Where Have All The Children Gone?

Community, Nature and the Child Friendly City

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Where are we going today?

- Starting Points & Background Info
- Primary Research
  - Questions
  - Case Study, Methods
  - Results
- Committee Work
- Now What?
- Conclusions

Starting Points: Children and Nature

- Children are:
  - Learning about the world
  - Developing a sense of place
  - Developing ecological responsibility
- Nature and Health: social, mental and physical benefits
- Children's interactions with the natural world are diminishing
- Measures of child welfare focus on education and health care, but not on play spaces and inclusion
- Richard Louv: *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder.*

Starting Points: Planning *for* and *with* children

- Planning *for* children
  - 4 focus areas
    - Health and Safety
    - Access
    - Integration
    - Greenspace
- Planning *with* children
  - Can improve all these factors

Starting Points: Policies and Programs

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – 1989
  - Full range of political rights (including right to be heard)
- Child Friendly Cities – UNICEF program
  - Implements the convention. “A Child Friendly City is a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children’s rights” (UNICEF, 2008).
- Provincial, Regional and Municipal Acts, Plans, Codes and Strategies
- Programs from other communities

Source: www.childfriendlycities.org

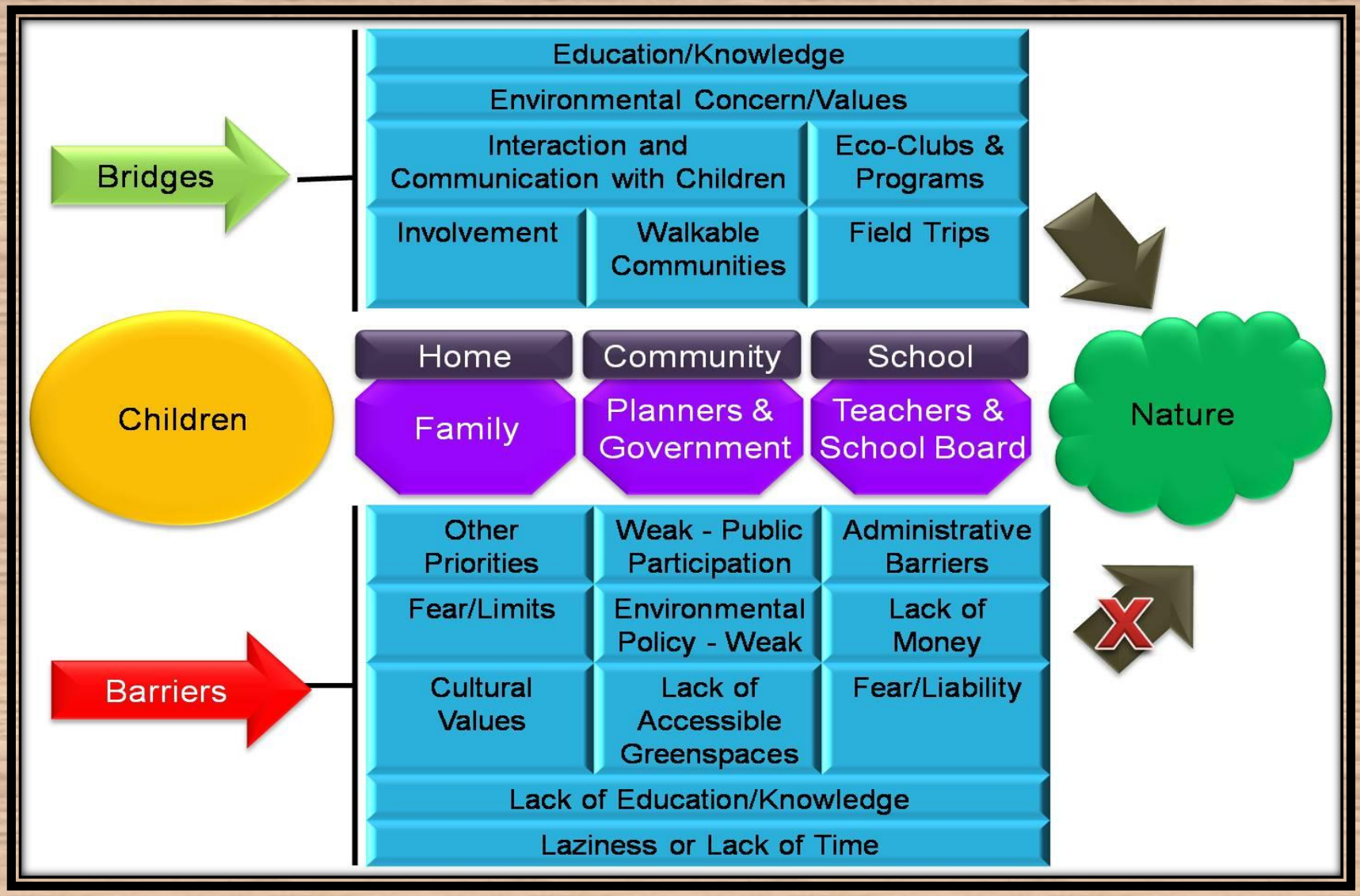
Research Questions

- How do urban children perceive and interact with their communities?
- What is the relationship between children and the natural environment within urban settings?
- To what extent are children consulted or considered in community planning and decision-making?
- Can the Child Friendly City model be used to re-connect children with the natural environment?

Methods

- City of Waterloo Case Study
- Field Work
  - Grade 5 students
    - Cognitive Mapping
    - Semi-structured interviews
    - Surrogate Images (Likert scale)
    - Grade 6 Environment Club Students
  - Other participants
    - Local planners
    - City officials
    - Teachers

Bridges and Barriers between Children and Nature

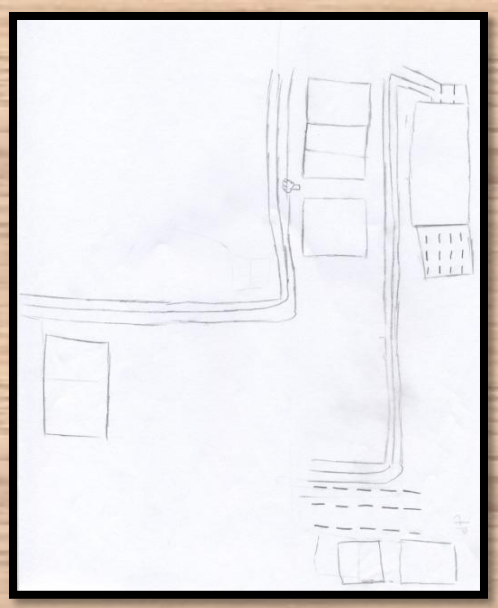


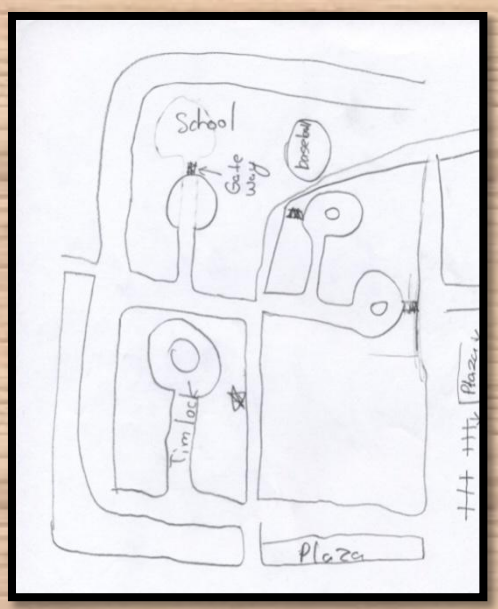
Some Key Results from Students

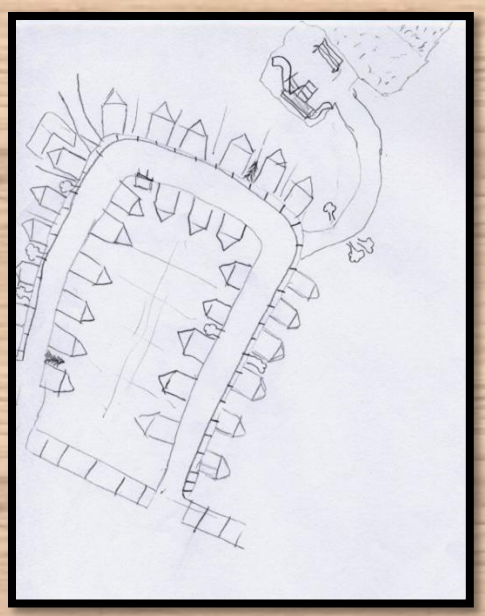
- Only 58% of grade 5 students included any natural element in their neighbourhood drawing (90% included streets). (77% in the Environmental club did).
- Groomed parkland images were rated highest. Pictures of forests and forested trails were significantly less “liked.”
- #1 “free time” activity mentioned = cycling (46%)

  #2 = video or computer games (41%)

- “Liking” vs. “Visiting” Greenspaces: Big difference







Group	Percentage of students including at least one natural feature
Grade five students (out of 41)	58.53%
Grade six environmental club students (out of 13)	77%

Key Results from Teacher Interviews

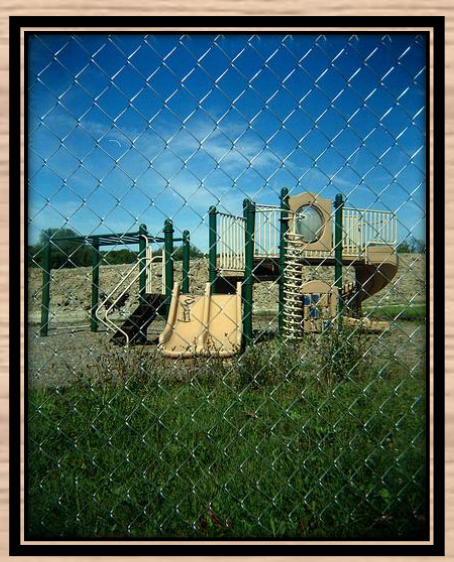
- Variable commitment to curriculum on government, the community and the environment
- Varying approaches to local schoolground greening and accessibility
- The responsibility to teach citizenship, environmentalism belongs to parents
- Field trips: difficult and declining
- Children have valuable ideas to offer (with limitations)

Key Results from City Interviews

- Greenspace “museums” for adults
- Children rarely considered in policy or decision-making
- No formal involvement process
- Youth Recreation Council: does not work with government
- Officials agree children should be consulted, but feel they do not have time to take on this role
- Feel the responsibility to teach citizenship and environmentalism belongs to teachers

Back to the research questions:

- How do urban children perceive and interact with their communities?
  - "Apart from" rather than "a part of" the community
  - Isolated in schools, home and playgrounds
  - Not actively involved in community
  - Afraid of many things (#1 = teenagers)
  - Little awareness of community



....research questions

- What is the relationship between children and the natural environment within urban settings?
  - Typically only use greenspaces (forests) for cycling
  - Most “like” forested areas, but rarely use them (many are afraid of or forbidden from them)
  - Video games are...(surprise!)... more popular.

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HERPETOFAUNA
Herpeto-who?!
www.city.waterloo.on.ca
Waterloo RIM park

....research questions

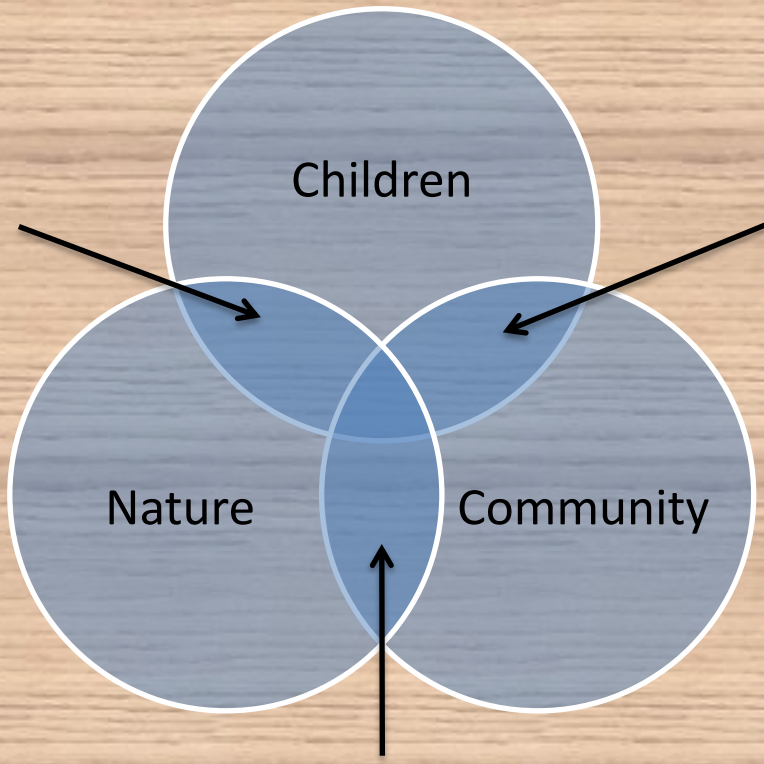
- To what extent are children consulted or considered in community planning and decision-making?
  - There are some concerted efforts to include children's voices, but is an individual decision and infrequent. (There is no requirement)
  - Keen on the concept of including children more in decisions, but few are keen to take action
  - Responsibility for children's involvement passed off
  - Research with children is an administrative nightmare

...research questions

- Can UNICEF's Child Friendly City model be used to re-connect children with the natural environment?
  - Involving children in decision-making (CFC Goal) helps us create spaces that are valued, accessible and useful.
  - The CFC model encourages communities to consider how children interact with their environments. It makes the disconnect between children and nature within cities obvious.
  - While this model may not forge this relationship directly, it provides an important step in the right direction.

In order to make Waterloo a Nature- and Child-Friendly Community:

Improve Children's Access to Greenspaces



Promote Integration and Participation

Conserve, Create and Restore Urban Natural Greenspaces

Safe and Healthy Community Advisory Committee

- Instrumental in many municipal events and initiatives (Neighbourhood Matching Fund, Open Streets, Community Gardens, Decision Making Lens)
- Child Friendly City subcommittee
  - Our idea for a Children's Charter was not well-received
  - Trying possible new directions
  - Keep having the conversations
- Working with government can feel like a game of futility.

Next Steps

- I am continuing to advocate for children's rights at the city level.
- Children's Council?
- Early stages of building a Natural Playground. Will children be involved?
- The field is growing as more people recognize the disconnect between children and nature and the resulting health, social and environmental consequences.

My most important job:

"If a child is to keep his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

-Rachel Carson

In Conclusion:
My Humble Opinions

- The responsibility for welcoming children into the community and into nature belongs to everyone.
- Urban parks and greenspaces are fundamental in connecting children to nature on a daily basis.
  - These areas must be accessible and inviting
  - We must stop treating them as museums
- Children approach things differently, and their abilities are often underestimated.
- Involving children in decision-making makes political, educational, and ethical sense.

Thanks for your time!
Please ask me questions!