needed for learning and cognition. They assimilate and accommodate new knowledge into their pre-existing knowledge. This enhances brain development. Thus, outdoor play enables children to achieve fundamental tasks like exploring, risk-taking, fine and gross motor development, and gaining rich knowledge through experience (Edgar & Berkley, 2016).

Bento and Dias (2017) explored the importance of outdoor play in the overall healthy development of children. They believed play promoted cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. These were necessary for children to thrive. They acknowledge that time and space influenced play experiences. Therefore, playing outdoors had immense significance in children's development through play (Bento & Dias, 2017). Through outdoor play, children could be in contact with natural elements. These elements

can capture children's interest and attention through their unique attributes and open-ended features. This aids children in developing their divergent thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, interacting with nature builds immunity, which is vital for healthy growth (Bento & Dias, 2017). Apart from cognitive and physical development, outdoor play helps in emotional development. Bento and Dias (2017) believed that exposing children to safe risks was vital for their emotional well-being. By taking risks, children get the opportunity to experience success and failures. This would help them to navigate their emotions. Once they overcome the challenges the risks pose, there is a sense of accomplishment. This aids in building children's confidence (Bento & Dias, 2017). Concerning social development, children engaged in outdoor play tend to cooperate with other children. Interactions between children lead to socialisation and the development of social skills like teamwork, leadership, cooperation, conflict management, and so on (Bento & Dias, 2017). Thus, outdoor play facilitates the holistic development of children.

The rapid urbanisation, technological development, and fear of safety have led to declining outdoor play among children (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015; Bento & Dias, 2017; Lee et al., 2021). Especially in urban settings, the lack of space for children to freely access the natural environment is challenging for outdoor play (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015). Structural arrangements are not only the factors that affect outdoor play in an urban setting. A child's play is socially and culturally constructed (Vygotsky, 1967). Therefore, social and cultural factors also influence children's outdoor play. Changing social norms regarding children's independent mobility and parental concerns over children's safety have decreased children's outdoor play (Lee et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the city planners and policymakers were woken by the importance and benefits of outdoor play. This led to the planning and designing of spaces for children to play in the form of parks and playgrounds (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015; Bento & Dias, 2017).

Atmakur-Javdekar (2015) observed that nature was designed according to human needs in urban areas. Traditionally, playgrounds and parks were constructed with fixed play equipment. The design was such that an alternative space was given to children to play, thus keeping them off the streets and sidewalks. This fixed structural arrangement for play in the park limited children's opportunities to play over time. Children were bored and disliked being separated from the adult world (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015). However, Bao et al. (2023) discovered that the highest level of activities happened in semi-open spaces in urban parks. Children preferred this space due to its dense vegetation and diverse varieties of recreational opportunities. The study confirmed that "natural landscapes could meet the needs of children for a stimulating and changing play environment. Children can improve the quality of their activities by playing in natural recreation facilities" (Bao et al., 2023, p. 9).

Furthermore, they also found that children's enjoyment in a park depended on the number of playmates they could come in contact with. Moreover, the perception of safety also impacted the level of play activities in the park. Thus, Bao et al. (2023) suggested that the number of activity spaces and the population of children in the area should be considered while designing a park. Children in all age groups should have a wide variety of play opportunities. Finally, they recommended that the urban green space be reexamined from the child safety and rights lens and redistributed accordingly.

The research discussed above revealed the crucial role of outdoor play in children's holistic development. The opportunities for outdoor play in an urban setting were offered through parks and playgrounds. It was essential to make conscious efforts to design parks and playgrounds that invoke likeness to outdoor play and provide a wide variety of play opportunities that enhance development.

### **Factors influencing children's outdoor play in the park**

Research has shown that various aspects of parks influence children's outdoor play and playtime (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009; Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015; Lee et al., 2021). Some of the main factors widely explored were the park's physical ecology and structure (Ernst, 2017; Lee et al., 2021; Bao et al., 2023), adults' role and influence (Refshauge et al., 2012; Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015; Ernst, 2017; Lee et al., 2021), and gender (Reimers et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2021).

Lee et al. (2021) also discovered how physical ecology impacted children's outdoor play and time. Children were more likely to be physically active during pleasant weather with moderate temperatures. However, extreme winter and summer could hinder their outdoor activities and playtime. Furthermore, green neighbourhoods were critical for children to spend more time outside. Thus, children preferred natural environments for outdoor play (Ernst, 2017; Lee et al., 2021; Bao et al., 2023). Atmakur-Javdekar (2015) discovered two primary concerns for outdoor play in the parks. Firstly, outdoor play in the park was more frequent among children if the park was situated at a walkable distance from their place. Secondly, visits to the park were more likely if the park's structural arrangement and equipment aided in holistic development and were accessible to everyone. Thus, parks' ecology and structural arrangement were important in their contribution to outdoor play among children (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015).

Parents play a vital role in providing outdoor play opportunities for their children (Lee et al., 2021). Parents created spaces for children to interact in certain ways, especially in urban spaces (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015). This was done through the adult-designed parks and playgrounds. Parents' physical activeness, support for play, knowledge and beliefs, and sociodemographic factors determine children's outdoor play chances. Those parents who were more physically active supported their children's outdoor play (Lee et al., 2021). Their concerns regarding children's safety and lack of knowledge regarding the value of play were some of the main barriers to outdoor play (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015; Lee et al., 2021). Ernst (2017) discovered that parents' perception of safety greatly influenced children's preference for outdoor play. This was moderated by children's age, gender, and other societal norms like decreased sense of community, changing employment patterns and long working hours (Lee et al., 2021). Hence, parental influence was a strong predictor of outdoor play and time.

Refshauge et al. (2012) examined adults' influence as a whole on children's visits to the park. They did their study in six public park playgrounds in the US and Denmark through an on-site questionnaire. According to them, children's outdoor access depended on adults' motivation. The motivation ranged from spending time with children (observed mainly in Denmark) to the importance of physically active children (American respondents). Though the motivations varied among the adults in Denmark and the US, all respondents stayed longer and visited a particular park frequently if they liked its social environment (Refshauge et al., 2012). Thus, various social aspects of the park also influenced adults' motivation, impacting children's play in the park.

Gender and ethnicity impacted outdoor play and time. Lee et al. (2021) discovered that boys and those dominant ethnic groups were more physically active outdoors. Girls and non-dominant ethnic groups were commonly associated with less outdoor activities (Lee et al., 2021). Furthermore, there were significant gender differences concerning the activity types children were involved in outdoor play in public playgrounds. Girls were engaged more in sedentary activities or activities on playground equipment, while boys were more involved in sports or more active games (Reimers et al., 2018). Moreover, Reimers et al. (2018) also revealed a reduction in girls' physical activities in the presence of boys. Thus, gender undeniably impacted children's outdoor play activities, especially in public places like parks.



Owing to the influence of various physical and social factors on children's outdoor play in the park, Lee et al. (2021) suggested an environment where children could choose freely. Here, the play was directed by children with less adult focus. This would enhance outdoor play among children. Atmakur-Javdekar (2015) recommended parks close to children's homes and blend perfectly with nature. Through these suggestions, one could understand the importance of the factors influencing play in the park and how they should be dealt with.

### **Methodology**

The study has adopted the instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 2008). The research questions, especially the second one, are exploratory in nature. While explaining different research strategies, Yin (2003) stated that a case study is best suited when "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). The current study contained a 'how' question, and the phenomenon being studied was related to the present time. Moreover, as a researcher, my range of control over the setting where the phenomenon occurs was minimal to none. Thus, it fits the criteria Yin (2003) put forward for a case study strategy. Furthermore, this study aims to understand a general phenomenon through a case study. Thus, the methodology is an instrumental case study (Stake, 2008).

### **Site**

The study was conducted in a neighbourhood park in Saket G block. The park was divided into four areas with the help of pathways made for walking or running. They intersected at the gazebo in the middle of the park. These areas were named Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, and Part 4. All had trees planted around them, and each had at least three stone benches to sit on the sidelines. Except for one (Part 2), all the other areas had bushes planted in the middle and bumpy surfaces. Part 2 had a level ground with a children's playground on one side. Part 3 had an open gym parallel to the children's playground in Part 2. Part 4 had an extra monkey bar and a seesaw slightly bigger and rustier than the ones in the children's playground. The park had three entry and exit gates – one towards the Saket G block gated community and the other two towards the public road.

### **Sampling Process**

The phenomenon explored through the study was how parks create space for outdoor play in urban settings. It also delved into what factors (physical, social, cultural, and so on) of the parks influence children's outdoor play. Stake (2008) pointed out that representative case selection was vital in an instrumental case study. According to him, "For this design, formal sampling is needed. The cases are expected to represent some population of the cases. The phenomenon of interest observable in the case represents the phenomenon writ large" (Stake, 2008, p. 129). Therefore, I selected my case, keeping this in mind. The neighbourhood park in Saket G block was a representative case for the following reasons,

1. The park was situated in one of the most urbanised parts of South Delhi, Saket.
2. The park was freely accessible to the public. There was no restriction on entry and exit from the park. Therefore, people from different sections of the society were present in the park. Thus, witnessing social interactions between people from various backgrounds was a possibility.
3. The park was spread over a large area where children can freely play. It also provides provision to play in the form of children's playgrounds.

Once the case was selected, the next step was sampling. "Even in the larger collective case studies, the sample size usually is much too small to warrant random selection. For qualitative fieldwork, we draw a purposive sample, building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study" (Stake, 2008,

p. 129). Hence, I used purposive sampling when conversing with children who availed the park for playing. The primary reason for selecting the participants was that they stayed close to the park. Whenever the participants planned to play outside, they went to this park. For the observation, children between the age group of (0-17 years), who were engaged in play were focused. Consequently, the adults engaged with these children were also observed, but only from the lens of how they influenced children's play.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected over a period of one year. Most of the data collection was done through participant observation. As Yin (2003) pointed out, one of the strengths of the participant method was that it provides valuable insights into interpersonal relationships, behaviour, and motives. My aim was also to gain these insights.

The next method was direct non-participant observation. I did a three-day non-participant observation where I sat at one place and casually observed children playing without influencing their play environment. I observed in the evening from 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm as that was when children usually came to play. Each day, my one-hour observation was divided into five parts. At the beginning of the observation, for 10 minutes, I focused on the park as a whole. I made a note of all the major play activities that were going on. Then, I divided the park into four parts; I focused on each part for 10 minutes. However, if I felt that some participants had anything interesting happening (for instance, interacting with new people as a part of making friends), then my observation followed that individual.

The third one was conversing with children and parents who availed the park. Through the conversations, I could understand the physical, social and cultural aspects that affected children's play. I could converse with three children who used the park to play.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The observed data was transcribed in detail. After reading the transcribed data twice, initial codes were given to the data. Some initial codes were physical play, adults' interactions with children, utilisation of provisions of the park, interactions among children, the topic of conversation, engagement in play, and so on. Later, these initial codes were categorised and put under six different themes. The major themes were the types of children who came to play, the types of play, utilisation of play space, play interactions, gender differences in play, and adults' influence on children's play. Under each theme, significant findings of the study were noted.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The Children Who Come to the Park to Play**

The children who came to the park to play were divided into five age-group categories - Infants (0-1 years), Toddlers (2 -4 years), Early Pre-Teens (4-9 years), Late Pre-Teens (10- 12 years), and Teenagers (13- 17 years). Teenagers, early pre-teens, and late pre-teens played most in the park. However, out of the three, teenagers were the most regular visitors. The same set of teenagers came to play cricket in the park as a group. On the other hand, adults accompanied the toddlers and early pre-teen children.

Since the park was freely accessible to the public, there was a combination of children from different backgrounds. Children from better social and economic backgrounds wore branded shoes, track pants, t-shirts, and shorts. They had their own play equipment like cricket bats, stumps, and rubber balls. Some teenagers had smartphones, too. Most of them entered and exited through the gate facing toward the gated community. On the other hand, children from marginalised sections of society came to play in the park in chappals or sandals. They were all wearing pants and shirts. They all entered and exited from the public

roadside. Though some had play equipment like cricket bats and tennis balls, they also used resources from the park to play. For example, they used bricks as stumps. They conversed in Hindi, while the other group talked in Hindi and English. Apart from socio-economic backgrounds, children from different cultural backgrounds were also present in the park. A group of Sikh boys came to play cricket in the park. Thus, the park was inclusive regarding social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. However, these different social groups did not interact with each other. They stuck to their own group. Moreover, there was no presence of children with disability. The park had no provisions like ramps or play equipment that included these children's needs. Therefore, it was not disability inclusive or friendly.

### **Types of Play**

Hughes's (2002) 'A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types' was used to categorise different types of play observed in the park. The most common type of play that happened was Games with Rules. It was observed among teenagers who were playing cricket and late pre-teens who were playing football. Social play, which came under Games with Rules, was seen among teenage girls. While playing basketball, the girls devised various rules to decide who would win. These rules had little to do with the actual basketball rules. The creative and locomotor play types were the most common among toddlers and early pre-teens. The creative play was seen the most at the open gym. It was utilised more for play by children ranging from toddlers to early pre-teens. For instance, two toddlers used leg workout equipment that swung one leg forward and the other backwards as swings. They sat on one of the foot paddles and swung backwards and forward. Similarly, some early pre-teen children around 6 to 9 sat on the equipment seat and tried to hang on the rods. Some were using arm workout equipment as steering wheels. The children interviewed also confirmed that the open gym was their favourite spot in the park to play. The toddlers were more engaged in locomotor play. Most of them played tag with the adults who accompanied them. Thus, Games with rules were common among older children (teenagers and late pre-teens). At the same time, creative and locomotor play, which comes under constructive and functional play, respectively, were common among younger children (toddlers and early pre-teens).

The study's observation aligned with Atmakur-Javdekar's (2015) reflection on children's play. "Functional, dramatic/symbolic and constructive play often reflect play behaviours of younger children that are free and manipulative in nature and that "games with rules" reflect play behaviours of older children" (Atmakur-Javdekar, 2015, p. 4). Here, younger kids manipulated the use of open gym equipment in such a way that it fit into their imagination. Meanwhile, the older kids followed the rules of cricket and football even when the space was limited for them to play an actual game.

### **Utilisation of Play Space**

The park had considered most of the recommendations from the Delhi Urban Art Commission and the National Institute of Urban Affairs, New Delhi. One such recommendation was Zoning. Zoning means dividing the entire space into portions that make it easier for the children to navigate the park (Delhi Urban Art Commission, 2020). By dividing the park into four areas, it carefully zoned the place. Zoning was done either based on age group or activities in the play space. The park under study was divided according to the first, as it had a children's playground for infants and toddlers in one area and an adult's open gym in another. The monkey bars and seesaw in the Part 4 area were designed for older children in their pre-teens or teenage years. According to the guidelines, "Zoning helps utilise the space effectively and incorporate activities and elements for all age groups" (National Institute of Urban Affairs, 2019). Thus, it could be argued that the park under study also attempted to utilise the space efficiently through zoning. Based on the playground utilisation definition given by Yao (2015), play space utilisation could be defined



as the number of children using the space for play during the observation. The utilisation of various zones of the park under study varied. Part 4 and the Children's Playground were underutilised during the observation. The number of children playing was minimal, and these were the least crowded areas in the park. Part 4 was often used by the elderly who came to chitchat, and only three teenage girls used this area to play. One reason was that this part was occupied by bushes planted in the middle and the monkey bar and seesaw placed on one side. There was no place to play cricket or football, the games the teenagers and late pre-teens were most involved in. Therefore, they preferred this part less. Meanwhile, the toddlers and early pre-teens were observed playing at places where the adults who accompanied them were present. Most of the adults took the children to Part 3. Thus, the frequency of toddlers and early pre-teens using this part was also less.

Children's Playground also lacked children playing. The average time spent by children in this zone was five minutes. The reason for this was the safety of children using this zone. Some of the play equipment was broken. Moreover, teenagers were playing cricket in the same area, and more often, the ball fell at this place. These made it dangerous for the children to play at the playground. One of the children with whom I had a conversation pointed out this. She said the one thing she did not like about the park was the 'flying balls,' which she feared getting hit by. Another reason was reflected in Javdekar's (2015) study, where he pointed out how playgrounds severely limited play opportunities for children with fixed play structures that bored children above six.

Part 1 and Part 3 were optimally utilised for play. In Part 1, a group of late pre-teen boys played football. They used the bush and trees as their goalposts. Occasionally, adults come to play badminton or for a walk. However, no other children played here except for them. Toddlers and early pre-teens majorly used part 3. They were the ones whom adults accompanied. When the adults were using the open gym, they played at the gym, exploring the equipment or around it. There was much free space for locomotor play where they could run around. Here, the fear of 'flying balls' was also minimal. Thus, part 3 could be considered a favourable area for them to play.

Part 2 was the most overutilised play space. Multiple cricket groups occupied it at the same time. This area was preferred by both teenagers and adults who were playing cricket. It was observed that two to three groups played cricket simultaneously. It was overutilised because there was limited space for two to three groups to play at a time. Owing to the lack of space, the play boundaries of the groups overlapped. The demand for this part was due to the favourability of playing cricket in this area. This part was the only area without any bushes in the middle. Moreover, it was a level ground, unlike other parts. These factors made it a better area to play cricket.

The available provisions and the features of different zones determined the zones' children's play space utilisation. This aligned with Hamilton's (2011) findings, where he stated, "both internal (i.e., feature and amenity type) and external (i.e., neighbourhood) park characteristics play a role in influencing park usage" (p. 55). Part 1 was preferred for football among late pre-teens because it gave them enough space to play without any external hindrances as others entered their play space. Toddlers and early pre-teens chose Part 3 as it was closer to the adults who accompanied them and were in a safer place. The physical factors like level ground and lack of obstruction made Part 2 desirable for playing cricket. Thus, it was the better option for teenagers to play. Part 4 was less desirable due to its lack of options available for play in terms of play space and equipment.

### **Play Interactions**

Most children whose parents did not accompany them came in groups. Their interactions stayed with the

group members only. There were minimal interactions outside the group. For instance, the three cricket groups playing in Part 2 did not interact with each other even when their play boundaries were overlapping. Similarly, the boys playing football in Part 1 also did not appreciate talking to outsiders and kept their interactions within the group.

It was also observed that those who want to interact with others found various means to do it. For example, a teenage boy who wanted to join one of the adult cricket groups was initially seen observing them play. Later, he started helping them by collecting the ball that had gone far. Slowly, he became a part of the game. Similarly, an early pre-teen girl wanted to interact with two siblings in the park. She attempted to have a conversation by subtly following what they were doing. The siblings were running on the bumpy parts of the park. The girl also did the same as them. Through this imitation, she slowly approached the siblings and interacted with them.

Another observation that was made was that shared interests aided in having interactions. The above-mentioned girl and siblings started interacting properly when they all went to pet a dog that came to the park. Though they interacted earlier, they parted ways quickly. However, when the dog came, they were all interested in petting it. This brought them together again. After petting the dog for some time, they became comfortable with each other and were seen playing together. The children I interacted with also shared their experiences of making new friends by playing together on the play equipment both parties liked. Thus, shared interests brought children together to interact and play.

The interactions among the children during their outdoor play in the park depended upon the presence of playmates and shared interests. Those whose playmates accompanied them did not make the effort to interact with others. Meanwhile, those who came without a play partner had more tendency to interact with strangers and find common ground to play.

### **Gender Differences in Play**

Gender was one of the factors that influenced children's outdoor play in the park. Gender differences in the nature of children's play in the park were visible in the current study. From day one of the observation, the number of boys playing in the park was more than that of girls. Except for three teenage girls, the boys were more regular visitors to the park than the girls. Boys engaged in intensive sports like cricket and football. They were the loudest in the park and highly involved in the game. Their interactions during play were primarily related to the game they were engaged in. Meanwhile, on the other hand, girls mainly engaged in badminton and basketball. Though these could be physically engaging, the girls were not as intense as the boys. Importance was given to having a conversation while playing rather than playing itself. Their conversations were not related to their game but to their school matters and other miscellaneous things. Furthermore, they did not stick to one activity the entire time they spent in the park. For instance, the three teenage girls who came to the park regularly were observed playing basketball for some time. Then, they were seen playing with an infant. Later, they went on to pet a dog that came with its dogwalker.

These observations aligned with the findings of Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris (2009), who discovered that the presence of boys was greater than that of girls in neighbourhood parks, and Reimers et al. (2019), who found that girls engaged more in sedentary activities while boys were in active activities like sports. Thus, the types of play and intensity of play were gender specific. The reasons for this gender specificity should be further researched.

### **Adults' Influence on Children's Play**

Adults played a significant role in the outdoor play of toddlers and early pre-teens. Adults accompanied

all the children under these two age groups. The children I spoke with also stated that they went to the park only when some adult was there to accompany them. Some of the ways adults influenced children's play were, firstly, the play of children, whom adults accompanied, was situated around adults' activities in the park. Most of the adults who came with children went to the open gym. While they were exercising at the gym, the children were playing in and around the gym. "Children's independent access to the outdoors is often restricted by parents, making young children dependent on adult motivation for visits" (Refshauge et al., 2012, p. 396). Here, the adults' motivation was to exercise in the open gym. So they took the children who accompanied them there. Thus, the children played in and around the open gym. The second observation was that when adults were involved in children's outdoor play, they controlled the course of the play. For instance, two adult men played cricket with boys in their late pre-teens on day one. These men were directing and instructing the boys on how to play. Similarly, another pair of adult men got involved with another group of boys playing cricket the same day. Over time, these two men took over batting and bowling while the children were merely fielding. On day three of observation, a mother played tag with her two children (both toddlers) and their help. While playing, the two adults were engaged in the game and were running after each other. Meanwhile, the children were excitedly looking at them play.

The third observation was that the adults took the initiative to make the toddlers and early pre-teens do more physical play. For instance, a girl in her early pre-teens did not play anything initially when she came to the park. She waited for the adult who accompanied her to play badminton with her. Similarly, a toddler who was more involved in creative play on day one was seen playing cricket and football with his grandfather and help on day three.

The adults' motivation, participation, and desire for physical activeness influenced children's outdoor play. Thus, adults' play is an indispensable part in determining the nature of children's outdoor play. Moreover, more often they control the outdoor play of young children as they were dependent on the adults to visit the park. Hence, adults' influence could not be ignored when it came to children's outdoor play in the park.

## **Conclusion**

Playing outdoors is the right of the children. The rapid growth of urban settings had posed various hindrances, like safety and lack of space, to children's rights. Their agency to access the outdoors had become limited. The city planners and developers found parks to solve this problem. The study discovered that the public park offered space for outdoor play for children of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. It was laid out so that different parts of the park could be used for different purposes. For instance, a playground area for young children to play. However, the utilisation of the park differed from the initial vision of the people who developed the park. Young children spend more time in the open gym with adults than on the playground. This indicated that various factors influenced the children's outdoor play. Three factors were identified through the study. One was the feature of the space and the provision provided by that space. Second, adults' role in children's play and third, the difference in the types of play and its intensity caused due to gender. These factors should be delved deeper through further study for a nuanced understanding of the role and importance of parks in children's outdoor play. Nevertheless, this study reiterates the essentiality of parks in children's outdoor play in urban areas.

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