

## **Children's Perspectives on Public Playgrounds in Two Swedish Communities**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper describes children's perspectives on local public playgrounds and discusses the effect of the surrounding landscape on playground use by comparing two Swedish communities: one in the forest and one on open, arable land. The researcher interviewed 141 children aged 6-11 from the two communities. They appreciated playgrounds for being fun and for offering many activities, but also described them as problematic, inadequate, or boring. The children often mentioned social dimensions of playground play, and viewed playgrounds as insufficient as the only places for children's outdoor play. In the forest community, the children appreciated having forested areas close to playgrounds. Access to natural places for play seemed to make playground design less important and less problematic for children.*

**Keywords:** [playgrounds](#), [children](#), [children's perspective](#), [natural environments](#), [forests](#), [play](#), [Sweden](#)

## Introduction

Planned playgrounds have been created by adults to protect children from unsuitable places and to provide them with meaningful and beneficial activity (Rasmusson 1998). However, designating specific places for children also creates the risk of separating them from the rest of the urban environment (Goodman 1979). Playgrounds can be viewed as an excuse for the lack of child-friendly environments, a "confession of failure to include children's needs in the broader perspectives of human behavior, politics and social change, as well as in urban planning and design" (Cunningham and Jones 1999, 16).

Tens of thousands of playgrounds were established in Sweden during the extensive house-building projects in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The standards and norms for playground size and siting in relation to walking distance from homes were established in the 1960s (Bucht 1997). Local authorities manage many playgrounds located in public parks and around preschools and schools, and others are in residential areas and housing estates.

Research on children's outdoor environments has changed across recent decades. Studies carried out during the 1970s criticized existing playgrounds (Holme and Massie 1970; Insulander 1975; Schlyter 1976; Norén-Björn 1977; Björklid 1982). Other research used observational studies of children to focus on their behavior within individual playgrounds (Brown and Burger 1984; Frost 1986; Susa and Benedict 1994). Hart (1979) pioneered the use of children's own views and feelings in studies of children's environments. More recently, the increasingly used concept of *child perspective* (described by Tiller 1991; Halldén 2003; Skivenes and Strandbu 2006) utilizes children's experiences and opinions of their environment. The new social studies of childhood recognize that "childhood and children's own social relationships are worthy of investigation in their own right" (Baker and Weller 2003, 34). Recent examples of research about children's outdoor environments applies the child perspective by involving children as informants (Rasmusson 1998; Wilhjelm 2002; Kylin 2003; Rasmussen 2004; Burke 2005). Children's own perspectives differ from that of adults', as well as from society's perspective of children (Boverket 2000). Acknowledging that children perceive and use outdoor environments differently from grown-ups is important (Wilhjelm 2002; Kylin and Lieberg 2001), since children's access to playing areas and the creation of child-friendly places is believed to be strongly connected to how much independent mobility children possess (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Kytta 2004). This level of freedom also affects children's amount of playground use (Carstensen 2004). Children highly value the ability to move freely and to access a variety of activities in their local environments (Chawla 2002).

Childhood and children's use of local environments in the Scandinavian countries have been described by Gullestad (1997), Rasmusson (1998), Chawla (2002), Wilhjelm (2002), and Kytta (2004). Research has found a comparably high level of

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<sup>1</sup> Following a parliament decision in 1965, more than one million new dwellings were built in Sweden over the next ten years. Previously, the total number of dwellings in Sweden was less than three million (Hall and Vidén 2005).

child independent mobility in Scandinavia, but children's everyday life there has become more institutionalized over time and children are more frequently directed to play in special *places for children* (Rasmussen 1998; Rasmussen 2004).

Discussion of the importance of green elements in children's play has a long tradition. Swedish playground researcher Hans Wohlin wrote that "the urban child is offered artificial establishments and at best access to natural areas" (Wohlin 1961). Kaplan (1977) described the natural environment as important for children's psychological well-being, and Tuan (1978) claimed that nature allows "full play," free from the rules of the grown-up world. Grahn et al. (1997) discovered that play in natural environments is good for children's physical and cognitive development. Herrington and Studtmann (1998) showed that installing natural materials and landscape elements in existing play environments provided additional realms of development, and Fjørtoft and Sageie (2000) and Fjørtoft (2004) noted improvements in children's motor fitness when playing in "natural playscapes." According to Naylor (1985) and Mårtensson (2004), play is highly affected by the landscape in which it takes place.

In recent years, playgrounds as places for play have received little attention in research, although as pointed out more than 20 years ago by Pellegrini (1987), more knowledge on what children do on playgrounds is still needed. It has been emphasized that *places for children* are not the same thing as *children's places*, and that the latter do not always fit with the perspective of planners and other adults who affect children's physical environments (Olwig 1989; Kylin and Lieberg 2001; Kylin 2003). However, Carstensen (2004) has shown that playgrounds can have a significant role in children's outdoor environments and can also constitute children's own places. Similarly, Rasmussen (2004) believes that it is possible for adult-planned *places for children* to be *children's places*. Children's own views of places for play outdoors and in naturalistic settings has been explored by Olwig (1989; 1990), Sobel (1993), Kylin (2003) and Mårtensson (2004), yet this area of research needs further attention. Applying the concept of child perspective when studying how children talk about playgrounds can help us understand how children perceive places planned specifically for them in the outdoor environment.

This study explores children's perspectives on local public playgrounds and playground play in two Swedish communities with different landscape surroundings. The issues examined include whether and how local factors such as the surrounding landscape and access to other places for play affect children's views and use of playgrounds. This paper also discusses children's views of playgrounds in general, whether public playgrounds have a value for children, the attitudes and thoughts children have towards playgrounds and playground play, and the playground characteristics that are important to children.

## Method

In this study, I interviewed children in two small Swedish communities to ascertain their views on local public playgrounds. The two communities were Degeberga, population 1,300, which has a great deal of access to nature in the surroundings, and Glumslöv, population 1,900, which has very limited access to nature. I

interviewed a total of 141 school children—55 in Glumslöv and 86 in Degeberga—about their use of local playgrounds in the two residential areas. The two communities have between 10 and 12 municipal playgrounds each, all of which were built during the last 20 years. The sites were also comparable in terms of size and house type (mostly detached houses), but clearly differed in terms of the quality of the external environment. In Glumslöv, playgrounds run by the local authority comprise a large proportion of the external environment available for children's play. There are grassy areas between housing units, but forest and other natural habitats are rare (Figure 1). In and around Degeberga, in contrast, there is varying vegetation with forests, tracks and clearings that are often easily accessible from residential areas and playgrounds (Figure 2). The range of playgrounds is relatively similar in both places, but those in Glumslöv show a bit more variation, from small and simple to large and elaborate, than those in Degeberga.

**Figure 1. Playground in Glumslöv**



**Figure 2. Playground in Degeberga**

I conducted the interviews with children in groups using a semistructured interview form as described by Kvale (1996). In Glumslöv, the interview groups included children between the ages of 9 to 11 years. At the Degeberga site, I interviewed 6- to 8-year-olds in addition to 9- to 11-year-olds, but in groups containing only children of the same age. Comparisons between different age groups can therefore only be made from the Degeberga study. Each group interview lasted 10 to 40 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The variation in time depended largely on the children's engagement during the interview. I conducted the interviews indoors in group rooms in the local school, with two to four pupils in each group. We used maps and photos of the local authority playgrounds as a basis for the group discussions. I encouraged the children to talk about the playgrounds they visited in the area they knew. The discussions focused mainly around four themes: 1) which of the playgrounds the children visited, when, and how often; 2) descriptions of what they did in the playgrounds; 3) what information they had about the playgrounds; and 4) their opinions about them. The responses sometimes flowed with a minor degree of support from the picture material and the interviewer, and when the dialogue worked well and a group discussion ensued, the children were given a lot of time and leeway. In other groups the same flow did not materialize, so the interview was more structured by questions.

The chosen method requires an awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. When an adult asks children about their local play places, it can be difficult to interpret whether the children's answers actually express their own opinions or whether they

are adopting a different perspective in an attempt to please the interviewer. According to Hart (1979), indoor interviews can be successful in bringing up broad views of the landscape and the social patterns connected with it, but these interviews are less useful than those conducted outdoors for understanding children's small-scale physical landscapes and their personal feelings for places. Rasmussen (1998) found that group interviews can produce information about children's meetings with other people, their experiences in the socio-cultural environment and children's own culture. The group situation allows an interaction between the children in the group. Many children involved as informants prefer group methods since the group situation gives support and is perceived as fun, even though some children can feel dominated by others in the group (Hill 2006). According to Waterman, Blades and Spencer (2001), open discussion questions are preferable when interviewing children since closed questions might increase their tendency for speculation. Thus, in the present study, I asked open questions as much as possible.

In both the interviews and the subsequent analysis of the material, the above-mentioned *child perspective* remained a central concept. However, completely comprehending children's own perspectives is an unattainable ideal. Despite the ambition to portray children's own views of their environment as fully as possible, it is often adults' interpretation of children's perspectives that is obtained. While the aim of the child perspective is to capture children's voices (Halldén 2003), interpreting the empirical material requires full awareness of the risk of children's statements being misunderstood and misinterpreted (Baker and Weller 2003).

The qualitative approach I used for data collection and analysis was inspired by the phenomenological approach as described by Moustakas (1994). The focus is on the essence of children's experiences and on their personal perspectives of playgrounds as objects and phenomena. Children's statements during the interviews formed the basis for my understanding, and I sought their opinions and perceptions of playgrounds rather than information on how playgrounds are constituted.

I carried out the analysis in several stages, based on recognized qualitative data analysis steps (Miles and Huberman 1994; Merriam 1998). I treated the interviews and transcriptions as part of the early analytical process, as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2006). I then reduced the transcripts to the material that concerned the objective of the study, followed by a systematic, empirical-based analysis of the text by reading and re-reading it, looking for regularities. Additionally, I coded sections of it according to content. I compiled the content groups into a large number of different categories, and combined them into more overarching themes. Through a deeper interpretation of the material, I aimed to reveal the children's underlying reasoning and indirectly expressed attitudes. I also made links to existing theory as a framework for understanding and describing my interpretation of the results. The analytical work thus involved reading the transcribed text repeatedly and then reflecting on, coding, categorizing and interpreting the content.

I viewed the children's statements from the perspective of the context in which they were delivered. I made comparisons in order to find similarities in the informants' opinions as well as differences, particularly between children from the two areas. I also addressed some age- and gender-specific issues. As children in the interviews presented narratives and stories about their local playgrounds and how they used them, the results of the analysis are presented here in a similarly descriptive way, illustrated by extracts from the interviews.

## Results

### Playground Play Means "Things," Activities and Friends

The children expressed their thoughts about what playgrounds can and should offer. Some had visited playgrounds in other areas and talked about wanting special play equipment they had seen there for their own playgrounds. The children placed demands on playgrounds, complained about them, even "hated" them. In Glumslöv, the children generally expressed themselves in a demanding way, even though in many cases they used the playgrounds often anyway. For example, when two 11-year-old girls in Glumslöv spoke about a playground they liked, they took as their starting point other, less well-liked playgrounds—i.e., the playground in question was good because it was not as bad as the others they knew:

*Child 1: I think that it is fun because it has better and newer things, and it doesn't look as rotten and so it's much more fun.*

*Interviewer: Not as rotten...*

*Child 2: [Laughs]*

*Child 1: Yeah. The wood's not as rotten.*

*Child 2: And moldy.*

Calling the playgrounds "rotten and moldy" was not uncommon. It was mainly girls who talked about playgrounds not being sufficiently clean-looking; in other studies as well, girls in particular have also been shown to dislike places that were considered dirty or untidy (Karsten 2003).

What should a playground be like? The children in the study identified some qualities as being particularly important. First, the playground was expected to be "fun," a word that appeared with a high frequency during the interviews. The interviewer mostly started by using the word "good" when talking about something popular, but was sometimes corrected by the children, who changed this to "fun" or even asked, "You mean *fun*?" To be fun, the playground had to provide "things to do," preferably "much to do" or "many things," and children criticized playgrounds that did not offer enough activities. That play equipment can be important is shown in the interview excerpt below, in which children aged 10 and 11 in Glumslöv looked at pictures of playgrounds and asked themselves what should be allowed to be called a playground and complained about playgrounds lacking "things":

*Child 1: I don't think you can exactly say that this is exactly a playground like that, sort of. It's just this little house with gravel you know.*

*Child 1: I think [that it is a playground], for there are a lot more things there, and it's fun. Yes, it's the most fun.*

*Interviewer: And what about the others?*

*Child 1: They're not fun, there's like no things there. For example that [points to a photo of a small playground].*

*Interviewer: The small ones?*

*Child 2: That's no fun, just a sandpit.*

The children in Degeberga also asked for more "things," as in this group of 7- and 8-year-olds:

*Child 1: And then there's one of those little lookout towers. Though it's not so fun. I think there's a bit too little toys in it.*

*Interviewer: OK.*

*Child 2: Yeah, there's only swings there.*

*Child 1: There's only a slide there.*

*Child 2: They could have put a, what do you call it, a kind of play house.*

Three 7-year-olds in Degeberga gave a description of what a playground should offer to be attractive to visit:

*Interviewer: So, what is it that decides whether you go to a playground?*

*Child 1: That's if it's fun.*

*Child 2: It's how many toys it has and how fun it is.*

*Interviewer: Fun and lots of toys?*

*Child 2: Yes.*

*Child 1: And it should not just be for children who are 2- or 3-year-olds.*

*Child 2: It should be for up to maybe 10-year-olds.*

In both Glumslöv and Degeberga, some children were keen on specific pieces of play equipment and many also remembered play equipment that had been at their playgrounds previously but had been removed. When children talked about things they liked, the stories and dialogue became intense. They described individual pieces of play equipment, and especially what they could do with it. "Yeah, there was one of those spinners. You stand, and you spin round and all that. It's really fun," said a 10-year-old girl in Degeberga. The same emphasis on physical games with the play equipment appeared, for example, in the following interview with three 7-year-olds in Degeberga:

*Child 1: Then, that playground there, that spinny swing, that's really fun.*

*Interviewer: Yes.*

*Child 2: Except you get nearly too dizzy sometimes.*

*Child 1: It's the most fun.*

*Child 2: We nearly always feel sick after it.*

*Child 1: That's the most fun playground, or, the most fun swing on the playground.*

*Child 3: Then, on that swing you can jump up and down and hold onto the big poles there.*

*Child 2: 'Cos it's cool!*

Playgrounds are about activity and movement. As in earlier research about children and outdoor environments (Lindholm 1995; Kylin and Lieberg 2001), the interviews in Glumslöv and Degeberga showed that children do not make any direct distinction between activity and place. The children very often described the playgrounds in terms of what they could do there, how they could move, and what it felt like. Björklid (1982) also claims that children give objects meaning through their use. One way of putting it might be to say the playground *is* "what you can do." The children interviewed talked about all sorts of physical games and challenges they found in the playgrounds. The dynamics of physical play have been described as being connected to specific places in the environment (Mårtensson 2004) and many children mentioned the search for places or equipment that offered them particular physical activities.

Two boys, 9 years old, in Glumslöv had preferences regarding playground design in terms of the physical sensations of playground play:

*Child 1: I like to climb. And to 'stunt.' You have to be able to climb and stunt.  
Child 2: I think the same. And it's fun if you are on a tall height and that.  
And stunting is cool too.*

Some children brought up activities other than direct physical play. A nice thing, according to children in Glumslöv, was to have a good place for a picnic. Children in both towns described how they performed games and imaginative play about everything from gladiators and war to singing shows on the playgrounds. Imaginative play is regarded as important for the cognitive, emotional and social development of children of all ages (Scarlett et al. 2005).

A girl in Glumslöv made the point that she did not play in the playground. She used it, but mostly as a place for just hanging out. Her description includes what she does in the playground—sits and talks—and also partly what it looks like there:

*I'm mostly at the new one and then I'm sometimes in [another playground], for I live quite near there. My friend and I usually just sit there, just like, only swinging on it, only talking or that. We usually don't do anything special on it. We think it's a bit broken, like those logs have started to get quite disgusting and that.*

Like so many others in the study, she also talked about the social aspects of the playground visit—being there together with a friend. Children described the habit of playing *with* someone when playing on playgrounds, like this 7-year-old girl in Degeberga: "Yes, I've been there lots of times. Fanny and I use it to play all the time—my best friend." Zinger (2002) claims it is mainly as an arena for cultivating friendship through interaction with other children that the playground has importance. According to Veitch et al. (2006), parents often report that their children are more likely to go to public places to play if siblings or friends accompany them. Here's an extract from a 6-year-old boy from Degeberga, who also referred to the playground visit as something social:

*Sometimes I bike there without saying. No, I sometimes ask if I can bike, then I stop at the playground with friends. Then I know someone called Linn. She lives really near a playground too.*

Things that were special and different in individual playgrounds were popular with children in both places. It made individual playgrounds a destination, often by bicycle. The demand for variation between playgrounds was most apparent in Glumslöv, which could reflect the lack of variation in the play environment as a whole there.

According to the interviews, the concept of playground from the child perspective seemed to consist of more or less compulsory parts. The preconditions for appreciating a playground included the company of friends within a large range of play possibilities, but also the physical play, the bodily experience and the activity that the place and the children created together.

### **Playgrounds Are Places for Children—But Not Necessarily Children's Places**

A 6-year-old boy in Degeberga said,

*Grown-ups, like [a teacher], if she says we can go to a playground, it's because she thinks we should have fun.*

That playgrounds are made by the adult community for children seemed to be obvious to the boy. The playground is a place in which to have fun, but at the same time it is the adult world's contribution to children's outdoor environment and not self-evidently children's own place. Some children expressed an antipathy for something planned for them when it had not turned out "right." This included, for example, a lack of sufficiently challenging play equipment, as noted by this 10-year-old boy in Degeberga:

*There's nothing fun there. There, that slide for example, that's not more than a meter high.*

A common critique from older children was that playgrounds were mostly designed to satisfy only small children's needs. As a girl from Glumslöv said,

*Most playgrounds are actually for babies, except that one, for that has got a bit more with one of those great climbing frames.*

Some children, even among the youngest in the study (the 6-year-olds), said that playgrounds had been more fun when they were younger. Children also commonly explained that they visited playgrounds in the company of younger siblings, younger cousins or other younger children, because the little ones liked them. Playground play seemed to be more legitimized for school children in the company of younger children.

The perceived lack of challenges and alternatives at playgrounds appeared to frustrate the children. The children's complaints show their awareness that

playgrounds are the creation of adults and that they can also be changed by adults or by the "authority." Titman (1994) claimed that children perceive the design of their school playground as a reflection of how highly the school world values them and understands their needs. Similarly, when playgrounds are not adapted to their needs, children may perceive themselves as undervalued and misunderstood.

Children expressed more displeasure with playgrounds in Glumslöv than in Degeberga, even though many in Degeberga did not use playgrounds much. Some children in Glumslöv said that they did not use playgrounds at all, perhaps to show their dissatisfaction with what the adult community had organized in the name of children.

Play equipment had planned functions, but children constantly created their own ways of using it. Many proudly described how they had found their own functions, and the potential to develop playgrounds in this way appeared to be important to children. Rasmusson (1998) described children's pride in bypassing the planned functions in playgrounds. Children in both Glumslöv and Degeberga expressed a desire to use playgrounds in their own way, e.g., riding snowracers down slides, climbing in places where it was not intended, digging down to the foundations of the play equipment, and even sawing on the play equipment. Noschis (1992) argues that children's desire to use play equipment in their own ways forms part of the process of creating their own identity, with a demarcation from the adult world. In Glumslöv, for example, two girls reported how the external roof bars on the play houses in small playgrounds had been removed to prevent them climbing there, but pointed out that "you can still do it."

Many children expressed strong reactions to recently introduced changes in playgrounds, e.g., removal of swings, in conjunction with health and safety concerns. Children from both communities talked about how they missed equipment that had been removed for safety reasons and they expressed dissatisfaction about their playgrounds being changed for the worse in this way.

Safety issues and dangers were interesting topics for the children in several ways. They were happy to talk about how they had hurt themselves and challenged themselves and the play equipment through using it in ways that could be dangerous. At the same time, there was great discontent with matters that were considered in need of improvement. A girl in Glumslöv said that a tower in one of the playgrounds was "really dangerous" because "you can wobble it and pull it backwards and forwards." She also reported how one of her friends had been trapped there once. Many showed great empathy with others, particularly small siblings or other younger children, as demonstrated by two 10-year-old girls:

*Child 1: Up on that, that can be dangerous, 'cos my little brother fell down from there.*

*Child 2: And that spinning thing there...*

*Child 1: Yes, the one you can run onto. It's deadly dangerous.*

*Child 2: I don't think that such little kids should go on those...unless they have parents holding them.*

*Child 1: You could have one of those for little kids that goes a bit slower.*

In a similar way, several children made suggestions about how playgrounds could be made better and safer for younger children.

The attitude towards what was perceived as unsafe was not consistently negative, as was shown when three 7-year-old boys in Degeberga discussed a local playground managed by a different body than the local authority. They complained initially about safety risks that they thought should be addressed, but it soon became apparent that it was actually the dangerous aspects that they liked best. The danger contributed towards creating activity and excitement in that particular playground:

*Child 1: Although that's really, that slide, that green one, it falls over real easily.*

*Interviewer: In the Hembygd park?*

*Child 1: Yeah, it's not fixed to the ground.*

*Child 2: No. I usually stand up on my legs, and bounce forwards so it jumps.*

*Child 3: You pull...*

*Child 2: Yank down so thump, thump...*

*Child 1: But, then it falls over, doesn't it?*

*Child 2: No.*

*Child 3: I usually stand on the edge of it. Then I feel that it wobbles like this, so then when it comes down like this, I jump down into the sand like this, and then you only see ding, ding, ding, ding...*

### **Playgrounds and Independent Mobility**

Playgrounds can function as spatial reference points in children's outdoor environments. Noschis (1992) has developed a theory that children give their outdoor environment meaning by seeing certain places as "high points" in a spatial network. These act as destinations to which the children travel when they move around the neighborhood on foot or by bicycle. Many children in this study showed that the playgrounds in their neighborhood had a strong identity and they appeared to act as some sort of reference. This was observed most in Glumslöv, where the playgrounds were well known and each large playground had a generally used name. The lack of widespread knowledge about and general names for playgrounds in Degeberga indicates that playgrounds there might not have the same significance for their users as those in Glumslöv. It also made it somewhat more complicated to interview the children there. For example, in Glumslöv the most popular playground was known as "the new play" by all users, but the most used playground in Degeberga had several different names. Most children called it after a woman employed in childcare who lived nearby. Some of the children called it after other acquaintances living nearby, and some others had no name for it at all or did not know of it. The frequent use of the names of acquaintances, usually other children, to identify the playgrounds in Degeberga meant that several playgrounds had more than one name.

Those children who lived near a playground or for whom it was easy to get there often presented proximity to playgrounds as something positive. The advantage conferred by having one's "own" playground was confirmed by a 7-year-old girl from Degeberga when she saw pictures of playgrounds during the interview: "Look, it's my playground!" She was keen to describe how easy the route between playground and home was: "If you walk in the woods there, there's a bathtub, and I live there." Other children similarly provided descriptions of how quickly, cleverly or easily they could get to playgrounds from home or from a friend's or relative's house. The potential to move freely to the playground appeared to be important for the children; this supports other studies that have reported children's wish for independent mobility (Chawla 2002).

In those cases where the direct question was asked about whether it was mainly the most fun playground or the nearest playground that was visited, some children became doubtful. While many children claimed that they mainly visited the playgrounds they think are fun, in many cases, proximity and the ability of children to get to the playground independently proved to be decisive for playground visits. Some children were obviously frustrated that they were not allowed to move around freely in their neighborhood, such as this 6-year-old in Degeberga:

*Boy: I think it's actually fun being adult, for then you can decide more and that.*

*Interviewer: Decide more yourself what to do?*

*Boy: Yes. It's a bit more difficult for us.*

Their level of independent mobility can be of major importance for the play life of children. For example, children with more independent mobility more often play with peers than other children (Prezza et al. 2001).

### **The Playground and Its Surroundings**

Trees and natural surroundings proved to be appreciated features of playgrounds. Where there was a neighboring forest, it was viewed as part of the playground and its green features were sometimes appreciated as much as, or more than, the play equipment. Despite the fact that the areas referred to as "forests" by the children were often small, they proved to be of great significance. Several of the children demonstrated that they did not allow the edge of the playground to act as a boundary for play. The surrounding land can also form part of the play environment and the playground experience, as explained by a 9-year-old boy in Degeberga:

*There has to be a lot of trees and forest so that you can climb trees and build dens and stuff. That's the best about playgrounds.*

The close availability of forests promoted children to seek play in dens. Finding or constructing dens is children's way of turning part of the public space into "my space"—of feeling ownership, according to Titman (1994), with special importance for development in middle childhood (Sobel 1993). School children in Degeberga talked about dens in forest areas beside two of the most popular playgrounds.

These dens were secret, but some children still disclosed where they were located, like this 6-year-old boy:

*Child 1: Yeah and a little, a little den over there!*

*Interviewer: Is there a den?*

*Child 1: Yeah, that one, that one. It's [child's name]'s and [another child's name]'s den. It's away in the forest there.*

Forest areas with dens in Degeberga were associated with social relationships, and children reported on who made a den together. Kylin (2003) has described the fellowship of den construction, where the secret den is developed and shared with friends. Korpela, Kyttä and Hartig (2002) found that children are often in the company of friends when they visit their favorite places. Having secrets with other children in outdoor play resembles the concept of "we-ness" (Nilsen 2004), with children establishing and re-establishing relationships with each other as they control a physical place.

In addition to den play, play in the forest adjoining the playground also appeared to be linked to different types of imaginative play. According to a group of 10-year-old children in Degeberga, there are differences between how boys and girls avail themselves of different places:

*Child 1: Yeah, there's quite fun 'cos there's a kind of forest there, so you can go up there too.*

*Interviewer: Yes, that's it. Is the forest better than the playground?*

*Child 1: Yeah, it depends on what you're going to do. If you're going to play war it's maybe better to be in the forest. But then some girls, they play, yeah ...*

*Child 2: Horses.*

*Child 1: So, when you were younger you used to go there with school sometimes, and with after school club. Then it was the boys who used to be there in the forest and play war and so on.*

*Child 2: So the girls were mostly out there and played, went on the slide and such.*

In Glumslöv—where natural areas were not available to the same extent as in Degeberga—children did not mention anything about dens in the forest. Instead, some of them had temporary hideouts in playgrounds, for example under play equipment. Only one playground in Glumslöv was surrounded by vegetation that the children referred to as forest, and that area in particular was greatly appreciated. The children in one group said that "you can run around" there, and one 9-year-old boy (Child 1) and one 10-year-old girl (Child 2) explained:

*Child 1: At it there's also a little forest you can go into.*

*Child 2: Little, though there is... There you can see lots and lots in so.*

*Child 1: You can play tag there and stuff. It's harder if you're in a forest like that.*

Despite this little overgrown strip not looking like much to the adult eye, the children described it as a place that one could enter and that was suitable for certain games. For example, the undergrowth provided the challenge and excitement suited to playing tag. This corresponds with theories about qualities in the landscape affecting the nature of play (Berg and Medrich 1980; Naylor 1985; Mårtensson 2004), even expressed as "the landscape playing with the child" (Mårtensson 2004, 108).

The access to forest areas adjoining playgrounds also influenced children's perceptions of play. In Degeberga, the children spoke about using a larger physical play area—not just the planned playground area—when they visited a playground. Playgrounds seemed to acquire a greater area of use for the children where the playground was complemented with other play-friendly places. Children in Glumslöv expressed greater frustration over play environments than children in Degeberga in part due to the lack of alternative play environments and variation provided by natural lands. Children in Degeberga talked about play, excursions and activities in the landscape. Alternatively, in Glumslöv, some children mentioned sporting activities as an alternative to playground play, but otherwise they did not seem to have many alternatives. The general lack of variation in the outdoor environment in Glumslöv contributed to the above-mentioned need for variation between playgrounds there.

## **Conclusions**

According to the children's answers in the discussion groups, playgrounds are insufficient as the only places for their outdoor play. This finding is in agreement with Cunningham and Jones (1999), who stated that the playground setting cannot fill all children's needs for access to outdoor environments.

Children's use of playgrounds is linked to the appearance of the entire outdoor play environment. The existence of other places for outdoor play besides playgrounds means children depend less on them; when there is access to other good places for play, local playgrounds might function better. In Degeberga, because of the access to forests, the children saw playgrounds as one element of several in a rich play environment. In Glumslöv, the many playgrounds caused frustration.

The qualities of the playground surroundings are of major importance to children. Children not only talked about the official playground and what was available there, but also about the surroundings, the people they met there, the way to get there, and details in the environment. The boundary between playground and nature is a transition zone between the planned and the wild, and perhaps also between society's perspective of children and from children's own perspectives. The accessibility of play equipment is affected by its position and relation to the landscape (Mårtensson 2004). The landscape and its details would perhaps have emerged as even more important for children if the interview method had been replaced by a method out in the playgrounds, for example child-led walks. The method used may have contributed to the focus on social aspects observed in these interviews.

The differences in the results from the two communities point out the importance of the local context for the playground use. Playground play must be seen in the context of both landscape surroundings and of social environments, similar to the way Naylor (1985) described play as dependent on a physical and social context. Carstensen (2004) also pointed out differences in playground use depending on the built environment. The selection of two small Swedish communities for the case studies limits the generalization of the findings, leaving out issues connected to other types of living areas such as densely urbanized ones.

The playground emerged as a place with specific values in children's eyes. Some children expressed a strong relationship to a specific playground. Their relationship to the site appeared to be stronger for playgrounds to which children had social links, for example those near their homes or homes of friends. As Carstensen (2004) described, official playgrounds can be expected to play an important role for many children. Children have much to say about them, and knowing a playground particularly well appears mainly to mean something positive. These studies thereby confirm that playgrounds in certain cases can represent children's own places (Rasmussen 2004). Furthermore, Hart (1979), Chawla (1992), Korpela et al. (2002), and Chatterjee (2005) have all taken an interest in children's place friendship, and the phenomenon has been described as both interesting and overlooked in the creation of child-friendly towns (Chatterjee 2005).

From an early age, the children in the study showed an awareness that playgrounds are intended for them. They knew that playgrounds are created through society's and adults' ideas of children's play and that they sometimes do not correspond to children's own perspectives. Adults' and society's norms, demands for order and, not least, financial limitations, manifest themselves in the playground, and influence children's attitudes. In playgrounds where variation and opportunities for fun activities had taken a back seat to safety and tidiness, children reacted negatively. Boring, predictable playgrounds lead to frustration and low use.

To some extent, gender and age appear to affect playground use and children's views of it. The interviewed children claimed the playground design and its surroundings needed to be adapted for different age groups and for the preferences of girls and boys. Karsten (2003) concluded that girls more easily become marginalized on playgrounds if they are not designed to serve boys and girls equally. Variation and combinations of equipment, other elements and the surroundings of the playground can all contribute to achieving more equal playgrounds for all children.

Limitations in children's independent mobility also became apparent in many of the child interviews. The youngest of the children (6-8 years old) have few possibilities to choose where to go and expressed feeling limited in their choice of places to play, which confirms earlier findings of relations between age and range of mobility (Naylor 1985), and emphasizes children's need to access outdoor environments (Chawla 2002; Kyttä 2004).

Using children as informants about their outdoor play places revealed a wealth of information, and could be a valuable method for including children in practice as well as research. The interview method, however, means that great engagement is demanded from the interviewer to earn the trust of children in order to obtain information from them. While children's awareness of the adult-based perspective of playgrounds and the interviewer's role as an adult may have affected the results, the impression from the interviews in Glumslöv and Degeberga was that the children did feel free to talk about their places. Some of the children hesitated as they described secret dens, but they referred their hesitation to the recording machine, not to the interviewer. Children are not used to their own views being interesting to adults (Hill 2006) and in some of the group discussions, children expressed surprise about this change in approach. Some children happily told the interviewer who asked for their point of view how very kind she was.

More about children and playground play remains to be explored, and several areas of additional research are recommended, such as children's views of playgrounds in settings other than in small communities. Other qualitative methods with children as informants can be tested, such as child-led walks, walking interviews on the playgrounds, or essay writing. There is also a need for practical examples of how children's desire to actively affect their places for play can be accomplished, and how local factors that affect children's perceptions of playground play can be used to improve conditions for outdoor play. Approaches to give children more independent mobility and access to the outdoor environment should also be important issues in further research.

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