

Street Play in the Revitalization of Low-Birthrate Communities: Playborhood Street Tokyo

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Tokyo Play

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Abstract

By the year 2060 it is estimated that there will be ratio of 10.03 adults to every child aged 0 to 14 in Japan, a figure that raises questions about the place of children in society. The Playborhood Street Tokyo Project ("Street Play"), presented here as a photo essay, explores how street play can create a framework for informal communication between generations and neighbors. The playful encounters described suggest that play is powerful enough to connect children and adults, and that a street is the best place for the casual meeting of neighbors through play. Tokyo Play hopes that street play will become the standard for healthy communities across Japan.

Keywords: intergenerational, play, street play, Japan

The ratio of adults to children in Japan has been steadily increasing, from a ratio of 1.72 adults per child in 1920, to 6.62 in 2010; it is estimated that by the year 2060, there will be ratio of 10.03 adults to every child aged 0 to 14 in Japan (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012). We fear children will become a permanent minority in our future society. What will happen then? Will children be welcome in their community? Will adults treat children fairly and not as nuisance? Will opportunities for children's play continue to exist? Tokyo Play believes it is not too early for us to start making a movement for playful childhoods in harmonious communities in 2060.

The principal reason for our Playborhood Street Tokyo Project ("Street Play") is not that we need more play spaces or to prevent obesity, but that we need a new agenda to bring back a framework for informal neighborhood communication. In one sense, it is good that nowadays we have many parks in which children can play, but this has also created the phenomenon where adults no longer care about neighboring children in the way they did previously. It has become solely parents' responsibility to care for children. Street Play is a project for children and adults to get used to living happily with each other in the same community.

The aim of the Playborhood Street Tokyo Project is that residents open a local street for a couple of hours to play and get to know their neighbors. Mike Lanza allowed us to use the word "playborhood," which he coined for an action in the United States that mixes "play" and "neighborhood." His influential 2012 book *Playborhood: Turn Your Neighborhood into a Place for Play* demonstrates innovative solutions to make neighborhoods play-friendly. By the end of 2017, Tokyo Play had supported 21 groups to start up new street play actions. We provided information sheets, consultation, and demonstration for the first trial, as well as resources such as spinning tops, skipping rope and chalk, and provided an online platform to share practices.

In 2012, we initiated a trial of Street Play at a children's event at a small local retail street in Ishinomaki, a city 250 miles away from Tokyo, which had been hit by a 2.5-meter Tsunami in 2011. We recycled artificial grass from a baseball stadium to carpet 50 meters of the street for play (Figure 1). We were surprised so many adults also came out to join the play, commenting, "I used to play with spinning tops well. There should still be six men whom I know who can play this in the neighborhood" and, "I did not know that there were still so many children in this city even after the earthquake! You should do more of this." We realized that play is powerful enough to connect children and adults, and a street is the best place for the casual meeting of neighbors through play.

Figure 1. People playing in an intersection in a city center

Our first trial in Tokyo was in Mitaka City. Once a month, the neighborhood organizes a holiday promenade along its commercial street. In partnership with members of the local Picture Book Library, Street Play started occupying one major street crossing.

Children and parents rolled out artificial grass of 5m x 10m across the whole intersection, which would usually be busy with cars and bicycles. Children started running about and parents sat chatting on the grass; children colored zebra crossings with chalk (Figure 2) and made dens from cardboard boxes donated from local shops.

Figure 2. Children turning the zebra crossing into a rainbow

A surprise happened when it was time to brush up the chalk drawings from the street. Many children rushed to help, grabbing the brushes for the privilege of the new activity (Figure 3). Parents started taking photos, impressed by their children cleaning up streets in the middle of the commercial area. Local shop owners came out to see the unusual activity happening in front of their shops. The florist enthused, "It is so impressive and fascinating to see children enjoying this. If you need water, use it from our shop! Bring all the buckets you have!"

Figure 3. 3-year-old having fun sweeping up the chalk on the street

It was in this moment that children, by playing, changed the mindset of adults who did not have opportunities to see or communicate with children in their daily lives. The florist chatted with a lot of children and parents shuttling to and from the shop for water, until the street was clean. After that first initiative, a local NGO has organized a Street Play session there one afternoon every month.

The Street Play in Kanda, a small community in central Tokyo, is also a unique case. Young members of the community organization started their Street Play by working with the team of volunteers from the local fire brigade. The fire brigade used the street play session as an incentive for families to participate in fire training sessions (Figure 4), which had previously been a struggle. An additional benefit was that because of the community fire training and public benefit, it was much easier to obtain a road occupation permit.

Figure 4. "Fire" creeping toward a child during fire extinguisher training

To make the training fun, a father dressed as "fire" in a tight red suit crept towards the children; children needed to properly use a water-filled fire extinguisher to "put out" the fire. The fire brigade took out a street-embedded water hydrant and showed how to set it up to use the emergency water stock. They also ran water down an improvised water slide in the middle of the street, built out of a large sheet of plywood and beer crates from a neighborhood liquor shop (Figure 5). Through this event, the equipment became familiar to local people, and more people recognized and socialized with each other.

Figure 5. An improvised water slide made of bottle crates and sheets

Finally, a member of the fire brigade sprayed water for the children to play in while the adults received training in the use of the large hose (Figure 6). The fire brigade looked proud in the knowledge that they could contribute something else to children in the community and had fun themselves; children became proud of adults in the community too.

Figure 6. Children joining the fire brigade's large hose training



In Oji, in the north part of Tokyo, neighborhood shops contributed to Street Play; the fish shop owner shared a huge ice cube, which was originally used for chilling fish, and a big turtle was taken for a walk (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Children meet a turtle on the street



Children need to be more visible in our society, particularly in local communities. In Japan, in enthusiasm for education, parents prefer to take children to programs under the supervision of professional adults. Through Street Play, however, we have found that ordinary people have many things to offer even if they are not child professionals. Through the successful involvement of these people, children would be able to grow up not so much as a minority, but more as a part of the community.

On the other hand, there are strong negative voices asserting that street play is not possible in our society because too many young parents are no longer capable of educating children in morals and manners. From time to time, the media covers stories of people being annoyed by children and parents carelessly letting them loose on the streets. However, one of the benefits of street play is the opportunity to educate parents about the morals and manners of the community, in order to pass them on to their children.

Streets used to be the frontline of informal learning in a community. Children learned how to be a part of the community through playing on the street, and adults learned to engage with neighboring children. To bring back this important function of the streets, we need to start using them again to gather, play and get to know each other (Figure 8). In a future low-birthrate society, it will be even more necessary that both adults and children are “visible” to each other in communities.

Figure 8. A neighborhood street becomes a play space for families



In 2018, one local authority in Tokyo has launched a project to facilitate Street Play. We have been in contact with other authorities including government agencies, and we hope that this could be a catalyst for Street Play to become a standard provision for healthy communities nationwide.

Children were driven off the streets during the last Olympics in Tokyo in 1964. In contrast, as we awaiting the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, we will bring children back to the streets. We will support groups' and organizations' efforts to organize Street Play events and break down barriers and differences between children and adults in communities. We hope a more tolerant and inclusive community life will be the fundamental legacy of the Games for our future.

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