

planning and creating space for teenage girls



The charity Make Space for Girls (of which I am a co-founder) focuses on making parks and similar spaces as welcoming to teenage girls as they are to teenage boys. This does not mean 'girl spaces' painted pink, or signs saying 'No boys allowed'. What it means is encouraging councils, developers, designers, architects and equipment manufacturers to be more creative and inclusive in how they plan and create teenage space so that it works for everyone (including the many teenage boys who do not feel that the current provision is for them).

This article considers the need to plan and create equal spaces by reference to three questions. What is the problem? Why does it matter? And why is planning part of the solution?

What is the problem?

When it comes to teenagers in parks, the standard provisions are multi-use games areas (MUGAs), skate parks, and BMX and pump tracks. All of these spaces are dominated by boys and young men. They are unregulated public areas and, as Doreen Massey said:

*'Such 'public' space, unregulated, leaves a heterogeneous urban population to work out for itself who really is going to have the right to be there. All spaces are socially regulated in some way, if not by explicit rules [...] then by the potentially more competitive [...] regulation which exists in the absences of explicit [...] controls.'*¹

A wander round our parks and similar spaces shows what this competitive regulation has done in terms of working out who really has the right to be in 'teen spaces'. Data from Skateboard GB in 2020 showed that 85% of skateboarders are male, and 80% are under 18. That equates to a lot of missing teenage girls. And although grass-roots football among women and girls is seeing fantastic increases, teenage girls still do not get a look in when it comes

to an informal kick-about in an MUGA. In short, most teen facilities are dominated by boys.

Why does this matter?

There are three strands to the answer to this question. First, fairness. Why shouldn't teenage girls have facilities that cater for their needs? Feeling welcome in a park is about feeling that you belong in the public realm and are part of the community. At the moment, too many parks send teenage girls the message: 'There is nothing here for you; you might as well go home.'

Second, health. We know that inactivity in teenage girls is leading to serious health problems. At the start of secondary school (years 7-8), only 48% of girls are 'active' compared with 54% of boys, and this decreases to 43% of girls (compared with 48% of boys) in years 9-11;² 44% of girls aged 13-15 are overweight. And by the age of 14 one in four girls report experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms, compared with one in 10 boys. We care about these statistics; we want to do something about the issues they highlight. So, as a society, we need to make the link between this level of inactivity and the lack of any welcoming (free-to-use) park facilities for teenage girls.

Being active doesn't have to be about getting sweaty in sports kit. Women in Sport researched the relationship between teenaged girls and 'sport'. For girls who saw themselves as sporty, sport was fantastic. But for girls who didn't, sport was perceived as judgemental, rules based, and yet another way to fail. What good park provision can offer these girls is the chance to be active and outside—whether that's on swings or just walking with a friend—without any pressure.

Finally, the law. Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child affirms the right to play for all children, up to the age of 18. Too often councils focus on the play needs of younger children, sometimes having an explicit cut-off at age 12 or 14, ignoring the basic Convention right for older children.

There is also home-grown legislation in the UK, and in particular the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010.³ The PSED requires public authorities to proactively consider the need to reduce inequality between groups with protected characteristics. Sex is one such protected

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Einseidler Park in Vienna

characteristic. So where (as is the case in park provision) girls are disadvantaged when compared with boys, councils have a legal duty to think about trying to reduce this inequality. (Note that not all characteristics are ‘protected characteristics’ under the PSED. For example, dog ownership is not a protected characteristic for the purposes of the PSED, so councils are not required by law to have regard to making things better for dog-walkers; but they *are* required by law to have regard to making things better for girls.)

Why is planning part of the solution?

Some people might say that the problem is not in the space or the design, which is all good—that MUGAs have to be designed with 3metre-high fences or they will lose the play value; that skate parks are inclusive, and anyone can use them; and that the absence of teenage girls is down to them: they just need to be empowered to use these spaces.

This argument is superficially attractive – if we could ‘fix’ the girls, we would not have to change other stuff. But where it falls down is when you try to map out what this empowerment would look like in practice. What form of empowerment works for the footballing girls who want to have a kick around when boys will not give up the space? What form of empowerment will help the 90% of girl skaters who told a survey that they did not feel comfortable skating in their local skatepark? What sort of empowerment improves the lot of the 10-year-old girl who changes her route home from school to avoid the boys playing in a MUGA who yell sexual abuse at her? What sort of empowerment will help the 13-year-old girl taunted by the older boys at the skate park with ‘I’d like to ***k you on your skateboard’?

Eva Keil, the leader of gender mainstreaming in planning in Vienna made the point that we should plan and design for the world we live in, not the

world as we would like it to be. And if we want to shift the dial, we need to look at the design of public spaces and how they work for girls.

One teenage girl told researchers from Muf Architecture when asked what she wanted from teen space in Newham that she wanted ‘a place to meet friends... do activities or nothing. Shelter from the weather and somewhere safe to hang without my ma stressing me.’ That should not be too much to ask. And we already have examples of what works in Europe—such as Einseidler Park in Vienna and Rösens Röda Matta in Malmö, both of which have been designed with teenage girls in mind.

As we—gradually—emerge from the Covid pandemic we have a real opportunity to address this issue. Research carried out by Women in Sport, who spoke to more than 1,500 teenage girls between October 2020 and February 2021, found that 82% of them were committed to putting more effort into being fit and healthy after the pandemic. So let’s seize this opportunity and engage with teenage girls to change our current thinking and create parks that are more welcoming to them.

● **Imogen Clark** is Co-founder and Trustee of Make Space for Girls (see <http://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/>). The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 D Massey: *For Space*. Sage Publications, 2005
- 2 *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey: Academic Year 2019/20*. Sport England, 2021. https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-01/Active%20Lives%20Children%20Survey%20Academic%20Year%2019-20%20report.pdf?VersionId=4Ti_0V0m9sYy5HwQjSiJN7Xj.VlnpjV6
- 3 See *The Public Sector Equality Duty. Q&A*. Maker Space for Girls/Weightmans, May 2022. <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/QA-on-the-PSED.pdf>