Step 1 - Listen

As you begin your playground journey, it important to remember that playgrounds do not bring play to children or communities. In every corner of the globe and across all cultures, children are at play. Children are born with an unstoppable drive to foster their own growth and development: to explore, discover, create, and delight. In every community there are also adults nurturing and encouraging these children, equipping the next generation with the tools to address the challenges tomorrow will bring. Playgrounds are simply spaces and structures built to validate and enrich this work already in motion. In the "Listen" phase of the playground process, your job is to listen carefully to how the community is already supporting their children. This information will inform both the direction and the content of the design. In this chapter you'll find:

+ An introduction to Asset Based Community Development

+ How to lead "Community Consultations"

+ Guidance on working with a community to determine whether or not a play space is a community priority

+ "Community Consultation" activities aimed at gathering ideas for design from children, teachers, parents, and community members.

Asset Based Community Development

This community consultation manual follows an Assets Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which is founded on the principle of building on community strengths instead of starting from an agenda of fixing problems. To follow this model, it is essential to assume an appropriate attitude towards the community you are working with: patience, a willingness to set aside your own negativity and assumptions of the issues, a high degree of respect for the community, and most importantly, the belief that they have the tools to improve their own lives.

Starting from the vantage point of strength as opposed to weakness is a paradigm-shifting way of changing the conversation from seeing all the problems to instead seeing the strengths and existing solutions. Furthermore, engaging the community in this way will foster strong ownership and maintenance of the play space in the future. A playground build does not finish after the opening day. Over time, the playground will need care, maintenance, and upkeep. It is essential to plan for the long-term sustainability of the project throughout the planning and build process.

It is important to engage the community in the playground design and planning. We call these meetings "Community Consultations." As you arrange your "Community Consultations," consider different groups of people whose input will be important such as: Children who will use the playground, teachers, childcare workers, and/or school staff, parents, community members and local leadership

In these discussion groups, be sure to include a diversity of members with respect to gender, age, ability, and economic standing. Pay particular attention to including and encouraging participation from those whose may not typically carry weight in community decisions (such as women, children, people with disabilities and the elderly). Be sensitive to community dynamics. Consider holding meetings in community spaces where everyone feels comfortable contributing to the conversation. In some contexts, this means organizing a few meetings for different groups of people in different places with different formats.

Defining priorities

Before you start planning your playground, we recommend you stop and temporarily set aside whatever "playground agenda" you might have and focus on the community and the children with an open mind. Building a playground is a big project - it requires time, resources, funding and hard work. It's also not a one-off event. A playground will require regular care, maintenance, and upkeep. It is important that a playground is only built if the project is truly a priority for the community at that time.

Before you introduce the idea of a playground (and particularly if you are not local to the community) first find out what the community is already doing. Below you'll find a list of questions to help guide your discussion. Remember, these questions are not a script for your meeting - you'll need to adapt them to your own context. These questions are provided to get you thinking about how you can learn about community priorities, assets, and what is already being done to care for children's needs. Using the Asset Based Community Development Approach, always start conversations by focusing on strengths as opposed to needs.

What is working in this community right now?

+ What are the good things in it?

+ What do you love about this place?

+ What in your community makes you proud?

+ Where were you at 5 years ago, and what has changed since then, for the better?

What is worth cherishing and preserving?

+ What common culture or identity do the children in this place share? (could be people group/tribe/country/region/ shared experience, etc.)

+ What are the positive characteristics of this culture/identity?

+ What parts of the community's past do you hope the children will carry on and preserve?

What do you see looking forward?

+ Envision your community in 5 years. What do you hope to see?

+ What are community members doing to make this place better for themselves, their families and their neighbors?

+ What are your key priorities for your community?

What is the community doing to care for the children?

+ What are the children in your community experiencing and learning in their childhood?

+ What do you want the children in your community to experience and learn?

+ Imagine your children at your age now. What do you see?

+ What are your key priorities for your children?

Who is working to improve the community and where?

+ Who is involved in bringing about good things in your community? Who are the key people who drive improvement in the community?

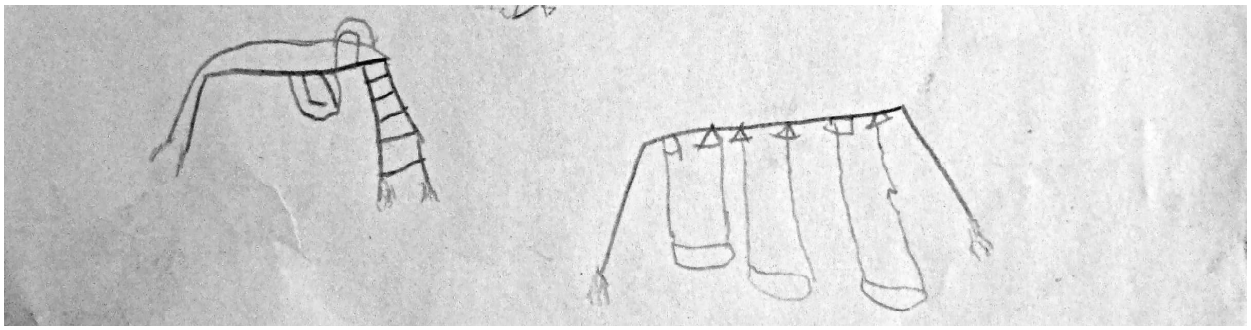
+ In which places are these good things happening?

+ What are the places of potential in the community? Where are the under-utilized spaces?

After discussing community priorities, you should have a good idea of whether or not a space for play is a priority for the community at this time. If it is not and there are more pressing concerns for the needs of the children, you may want to think about how you could support the community in utilizing their assets to address these priorities first, and revisiting the idea of a play space at a later date. If a play space is identified as a priority, take some time to introduce the idea of working with the community to design and build a unique space for play. You can then move ahead with the next activities: "Learning About Local Play," "Learning About Children's Lives," and "Mapping Resources and Materials."

Engaging children in design

Learn from our mistakes....Early in our playground building experience, we were working on a preschool playground design in Uganda. We told one of the teachers we wanted to get ideas for the design from the kids and we asked her to have the kids draw pictures of what they wanted their playground to look like. When we came back to collect the drawings, the teacher handed us a stack of 30 drawings. And every drawing looked almost exactly the same: a slide, swingset, and a seesaw.



We realized that probably the only playgrounds the teacher (and the kids) had ever seen included these three elements. The teacher may have only ever seen one playground design and may have assumed that a playground could only look one way. So when she asked the kids to draw playground, she drew a slide, swing-set and a seesaw on the blackboard and asked the kids to copy it. While she had the best of intentions, this stack of drawings didn't give us any inspiration for the design of their playground.

Even in situations where we've asked kids to draw what they want their playground to include without giving them examples, their ideas are often limited to what they've seen before. Although directly asking children what they want their playground to include seems like the most obvious thing to do, it isn't usually the best approach to engaging kids in design, for a few reasons:

+ Young children haven't developed great self-analysis thinking skills yet. If you ask them how they like to play, they might say they like playing on swings. But if you watch them at play, they might actually spend their entire recess building little houses from twigs.

+ They'll want to give you the "right" answer. Children are pretty intuitive. If you ask them what they want their playground to include they might just tell you want they think you want to hear.

+ Their knowledge of playgrounds is limited (this goes for adults too.) What a playground can include is often restricted to the playgrounds they have seen. And most playgrounds around the world follow the same old patterns and look strikingly similar.

Asking adults directly about design can be problematic as well. Adults have trouble "getting in the shoes" of children and actually remembering what it was like to be their age and how they liked to play. Both adults and children may associate play simply with organized games or built structures (i.e. football or swing sets), rather than open ended activities and materials, (i.e. "playing house" or collecting fallen leaves.)

Despite these challenges, we still believe it is important to engage children and adults in design process for a few reasons:

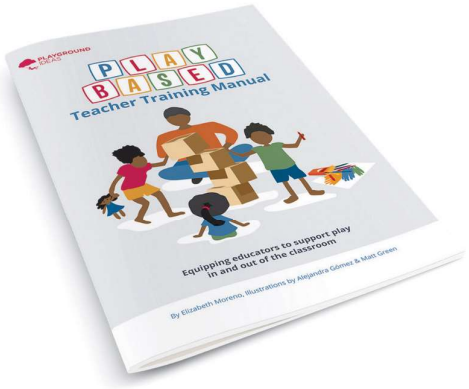
+ While there are universal ways in which children around the world play, every community has unique local games and play traditions. Tapping into these in the design phase celebrates and validates these traditions and may give you great ideas of ways you can incorporate these games in your design to make it really amazing.

+ Engaging children in the design process gives them a chance to participate in what will happen to their space. Play spaces are special, sacred places to children. When adults come in and change their play space, they might feel frustrated or fearful that they will lose their favorite places to play.

+ Capturing children's views on the design can be a way for adults in the community to learn more about how children play. Sometimes at the onset of the design process, adults have very firm ideas of what they want in the space ("It's not a playground if it doesn't have a slide!" or "We MUST have a football pitch!"). Redirecting adults to actually listen to children and consider how they like to play keeps things in perspective.

Instead of asking specifically about the design, focus on learning about children's play and the unique games and play traditions of the local community and use those ideas to help shape your design. As much as you engage children in the design process, be careful not to place the burden of designing on children. That is the job of the designer. You must balance children's insights with your own research on best practices in design and children's play. As the designer, one of the best thing you can do to design a playground for children is learn about children's play yourself. Having a comprehensive understanding of the depth and richness of children's play is essential. In the Design chapter of this handbook, you'll find more research on best practices in playground design. To further broaden your understanding of children's play we would also encourage you to explore the following resources:

Our "Evidence" page
(playgroundideas.org/explore-the-evidence) If we were to write a syllabus for a course on the importance of play, this would be it. Explore articles, videos, and podcasts on play, spanning the fields of economics, psychology, child development, education and neuroscience.



"Teacher Training Manual"
(playgroundideas.org/handbooks)
A basic primer on children's play aimed at adults working with children. You'll learn about why play is important to child development and broaden your understanding of what play looks like.

"Case for Play"
(playgroundideas.org/caseforplay)
This research report highlights the most significant research findings on the impact of early play interventions, particularly for children living in poverty.

Community consultations

In the following pages, we've provided several activities that will help you tap into learning about children's lives and local play. Pick and choose which activities to use in your "Community Consultations":

Mapping Play Activities and Spaces

Do this activity with separate groups of adults and children or as a mixed group. Keep in mind children may be intimidated sharing in a large group with other adults.

For children:

+ Ask the children to draw a map of their community.

+ Ask them to mark all the places they play on their map and illustrate/label these places.

+ Share as a group - ask kids to share their favorite places to play and why they like playing there. What was special about these places? What kinds of games do they play there? Get kids to demonstrate their games and have fun with it!

For adults:

+ Ask each person to draw a map of the community they grew up in.

+ Ask them to mark all the places in which they played on their map and illustrate/label these places.

+ Share as a group - ask people to share their favorite places to play and why they liked playing there. What was special about these places and what kinds of games did they play there? Get people to demonstrate games they played and have fun with it!

Adults "light up" remembering all their favorite play spaces as children. It can also get them thinking about what kinds of play from their childhood they want to preserve for their children.

Identifying Play "Ingredients":

Ask both children and adults to identify from their maps the key "ingredients" that should be included in their "Play Recipe" (e.g. trees, rocks, cars, grandfather's shed, cooking etc.) Write each ingredient down on a small piece of paper. Bring all the papers together and lay them out where everyone can see them. Get the community to organize them into groups or areas. The community may have their own categories or you could organize them into different play types like: sports play, physical movement play, nature play, imaginative, pretend play, social play and place/ cultural play/games. From this list, get the community to identify the priorities of what is needed in this playground as opposed to things that already exist in the community. Carefully document this list.

Drawing and Modeling:

Ask children and adults to draw a picture of what they would like their playground to include. Encourage imaginative ideas like elephants, airplanes, dinosaurs, and birthday cakes. Alternatively, provide loose materials (sticks, clay, fabric, etc.) and participants can model designs. Only do this activity if you have first engaged the group in some of the other "Community Consultation" activities.

Playing Local Games:

Ask children to teach you some of the games unique to their country, culture, or community. Ask adults what local games they remember playing as children. It can be helpful to start by teaching them a game you played as a child that was unique to your own culture (hopscotch, skipping rope, singing games, etc.

Walking Tour:

Ask a small group of 3 or 4 children of different ages to walk you around their community and point out all the places they play and tell you what they do there. You'll get to know which places are really special and why, and you can incorporate what you learn from the children into the community map. It will also tell you what's missing.

You can talk and ask questions as you walk along, and the answers will tell you a lot about play in the community. Make sure you include both boys and girls, children from different backgrounds and children with a disability as each will have different ways of using the same space. If possible, visit schools or existing play spaces and observe their activities and ask them what is happening. (Do not do this alone or in places out of view of the general public.)

"Playground Reporter Exercise"

(See page 67): This exercise gives older children (12-14 yrs.) responsibility in gathering information from their younger peers about how and where they like to play. Children of this age can be a great resource because they walk the line between child and adult. They have spent many years playing in the spaces of their communities throughout different developmental stages and are young enough to have clear memories of play throughout their childhood. They are also mature enough to be able to accurately reflect on and describe these memories. Unlike adults, younger children do not yet see them as authority figures and are more likely to share honestly with them.

Learning about Children's Lives

A good playground will connect to children's lived experiences and provide them with opportunities to explore and understand the world around them through play. Below are a few sample questions for adults, aimed at getting a good snapshot of children's lived experiences in their community:

+ What are some important parts of the history of this community?

+ What is the main occupation of the parents of the children in this community?

+ What is special and unique to this community? What sets it apart from surrounding communities?

+ How do your children spend their free time? At school? At home?

+ Do they have time and space to play outdoors? Does anything prevent this?

+ Complete this sentence: "My child is happiest when..."

+ Complete this sentence: "What my child fears most is..."

Trauma and play

No child experiences a purely positive childhood and play is a powerful tool for children to understand and deal with emotions, trauma, and confusing situations. If children identify playing games associated with negative experiences (war, violence, sickness, etc.), do not ignore these things. List them down and work with the community to brainstorm places for play that could encourage them to positively work through their questions through play. Examples:

+ For children who experience illness and fear of doctors, injections, or medications, their playground could include a mini hospital shop front with patient bed and pharmacy where they get to be the doctor and patients.

+ For children who live in chaotic or violent home environments, their playground could include peaceful spaces or enclosed nooks to feel safe and protected.

+ For young children in a daycare who struggle with separating from their parents, their playground could include adult seating or interactive elements that would encourage parents to play with their children on site before they leave.

Once you've gathered input, ideas, inspiration, and feedback through the "Community Consultations," it's time to move on to planning and designing!