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# Beyond what is there: children's sense of leisure possibilities in the neighbourhood

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how Swedish children aged ten to twelve perceive their neighbourhoods as spaces for meaningful leisure. Drawing on group interviews with 50 children residing in areas with varying characteristics, the research applies the concepts of 'children's places' and 'places for children' to analyse how children navigate and interpret their local environments. While many children expressed satisfaction with nearby facilities, such as playgrounds and sports fields, they also highlighted limitations in variety, maintenance, and age-appropriate challenges. The analysis reveals how children's perceptions of their neighbourhoods' range of leisure activities spans beyond the actual supply of leisure places. Access to these leisure places is affected by different sets of normative perceptions of (a) availability for the specific age group, (b) availability and maintenance and (c) availability and proximity. This study offers new insights into the everyday lives of Swedish ten-to-twelve-year-olds and their everyday lives. It builds on previous research on children's and young teenager's microgeographies, by highlighting the importance and hindrance of children's sense of availability and access to the range of activities offered by the community. The contribution of this paper is mainly the insights of the complexity of this particular age group and how being in the middle years and the increased awareness that comes with that is affecting children's microgeographies beyond what is there.

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## Introduction

From a historical perspective, the unsupervised leisure of children and young people has been perceived as a problem in Scandinavia and the Global North. For example, children drifting around have been dealt with as a threat to law and order within the industrial community (Tahilzadeh, Kings, and Nazar 2023). Therefore, societies' leisure and youth policies are usually based upon the perception that it is of crucial importance for children and teenagers to participate in structured and controlled institutionalised leisure activities (Zeiher 2009). Such policies have had different purposes, such as preparing children and young adults for the labour market with different activities or simply keeping them off the streets when unsupervised due to parents being at work. Despite these societal ambitions of keeping children and young people actively engaged, in Sweden there are reports of older children (aged ten to twelve) dropping out of

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different kinds of institutionalised and organised leisure activities (Lago and Elvstrand 2022; SOU 2022:61). Research on what these children do instead, or how they perceive their leisure time outside of organised activities, is sparse.

Children between the ages of ten and twelve are often referred to as being in their middle childhood. In the Swedish context, at the age of ten, children change from primary to middle school (mellanstadiet), and by thirteen they change from middle to high school (högstadiet). This stage of life places them in a transitional phase between early childhood and adolescence. Research on the circumstances of Swedish children in their middle childhood is limited, resulting in a lack of knowledge about their daily lives. However, middle childhood is frequently described as a sensitive developmental period, marked by a search for identity and a growing desire for autonomy (Lago and Hedrén 2025; Sørenssen 2025). These characteristics underscore the significance of time spent outside of school in the process of identity formation.

Children's relationships with their neighbourhoods have previously been studied by Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith (1998), who stated the diversity of children's experiences and childhood. There is not one childhood or one universal experience, but a multitude of different perceptions and individual circumstances, within which children's leisure time takes shape and gains meaning. These situated relationships with the environment contribute to the formation of what can be described as *microgeographies*. In this study, while acknowledging the importance of recognising the diversity of childhoods, we adopt a collective perspective on the experiences of ten-to-twelve-year-olds in relation to their neighbourhoods as places for leisure. In doing so, we contribute to the broader understanding of children's spatial experiences, adding pieces to the puzzle that form the 'spatio-temporal map of collective experience' that Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith (1998, 194) began to sketch together with 13-year-olds in England in the 1990s.

Studies on children's leisure activities have emphasised that perceived access to such activities occurs at the intersection of places intended for children, places children actually use, and factors such as the availability of transport, which influence whether certain locations are perceived as part of their local area (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). According to Chawla and Malone (2003; also Morrow 2011), both children's perceptions of accessibility and the quality of local spaces play a crucial role in determining whether, and if so how, children can participate in society. Meaningful leisure time is considered one of the most influential factors in children and young people's well-being (Tahilzadeh, Kings, and Nazar 2023). It can thus be argued that the ability to access meaningful leisure activities is important for children's participation in society. Meaningful leisure is also a legal right for children as stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), which has been incorporated into Swedish law since 2020. However, studies indicate that children are often excluded from the public sphere (Olwig and Gulløv 2003; Odenbring 2014). Other research suggests that children do have access to places for leisure, but that there are also limitations to what they perceive as places for them (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2013; Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). The extent to which and how children are able to participate influences their attachment to their own neighbourhood. In the long run, this also contributes to children feeling included in their community (Rutberg, Lindqvist, and Henriksson 2023). Therefore, it is crucially important to understand children's own perspectives on leisure and their neighbourhood's places for leisure.

To gain further knowledge about children's leisure time, this paper's overarching aim is to explore how children experience their neighbourhood as a place that supports leisure. To fulfil this aim, the following questions are asked: How do children describe their neighbourhoods' range of leisure activities? What aspects affect children's perceptions of their neighbourhoods' range of activities?

In this paper, the notion of leisure includes both the activities that children engage in and the time span that occurs outside of school hours. We therefore use the terms leisure and leisure time synonymously.

## Background

### *Children and their neighbourhood*

Children's experiences and relationships to their local environment are individual and affected by individual attributes such as socioeconomic family situation, gender, ethnicity and disability (Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith 1998). In their study of 13-year olds' perceptions of their 'fourth environment' (places outside of school, home and playgrounds), Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith (1998) found four different functions of such places: places away from authorities, places to be with friends, places of adventure and places for solitude. The access to these 'special places' creates a feeling of place ownership and agency for young teenagers and keeps their overhanging boredom away.

Rasmussen and Smidt (2003) also illustrated how the local environment opens up an intersection between public and private spaces, between places designed for children and those that children actually use. According to the children in their study, who were aged between 5 and 12, they moved between these different types of spaces – between playgrounds and natural areas, between private homes and sports centres. Proximity and accessibility were more important than the specific nature of the places themselves, resulting in children describing a wide variety of locations. Children's sense of agency in this intersection of private and public places also includes perceptions or relationships with local authorities (Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith 1998). Municipal planning and redevelopment efforts of neighbourhoods, such as the reconstruction or removal of familiar neighbourhood spaces, can evoke feelings of powerlessness and mistrust among children, especially when their everyday places are altered or erased without their involvement.

Through action research with 14-year-olds, Chawla and Malone (2003) investigated children's descriptions of their perceived integration into the community. They showed that, when children do not feel integrated into the community, that is, when the neighbourhood does not offer them places to be, this could lead to feelings of boredom and exclusion. The researchers emphasised the importance of enabling children to be fully included within their local environment. This inclusion is not only about having designated places for children, but also about children feeling that they have access to shared, community-wide places.

In addition to physical aspects, social dimensions are also a central part of the local environment. The significance of a place rests not only in its physical features, but also in who else is present there (see also Chawla and Malone 2003; Manouchehri et al. 2021). In relation to the idea of neighbourhood, accessibility is also important. Besides norms and expectations regarding whether or not places are available to them, children also emphasise movement and transport as a part of what gives them access, and which areas become part of their neighbourhood (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003; Weir 2023). Weir (2023) highlighted the function of threshold spaces when children navigate their neighbourhoods. These can be described as semi-public places that bridge the gap between the private realm of the home and the broader public environment. These are places that exist in between the home and fully public places that children make use of in their activities; for example, entrances, walkways, courtyards, or spaces adjacent to residential buildings.

In their study of the activities of 10 – to 13-year-olds in their local areas, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) highlighted gender differences in how children use places. Girls were more likely to use indoor spaces than boys. This was linked to girls more frequently perceiving a lack of places in the local environment that met their needs. However, Christensen and Mikkelsen (2013) showed that, in response to this, girls engage in the creative use of place to enable desired activities and relationships. When girls perceive that there are no designated places for their desired activities, they use public places to meet their needs.

### *Leisure as place*

It has been argued that leisure is 'the third place', enabling the fulfilment of human wellbeing in life (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982; Weir 2023). The third place is a public place away from both home

and work, where people can meet in relaxed and informal ways, without any demands or expectations of being productive or useful in any way. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) argued for the necessity of leisure experiences in a third place and suggested shared conversations and sociability as the big gain. The place itself may vary in setting, but third places can contribute to a sense of belonging to community life (Weir 2023). Rasmussen (2004) described children's time-space as an 'institutional triangle', constraining their leisure worlds to be performed between three corners of a triangle: school, home, and organised leisure activities. According to this theory of children's leisure, one can question whether children actually have access to a free space, outside of school, home, and institutionalised activities. Children's opportunities for leisure in public places have been curtailed in line with increasing safety discourses about their whereabouts (Holloway 2014). The public place is associated with stranger danger and traffic incidents. In a Swedish context, this increased safety thinking about children in public places has led to parents driving their children to and from school, reducing children's attachment to their local area (cf. Christensen and MikkelsenChristensen and MikkelsenChristensen and MikkelsenChristensen and Christensen and MikkelsenChristensen and MikkelsenChristensen and Mikkelsen 2013; Rutberg, Lindqvist, and Henriksson 2023). These safety discourses risk leading to the exclusion of children from their own neighbourhoods.

Hence, as mentioned above, collecting systematic knowledge about children aged ten to twelve and their experiences of leisure within their own neighbourhoods has not been a priority in research. This has led to a need for increased knowledge and insight into children's own experiences that can expand or problematise the notion of children's leisure places.

### *Leisure as activity*

Children's leisure has previously been analysed through the lens of their participation in organised leisure activities. Participation in sports is often highlighted as a prevalent and widespread activity among children across various national contexts (Felfe, Lechner, and Steinmayr 2016). Studies on children's and young people's engagement in sports frequently adopt a health or wellbeing perspective (Geidne, Quennerstedt, and Eriksson 2013), alongside comparative examinations of children's academic achievements in relation to their involvement in sports (Owen et al. 2021).

Children's engagement in organised activities can be understood as part of society's ambition to support both their wellbeing and that of the wider community by keeping them active and occupied. In Sweden, the responsibility for providing children with meaningful leisure time through various institutions has a long tradition. A voluntary part of the Swedish education system, School-age Educare (SAEC), represents a form of educational and leisure welfare provision and plays a key role in realising the societal aim of keeping children active. SAEC is regulated by a curriculum, but also includes elements of casual leisure, with social interaction and peer relationships being central features. As mentioned above, being voluntary, SAEC is one of the institutionalised leisure offerings that children tend to stop attending when they reach ten years of age. Statistics show that attendance rates drop from 73% of all Swedish 9-year-old children attending to 35% of 10-year-olds and decrease even further for 11 - and 12-year-olds (SOU 2022:61)

In a Swedish study comparing children's perspectives on life in the USA and Sweden, Odenbring (2014) uses the notion of institutionalised childhood when describing how children's time is regulated, characterised by long school days, homework, and organised and adult-led leisure activities. In Odenbring's study, children describe a stressful everyday life with a lot of nagging from parents and siblings, due to the family's busy schedule. Similarly, Lago and Elvstrand (2021) demonstrate that nine-year-olds describe the demands of school and SAEC as a significant factor in their decision to spend their leisure time either at SAEC or at home.

International research on ten - to twelve-year-olds attending extended education offerings has shown that these children perceive that more resources are put into the activities for younger children, diminishing these older children's sense of belonging (Hurst 2015, 2020). This influences

children's choices not to participate or leave the organised extended education offering, due to the offered activities lacking meaningfulness for them (Lago and Elvstrand 2022). Studies based on interviews with staff in extended education report similar results and suggest that staff need to increase their adjustment of activities so they will better attract and challenge older children (Elvstrand et al. 2022).

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society regularly conducts survey studies on the circumstances of young people, and these are published in annual reports. In 2023, the focus of the survey study was youth leisure (Agency for Youth and Civil Society 2023). The results highlight youth participation in activities across three distinct areas: sports and physical activities, cultural and creative endeavours, and social interactions. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of youth leisure as being diverse and shaped by socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, as Odenbring (2014) states, even younger children's leisure activities are dependent upon their family's economic and cultural situation. However, these annual reports gather information about the leisure activities of children and teenagers, in general, and specific data on ten - to twelve-year-olds remains scarce.

According to the Swedish authorities (Dir. 2022, 96), children's and young people's leisure activities tend to focus either on younger children or older teenagers. As a result, children in their middle childhood are often overlooked in survey studies. Qualitative studies gathering these children's own perspectives on their leisure activities outside of organised pedagogical services are even scarcer. Therefore, a study examining children's understandings of the activities offered within their surrounding neighbourhood, such as this one, can contribute to the knowledge base regarding the age group of ten - to twelve-year-olds and their perceived needs and desires relating to meaningful leisure time.

## Theoretical framework

This study is based on an understanding of children and childhood as geographically situated, which means that children both shape and are shaped by the places they inhabit (Holloway 2014; Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2018). This means that children's experiences are seen as interconnected with the places to which they have access, as well as the places they want to be able to access. Places are thus seen as physical, social, and imagined, and in this study a geographical perspective is used to understand how children describe the places they can and want to be able to access. Analytically, the understanding of place is linked to the concepts of 'children's places' and 'places for children' (Olwig and Gulløv 2003; Rasmussen 2004). This distinction has been used to understand how children use and give meaning to different types of place in order to highlight the imagined child in the places that adults provide for children (places for children) and how children themselves define and use different places (children's places), including both specifically provided places and other places, such as unstructured places or places not primarily designed with children in mind.

This theoretical perspective is used in the study to understand children's perceptions of their local area from their own perspectives. The concept 'places for children' is used to analyse how the participating children relate to specific (adult-provided) places and what they believe these places say about how adults view them. The concept of 'children's places' is used to emphasise their own desires and uses of the places to which they have access. Rasmussen (2004) emphasises that children's places do not primarily need to be made visible through direct naming ('this is what the place means to me') but are more often made visible through feelings and activities associated with places ('I used to play soccer here', or 'there's nothing fun to do here').

## Method

We interviewed 50 children aged between ten and twelve years, 22 boys and 28 girls, in 14 different group interviews (two to five participants per group) about their leisure activities and how they

spend their time outside school hours. Recruitment of participants was conducted with help from open leisure programmes (OLPs) tailored for ten to twelve year-olds. The participating children all attended some form of OLP on a regular basis and were asked if they wanted to be part of the group interviews. Children with informed consent from caregivers could participate in the interviews. The children received written information about the study before the interviews, but they were also informed orally during the introduction to the interviews. Caregivers had been informed and had given their written consent before the researchers came to the OLP. This approach, as well as the anonymisation of all children and OLPs, is in accordance with Swedish research ethical standards, since the children were under 15 years of age (Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet 2024). The groups were formed with help from the staff at the OLP's, who organised them based on various aspects such as which children were present that day and which children would want to participate together. In some cases, participation was rewarded with treats from the staff, affecting who wanted to participate (Table 1).

The OLPs represent a diversity of neighbourhoods and different municipalities. Apeln and Betan are situated in disadvantaged areas on the outskirts of midsize cities. Asken and Dahlia are situated in socioeconomically diverse areas on the outskirts of midsize cities. Dragon and Dill are situated in residential areas on the outskirts of a midsize city and Cirkeln is in the centre of a small city. Basilika is situated in a rural village near a midsize city. Hence, the voices of children with varied socioeconomic backgrounds, from high – to low-income families, are all heard in this study. More detailed information on the participants' ethnic, income or disability backgrounds are not available in the data and can therefore not be analysed or compared.

The interviews were conducted by one or two of the authors and started with the children being asked to individually write on post-it notes, firstly about things they like doing outside of school and the OLP, and secondly about things they like doing when they visit the OLP. In this paper, only data relating to the first question is included. After writing individually, the children were asked to tell the others about their notes. When everyone had talked about what they had written, further questions were asked. These questions aimed to deepen the discussions on how the children experienced their opportunities for meaningful leisure in their neighbourhood. The interviews lasted between 20 and 60 min and were transcribed.

## Analysis

The initial analysis involved a detailed examination of the transcribed interviews. These examinations resulted in the development of descriptive categories that captured the activities children reported: (a) being currently engaging in, and (b) that they aspired to engage in within their neighbourhood. The next phase of the analytical process entailed identifying recurring patterns within

**Table 1.** Participants.

Municipality	Setting	Group	Participants
A	Apeln	1	3 girls
		2	3 boys
	Asken	1	3 girls
		2	2 boys 1 girl
B	Betan	1	3 boys 2 girls
		2	2 boys 2 girls
	Basilika	1	4 boys
		2	5 girls
C	Cirkeln	1	1 boy and 4 girls
D	Dahlia	1	1 boy and 2 girls
		2	1 boy and 2 girls
	Dill	1	2 boys
		2	4 girls
	Dragon	1	3 boys

the children's remarks regarding their perceptions of the neighbourhood. This phase highlighted the children's articulated thoughts on their neighbourhood as a place for leisure. In the final phase, the analysis of current and desired activities was examined through the lens of descriptions of the neighbourhood as a place for leisure. The different phases showcased: (a) the places and activities in the neighbourhood that children engaged with, what factors influenced their comprehension of the availability of these, and (b) what developments of leisure facilities the children desired in their neighbourhood and what factors influenced those desires and needs.

Altogether, the process of analysis revealed several different normative factors influencing children's notions of the suitability of their neighbourhood as an arena for leisure activities. These normative factors are discussed in the concluding discussion.

### **Methodological considerations**

The analysis highlights methodological issues when interpreting children's understandings of their leisure activities. The analysis indicates that the children were influenced by perceptions of what children at the age of ten to twelve *are supposed* to be doing in their leisure time. Therefore, we are self-critical of how the questions were asked, but also attentive to what lies behind the children's answers. One example is shown below, in the analysis of why there was such a relatively low focus on the social aspects of children's leisure. Our interpretation is that we specifically asked about *what* they were *doing* in their leisure time. This question holds assumptive expectations about children's activities and doings and possibly affected their answers. However, when answering this question, the children were also making their own interpretation of what we as adult interviewers wanted to hear.

### **Children's leisure activities**

To understand children's reasoning about and experience of their neighbourhood supply of leisure activities, here we provide an overview of what the children in the interviews said they were doing in their leisure time. Overall, the children's activities can be categorised in three different ways: *engaging in physical activities and sports*, *engaging with family and friends*, and *engaging in media consumption*.

Firstly, when asked what they did in their leisure time, the children seemed to associate the question with organised activities, mainly sports and physical activities. However, in relation to sporting activities, there were two ways of engaging: either in organised practice sessions at clubs, or by gathering some friends and going to the local soccer field or basketball court.

Secondly, in addition to physical activity, the children talked in the interviews about how they spent time with friends and family in their free time, emphasising *who* they engaged in activities with. Some of the children described how they engaged in different activities with their family, for example, playing video games with a mother or doing gymnastics with a brother:

Sometimes I play MarioCart with my mum. (Apeln 2)

I do gymnastics, my brother used to teach me stuff [...] I do cheerleading or I hang out with friends and do cheerleading with them. (Dahlia 1)

The children's descriptions of what they do with friends also involved physical activity in different places in the neighbourhood. For example, playing with friends could include jumping on trampolines in someone's back garden or riding their bikes on the streets. Often the children used 'we' to highlight the social aspects of their activities, making them socially situated even if explicitly mentioning friends was rare.

Thirdly, the children also mentioned, in a confessional manner, that they engaged in social media and computer games.

Honestly, I look at my smartphone a lot or watch TV, like, I watch movies and stuff. (Cirkeln)

Media consumption, such as engaging with social media, watching YouTube clips, playing computer games, or watching TV was expressed as a set of activities that can be performed together with friends or family, but it was also highlighted as something you do by yourself after school, thus giving it a recreational purpose.

### Children's experiences of their neighbourhood as a place for leisure

Overall, the children were quite satisfied with their neighbourhood's supply of places to engage in activities, but they also expressed tensions and dissatisfaction with the available places for leisure. Further analysis deepens the understanding of the children's perceptions by focusing on deficits and potential improvements in the range of leisure activities in their neighbourhood. This analysis indicates a diversity in the children's experiences, indicating a difference in perceptions depending on the socioeconomical status of the neighbourhood children lives in.

The analysis of children's experiences of their neighbourhood as a place to spend leisure time is divided into two sections. Firstly, the children's descriptions of their neighbourhood's supply of activities are discussed, followed by a further analysis of how they emphasised proximity as a factor in the availability of activities. Secondly, we describe the children's suggestions for developments in neighbourhood leisure activities, with a deepened analysis of their expressed need for progression and challenges in places for leisure.

### Neighbourhood activity offerings

When the children talked about their neighbourhood's range of activities, they described their doings within different places in the surrounding area. The children first highlighted various places such as sports fields and playgrounds that they used to visit and to which they had close access from home. These places were often named: *the* soccer field, *the* hill. This naming practice illustrates how children actively make sense of and personalise their everyday environments. In the first quote below, playgrounds are given the names, pineapple park and airplane park (pseudonyms), associated with the shape of some equipment or a theme of the playground.

I have three playgrounds outside my house, or, like five, the pineapple park and the airplane park. (Dahlia 2)

What's good I think, is that the soccer field is very close to my house. We have a nice big soccer field that you always have time to visit. (Dill 1)

As in the examples above, the children mentioned year-round sites such as playgrounds or soccer fields. The interviews were conducted during wintertime (December – February). Repeatedly during the interviews, the children made a distinction between the summertime and wintertime activities available in the neighbourhood. Ice skating fields, beaches, or public pools were mentioned as activity offerings in the neighbourhood:

I would say that it's more difficult in the winter, 'cos in the summer I can go swimming and such things, without leaving the neighbourhood. (Dragon)

The types of places described by the children varied across the interviews and appeared to be contingent upon the specific spatial configuration of each neighbourhood. Features such as a lake, forest, or ice hockey rink were mentioned only when they were nearby, no matter the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood. Participants living in residential communities talked about their own or their friends' gardens as fun places to play. This was not mentioned in the interviews where the children lived in deprived neighbourhoods. As in Rasmussen and Smidt (2003) and Weir (2023), the neighbourhood connects private and public places; therefore, the gardens can be understood as threshold places for children in residential communities.

### *Importance of proximity to activities and friends*

When the children talked about neighbourhood leisure places, proximity was a recurring issue. This can be interpreted as a negotiation about what the neighbourhood *is*, and thus what they could access in their neighbourhood was also connected to their perceived ability to move away from home. They described a broad range of activities for them to engage in, but said that these were 'too far away', 'in the city', or gave other descriptions indicating place barriers to accessibility. Some children, mostly in residential communities, explained difficulties in getting a ride from their parents to different activities because their parents and their siblings also had full schedules of activities during the week. What is considered part of the neighbourhood leisure opportunities can therefore be interpreted as connected to what children can access, where they are allowed to go, or what they have the means to access on their own, which affects their leisure opportunities (cf. Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). The neighbourhood can thus be seen as a negotiated place whose outer limits depend upon each child's individual circumstances. This could also relate to the area's geographical specificities and contextual challenges. For example, a few children in more disadvantaged areas where there had been incidents of violence talked about how this affected their access to their neighbourhood.

Opportunities to spend leisure time in the neighbourhood were also influenced by social aspects, both hindering and enabling, such as the proximity of the children's friends. In some cases, the children talked about friends living too far away:

I'm jealous of Tilde and Olivia, because they live so close to my friends. We used to hang out, like, a big crowd, and half of them live close to each other. And they have a lot of stuff to do there. At my house, there's like nothing, only streets and houses. (Cirkeln)

This example highlights children's perspectives on social aspects of their leisure and shows that the availability of (desired) friends also influences how they perceive the leisure opportunities in their neighbourhood. The statement also emphasises how this leads to different children having different access to desired leisure activities, as this depends upon whom they want to be with.

### *Developments of the neighbourhood as a place for leisure*

In the interviews, the children expressed critiques and wishes for neighbourhood development. They were not only talking about what they could access but also about the quality of the neighbourhood's facilities, such as outside public sports fields:

There are things to do ... but they aren't like good enough so you can't do what you want. Like, you can't play basketball or soccer properly. (Dahlia 2)

The child in this example acknowledged that there were leisure opportunities at nearby sports fields in the neighbourhood, but said that they were in such bad shape that it was impossible to play soccer or basketball 'properly' due to tattered goals or basketball hoops. This point recurs in other interviews where the places and equipment available in the neighbourhood were not perceived as being maintained sufficiently well. Another critique was that there were holes and bumps in the soccer field and cracks in the tarmac on the basketball court.

The maintenance of places for children has varying consequences depending upon the neighbourhood's characteristics. The children at Basilika, situated in a small community a few miles outside a larger town, described another example of how the children experience themselves and their leisure places in a societal perspective. The demolition of the area's only playground.

Interviewer: Is there anything missing here that you would like to have?  
/ ... /

Child 1: Well, um, maybe a climbing frame.

Child 2: Yes.

Child 3: Yeah, that would be needed, because ours was torn down so they could build flats.

Interviewer: Ah, so there used to be a park, but they knocked it down?

/ ... /

Child 1: Yes. And the people who work there [at the municipality] said there would be a new one. But there never was! (Basilika 1)

This example shows how the authorities' demolition of a playground was affecting the children's trust in the municipality. We interpret the children's reference to a 'they' as meaning adult society, represented by the municipal workers who demolished the climbing frame. The community's priority of housing over spaces for children, and the broken promise of a new playground, risk having negative effects on children's perceived access to leisure places (cf. Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith 1998). This was particularly significant in this case because there were no alternatives within the neighbourhood, and other activity options were located far away. 'In the city' was a location the children at Basilika talked about more than children in other interviews, but similar descriptions of places outside the neighbourhood – often 'in town' – were also given by other children. However, such places outside the neighbourhood were less accessible because the children rarely had the means to get there on their own.

### *Importance of progression and challenges*

The children were also asked to make wishes for activity places or premises in their neighbourhoods. When discussing this, the children expressed a desire for playgrounds adapted to them – as children in middle childhood. They experienced themselves as situated in between the younger children's playgrounds with sandboxes and baby swings, and the teenagers' places to gather and socialise:

A higher climbing frame, or more stuff that's more challenging. And there could be a sign, that this is for children over 'this and that age', a recommendation for parents so they know their children can't handle it. (Dahlia 2)

In the quote, one child suggests a solution to the perceived problem that playgrounds are mainly designed for younger children. During the interview, the children argue that this is because younger children might get injured if they use the playground without adult supervision. The proposed solution is to put up warning signs for parents when playgrounds are designed for older children, in order to prevent younger children to get injured. This indicates a desire to have (some) of the available places adjusted to their age span and their perceived needs and interests. In other interviews, the children referred to being bored if the playgrounds were not challenging enough. This can be interpreted as meaning that the available leisure places were not offering desired possibilities, which in the above example means more challenging climbing frames and higher swings.

Overall, the deficits and potential improvements described by the children point to a rupture in their satisfaction with the range of leisure activities in their neighbourhood.

## **Discussion**

This paper set out to explore how children perceive their neighbourhood as a place for leisure, to advance the spatial perspectives on children's everyday lives. Overarching insights show that children's perceptions of what activities or places the neighbourhood is offering go beyond what activities there are. Our analysis of the perceived deficits and potential improvements in the range of amiable activities in their neighbourhoods reveals a sense of being overlooked by society, as expressed through the children's concerns about access to leisure opportunities. These findings reinforce and bring new perspectives to the work of Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith (1998) on 13-year-olds in England, despite our study being conducted in Scandinavia nearly three decades later. Thus, in times of digital, social leisure activities, the result of our study is strikingly analogue. The analysis reveals how children's perceptions of their neighbourhoods' range of leisure activities spans beyond the actual supply of leisure places. Access to these leisure places is affected by different

sets of normative perceptions of (a) availability for the specific age group, (b) availability and maintenance and (c) availability and proximity.

Firstly, the children in this study construe themselves as a distinct age group, between young children and teenagers. This shapes how they perceive places in their neighbourhoods, such as playgrounds. These places are characterised as places created for children, shaped by adults' good intentions and beliefs about what children need and what is beneficial for them (Rasmussen 2004). As a result, the children find playgrounds unchallenging and unsuitable, which can lead to feelings of exclusion from public spaces (cf. Christensen and Mikkelsen 2013). A deepened analysis of the 'doings of age' by ten-to-twelve-year-olds in their descriptions of their leisure is found in Lago and Hedrén (2025).

Secondly, children associate leisure with physical activity and sports, and they emphasize the importance of well-maintained places. The feeling of being overlooked by society is visible in the children's understandings of why leisure places for them are not taken care of, ignored, knocked down or remodelled. Like Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith (1998), this study shows how urban planning decisions can foster mistrust when children's needs are ignored. Given concerns about declining physical activity among children (Jonas 2025), society must prioritise the maintenance of children's outdoor leisure places.

Thirdly, children's sense of access to neighbourhood leisure activities is strongly influenced by how close these places feel to them. Children's views of proximity varied, indicating the differences in children's lived experiences. Proximity involves both physical distance and a sense of emotional or social access. Children may feel distant from places that are poorly maintained or not suited to their age group. The result of this study indicates a variation of experiences of proximity and availability for children living in different kinds of neighbourhoods. Parents and siblings play a key role in shaping children's access, regardless of neighbourhood. In residential communities in disadvantaged areas, children worry about access because they often rely on rides, which depend on how busy their parents or siblings are with their own activities. In more disadvantaged areas, safety concerns – especially after dark – limit children's freedom to visit leisure places. These differences in perceived access reflect broader inequalities in Swedish childhoods. Previous research has emphasised the significance of proximity to leisure opportunities (Chawla and Malone 2003; Rasmussen 2004), indicating this as a continuing concern for children of this age.

These different aspects of the sense of availability show the complexity of planning for children's leisure places in neighbourhoods. Simply building 'places for children' does not guarantee meaningful access; children may view such efforts as superficial if the places are poorly maintained or based on narrow assumptions about their interests.

Based on this, it is important to discuss what understandings of 'the child' are being employed when places for children are designed. Children noted that their neighbourhoods often included places for younger children, while places suited to their own interests were too far away or inaccessible – due to age restrictions or lack of resources. These places were therefore perceived as unavailable. Children's interpretations of leisure spaces vary. Whether a neighbourhood is seen as offering meaningful activities depends on factors such as age, interests, social status, and relationships.

Finally, this study offers new insights into the everyday lives of Swedish ten-to-twelve-year-olds and their everyday lives. It extends existing research on children and young teenagers' microgeographies, by highlighting the importance and hindrance of children's sense of availability and access to the range of activities offered by the community. The contribution of this paper lies in showing how the middle years shape children's microgeographies in ways that extend beyond the material environment. The study highlights how this age group interprets and navigates their neighbourhoods through a growing sense of what is possible, permitted and meaningful.

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