



Room to grow

Three-time Olympic medallist, parent and childhood fitness advocate Silken Laumann makes the case for community park space

I was recently in Hong Kong, a crowded city of seven million. And yet, amid the thousands of high-rise apartments pressing one against the other with laundry hanging from windows, I found community parks — open spaces where young people meet to play basketball, older people find a place to practise tai chi, and small children climb compact but interesting play structures. One evening we were having a casual dinner at an outdoor market restaurant and my partner's nephews, seven-year-old Jack and five-year-old Max, were getting restless with all the adult conversation. I offered to take them to the town centre, where



Silken, Kate and William live a short walk from their local park.

a playground and basketball court beckoned. Soon we were shooting hoops together and drawing local youngsters into a game. I didn't speak a word of Cantonese, but we pointed and laughed our way through creating teams, and rejigging the lineups when our team lost badly. Playing basketball in the middle of a busy city centre on that beautiful night is my favourite memory of Hong Kong.

Here in Canada, our community parks are places we largely take for granted. In our early parenting years, we bring our young children there to hang from the monkey bars, crawl through plastic tunnels and spiral in the tire swing. It's also a place to stay connected through those demanding years of raising little ones, when meeting another parent in the park can be like a life raft in a sea of non-stop interaction with pre-language little people. And as our children get a little older, our parks can serve as places to draw us out of our apartments and houses, connect with the community we live in, experience the joy of kicking a soccer ball with our tweens and sharing a smile with an aging neighbour.

When I was growing up in Mississauga, Ont., the Sunday picnic was an honoured tradition in my family. We'd go to lakeside Jack Darling Park where the food was secondary to the Frisbee, soccer ball and freeze tag. The afternoon would be spent running, throwing and playing with each other. It was through my parents' love of play that I found my own — and now that I'm a parent myself, that love of play still has a valued place in my life.

When I share my passion for unstructured play with others, I'm asked about the role that sport plays in my children's lives. I am extremely grateful my daughter, Kate, can enjoy synchro and gymnastics, and my son, William, has a passion for basketball. But the three of us are just as happy running around with our dog, Balto, or playing road hockey in the driveway. We need to protect the opportunity to have these special times by not overscheduling our lives. Organized sports can boost kids' fitness, introduce them to new friends and teach them how to work as a team. But sport alone is not the answer to keeping kids healthy and active. Physiotherapists are starting to see overuse injuries in 10-year-olds, not only because soccer is everything and the only thing these 10-year-olds do, but because they're missing play experiences that build strength, flexibility and balance in different and important ways.

We know play is good for kids: It enhances brain function, coordination and social skills. The physical play of climbing a tree, riding a bike or playing a game of tag recruits multiple muscle groups and develops complex

If you build it, they will play

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skills that are fundamental in building a healthy body. And the best part of it is that when kids are playing a game of capture the flag or racing to the end of the monkey bars, they aren't thinking about building bones or increasing lung capacity; they're having fun. Even later, between nine and 12, children still need the physical play of riding bikes and bouncing on trampolines to complement the sport they are enjoying.

My favourite parks are the ones where we can alternate between a field for impromptu softball games, some rougher terrain that lets the kids get close to nature on a regular basis, and a great playground structure. The latter is getting hard to come by, as many neighbourhoods replace older equipment with dumbed-down structures that wouldn't challenge any child over the age of four: My son calls the one installed in our local park a "baby playground." It offers so little to inspire the imagination that on our weekly visits there to play with the dog, William and Kate use it for nothing more than to chase each other around. The standard combination of two swings, one slide and one row of monkey bars may be deemed safe, but if the equipment is too easy, children will get bored, and if they are bored they will look for other challenges that ultimately put them at risk.

A great playground is designed for both individual and group play, and the equipment should allow kids to spin, rock, balance and climb. The best structures I've found are made by RecTec Industries (rectecindustries.com) in Delta, BC. Far from

boring, these colourful structures are relevant and interesting enough to engage children for long periods of time. There are climbing walls and twisty structures you can slide down or climb up, plus a place at the top for imaginary play and a big slide that makes your stomach drop. RecTec installed one of these with the Steve Nash Foundation at Central Park in Victoria, and at any time of day the structure is teeming with kids. If only every community were lucky enough to have a playground like this.

But even the best park doesn't serve the community if it's difficult to access. Is the park an easy walk for parents with strollers? Do kids have to cross busy streets to get there? I feel comfortable enough with the location of our neighbourhood park to let my kids walk there alone, and I know the retired couple whose house is close to it, so my kids can check in with them if they need help.

Sounds like a tall order, but vibrant, accessible parks are worth it for what they contribute to our communities. Great parks are great because of the people who use them. So let's make sure there are reasons for people — young and old and of every ability level — to come out and play. ❤️

Silken Laumann is an inspirational speaker and ambassador for GoodLife Kids Foundation.

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