Planning And Design For Healthy Child Development: Mapping Places Of Play And Prey With Denver Kids

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PROJECT SUMMARY:
In this study, aerial maps were used to investigate Denver neighborhoods through children’s eyes. This community-based research project taught inner-city children about the power of mapping and voicing preferences and concerns. Using aerial maps, hand-drawn maps, photographs, and other methods of exploration, children created their own maps of school grounds and surrounding neighborhoods, revealing quantitative and qualitative data in a creative and informative way. This research serves to empower students and to educate city officials about the benefits and deficits of inner-city living for Denver youth. Special emphasis was placed upon places of play and physical activity, as well as on places of prey and gang activity.

This project was conducted with assistance from Denver Public Schools and Denver Scores, a local nonprofit organization that runs after school programs focused on soccer, writing, and community service. The students presented their maps to the neighborhood watch group, local business leaders, Denver Public Schools, and all of the youth at the Denver Scores end of season event Shout! in an effort to raise awareness. Safe houses were identified throughout the neighborhood as a result of this project.

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MAPPING WITH KIDS:
Mapping can be done with children as young as four years old but to gain information about how children perceive their neighborhoods, it is recommended that you work with six year olds and above (Hart, 1979; Driskell et al, 2002; Halseth and Doddridge, 2000). For the purposes of this study, we began with a brainstorming session followed by cognitive mapping and detailed drawings. Fourth through sixth grade students were asked to draw the path they typically walked to school. In a follow up session, they were then asked to identify any places or things that they particularly liked or disliked and to create drawings. Some students drew pictures of things they wanted to see more of as shown below.

Figure 1 - “I want to have more flowers and butterflies.”
MAPPING WITH KIDS CONTINUED:
Students shared their drawings and cognitive maps with one another and discussed similarities and differences. Some of the students identified the same places as being scary:

“Yea, there’s a drunk guy who lives there. He yells at us kids and stuff." "Yea, I know that house!” “Yea, he’s mean!”

Several students commented on fear of traffic, being kidnapped, and dogs:

“It looks scary, like lots of cars and stuff, so I don’t like to go there.” – student talking about Federal Boulevard
“If I walk through the projects someone might take me...”
“I don’t like walking this way because of this dog, so I go around on another street instead or sometimes through the alley but that doesn’t feel very safe either.”

At the next session we introduced aerial maps starting with a map of the school and playground. Kids were asked to transfer information to the aerial maps so that we could make one big map to share with other students, neighbors, Denver Public Schools, and business leaders.

Figure 2 - “We mapped where we feel safe and where we don’t.”

YOUTH VOICING THEIR CONCERNS:
Kids need to know that their opinions matter, especially where places of play and prey are concerned. Projects like this help youth find a voice while also helping planners create more livable cities.

Figure 3 - Transferring information to large aerial maps.

HEALTH AND SAFETY:
Unfortunately, the social and built environment of many minority children living in impoverished urban neighborhoods frequently fails to support their healthy development. They are often exposed to life- and health-threatening environmental stressors such as street violence, homelessness, illegal drugs, and negative role models (McLoyd, 1998). They also have limited access to safe outdoor play spaces and to structured opportunities for involvement in organized sports and activity lessons (Sallis et al, 1996). Research shows that low socioeconomic status minority children are more likely than non-minority children with high socioeconomic status to have negative health related outcomes, including low levels of physical activity (Nader et al, 1995; Sallis et al, 1996; McLoyd, 1998) and high rates of obesity (Ogden et al, 2002). More research with youth is needed to identify how neighborhood’s physical and social settings affect youth. Mapping with children is one way to better identify some key issues while empowering kids to take action.

REFERENCES:


Children, Youth and Environments Center for Research and Design
University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center