



Studying Play in Alexandria





Executive Summary: Studying Play in Alexandria

In December of 2010 the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network, in collaboration with Alexandria Arlington Smart Beginnings, the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, the City of Alexandria, and others, issued a call for proposals from consultants to help them “better understand the playspace needs of the City of Alexandria for younger children,” particularly ages 2-5, and to raise awareness about playspace opportunities and needs in Alexandria. This was part of a larger early-childhood obesity prevention initiative underway led by the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network (A-COAN). A-COAN is committed to making **the healthy choice the easy choice** by encouraging active lifestyles and healthy eating through policy, systems, and changes in the environment.

Specific goals of the study were stated as:

1. Better understand the condition of existing indoor/outdoor playspaces in public/private spaces
2. Increase the understanding of residents’ access to playspaces and socio-cultural influences impacting playspace use
3. Be useful in a long-term master planning process
4. Prioritize future playspace locations and funding needs

*According to Inova Health System’s assessment of overweight and obesity prevalence across Northern Virginia, **43.5%** of children in Alexandria, ages 2-5, are overweight or obese.*

Process for the Study

The study consists of these main parts:

- An **inventory of playspaces** that included an evaluation of the functionality of each playground or playspace toward serving the needs of 2-5-year-old children.
- An **analysis** of the physical distribution of and access to playspaces across Alexandria and how this is meeting the needs of children.
- A series of **focus group sessions** with family day care providers, participants in Alexandria playgroups, service providers, providers of play facilities, and others to determine the needs, values, and priorities for play relative to 2-5-year-olds in Alexandria.
- An overall **evaluation** of the gaps, opportunities, and constraints that affect access to play in Alexandria.
- A set of **recommendations and strategies** for improving access to playspaces for 2-5-year-olds in Alexandria and the value of the available playspaces.

A Photovoice Project, which reinforced many of the findings from the focus groups, was also conducted in tandem by Project Play.





Alexandria Photovoice Project

While this play assessment was going on, Project Play launched a Photovoice Project to engage community members in identifying ways to improve Alexandria playgrounds. In a Photovoice Project, participants are asked to share their opinion by taking photographs, sharing them with others, and developing narratives to go with their photos. Parents and caregivers participating in the Center for Alexandria's Child playgroups were asked to take pictures of the best and the worst features of playgrounds. Over 30 parents and caregivers volunteered and photographed 20 playgrounds. The majority of participants did not speak English as their first language.

As participants primarily photographed the playgrounds that they took their children to, the majority of their photos helped to better understand what playground features were most important to playground users. The 10 themes that emerged were:

- Safety
- Easy and safe access
- Shade
- Surfacing
- Fun and engaging playspaces
- Age-appropriate equipment for children
- Seating for adults
- Amenities (water fountains and bathrooms)
- Importance of indoor and playgroup space



"We always watch our kids, and if something happens, we can go quickly. I think [that] the park also has many entrances/exits isn't always good, because people pass the park as a shortcut. Sometimes they throw garbage or trash. I think only one entrance/exit is good if the park isn't so big. The location of the park is also important. If the park is near a very busy street, it's hard for us to go, and when the kids run from the playground, it causes accidents." —Mie





*“Los colomprios no estan calientes porque el parque esta cubierto.”
[The children are not hot because the park is covered.]
—Eliana (Lee Center)*



“The floor is no good for strollers.” —Adriana (William Ramsay Playground)

The Importance of Play

The growing absence of active outdoor play from children’s lives is a nationwide concern. Many factors contribute to this, but a primary one is the lack of places to play that are easy to get to and that offer the variety of experiences needed for a child’s healthy development. One consequence of this is an increasing disconnect between children and their environment. An even more alarming one is the effect on mental and physical health. Rates of obesity among children have grown to the point where in 2007, over 40 percent of children between the ages of 2-5 in Alexandria were overweight or obese. Getting children engaged in active play is one way to reverse this trend.





Play in Alexandria

This study looked at two main areas of focus regarding play in Alexandria:

1. **Physical infrastructure of play**
2. **Overall perception and understanding of play among residents**

All of the public and semi-public playgrounds throughout the city were identified and located on a map. Each of them was visited by experts on child development and playground design. Because play is more than just using prefabricated equipment, the area around each playground was evaluated as well. The playground and its surrounding area was collectively called a **playspace**.

In addition, each playspace was evaluated on a set of characteristics and amenities that affect its play value. These included things such as ease of access, perceived safety, and pleasant surroundings. They also included physical attributes like the availability of restrooms, shade, drinking water, and seating for caregivers.

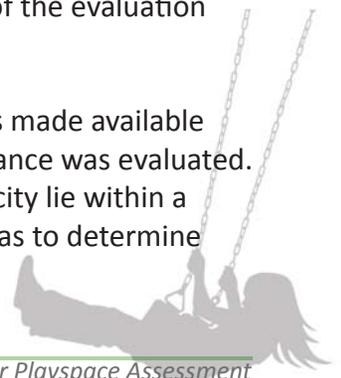
- Each **playspace** was evaluated on how well it serves five components of healthy play:
- Physical activity
- Intellectual activity
- Social interaction
- Contact with nature
- Unstructured free play

The characteristics recorded for each playspace were plugged into a formula that yielded a numeric score for the playspace. The numeric scores were used to compare playspaces to one another in terms of their relative value. They were also used to establish norms and standards against which all playspaces could be evaluated.

After review and consideration, **a total of 86 playspaces** in Alexandria were found to be relevant to the scope of this study. These were further broken out into playspaces that are appropriate for children between the ages of 2-5 and those that are not. Of the 86 playspaces, **67 were identified as appropriate for ages 2-5**. Of those, 15 are located at schools and are not available to the public during school hours, which means that a **total of 54 playspaces** available throughout the day and suitable for 2-5 year olds were identified.

An “ideal” playspace for 2-5 year olds would have all of the elements and meet all of the conditions assessed during the evaluation. While no such ideal playspace was found, one playspace was identified as providing all of the components of play at full value. This was **John Adams Elementary School**. However, because it is located at a school, it is not available full time. It also does not provide restrooms, drinking water, and some of the other physical attributes necessary to form an ideal playspace. A more detailed discussion of the evaluation results for all playspaces can be found in this report.

The playspaces were also used collectively to evaluate how and where play is made available throughout the city. In particular, access to playspaces within a walkable distance was evaluated. Two parameters were evaluated. The first was to identify which parts of the city lie within a walkable distance of a playspace and which do not. The second parameter was to determine





the total value (according to the assessed value of each playspace) of all playspaces that are within walking distance of any given location. These results were compared with demographic mapping to show where playspaces exist relative to where children live, and the relative value of those playspaces. Through this process, areas with gaps in service were mapped. The results show significant gaps in the western part of Alexandria. These gaps tend to occur in areas with high and/or dense populations of children, particularly children under 5-years-old.

The perceptions and overall understanding of play among residents came primarily from a series of focus groups and the Photovoice Project. The input from these indicates that, in general, people feel that playspaces are not adequately distributed throughout Alexandria and that the available playspaces do not adequately meet the needs of children ages 2-5. Particular concerns included the lack of playspaces within walking distance of home and the overall safety and security of playspaces. People felt that maintenance of playspaces could be better. They also wanted to see surfacing in playspaces that is better suited to younger children. Overall, there was a feeling that playspaces needed more equipment and amenities suited to the needs of 2-5-year-olds.

There was also a concern among the focus group participants that information about where playspaces are located and what they offer is difficult to find, especially for people who are new to the area and those who do not speak English. At the same time, it was expressed that people in these categories gain a lot of social and emotional value through the connections they make through the play of their children. Joining play groups and meeting people at playspaces does a great deal to help people connect with one another and their community.

● Recommendations

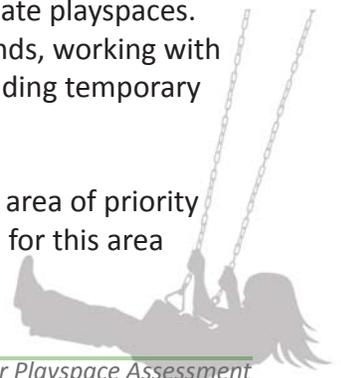
Three primary actions were identified as ways to expand and enhance access to play in Alexandria. These include:

Specific playspaces to improve were identified, and areas needing new or improved playspaces were discussed. The importance of providing a full range of play experiences within a

- **Improve the quality of playspaces**
- **Increase the quantity of playspaces and assure that they are well distributed**
- **Improve awareness of the importance of play and the general understanding of where to take children to play and how they can gain the most benefit from playing**

reasonable proximity of where children live was highlighted. While improvements are needed throughout the city, the westernmost part of Alexandria was identified as a priority due to its high density of children ages 2-5 and the overall lack of access to appropriate playspaces. Recommendations for this area include expanding access to school playgrounds, working with private owners to improve playspaces at residential developments, and providing temporary and mobile play opportunities.

The area in northern Alexandria known as Arlandria was also identified as an area of priority due to its high number of children and lack of playspaces. Recommendations for this area





include adding and improving playspaces within it and making sure that people living there know how to safely get to playspaces in adjacent neighborhoods. Those adjacent playspaces should be improved to assure that they can accommodate the spillover from this neighborhood and meet the full needs of all children.

The concept of Destination Playgrounds was also discussed. These are places that motivate people to make an effort to bring their children to a place where their full range of play needs can be met and that encourage them to stay longer. In the process, parents may also meet fellow citizens, get to know one another, and build a better community for themselves as well as their children.

