Changing Childhood & the Creation of Child Friendly Communities
Workshop Roundup
By Bob Yates

Reflecting on our own childhoods as a way of identifying change and honing in on policy and practice enhancements to create more child and youth friendly communities was the focus of a Society for Children and Youth of BC (SCY) workshop held on June 1, 2016.

It was also a very special workshop as it recognized the contributions of longtime former SCY Executive Director Valerie Fronczek, who passed away in 2013. The workshop was led by Dr. Roger Hart, the Director of the Center for Human Environments and the Children’s Environments Research Group at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York (www.cergnyc.org). Roger, a longtime associate and friend of Valerie’s, noted her many contributions, from early Habitat conferences to the General Comment on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the writing of which she spearheaded in her role as Communication Secretary of the International Play Association.

The workshop used materials that Dr. Hart has developed for UNICEF, which contain a combination of questions and graphics to help children and adults reflect on their experience of childhood. The material explored ‘what has changed?’ and ‘what should we do about it?’

While individual breakout groups looked at what has changed in the last 30+ years to childhood experiences in early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence, there were many similarities that emerged across the groups:

Play – the theme here was one of loss: loss of time alone, of access to nature, of getting outdoors, of neighborhood friends, of innocence. There was general agreement that the lack of opportunities for unstructured play has had serious negative consequences for children of all ages.

Ranging and knowing your neighborhood – the changes noted were from neighborhoods that were friendly and welcoming to children, in which children could range relatively freely and there was more of a sense of community responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of all children, to empty neighborhoods, with limited street life, where everyone is a stranger and where even walking or biking to school has largely disappeared.

Parental roles – have also changed from ‘hands off’ to ‘hands on’. While some of this change is driven by a desire to provide the very best opportunities for their children, parents also saw no alternative to a constant round of parentally driven activities. Concerns about safety (linked closely to the point above), as well as fear of being judged by others for being too ‘hands off’, were major drivers of this shift.

Communication, the Internet and Social Media – groups noted that children of all ages had both gained a lot – easy access to information, instantaneous communication with
friends and peers – and lost a lot – personal contact, a sense of being alone, information beyond the level of comprehension. There was a sense that online social activity is often used to replace face-to-face social interactions. Additionally, given that many young people have their own devices, it is much more difficult for parents to monitor children’s social lives, friends, and activities than in the past (e.g. communicating via land line in the past).

**Psychology** - again the sense was of loss of spontaneity and imagination, and the growth of stress (for children and their parents), separation anxiety and risk aversion. The constant programming of young peoples’ time and the instant gratification from devices has reduced their ability to deal with boredom and use their own imaginations and creativity to fill downtime.

A panel shared their concerns and responded to some of these points with suggestions about policy and practice changes:

**Rebuilding Neighborhoods And A Sense Of Community**

- Rebuilding the ‘community scaffolding’ that used to support children’s play and freedom in the community – putting children back at the center of the urban design process.
- Strengthening neighbourhood hubs, especially schools, and expanding after school care – ensuring amenities are close to where children live
- Encouraging greater density and more family two and three-bedroom units, especially on the lower floors of apartment buildings (the three bedreomed penthouse is seldom either affordable or child friendly!)
- Taking a holistic approach to the encouragement of more walking and biking to school.
- Challenging the loss of the neighbourhood school, and engaging the school board in a community dialogue.

**Rebuilding unstructured play.**

- Training for recreation staff in ‘playwork’.
- Play rangers in parks to facilitate unstructured play and meet parental concerns.
- More natural play areas and less focus on playgrounds as the places where play occurs.
- Listening to children and building more effective ways to cultivate children’s participation.
- Supporting membership groups and encouraging them to listen better to children.

Above all, there was agreement that action was needed and that it will require systemic, cross-disciplinary approaches if these issues are to be resolved. Childhood is too valuable to be lost. Participants felt that it is important to have convening events, such as this, to bring these issues to the forefront and work together to find solutions.