



Original article

Adapting cemeteries for child visitors: Professionals' perspectives on inclusion and child-friendliness

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ABSTRACT

Cemeteries are visited by various user groups and may become increasingly important for them with increased densification of other open spaces. While there is a small but growing body of research on activities such as recreation in cemeteries, studies focusing on children as visitors are particularly scarce. This study therefore explores how cemeteries can be made more child-friendly and inclusive for children. Interviews were conducted with eight professionals working with cemeteries in Sweden, including cemetery managers, project managers, a vicar, a pedagogue, and a landscape architect. Two of these interviews related to cemeteries where adaptations for children had been made. The results revealed different perspectives, highlighting a general willingness to better include children, in ways that can be considered respectful. Although actual examples of adaptations appear rare, combinations of child-friendliness with nature and biodiversity, or with concrete maintenance, may be of particular interest. Identified barriers for more child-friendly cemeteries include unclear responsibilities, as well as a lack of knowledge and time.

1. Introduction

1.1. Cemeteries in urban environments

In recent decades, cities have become more dense, leading to the disappearance of green space in favor of new developments and a loss of qualities for recreation (Jansson & Schneider, 2023). The remaining green areas therefore play an increasingly important role, especially in urban environments (Długozima et al., 2024; Stumpe et al., 2024). This includes cemeteries as they, so far, have been mostly unthreatened by densification (Säumel et al., 2023). Although cemeteries are not only of a natural character, they often have abundant greenery and designs aimed to create a sense of tranquility, such as in the Scandinavian countries (Nordh et al., 2017), while characters and practices vary across geographies, cultures and religions (Długosiński et al., 2022; Długozima et al., 2024; Klaufus, 2016; Rugg, 2000).

Cemeteries in many parts of the world provide several different functions to the built environment. They serve as sites for religious ceremonies, burying and mourning, history and culture, but also contribute to wildlife and ecosystem services of various types (Długozima et al., 2024; Moesch et al., 2024; Säumel et al., 2023). This includes a substantial contribution to urban cooling and related health

benefits, as many cemeteries have mature trees (Stumpe et al., 2024). Another function is species conservation, for which there is considerable potential, provided that these often biodiverse and natural areas are managed carefully (Kowarik et al., 2016; Löki et al., 2019). In terms of biodiversity and native biota, cemeteries are generally at least as valuable as many other green spaces. The many functions cemeteries provide to people, often possible to frame as cultural ecosystem services, relate to a broad spectrum of spiritual and recreational uses (Rugg, 2020). This includes to serve as open and historical archives with free access to a botanical, historical, religious and ethnological cultural heritage (Nordh et al., 2017; Nordh and Evensen, 2018).

Cemeteries can be described as places where urban wilderness can co-exist with restorative green spaces in busy cities (Moesch et al., 2024). The religious and cultural significance that cemeteries have can help them remain intact over a long period of time compared to other green outdoor environments, making it beneficial to prioritize biodiversity, conservation and sustainability there (Itescu & Jeschke, 2024; Moesch et al., 2024). The nature is described as a positive factor for visitors to cemeteries (Moesch et al., 2024; Straka et al., 2022), but their visits can also include mourning, as well as showing historical interest in the sites. Some preferred features on cemeteries are wildlife, solitude and vegetation, making greenery in cemeteries beneficial, with rich

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vegetation also linked to visitors' well-being (Straka et al., 2022).

This shows that cemeteries cannot only be seen as religious places, and many of them are assessed and treated like other green and open spaces. However, since they contain various types of burial elements, they cannot be seen purely as park spaces either (Kjøller, 2012). Therefore, cemeteries have a specific character in the urban landscape, as nature, culture, history and mourning all meet there (Nordh et al., 2017). This is particularly true in parts of the world where it is common to develop large and green cemeteries, such as in Sweden, in focus for this study.

Also historically, the role of cemeteries has covered many aspects, including for various types of recreation and aesthetics (Evensen et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that the historic functions of some cemeteries include as city parks and play spaces. There is documentation of several early 20th century cemeteries in Stockholm, Sweden, even including playgrounds with equipment such as sand boxes and swings, and hills for sleigh riding (Lundberg, 2018). However, these elements were gradually removed, from the 1940s and onwards (Lundberg, 2018). Despite this historical connection, there is very little research relating to child-friendliness of cemeteries.

In contemporary urban cemeteries, such as commonly in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, recreation takes place alongside mourning. There is considerable variation in how visitors perceive the use of cemeteries, and which activities are deemed appropriate and socially acceptable there, as well as about how to grieve (Nordh and Evensen, 2018). Persons from different faith communities have expressed a general concern about the risk of disturbing others (Nordh et al., 2023). While activities like walking are widely accepted, for example picnicking, biking and sports have been found more disturbing (Lai et al., 2019; Moesch et al., 2024). This may also be related to the characters of individual cemeteries, offering different conditions for activities, in turn affecting both experience and acceptance (Evensen et al., 2017). This includes factors such as size, character, and location (Nordh et al., 2023). On large cemeteries that appear open and green, there is greater acceptance of more active uses – such as running, biking and walking a dog – compared to in smaller and more formal ones (Nordh et al., 2023).

Cemeteries are described as potential environments for different activities, because of the restorative characters that can be found there (Dlugożima, et al., 2024; Lai, et al., 2019). Today, there are expectations to consider the needs of a large variety of user groups in the development of urban cemeteries (Evensen et al., 2017). With such an approach, cemeteries have the potential to be where the whole community meets, including different faiths, believers and non-believers, and also different ages.

1.2. Child-friendly and inclusive cemeteries

Child-friendly environments require the consideration of a range of aspects (Jansson et al., 2022), including an understanding of children's perspectives. More focus can be directed on children as users, to create welcoming and inclusive environments (Derr and Tarantini, 2016). It can be done in several ways, but one main difference from adults is the play aspect sought for by children. This is often highlighted through the many different uses that children look for in an environment, sometimes described as affordances (Lerstrup and Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2016). It makes outdoor environments something children relate to, because they are often rich in available elements to play with (Mårtensson, 2013).

One type of environment where play is supported for most children is nature and other green spaces. For children, contact with nature in outdoor environments is essential for physical activity, social interactions, and stress reduction (Chawla, 2020; Nejade et al., 2022). This happens by spending time in nature, among trees and other greenery. Vegetation also helps to reduce air pollution (Diener and Mudu, 2021), cools outdoor temperatures, hard surfaces and buildings (Salmond et al.,

2016), and provides protection from the sun's rays (Cherian and Subasinghe, 2023). To ensure that children have the opportunity to play outdoors, green spaces must be available close to where they live and move in their daily lives. Access to outdoor environments affects health in general, even more for children than adults (Hartig et al., 2014).

The inclusion of children may place different demands on the environment compared to adults. Children's interests and child-friendly environments may be promoted through a child-centered perspective, including both adults' perspectives on children – a child perspective – and also children's own perspectives, through e.g. participation (Jansson et al., 2020). In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – ratified by Sweden in 1990 and part of Swedish law since 2020 – several articles are relevant concerning the inclusion of children in cemeteries. Article 12 establishes children's right to be heard, participate, and have influence (UNICEF, n.d.). Article 14 states children's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, emphasizing that they have the freedom to practice their religion and that caregivers have a duty to provide guidance as children exercises this right in their ongoing development (UNICEF, n.d.). Article 31 highlights children's right to age-appropriate rest, leisure, play, and recreation, as well as the right to freely participate in cultural and artistic life (UNICEF, n.d.). The Church of Sweden conducts child impact assessments with the aim of securing positive outcomes for children. A child impact assessment is a process for evaluating and explaining what is in the best interest of the child in a specific context and timeframe. This assessment is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and serves as a basis for decision-making, ensuring that children's perspectives and well-being are considered (Svenska kyrkan, 2023).

While there are some studies on conflicts of interest and various uses of cemeteries (Nordh et al., 2023), no studies focusing on children as users of these spaces, not from children's, caregivers' or professional's perspectives, have been identified. However, a Swedish study from 2003 (Sörensen, 2003) investigated the views of young adults aged 18–20. They regarded cemeteries as places of cultural value, memory, and connection to family roots, emphasizing the importance of reverence, emotional depth, and spatial quality. However, they found everyday use—such as treating cemeteries like parks—inappropriate, and they stressed the importance of a well-maintained appearance, rejecting ideas like implementing meadows. Sörensen (2003) highlighted the need for more knowledge on young people's perspectives to inform future cemetery development. However, many years have elapsed and while the interest in various user groups in cemeteries has increased in studies (Evensen et al., 2017; Skår et al., 2018), children are still invisible in the research on cemetery use, both from their own and from adults' perspectives.

As children visit cemeteries for various reasons, there is a need to understand more about the possibilities of making them increasingly child-friendly. The lack of knowledge about specific user groups might in itself constitute a risk for exclusion, and for example children may not feel welcome or included. Therefore, bridging this knowledge gap can have societal benefits both for individual children, and for childhood in general and over time. The overall aim of this study is to explore how cemeteries can become more child-friendly and more inclusive for children as visitors. More precisely, it investigates the perspectives on child-friendly cemeteries among adults working in relation to these questions in Sweden. This is studied as supported by two research questions: What possibilities, opportunities and risks can be associated with cemeteries focusing more on child-friendliness? What can be learned from existing examples and ideas of working in more child-friendly ways in cemeteries?

2. Methods

2.1. Study area

This study focuses on cemeteries in Sweden, based on qualitative

interviews with Swedish professionals about child-friendliness and children as visitors. The study of Sweden may limit transferability of the findings to geographically, culturally and religiously different contexts, while to some extent generalizable to similar contexts, such as where cemeteries have green and park-like characters.

Sweden has around 3 000 public cemeteries covering over 6 000 ha of land (SKKF, 2020). These are managed by the Swedish church, protestant Christian, through 556 local organizations, a number that is in decline due to merges. There are also around one hundred cemeteries managed by other religious communities or foundations. Today, the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan) is divided into 13 dioceses and 1 288 parishes in Sweden, and also 31 parishes abroad. In 2023, the number of members were 5.5 million people, about 52.1 % of the population in Sweden, which can be compared with the 7.7 million or 95.2 % being members in 1972 (Svenska kyrkan, 2024).

2.2. Respondents

Eight interviewees, referred to further on as respondents, were all purposefully selected professionals identified through personal networks of contacts and chosen for their different roles. Six of the respondents were included in five interviews, mainly with a focus on the subject in general (referred to as *General*). The study included all professionals that were identified who fit the requirement of having worked on or reflected upon the aspect of child-friendliness of cemeteries in particular, from different perspectives and based in different locations in Sweden.

An additional two interviews were conducted in relation to existing cemeteries where child-friendly approaches have been implemented (referred to as *Place-Based*), with the interviews referring to those two specific cemeteries (see Table 1). In the selection of cemeteries, personal networks of contacts were combined with both digital searches and asking the respondents in the general interviews for recommendations. Five recommended cemeteries were visited until selecting the two of them that most clearly and visibly had included child-friendly adaptations: Bjuv and Råda cemeteries, located in different parts of Sweden (see Fig. 1).

Of the eight respondents, six were female and two were male, aged 35–65 years old. They worked in different parts of Sweden and within differently sized geographical contexts, from local to national scales. All had several years of relevant working experience, some active for decades, while for some their roles and responsibilities had changed over

Table 1

The respondents and their professional connection to child-friendliness of cemeteries and division into general and place-based interviews.

<i>The respondents</i>	Code	General or Place-Based	Type of interview or contact
Chairman of a cemetery managers' association/ cemetery manager with broad perspective on inclusion of children	I1	General	Email
Two project managers of a national cemetery project about inclusion of children, called Burb (Burb, n.d.)	I2	General	Digital meeting
Cemetery manager involved in activities for children locally	I3	General	Digital meeting
Landscape architect with experience of child-friendly focus on cemeteries in several locations	I4	General	Digital meeting
Vicar with expertise in grief and interest in children's perspectives	I5	General	Physical meeting
Cemetery manager with many ideas on how to include children	I6	Place-Based	Digital meeting
Pedagogue with many years of experience in working in a congregation	I7	Place-Based	Phone meeting

time. They were contacted via email, and informed about the study in a transparent way, including that their names would be anonymized, but not their work title or geographical area, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation. The respondents all gave their informed consent to participate and were given the options to meet digitally, in person, or respond via email for the interview.

2.3. Interviews

The interviews were conducted by a single interviewer with both educational and professional experience in landscape architecture, garden design, and journalism, including focus on children's environments and cemeteries, and experience from conducting different types of interviews. The interviews were conducted between 26 September and 8 November 2024 and in most cases through digital video meetings. However, one respondent chose to submit answers in writing, one interview was conducted by phone, and yet another through an in-person interview. Both the place-based interviews were conducted on distance, while the two cemeteries were also visited by the interviewer before the interviews. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, based on interview guides but giving the respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their answers based on their own prior understanding (May, 2011). During the interviews, questions were asked about how the respondents perceive the inclusion of children as visitors to cemeteries today, whether they believe efforts to promote children's inclusion are important and why, as well as examples of good practices. All questions were formulated in an open-ended manner to give respondents room to answer from their own perspectives.

Two different sets of questions were developed into two interview guides, one for the general interviews and one for the place-based interviews, respectively (see Table 2).

2.4. Analysis

Each interview lasted 45–60 min and was documented through note taking, then summarized question by question for each interview, followed by a comparison between the different interviews, highlighting similarities and differences. Thereafter, the data were analyzed through a meaning condensation resulting in a description of the relevant content from each interview (Malterud, 2012).

The descriptions were sent to each respondent for approval, and thereafter the content was further analyzed through reflective thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), separately for the general and place-based interviews.

3. Results

3.1. General perspectives on child-friendly cemeteries

The analysis of the general interviews resulted in three overarching themes: Children's place in cemeteries today, Risks and opportunities, and Examples and possibilities.

3.1.1. Children's place in cemeteries today

All respondents agreed that cemeteries today are rarely adapted for children, despite the fact that many families visit them for various reasons, including recreation, reflection, and remembrance. I2 described children's knowledge about cemeteries as limited and noted that signs featuring religious symbols can create a sense of exclusion for children from different faith backgrounds. Although some initiatives exist – such as children's books on grief or preschool groups occasionally planting flowers in cemeteries – these efforts were generally seen as insufficient to meaningfully create inclusion.

3.1.2. Risks and opportunities

While some concerns were raised, mainly about maintaining respect

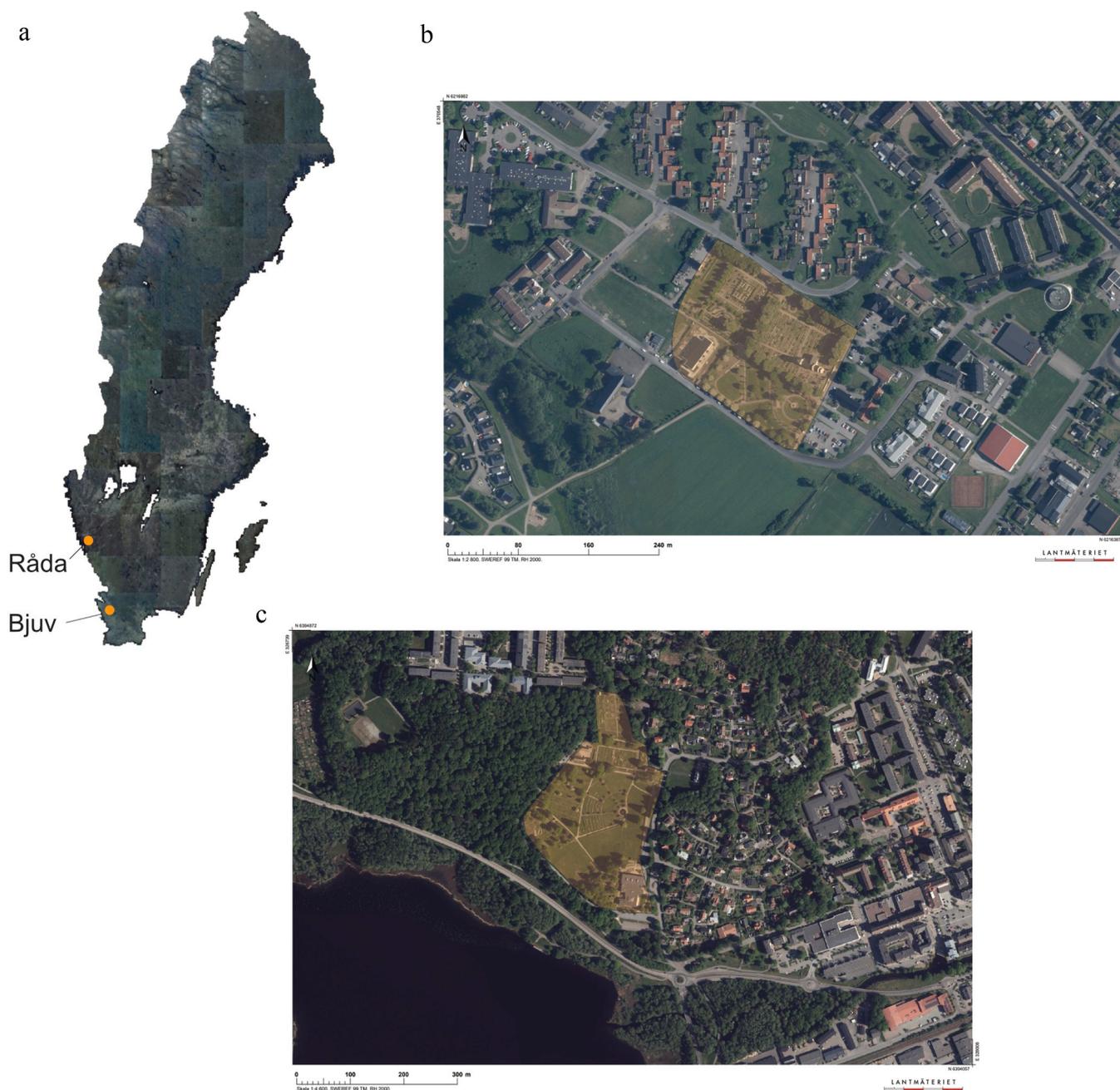


Fig. 1. a) Bjuv and Råda cemeteries as located in Sweden. b) Bjuv cemetery and c) Råda cemetery as designed and positioned in the landscape.

for the cemetery's primary purpose as a resting place for the deceased, none of the respondents viewed children's presence as inherently disruptive. On the contrary, several of them (I3, I4 and I5) noted that lack of respect in cemeteries can occur at any age. I1 saw no risks in adapting cemeteries for children, arguing that children are an important part of society. However, there were also many thoughts about how to balance child-friendliness and other uses in a good way. I2 highlighted that while child-friendly elements are welcome, they must not compromise the cemetery's primary purpose. If conflicts arise, they stress the need for thoughtful analysis to avoid the risk of disturbing the place's atmosphere. I3 even expressed concern over elements like playgrounds or large family gatherings, which he felt belonged in parks rather than cemeteries. The respondent believed cemeteries should be visited for their beauty and serenity, and that children should be encouraged to return throughout life. I4 thought that while some might complain about children's behavior, with clear guidance most children

adjust well. The respondent advocated for inclusive design that benefits all ages. I5 underlined the need to protect what is sacred, without excluding joy or curiosity from children's experiences. For the respondent, physical safety for children was also important, mainly by keeping gravestones stable.

The risks of excluding children were described as significant. Keeping children away from cemeteries and from conversations about death may foster alienation and fear – both of the physical space and of grief. One of the most pressing concerns raised was that children who are not permitted by their caregivers to visit cemeteries may later feel disconnected from them, potentially leading to fewer visits as adults and, in turn, to the deterioration or neglect of these spaces. I5 even suggested that this disconnect could contribute to an increased risk of inappropriate or criminal activities, such as drug use, in abandoned cemeteries. Several respondents (I2, I4 and I5) emphasized that children are seldom asked about their own experiences and needs in cemeteries, a gap that

Table 2
The two interview guides used.

<i>Interview guide – general</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much are children included in cemeteries today? • What benefits could come from including children? Benefits for different groups? For the children themselves? • Could there be risks in adapting cemeteries more for children? • Are there risks if we do not include children? • Could there be benefits in grief work for children and other mourning visitors? • Are there educational benefits? • Would you like to share good examples of how children can be included in cemeteries? • Do you think physical adaptations could be made in cemeteries to include children? Why/why not? What could these adaptations be? • If relevant to you: Does the congregation and cemetery management collaborate on the inclusion of children? • Are there any child-related aspects of cemeteries that we have missed discussing?
<i>Interview guide – place-based</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the initiatives you have implemented to include children. (Physical changes? Activity initiatives?) • Why did you want to do this? What values did it bring? • Were there other options considered? • How did you plan it? Who contributed ideas and design? • What determined the location of the changes? Large-scale vs. small-scale. Are there areas in the cemetery where such changes would not be appropriate? • Who are the visitors at the cemetery? • How has it worked? What have you observed? Are the initiatives used as expected? • Have you received feedback from families with children and other visitors? What did they say? • Have you implemented other initiatives in the past to include children? • Do you have plans for more child-focused initiatives in the future? • What are your thoughts on the benefits and risks of physical adaptations for children? • What do you think children need when visiting a cemetery, whether as accompanying visitors or as the closest mourners? • Does the congregation and cemetery management collaborate on the inclusion of children? • Are there any child-related aspects of cemeteries that we have missed discussing?

could be addressed by more actively applying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Inclusion of children was considered beneficial for them. Many respondents (I1, I3, I4 and I5) argued that attending funerals or visiting cemeteries is not harmful to children; rather, it is the act of exclusion that may deepen grief and feelings of isolation. Regular visits from a young age were considered a way to normalize death and mourning, helping children develop a healthy and grounded understanding of these aspects of life.

The respondents underlined the importance of acknowledging children's questions and emotions around death from an early age. I5 emphasized that adults play a central role in guiding children's encounters with death, while also warning against the tendency to project their own grief onto children. Children's directness and need for clear, tangible ways to process their feelings should be met with both honesty and sensitivity. The act of visiting a cemetery, leaving flowers, lighting candles, or simply asking questions were all seen as healthy ways for children to engage with loss and remembrance.

Including children in cemetery life was also seen as beneficial for society at large. Greater inclusion was believed to promote a deeper understanding of cemeteries as cultural heritage sites, green spaces, and places of social integration. Children who gain early knowledge about cemeteries may carry these insights into adulthood, potentially shaping both their personal relationship with death and future decisions about the design and use of such spaces.

3.1.3. Examples and possibilities

The respondents expressed a strong desire for children, in particular preschool-aged, to visit churches and cemeteries regularly, thereby fostering their natural connection to these spaces. Different types of examples of adaptations to support this were described, ranging from small gestures to larger redesigns from an adult child-perspective, or in the form of projects aiming to include children and sometimes also children's perspectives.

A range of possibilities for developing more child-friendly cemeteries were described. Small gestures, such as providing child-sized gardening tools or signage that explains how to move through the space or about biodiversity, were viewed as effective ways to create a more welcoming atmosphere for all. Changes that give opportunities for children to

engage in hands-on activities had appeared helpful in making cemeteries more comprehensible and positive places. Other creative suggestions included interactive sculptures, memory trees where children can hang tokens, areas for drawing or planting, and orientation boards placed at child-friendly heights. I1 gave an example of a setting that might be suitable for a cemetery: a memorial garden designed specifically with children in mind – particularly those who have lost a sibling.

Some initiatives were examples already in place to include children more actively in cemetery environments, of which some had a participatory approach. These were guided walks for preschool groups, distributing children's books about grief during All-Saints' weekend, and hosting child-centered activities such as planting flowers or building birdhouses. The All-Saints' weekend was mentioned as a particular possibility, when many visitors seek not only remembrance but also hope. Children's presence during such moments can offer comfort and continuity. In the Burb project (Burb, n.d.), where children are invited to cemetery participation with their schools, "cemetery labs" were held where children could express their thoughts about cemetery design. Their feedback often emphasized natural features such as flower meadows and water elements, highlighting the importance of biodiversity as well as spaces for calm play and presence. The children had also expressed a wish for ceremonies and solemn activities, suggesting a nuanced understanding of the cemetery's layered meanings. The respondents described how some of the parishes had involved children in planning and design processes by conducting child impact assessments or partnering with local preschools. The respondents emphasized that involving children in both the design and use of cemeteries can result in spaces that are more inclusive for everyone.

The level of collaboration between stakeholders on this issue varies. In some cemetery organizations, a child-centered perspective had been acknowledged as a priority, though no concrete measures had yet been implemented. In others, conversations sparked by the topic had begun to inspire new ideas and a willingness to experiment with inclusive practices. While challenges remain, the overall sentiment among respondents was one of hope: that by listening to children and including them in meaningful ways, implementing children's own perspectives, cemeteries can become spaces of connection, memory, and growth for generations to come.

3.2. Perspectives with examples from two cemeteries

The analysis of data from the place-based interviews resulted in three overarching themes: Examples and Possibilities, Learning and inclusion, and Challenges, Risks and Opportunities.

3.2.1. Examples and possibilities

The two cases that were selected for the study had both made clear and visible adaptations to become more child-friendly, but in very contrasting ways. The respondents connected to these cases described examples of efforts to include children in and around cemeteries, with focus on the case. Each case was rooted in distinct institutional frameworks but sharing a commitment to making these spaces more accessible and meaningful to younger visitors.

In the first case, Bjuv cemetery, I6 outlined initiatives driven by both inspiration and need, though a lack of clear guidelines for child impact assessments were experienced to make them vague and open to interpretation. While there were intentions to include children, practical constraints and limited follow-up had hindered promising moments – such as when local kindergarteners had planted bulbs in the cemetery – from developing into long-term collaborations. However, some physical measures had been introduced, including a rack with child-sized tools and the development of a biodiversity-themed area featuring mounds, a faunary, and stepping stones (see Fig. 2a and b). Each year, confirmation students were also invited for an educational cemetery tour around All Saints' Day, receiving a small book on burial traditions. I6 expressed a

strong desire to engage children more consistently, considering possibilities through school visits or by involving them in specific projects like building birdhouses or designing playful signs.

The second case, Råda cemetery, is a more immersive environment built with a child-centered perspective, providing a very rare example of more far-reaching possibilities. I7 recalled how the closure of a parish preschool had sparked the creation of a family meeting space near the cemetery. Drawing inspiration from playful and natural environments, the parish used a hillside area with old oak trees to create a play area, a barbecue space, and animal enclosures with rabbits and chickens (see Fig. 2c and d). This site is called the Children's Environmental Ark (Barnens Miljöark) and was designed to welcome families with children. This outdoor area has become a popular meeting place, visited by both children and elderly parishioners. Although it is not located within the cemetery itself, except for an enclosure with sheep that actually is, its proximity allows for natural transitions between play and reflection, with activities occasionally touching on existential themes, like when a sheep had died and the children were curious about it.

3.2.2. Learning and inclusion

Both I6 and I7 described viewing cemeteries as spaces where children can gain knowledge and experience about nature, life and death. I6 emphasized the importance of addressing death more directly, noting that fear of it often stems from cultural avoidance. Engaging children in rituals or discussions could help normalize death as an inevitable part of life. I6 also described educational potential in letting children explore

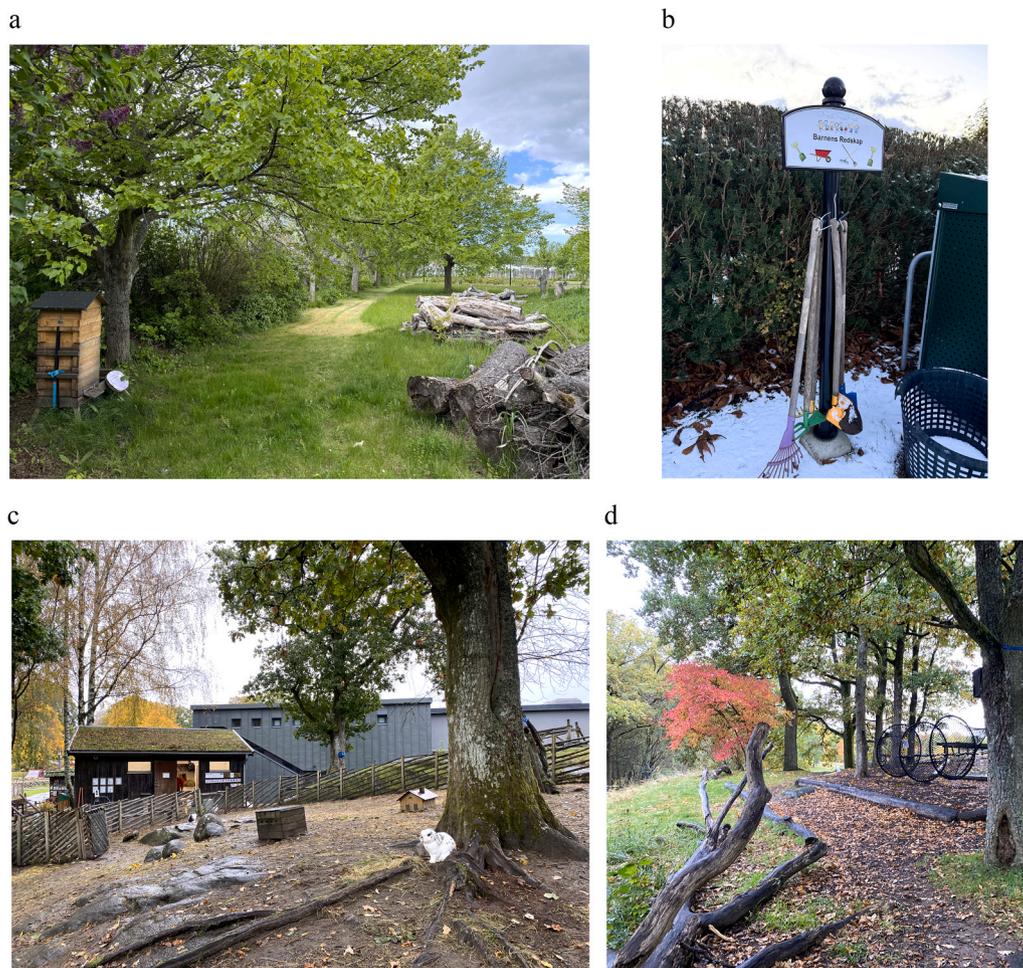


Fig. 2. a) Biodiversity-themed area in Bjuv cemetery. A less strict area where it is possible to explore the surroundings. b) Child-sized tools in Bjuv cemetery, provided to make children feel more welcome and included. c) Animal enclosures with rabbits and chickens in the Children's Environmental Ark, next to Råda cemetery. d) Parts of the play area in the Children's Environmental Ark by Råda cemetery, where children can play with programmed elements and natural materials.

biodiversity and seasonal changes and expressed hope that more targeted visits will deepen their understanding of the cemetery's purpose. For I7, the goal was to foster curiosity and connection through unstructured play and encounters with nature, something that the Children's Environmental Ark had realized, becoming a hub for families, where even themes of loss can be addressed when they arise naturally.

The role of adults was emphasized for children's learning and inclusion. Both I6 and I7 believed that children don't necessarily require adapted play structures within cemeteries but are capable of understanding the atmosphere and acting accordingly when accompanied by a respectful adult. The key, they argued, lies not in changing the cemetery's physical layout, but in preparing adults to guide children and answer their questions openly and honestly. I7 described the lack of staff with knowledge about grief and related issues in the cemetery as a shortcoming. The respondent therefore emphasized the importance of having accompanying adults who can offer children adequate support and understanding.

3.2.3. Challenges, risks and opportunities

Both I6 and I7 reflected on the challenges of sustaining and expanding efforts for child-friendly and including cemeteries. I6 pointed out time and budget constraints as obstacles to more frequent collaborations with schools. While the cemetery service was relatively well-funded, long-term development requires careful planning, in order to keep the respect of the unique values and atmosphere of the cemetery. He suggested that child-friendly zones within cemeteries could facilitate child-friendliness while considering respectfulness. Ideally, children would be invited into the planning and design process, although the respondent thought that doing so could pose challenges, emphasizing that few children have the familiarity or vocabulary to express what they need in these settings.

In terms of planning, design and location, many initiatives have emerged organically – responding to visitor requests or evolving needs. Larger design work had been commissioned externally, but I6 wished children could be more directly involved. When a new section of the cemetery was added, biodiversity features were placed on its edge to maintain a gentle contrast with older, more formal parts. Similarly, I7 and colleagues – with backgrounds in scouting and sports – used their experience to enhance the natural terrain with climbing elements and physical challenges, encouraging children's activity without "over-designing" the space.

The two cases provided almost no perspectives of risks related with their child-friendly developments, but mainly say positive outcomes and opportunities. Feedback in both cases had been predominantly positive. While I6 had received few comments from regular visitors, the participating preschools expressed gratitude. I7 noted that local residents appreciate the liveliness of the Children's Environmental Ark, that older visitors enjoy seeing happy children and animals near the cemetery, and that there had been no complaints. The Children's Environmental Ark had even helped build a sense of continuity, although I7 had noted a shift in recent years, with fewer families visiting the area frequently.

Despite clear interest in strengthening the link between cemetery management and the congregation, actual collaboration was limited. In the first case, joint efforts were mostly confined to the annual tour for confirmation students. I6 saw potential for the cemetery service – which operates outside of religious affiliation – to take a leading role in promoting inclusion, potentially making it easier to reach all children regardless of background. In the second case, there was no formal collaboration between the cemetery and children's activities, though the physical proximity between the spaces had led to a shared rhythm of use and mutual appreciation.

Looking ahead, both respondents I6 and I7 envisioned new opportunities. I6 hoped to develop a stormwater system that doubles as a natural play feature, as well as educational signage and nature-building projects. I7 stressed mainly two things: the importance for children of returning to familiar places, and to create environments that nurture

children's imaginative engagement. These two aspects are fulfilled when using the area regularly.

4. Discussion

4.1. Support for the inclusion of children

This study explores how cemeteries can become more child-friendly and inclusive for children, allowing them to engage with existential questions and cultural heritage in a context where these factors meet (Nordh et al., 2017). Child-friendliness of spaces might be of specific importance in times of densification of cities (Jansson & Schneider, 2023; Stumpe et al., 2024) with awareness of access to outdoor environments being of greater importance for children than adults (Hartig et al., 2014). While this study found a general interest in making cemeteries more child-friendly among persons working with them in different roles, identifying possibilities and opportunities but few risks, challenges remain regarding how it should be implemented in practice and who should be responsible for working with these questions.

In this study, the respondents suggested that cemetery management should ensure inclusivity, possibly in collaboration with schools, to make all children feel welcome. However, cemeteries may be seen as mainly adult spaces and even the idea of providing for children visiting cemeteries is unconventional. This was reflected in many of the respondents discussing how to make cemeteries child-friendly while considering the need for any changes to reflect respect for other visitors and uses. As many respondents pointed out the importance of developing with respect for the context, this may be of specific importance to handle in order to achieve change.

The results also show that child-friendliness of cemeteries can be possible both as related to aspects that are specific to cemeteries (Fig. 2b), and that are not (Fig. 2a, c and d). The few examples identified in this study range from providing children with the possibilities to maintain graves to experience biodiversity and animals, the latter found also in other types of green spaces. Both these aspects may enhance the experiences for children through their interest in both being directly involved in maintaining spaces and in experiencing different types of nature wilderness and biodiversity (Jansson et al., 2022). Thus, cemeteries may become more inclusive to children, and possibly also to other groups, both by inviting them to take part of the traditional environments and by developing the environment for increased multifunctionality (Długozima et al., 2024).

4.2. Potential benefits and opportunities from child-friendly cemeteries

Children's presence in cemeteries was described by the respondents to offer benefits, such as fostering children's positive experiences and learning practical skills, while being positive also for other visitors and society at large. Cemeteries provide a peaceful environment with high biodiversity levels (Kowarik et al., 2016; Löki et al., 2019; Straka et al., 2022; Säumel et al., 2023) that contrasts with much of urban life and supports children's well-being (Chawla, 2020; Cherian & Subasinghe, 2023; Nejade et al., 2022; Rugg, 2020; Salmond et al., 2016; Stumpe et al., 2024). The results show that developing cemeteries for child-friendliness was not considered particularly risky, only to some extent concerning children's safety, and in the balancing with remembrance and other core uses.

Implementing child-friendly elements in cemetery environments can be complex and while there is much agreement on its importance, the views on how to actually work differ both today and over time. The combination of nature or biodiversity with child-friendliness appeared of particular interest for the future, emerging as a recurring theme in the study. It is interesting in light of the earlier findings by Sørensen (2003) which showed little acceptance of meadows in cemeteries among young adults, compared with more recent findings such as in a cemetery study in London, where the younger respondents (and other locals) showed

more acceptance for recreational activities and biodiversity (Moesch et al., 2024). Historically, Stockholm cemeteries included play areas (Lundberg, 2018), which can raise thoughts on their reintroduction. This may be done not with the goal to foster engagement and reflection in relation to cemeteries, but with benefits more for play and inclusion.

4.3. The acceptance of child-friendly approaches

Several respondents expressed skepticism about adding typical playground equipment. The removal of former traditional play areas in Stockholm cemeteries (Lundberg, 2018) may show that it is difficult to manage the combination of traditional facilities for play and other functions of cemeteries over time, and that the implementation of child-friendliness today may need some reflection. Instead of play equipment, respondents claimed to be comfortable with playful elements made from natural materials, like logs and stones. This is in line with nature as one of the valuable parts of the multifaceted uses of Western cemeteries today (Ditugozima et al., 2024), where biodiversity, including for example dead trees, is not considered disturbing (Straka et al., 2022). The preference for natural materials also shows that the fear of playfulness being disturbing to other visitors may be mainly about aesthetics. These two examples, biodiversity and play equipment, also show how acceptance of cemetery characters and uses may change over time. The acceptance for different physical adaptations for children may also depend on the context and character of cemeteries. Previous studies found more acceptance for active uses in larger cemeteries that are perceived as open and green, compared to smaller and more formal ones (Nordh et al., 2023). In the two studied cases, there are both formal and informal areas, but they are both generally large, open and green. The areas they had developed for more child-friendliness were also placed in more informal spaces, which appeared to afford greater opportunities to incorporate child-friendly elements that are accepted.

4.4. Lack of examples of child-friendly measures on cemeteries

So far, limited effort has been made to include children and make them feel welcome in cemeteries. The examples of concrete action for child-friendliness in cemeteries found in this study do show a large spectrum of approaches, mainly of activities such as guided walks or planting of flowers, but also that these are rather uncommon, with no conventional ways of working and rarely including physical adaptations of the cemeteries. The difficulty in even finding actual example cases for this study gives an insight into how rare this work appears to be, possibly connected to views of physical adaptations not being needed, in particular not as play structures. However, the examples found appear not generally known of, and there may be a large need for exchanges of experiences among professionals who have tested different approaches in order to spread and advance the work. The Church of Sweden conducts child impact assessments (Svenska kyrkan, 2023) with the aim of securing positive outcomes for children. Yet in practice, a child perspective is rarely prioritized in cemetery development, and even less so children's own perspectives, according to the respondents.

There may be several reasons behind this lack of implementation. Some of the respondents pointed to administrative structures as obstacles that hinder progress toward greater inclusion, as well as a lack of clear guidelines. Some of them were also hesitating to include children to participate in development processes like planning or design, while participation in concrete maintenance processes, like planting flowers and using maintenance tools, provided as shown in Fig. 2b, may be easier to implement. While the lack of children's perspectives in development may be problematic, their involvement concretely in maintenance may be a valuable opportunity (Jansson et al., 2020).

The lack of studies on children in cemeteries highlights that, although children are part of society, they have so far been largely overlooked in cemetery-related research. Projects such as Burb and the learnings and manuals that can be generated therefrom, might be a

source of knowledge useful in the development of more inclusion and child-friendliness in the future. However, it may also be of great importance to adjust methods and approaches to each specific site or context rather than advocating one method for all, as shown for example in the very unique case of the Children's Environmental Ark and in how also other respondents emphasized the values of finding place-based solutions.

Collaboration and responsibility appear to also be of importance. The lack of collaboration between cemetery management and congregations within parishes was an unexpected finding, revealing a possible challenge in the development of cemeteries inclusive for children. It is unclear what role should be responsible for the development of more child-friendly cemeteries. Clarification of roles and stronger collaboration between schools and cemeteries could improve child inclusion and make this type of environment more welcoming for both children and other visitors.

4.5. Limitations of the study

This study has limitations, such as the geographically limited scope with Sweden in focus, and the small number of respondents and cases. Also, the recruitment of respondents, made through personal contacts and networking, and the small number of respondents that this resulted in, may have limited the perspectives concerning gender, age and experience. The qualitative approach has been a useful way of exploring the theme in depth with each respondent from their perspectives, while the self-reporting character of interviews may be influenced by social desirability bias. Including only professionals with an engagement in children as visitors to cemeteries has been a way of approaching best practice, but cannot be expected to reflect the general perspectives among professionals working in relation to cemeteries in Sweden. This study may thus provide a starting point for further research regarding inclusive and child-friendly cemeteries.

Basing the study on interviews required flexibility to meet each respondent's preferences. While the interviewer has relevant experiences and background, only one interviewer conducting all interviews alone might be a limitation. Relying on notes, rather than using recordings, allowed more natural conversations but it may also have resulted in missing out on some information. While digital solutions for interviewing are often considered to work well, the interview conducted as a physical meeting resulted in longer discussions on each question and took more time than the digital interviews. It is therefore possible that in-person interviews can result in more in-depth explanations and spontaneous reflections. The interview that was responded by email might have been more deepened if followed up by a digital meeting or call. On the other hand, that person got more time to think about the answers.

Also, a broader range of respondents, including children and other visitors, would have enriched the study. The focus on adult actors gave an important child-centered focus from an adult child perspective, including several professionals' perspectives. However, this does not replace the inclusion of children's perspectives, which remains a highly relevant theme in order to work with child-friendly environments. There is therefore a need to study also children's perspectives on cemeteries in future research.

Practices and attitudes towards children in cemeteries vary strongly across cultures and religions, which limits the transferability of the findings. Still, some of the findings may be relevant also outside Scandinavia, in particular in other contexts where cemeteries are similar to other green spaces such as parks.

4.6. Conclusions

This study provides some novel insights into practices around child-friendliness of cemeteries. Adults with a professional engagement in children and cemeteries agree on the importance of making today's

cemeteries more child-friendly, but many of them express thoughts on the need for this to be achieved in a way that can be considered respectful to other uses. The recurring thoughts about finding respectful ways are lifted together with the many possibilities for making cemeteries more child-friendly, considered opportunities beneficial to children and a wider range of visitors as well as society at large, while associated with few risks.

This study has revealed a lack of both studies and examples of concrete actions and solutions to guide the efforts for child-friendliness. There is a need for future studies about cemeteries to consider inclusion in general and child-friendliness in particular, also children's own perspectives. The examples of practical implementations that have been found are few and of different characters, where a combination of child-friendliness with nature and biodiversity, or with concrete maintenance like small sized tools, appear particularly well-functioning and accepted. However, there is a lack of a broader spectrum of approaches tested, both concerning physical adaptations and activities.

The issue of responsibility and collaborations for child-friendly and inclusive cemeteries remains unclear, despite requirements for making child impact assessments. Results are emphasizing the value of practitioners working in relation to this to establish responsibilities and collaborations across different roles and professions, and to learn from the experiences. Developing a central method or knowledge bank could be helpful for the future, while adaptations may need to be tailored to each cemetery's unique context.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Märít Jansson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Cecilia Karlsson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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