

# Building “the secret city” for children

## Planners in Israel use voluntary guidelines to urge climate- and child-friendly measures

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Urban planning can support the development and wellbeing of children and caregivers. It's also vital for mitigating and adapting to climate change. Many interventions – from planting trees to improving public transport and walkability – can promote both aims, while also making public spaces more vibrant for everyone. But how can urban planners get the guidance they need to reach these goals?

With both children's wellbeing and environmental sustainability in mind, Israel's Ministry of Education tasked our firm with developing national guidelines for urban planners. Until then, the Ministry's guidelines had covered mainly the planning of schools and kindergartens. Now, the Ministry sought to expand its role to represent infants, toddlers and caregivers outside of classrooms – in streets, libraries, parks, housing developments, open spaces and mobility infrastructure as well.

### **Developing the guidelines**

We began by working with a child development specialist to translate psychological insights into spatial guidelines. For each topic, Dr Dana Shai, head of the Center for the Study of Early Emotional Development (SEED), presented us with several psychological principles.

Some were general, such as the importance of the connection between child and caregiver for the

child's ability to relax, learn and develop. This holds true whether you are planning a public park or a bus station. We reviewed all the guidelines with the notion that a place could not be child-friendly if the caregiver feels bored, left out, stressed or uncomfortable about engaging with the child.

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Other principles were specific to aspects of the urban environment. For example, when planning areas for transportation, we should remember that young children are always present in the moment – they lack an adult's understanding of being temporarily in transit. That means every such area should engage children, and enable their caregivers to have a valuable experience with them.

With these ideas in mind, we looked at existing planning regulations. We highlighted those that support children and caregivers, and suggested changes to those that aren't in their best interest.



Photo: Courtesy of Gavriel Segal planners

At many points, there was a strong overlap between the needs of small children and the goal of environmental sustainability. For example, one of the guidelines we developed was placing natural vegetation and artwork at children’s eye level, to create what we call “the secret city”.

But young children can enjoy the secret city only if they spend time on the streets, walking from place to place. And in Israel’s main metropolitan area, over 50% of journeys by children aged 4 and under are in private cars. Young children are rarely taken on public transport.<sup>1</sup>

So planners need to address mobility issues too, bringing benefits both to children and to the environment. Travelling by bus offers more

<sup>1</sup> Data is based on a survey conducted by government contractors Netivei Ayalon Ltd for the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv-Yafo during 2016–2017.

opportunities for a caregiver to talk and interact with the child, and gives families more quality time together. It’s also more sustainable: Israel’s traffic congestion is considered the worst in the OECD (OECD, 2021), and having fewer cars would reduce carbon emissions and air pollution.

### **Facilitating change by encouraging discussions**

In the next phase of developing the guidelines, we put together a committee of planning professionals from government, local authorities, academia and NGOs. Similar projects offered various models, from an external experts-led process to centralised, mandatory government regulation.

We chose a hybrid model, developing voluntary guidelines together with the committee. We hoped this would help to insert new points of view into Israel’s urban planning activity.

The committee model did indeed facilitate a process of change. At our first meeting we asked each participant to share stories about his or her connection to children in cities. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, uncles and aunts all shared first-hand experiences of moving around their cities with young children in tow.

In another meeting dedicated to parks, we faced a trade-off between children's safety during play and the importance for child development of taking risks and experimenting. Although the Israeli kibbutz was one of the first settings to introduce the idea that children need to play and experiment with all types of materials and products to stimulate their imagination (Friedman, 2021), in general Israel has a safety-driven culture. Our public parks nowadays are mostly predictable and unchallenging, with play installations that are shiny, colourful and synthetic. (See also the interview with Ram Eisenberg on page 82.)

Our committee included representatives from the national standards institutions, the Ministry of Education, and local authorities. With their input, we were able to identify reasons why parks had not included more challenging and engaging play installations. And we realised that we might not need to change regulations to force parks to introduce more challenging areas, but only recommend – with supporting evidence – that parks should also include seasonal vegetation, topographic elements, loose materials and even animals.

Since our guidelines are voluntary, we cannot oblige authorities to adopt them. However, we found that the open nature of the process encouraged free discussions. This helped to carve out solutions and facilitate agreements and understanding between the various stakeholders. During participatory sessions and activities, many ideas came up, practical tools were developed and partnerships were formed. Based on this, we hope that implementation will follow.

### Three key takeaways

Our project enjoyed two big advantages: families are immensely valued in all sectors of Israeli society, and most of the population lives in urban areas. Still, based on our experiences from developing the guidelines, we can identify three key lessons for others interested in promoting child wellbeing and climate action.

First, working with diverse partners from government, local authorities, academia and NGOs helps to facilitate concrete discussions about opportunities and constraints.

Second, connecting children's wellbeing with issues such as walkability, transport and housing helps to link children's interests to relevant planning activities.

And finally, developing voluntary guidelines offers a flexible opportunity for officials to re-evaluate existing regulations and dream of new possibilities.

➤ Find this article online at [earlychildhoodmatters.online/2021-17](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2021-17)

## References

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