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FAIRPLAY 4 Children and Families in Vancouver's Inner-City Community

Summary Report

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INTRODUCTION

Play is critical to the development of children's social and emotional well-being. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrined children's right to play and highlighted its educational and societal benefits. Yet, there are growing concerns that children in Canada, as in other Westernized societies, are spending significant amounts of time indoors in structured activities and in front of screens and not enough time playing outdoors.

These concerns have been linked with increasing rates of childhood obesity, Type II diabetes, and fatty liver disease[1,2]. In response, public health policies and campaigns about play emphasize the importance of outdoors and 'risky play' for the health and wellbeing of all children and youth. Risky play has been defined as "thrilling and exciting play at height, speed, near dangerous elements (e.g., water, fire), with dangerous tools, rough and tumble play (e.g., play fighting), and where there is the potential for disappearing or getting lost".[3]

Current public health messaging about play has been critiqued for focusing primarily on play as a means to promote children's physical health, for being informed from an adult perspective, and for disregarding how children's play opportunities can be shaped by broader social and environmental factors that are largely beyond a family's individual control[4,5] . Among these factors are barriers such as transportation, equipment, and childcare costs, inequalities in neighborhood resourcing and access, and policy gaps.

'Fair Play 4 Families and Children in Vancouver's Inner City' was a community engagement project funded by the Vancouver Foundation that aimed to better understand how opportunities for equitable and meaningful play could be enhanced for families, children, and youth in the inner-city community that

[1] Alexander, S. Fusco, C. and Frohlich, K. L. (2015), 'You have to do 60 minutes of physical activity per day … I saw it on TV': Children's constructions of play in the context of Canadian public health discourse of playing for health. *Sociol Health Illn*, 37: 227-240.

[2] Benedict, M., & Zhang, X. (2017). Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: An expanded review. World *Journal of Hepatology*, 9(16): 715–732.

[3] Brussoni, M., Gibbons, R., Gray, C., Ishikawa, T., Sandseter, E. B. H., Bienenstock, A., … Tremblay, M. S. (2015). What is the relationship between risky outdoor play and health in children? A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12(6), 6423–6454.

[4] Alexander, S., Frohlich, K., Fusco, C. (2014). Playing for health? Revisiting health promotion to examine the emerging public health position on children's play, *Health Promotion International*, 29(1):155–164.

[5] Gerlach, A., Browne, A., & Suto, M. (2014). A critical reframing of play in relation to indigenous children in Canada. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 21(3), 243–258

includes the Downtown East Side (DTES) and Strathcona. Play was broadly conceptualized as encompassing everything from the type of play that occurs in family homes and playgrounds among young children, to activities provided through the various community organizations in the neighbourhood, to 'hanging out' activities that were described by youth participants.

This project was premised on the understanding that the perspectives of families, youth and community members with lived experiences of playing and seeking play opportunities in this community are central to informing socially responsive public and community planning policies and action. It is our hope that service providers, parents, teens, school administrators, and policymakers alike will find this report a helpful resource and, ultimately, that it will provide useful information to support Vancouver's inner-city community in developing strategies to enhance opportunities for child and family play.

Community Context

The study informing this report was conducted predominantly in the Strathcona community with a few participants joining from surrounding inner-city neighbourhoods. While this community has many strengths, it also has difficulties. Successive measurement of school readiness in Strathcona suggest that current approaches have been unable to improve outcomes for the poorest children in the City of Vancouver. The community itself is characterized by long term poverty and high unemployment, with the majority living below the poverty line in small living quarters. A large proportion of families live on income assistance, many youth do not complete secondary school, and there are a number of related social problems that include substance use, violence, child apprehension, family problems, and gang activities. Such a context makes it difficult for families to experience play and appreciate its importance.

As a result of neighbourhood-level poverty, spaces and opportunities for safe, accessible play outside the home are inadequate. Community participation is especially low among newcomers, Indigenous families, seniors, and children with special needs. Access to play opportunities are a critical tool for parents to organize and support each other in community and to ensure their children have safe opportunities to learn and grow.

Community Engagement

This community engagement project was undertaken in partnership with RayCam Cooperative Centre, the Aboriginal Life in Vancouver Enhancement Society (ALIVE), and the University of British Columbia, School of Nursing and was funded by the Vancouver Foundation. Researchers, Drs. Alison Gerlach and Emily Jenkins who have expertise in child and youth health equity and community engagement, led this project. These findings are based on 11 focus group interviews conducted by three health researchers with 45 participants (comprised of residents, and service users and providers from the inner-city community) between July 2016 and July 2017. Interviews took place in a variety

of community settings, including: local schools, community centres, and libraries.

Community Participants

Participants (see Table 1 below) included mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunties and uncles, youth, and service providers. Participants represented a diversity of racial backgrounds including Indigenous, White, and West Asian, and their ages ranged from 16 to 58. Service providers (see Table 2 below) who participated came from a diversity of vocational backgrounds such as child and youth work, various health professions, and community services and programming.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Community Residents and Service Users

Demographic Information		# of Participants (n=21)
Age	15-24	7
	25-34	4
	35-44	4
	45-54	4
	55-64	1
	Unknown	1
Gender	Female	18
	Male	2
	Unknown	1
Ethnicity	Indigenous	7
	White	3
	West Asian	8
	Multiracial	1
	Black	1
	Unknown	1
Resident or Service User	Resident	18
	Service User	2
	Unknown	1
Attending School	Yes	2
	No	18
	Unknown	1
For students (n=2): attending Public or Alternative school?	Public	0
	Alternative	2

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Community Service Providers

Demographic Information		# of Participants (n=24)
Employment	Early childhood and youth worker	7
	Health professional	3
	Police	1
	Community services/programming	5
	Educator/school administrator	1
	Municipal staff	1
	Other	3
Years in role	0-2	9
	3-5	5
	6+	7
	Unknown	3
Gender	Female	14
	Male	7
	Unknown	3
Ethnicity	Asian	4
	Indigenous	2
	White	13
	Other	2
	Unknown	3

KEY FINDINGS

In this report, we share key findings from our focus groups, using the words and stories shared with us by the community members we met. We highlight the strengths as well as opportunities to enhance play in the Vancouver inner-city community.

Community Context and the Realities of Families' Lives

The impact of broader social factors and contexts on play is not adequately recognized in the dominant public health campaigns in Canada. In contrast, participants' stories in 'Fair Play 4 Families' provide rich descriptions of how play was influenced by the community context and by the realities of families' everyday lives, including:

- having 'no extra money' or space for play
- understanding the complexities of families' lives
- recognizing that play spaces can be a real danger'
- searching for places where youth can 'loiter safely'

These factors are discussed in the following section.

Having 'No Extra Money' or Space for Play

Poverty surfaced as a key challenge facing children and families living in the study community. In relation to play, experiences of poverty were described as shaping the relationship that residents have with publicly available spaces. According to one of the youth worker participants:

> *In this neighbourhood, the public spaces are where a lot of people get their basic needs met for housing or using the public washroom or sleeping outdoors if they don't have a place to stay or they live in tiny SROs…So the pressure on the public space is immense and it means other user groups like children and youth might feel pushed out.*

Participants described how high rates of homelessness and precarious housing in their community meant that public spaces, including public parks and playgrounds, and school

playgrounds over the summer, are often used in ways that that they were not intended for – impacting opportunities for play in these spaces.

A downstream effect of living on a very limited income is that for many families in this community, organized play and recreation are luxuries they cannot afford or prioritize. As the following excerpt from an early childhood educator highlights, when families have to focus their energy on getting their basic needs met, particularly food and housing security for their family, play is not a priority:

… the priority in this community is often crisis and housing and where am I going to get my food so sometimes I think things like this get kind of pushed back because there's other things that are more priority for the community.

Families described prioritizing their money for 'rent and food' and 'having no extra money' for their children's participation in organized programming offered through Vancouver Parks and Recreation, for example. As one mother said:

I live on $1,000 a month for me and my son…..I have no extra money. But I found Hockey Heroes for children at risk. And that's an awesome program down at Britannia but it's only one day a week.

Having programs within walking distance was key for many families. In the following excerpt, a mother talks about struggling with the costs of public transportation to get to organized activities with her son:

There's a lot of good stuff that exists out there, it's just a matter of getting there, getting access to it…. And transportation, if you've got three kids it's so expensive to go on the bus it's like impossible….We don't get to do too much unless it's walking distance.

During meetings with service provider groups, poverty was recognized as one of the key issues that organizations in this community are trying to work around in order to provide meaningful programming with children and families. Service provider participants talked about innovative models of program delivery that can help to overcome this barrier. No-cost programming, for example, is an emerging model that is not widely adopted but is currently being explored by some community stakeholder groups.

Understanding the Complexities of Family Play

The findings bring to light how play is also influenced by multifaceted stressors that families' experience in their everyday lives. The following interview excerpt from an early childhood educator provides an important insight into the complexities of raising children in this community for families who are trying their best 'to steer themselves in a more positive direction':

A lot of the parents I work with are trying to steer themselves in a more positive direction so they're letting go of these friends, or these family

members, that maybe aren't into the greatest things. In order to do that they have to separate themselves…or be careful where they go and who they run into and see. So it's hard. What I hear a lot of families say is like "my supports are down here" but also a lot of their vices are down here.

This participant also shared her experiences of supporting parents who did not have 'a lot of opportunity to play' in their own childhoods:

A lot of parents especially in this community, too, didn't grow up with a lot of opportunity to play…. we're teaching that to our children in this community but we're also teaching the importance of play to the parents as well.

The findings also highlight how children's play experiences can be influenced by parental mental wellbeing and concerns about the safety of their community. In the following excerpt one mother talked about the challenges of finding appropriate play opportunities for her son who she described as 'having special needs':

So like finding just three places to take him to… on the weekends. Because my weekends are still, like he stays home and it's not fun, he doesn't have friends. It's just mom and him, right? So we kind of clash at times because he doesn't get enough stimulation outside…. my anxiety attacks stem either from him running straight into the streets or not being able to contain him.

And there's so much danger out like cars, and just don't talk to any strangers and you know, that type of thing.

Being isolated at home because of concerns about their children's safety in playing outside was also a theme in our discussions with a group of mothers who were newcomers to Canada and this community, from Syria:

(Translator) They feel there's a pressure on them because [their] kids wanna go out, [but] they don't feel it is safe. Back home, they knew neighbours, they all knew each other, they know who their kids are playing with, there's more trust and more safety.

Not being able to speak English was also identified, by both Canadian and newcomer mothers living in the same housing development, development, as a contributing to newcomer families' isolation and low participation in neighbourhood play and recreational opportunities. As one mother noted:

You're not going to create spaces for

communities to hang out if you don't have translators. You can't just throw them together and expect it all to work out. It's a huge barrier.

Similarly a mother who is newcomer from Syria said:

[Translator] when you don't know the language, we have a language phobia, we are kind of so scared to go out and talk to someone because we don't know what we're going to be talking about… I'd rather stay in my home…. we have nothing to do, no recreation for us and for kids.

Several parents also expressed how finding and navigating their way through the array of available play and recreational resources for their children was an additional stressor and barrier that often requires a certain level of literacy and computer 'know how'. As one mother stated:

Just going through the internet, there's so much, right? There's so many big words. I'm kind of illiterate so I don't even know how to use a computer. So that is my challenge. And to have someone work with me, a place like this gets so busy and there is not always anybody available to actually sit down with you and help you find ways of reaching out to those certain places where you'd like to go, you know?

A recurring theme from community members was the need to better coordinate programming and to make identifying available resources more accessible to people with varying degrees of access to services and supports, including the internet.

Recognizing that Play Spaces can be a 'Real Danger'

Parents, youth, and service providers repeatedly voiced their concerns about the safety risks of playing unsupervised, outdoors in their community. As one mother stated: *'You don't leave your kids unsupervised anywhere'*. The number one concern was lack of safety in public play spaces and neighbourhoods as a result of 'the accessibility of drugs in the neighbourhood, and children being harmed from drug paraphernalia, especially discarded syringes.

As one parent said:

… it was one of those tube slides, a bunch of needles were in there… that's why I don't bring my kids to the park too much.

As the following excerpt shows, newcomer families in this community shared similar concerns – keeping their children indoors because of 'drug users'.

(Translator) She was mentioning about the drug users around. She said that's another reason for us [to keep their children indoors] because… we see all the drug users at the different places. So that's kind of little unsafe for the kids.

There was also some evidence that parental concerns about keeping their children safe were interlinked with their experiences of being involved with and/or 'feeling very watched' by child welfare authorities. This may result in parents being reluctant to engage in community programs with their children or, as evident in the following excerpt from a mother, have other consequences:

There were needles in our front yard. So my husband taught our kids about needles – they're bad, don't ever touch them. And daycare took them for an outing and one of the other kids had a needle and my son was trying to tell him not to touch it. And, we actually got in trouble because our boys knew what needles were. And we had the Ministry over.

The findings show how finding needles in parks was expected and was having a negative impact on play and recreation opportunities for children and youth. As a youth worker noted:

It's a huge barrier for creating the out trips and safe spaces for youth to go and play. Had a beautiful day this week, where one of the [program] coaches wanted to go to a park to do some working out [with the youth], and I had to be realistic about the limitations – we needed a needle sweep and we don't have any needle boxes on site. It was a reality check for a lot of other members of the community. Where when they see other members of the community playing soccer in the field, they assume "oh there's no needles there and we can bring our younger, under 12 year old kids there to play" and that's not the case.

Another youth added:

The insanity of Crab Park today with the porta potties are just crammed full of needles and stuff.

School board policies that limit garbage bins in order to promote recycling was also noted as contributing towards the problem, as there was nowhere to discard of unsafe materials on school playgrounds. Another youth worker reported that the safety concerns go beyond 'just the needles', with many of the public spaces in the community being so poorly maintained, that children and youths' safety was at risk:

That washroom at [name of school], it's a nightmare as well. But it's not just the needles, it's the whole thing. Like we're sending our youth here, "we want this to be a safe place for you to play but it's not safe for you to step on the grass, go to the bathroom, wash your hands go get water" are you kidding?

Beyond concerns about the physical safety of play spaces, participants expressed concerns about safety

within the neighbourhood at-large. Parents and youth also voiced their concerns about other safety issues that limited their ability to play outdoors, including interactions with people who are intoxicated and viewed as unsafe as well as exposure to predators who may lure children into unsafe situations. Parents voiced concerns about 'men hanging around' their housing complex and school playgrounds. As one mother said:

When I leave the school I see people hanging around here and I worry that my son is coming out here at lunchtime and what are they going to do.

Another mother shared her fears about their home's proximity to the sex trade:

I'm not against prostitution but I don't want my girls to continue seeing women pulling dates in front of my house. Or being picked up on the corner right here.

Another mother added her concerns:

It's a 15 minute walk and you're at Main and Hastings. Some of the little girls [playing] outside, I'm like 'what are you doing? Where is your mom? Do you know where you live? Doesn't your mommy tell you about bad guys?

There was a sense from the group that the current measures to promote safety of residents in this community were inadequate and that additional interventions were warranted to create environments in which play could be supported.

Searching for Places Where Youth 'Can Loiter Safely'

Participants empathized about the shortage of local, accessible spaces for young people to 'interact safely'. As one parent participant said:

In terms of youth, sounds like they're hanging in the park because where else do you have for youth to go? I think there has to be a safe [hangout] place for youth.

Another parent added:

I've noticed here on our pro d-days and late at night, a lot of our grade 7s are just wandering around the community… and I ask them why don't you go to [name of program], and join some – "it's too far. It's too far."

Youth workers also discussed the potential benefits and challenges of having a space available for youth at night:

When we had the (name) warming centre…and they actually ended putting regular youth staff there because of how many youth were coming in… There was nowhere else to go – and when a few of them started coming, a lot of them started coming, and somewhere to be, healthy, safe place to be…. Having youth staff here as like a familiar face helped with safety of it.

Having 'a safe place for youth to go after hours' was associated with keeping youth away from 'the drug area'. However, a youth worker suggested the importance of taking a cautionary approach to these types of programs:

… programs, especially at that time, … can go sideways pretty easily and unfortunately that's what we're talking about…. having youth under the age of 19 hanging out at a space 24 hours a day when they could be missing, they could be choosing to go there instead of home, not going to school the next day, all these different variables that unfortunately gets swept under the rug when you're trying to provide … a safe space for youth.

Also, while a few youth described the need for lit, undercover areas in their neighbourhood, parents talked about the drawbacks of such an area in their community:

… we don't recommend any undercover area anywhere because that's what attracts…. drug people or homeless or people who want to party like youth that are partying…. because it rains a lot in Vancouver and they want a dry spot to drink their alcohol.

Repurposing Play Spaces

The link between the increasing numbers of people who are living on or near the street in this and surrounding communities and children's play has not been adequately recognized or addressed. The community members and families involved in this project expressed their empathy for people who need to take shelter in public playgrounds and parks because they were homeless. As one mother stated:

We're never going to live in utopia. So we're going to have to deal with homeless people coming in and sleeping on a park bench. But maybe we need to just say 'this belongs to our children until 10pm at night'.

Another mother added:

I am not worried about the homeless people in the park because there is nowhere else for them to go. But I'm worried about what they leave behind – because no one is doing the clean up.

Parents at a local school described how the covered area in their school playground was 'taken over' during the summer months and used as a shelter. There was also some discussion amongst parents about 'a bit of a vicious cycle' whereby parks and playgrounds that are poorly maintained and run down don't get used by families or children but are used 'for other types of things' which further detracts from parents wanting their children to play there.

Overall, the findings on how community factors and families' realities influence play outside of the immediate home environment provide important insights into the complex nature of family play and the challenges of creating play opportunities that are responsive and tailored for the realities of families' living in Vancouver's inner city. These findings also highlight how many of the factors that are influencing children and youth's access to play are beyond the control of individual parents or families. Moreover, the findings provide important insights into what 'risky play' really means for families, children and youth in this inner city neighbourhood.

Community & Program Strengths and Opportunities

While participants portrayed the challenges faced by many of the families in this inner city community, their stories were also full of examples of how community programs strengthened families and the community as a whole. The findings highlight community strengths and resources, including community programming that: (1) benefits all ages; (2) respects and supports youth's autonomy and agency; (3) brings families together; (4) thinks about play in the context of reconciliation, and (5) involves community agencies planning and working together. These are discussed in the following section.

Benefiting All Ages

Participants identified that integrating opportunities for youth mentorship in play and recreation activities was *'a really healthy process because it's beneficial on both sides'* – having a positive impact on the community, and the confidence and wellbeing of youth and younger children. A service provider involved in mentorship programs shared how their organization used mentorship models to enhance program delivery and build capacity among young people:

One thing we did, a few years ago now, is we would train older youth, like preteens, pretty young, how to support participation of younger kids in summer day camps. Kids with behavioural issues… they'd go out on these trips and they'd be paired up with their buddy; at the end of the day they would tell the parents how their kid did.

Participants also talked about the benefits of outdoor play spaces that are accessible to multi-age users. These spaces enhance play opportunities for families with children and youth of different age ranges, as one participant noted:

The parks that have a little bit of everything are the popular ones. Because the older kids like it and the smaller kids like it, you go on a hot day.

Bringing different generations together to benefit both youth and children was also evident in community programming involving Elders. One participant discussed an Elders cedar weaving program, and the importance of bringing children and youth from the surrounding school community to attend and observe the program – creating an opportunity for intergenerational learning:

We have a cedar-weaving program, it's an Elders arts mentorship program, that's through the arts and health department of the Parks Board…we have an elementary school, alternative schools and a high school here, so we reach out to them and the different workers that we know. To pull classes to come and see what the Elders are doing. The intergenerational thing is really important.

Celebrations for the Chinese New Year and Christmas were also given as examples of community events that brought together and benefited multiple generations.

Respecting and Supporting Youths' Autonomy and Agency

Participants talked about the various ways that programming for youth can be structured – some programs were more rigid than others. The programs with less structure were identified as being particularly accessible for young people in this community. For example, a drop-in boxing club and a skateboarding program which had few requirements for participation. As one youth worker stated:

East Side boxing club for the older youth - it's their passion they love coming…. There aren't really guidelines that you have to do A, B, or C or you're not participating. It's a very free drop-in style, like participate if you want or go do something else if you're not in for it.

Similarly, participants described the skateboarding program as easily accessible:

The city worker down there who's paid just to be there for four hours twice a week to teach kids how to skateboard, that kind of mentoring

and that type of programming and that kind of set up. Learn at your own pace, like there's someone here. But super great because it's so accessible like "oh why don't we just go to plaza between the set time and this time" someone's gonna teach me how to skateboard for the next month and a half.

Having youth involved in the design of public play and recreation spaces was also evident. As one youth noted:

Skate parks are huge. The ones underneath the viaduct do really well. It depends on if it's made properly. The one by the viaduct, they love it, everyone goes there. The one at Kensington, I've never ever seen anybody ever using that one…it's very advanced so there's not many people who use that one.

Also, as the following excerpt highlights, gender equity in relation to the design and use of play/recreation spaces was also raised by youth workers, as being important in the context of 'girls and girl-identified people':

We were talking about field access and recreation access through more sports, and other things, especially like, younger youth and preteen population, like just that drop off, pre-teen where girls or girl-identified people just aren't engaged in sports, and it drops off. So that's been a big focus… and how are we actively focusing on transgender, queer population or girls themselves. It's a huge issue.

Supporting youths' autonomy and agency in programming requires youth workers to adapt and innovate in engaging youth in their programs. Several participants identified the importance of programs being responsive to young peoples' needs and realities, including 'being tied to technology all the time'. One participant discussed the value of integrating technology in order to engage pre-teens in a scavenger hunt:

I don't think that stereotype of kids being tied to technology all the time, is false. We see that as the deterrent a lot even with our pre-teen camps. The trick is trying to incorporate it. There were cool scavenger hunts that you can get that are free-ish [and you can] build the tech in.

The findings highlight that engaging with young people involves respecting and supporting opportunities for them to be in-charge and have greater agency. As the following excerpt highlights, programs that are started by youth do not always translate well to becoming more organized:

Two or three years ago there were a lot of youth onsite here going to youth centre hanging out who were adamant they were never going to get into sports, they didn't like doing any recreational activities…. they had their own little club that they'd get together and like work on their dance moves, and then they'd have a night where they showed off their moves in the centre. But I think that was what was really interesting is their perception of what play ***is****…. and then unfortunately we burned it by saying, "hey would you like to start a dancing program" and they're like "no".*

Supporting youths' agency also required programs to be flexible and creative. One youth participant described how staff at a community centre helped her to pay for and acquire identification and repay the money by volunteering at the centre:

One of the barriers I had was I didn't have any ID, or any money to get ID or passport, and they (name of community centre) let me get it, they helped pay for it. She actually took me to go get it, and I'm working it off.

However, the crisis-driven nature of the community was identified as a challenge to engaging children and youth into the planning process. As this youth worker reflected:

The public image of that area is so crisis-driven that intervention and early intervention prevention pieces are hard to attract public support because everything is a perpetual crisis…. that makes it all the more harder for children and youth [to get] into the planning tables and have a voice there….I think there's a lot of other factors here that create pressures that are fairly unique.

Bringing Families Together

Participants described the benefits of having programs that provided childcare and offered parents time to participate in their own programs. However, parents also welcomed activities that involved the whole family including family nights and field trips and having events or activities over the weekend. Parents wanted to have more opportunities for families to participate in programs together, and more family designated spaces in community organizations.

Something we have done in the last couple years are family field trips which we had a budget to do in a year. We do them around season so spring break, field trips for kids and teens. We hope in the future to do more of that because those are really successful.

At (name of organization) we do a Saturday family group. They go out together to free community events throughout the city. Once they get there, they're like "oh my god, I've never been here in my life!" Like Lonsdale Quay, they'll just take the Sea Bus over there, and certain places in the community they go to the library, when they go together that kind of fear and that anxiety lowers a bit.

While participants recognized that many of the programs were geared towards women, there were concerns about including fathers, foster parents, and extended family in programming, and the positive implications this would have on families in the community in general:

There's lots of dads that want to be included in programs but maybe they're intimidated because it's all moms….If we supported dads more then, these dads would be able to step it up, be there for their families….So again focusing on the family not just mom and kids…

Thinking about Play in the Context of Reconciliation

The question of, if and how play has a role in the context of Indigenous families' experiences of discrimination and intergenerational traumas was raised by some of the participants. The conversations we

had with parents and service providers in this community suggested the need to incorporate principles of reconciliation and anti-discrimination into play.

We talk a lot about reconciliation - what that means on the ground - so using culture in play and including those kinds of activities in a positive way… making sure we're doing a good job of integrating those things with youth workers and families… I think that, this [play] is such a huge thing that could heal communities and heal the next generations of children, heal our parents who have come from families and upbringings that didn't have play. So I think this is a wonderful way to look at healing, like community healing.

In one focus group that had several participants who self-identified as having Indigenous ancestry, a mother talked about 'the immense stigma' she felt growing up and her embarrassment when her mom was carrying her drum. She went onto question how 'this current generation feels in terms of stigma regarding their culture' and the importance of connecting with Indigenous cultures through play. Parents wanted to have more Indigenous arts and crafts, teachings, dancing, drumming and ceremonies with their families. An early childhood educator also talked about the importance of Indigenous cultural programming and the positive response she was getting for these types of programs:

Having that cultural element I think is really important. And it's so popular, once you put that idea… There's going to be drumming. We're going to sing….we're going to learn songs, stories, or do beading or crafts… You get such a great turnout. Like people want it in the

community. And there's such a big need for it.

The importance of including, supporting, and funding Elders in programs was also raised as being key to their success.

There were also multiple conversations about the importance of having community events that celebrated different 'cultures' and that may be viewed as aligned with the idea of 'reconciliation' in Canada. For example, it was suggested that programs could host different 'ethnic pot lucks' as a way of building relationships across various ethno-cultural groups and fostering community cohesion.

Planning and Working Together

Focus group participants described the importance of elevating play opportunities by shifting the focus away from individual community members or organizations to working together as an entire community:

Having these neighbourhood meetings and talking about how we're not stigmatizing people, or demonizing people but actually working together and resourcing that and local people can have jobs around those things.

… if organizations can start kind of thinking beyond just their organization, especially down here I think we need to do that….to like be effective with our communities and not just to keep our clients contained to just our organization" (ECE worker)

One of things to stop – stop organizational silos and competing. There's so many different organizations there to help but they're not because they're competing with each other for resources, they're not communicating, there's duplications of services, or gaps in services because you don't know what else is out there.

In addition to breaking down barriers between organizations, the notion of viewing issues as interconnected was also relevant:

You can't do any of these things in isolation and anything that does harm is a problem. So for us as a community, it's like our people who are users are also parents or sisters or brothers and there's that sense of, I know we were talking about reducing stigma, but it's also more like supporting each other about how we're using spaces, and taking care of each other, and keeping eyes on each other is really important.

The findings on 'community planning: strengths and opportunities' provide a potential foundation for informing future community planning to support the health and wellbeing of families, children and youth and the community as a whole through enhanced opportunities for play in its broadest sense. Further recommendations arising from this project are the focus of the final section of this report.

CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings and further input from community members, we have identified **6 core recommendations** to guide future action related to play in Vancouver's inner-city community. These recommendations are interrelated and have been kept broad so that they can be taken up and acted upon by diverse groups of citizens as well as organizations and institutions serving the community.

- **Ensure community governance and ownership:** Community governance is critical for ensuring community leadership and decision-making in the planning process related to the use of public spaces where children and families gather and play and to address complex social issues (e.g., the trickle-down effects of the opioid and housing crises impacting Strathcona and surrounding inner-city communities). Engagement of children and families is key to supporting transformative change. Place-based design principles should inform the development of programs and services created in partnership with community to ensure that they serve the needs of the populations in which they are situated.

- **Create community coalitions:** Community programs must look beyond their own preferences in order to coordinate with other programs and institutions and engage in collaborative fundraising for place-based initiatives. This type of coalition will support the "knitting together" of resources across organizations and ensure that services meet the needs of the community. This collaboration will also support best use of limited resources, as organizations can work together to provide a comprehensive suite of initiatives to support play opportunities for children and families. These coalitions should be inclusive of local residents.

- **Protect and strengthen opportunities for play:** Recognizing the critical role of libraries, community centers and schools in reducing barriers to play and providing and safeguarding opportunities for play in inner city

communities, where these opportunities would not otherwise exist. These programs are critical to the health and wellbeing of children who are growing up in marginalized and vulnerable communities.

- **Address play inequities:** Resources should be developed using a poverty reduction lens to ensure free or low-cost services that are accessible to all. Programs and services that support play should be viewed as an investment into the current and future health of our communities. Place-based design principles should inform the development of programs and services created in partnership with community to ensure that they serve the needs of the populations in which they are situated.

- **Build on existing community initiatives:** Prioritize opportunities to build on and enhance existing community led initiatives that relate to community governance (e.g., Our Place and Youth Matters) and Coalitions (e.g., Moresports and Graduation Strategy). Explore play from the perspective of Reconciliation and community connection to bring children and families together.

- **Prioritize safety:** Address glaring safety concerns in local parks and playgrounds. Support intersectoral prioritization and action with community residents and stakeholders with City of Vancouver, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and others.