

Children's Views on Child-friendly Environments in Different Geographical, Cultural and Social Neighbourhoods

Maria Nordström

[Paper first received, March 2007; in final form, January 2009]

Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine how the dimensions in a theoretical framework for environmental child-friendliness developed by Horelli apply to responses about child-friendly environments from 12-year-old children living in geographically, culturally and socially different urban neighbourhoods. Children's written responses to the question of what they find to be a child-friendly city have been analysed according to these dimensions. The results show that three of the dimensions in particular apply to the children's responses: 'safety and security', 'urban and environmental qualities' and 'basic services'. However, other dimensions of that framework, containing more abstract phenomena, do not seem to apply to these children's environmental experiences. A child-friendly perspective on cities, with children's age in mind, seems to involve a local perspective on environment, a result that indicates a need for change in current city planning practice.

Background

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of Children, CRC, is the background to many recent child-environment studies. According to the CRC, not only shall concerns for children's welfare be given priority but children themselves shall also be given the opportunity to speak up and have their voices heard. This double demand by the CRC is often reflected in children's environment studies. They indicate an effort to

describe the importance of environment to children as well as attempts to create good environments for children (Clark 2004). Studies using the concept of child-friendly environments have usually been inspired by the concept of child-friendly cities, CFC. This concept

embodies a commitment to create better living conditions in cities for all children by upholding their basic human rights (Chatterjee 2005, p. 2).

Maria Nordström is in the Geo Science Centre, University of Stockholm, Stockholm 106 91, Sweden. Email: maria.nordstrom@humangeo.su.se.

In order to support this commitment in CFC projects in practice, a secretariat was established by UNICEF in Florence, called the United Nations Child-friendly City International Secretariat (Riggio, 2002).

The concept of child-friendly environments has been defined by Horelli as complex, multidimensional and multilevel. It refers to

settings and environmental structures that provide support for individual children and groups who take an interest in children's issues so that children can construct and implement their goals and projects (Horelli, 2007, p. 283).

It has been used to link environmental qualities appreciated by children to physical planning, reflecting Horelli's position that "environmental child-friendliness is a community product developed from local structures beyond the individual level" (Horelli, 1998, p. 225). Horelli's ambition is to relate children's experiences to issues of planning by making them part of the normative universe of planning. She writes that her theoretical framework "can be used as an analytical or even a political instrument, when the content of a municipal or regional plan is being negotiated" (Horelli, 2007, p. 272). Horelli started applying her framework in Finland, and she has since extended it to Italian contexts as well.

In our research on the consequences for children of intensified building and on children's uses of the outdoors in different urban neighbourhoods in Sweden, we have been addressing the question of how children communicate their place experiences (Cele, 2006) and what a child-friendly planning tool would be (Berglund and Nordin, 2005). To find out how children's environmental views could be situated in the context of planning, we applied the normative dimensions of the Horelli framework in a special study to three groups of children living in environments that are geographically, culturally and socially different. In particular, we connected our study to Horelli's work with

Italian colleagues in recent Finnish–Italian studies (Haikkola *et al.*, 2007). By calling our co-operation with the Finnish and Italian research groups 'the Northern–Southern Dialogues', we emphasised that we were on the look-out for culture as an important and distinguishing factor in children's attitudes to and evaluations and uses of environment (Björklid and Nordström, 2007, see also Chawla 2002).

Horelli's normative dimensions will be presented next, followed by some of the results of the child-friendly studies in Finland and Italy. After this, the results of the Swedish study will be presented and compared with those in the Finnish–Italian studies. All the studies are qualitative studies using children's verbal descriptions as the basis for categorising them according to the dimensions. After the presentation of the results of the Swedish study, some reflections will be offered on the meaning and use of the concept of child-friendly environments as seen from the perspective of Horelli's dimensions.

Horelli's Normative Dimensions for Environmental Child-friendliness

Ten normative dimensions apply to issues of importance in community and regional planning. The 'abstract definitions' listed in Table 1 describe areas of application for the 'normative dimensions'. In categorising children's environmental evaluations according to the 10 dimensions, a way is suggested for linking children's views to areas of planning.

The 10 dimensions were first developed and applied in a study with youth 13–18 years old, by Haikkola and Horelli in 2002 and later corroborated in another Finnish study by the same team in 2004. They were also applied in the Finnish–Italian studies described later. It is important to observe that, in these studies, the age of the children is lower than in the first study by Haikkola and Horelli. The children

Table 1. Theoretical framework describing 10 normative dimensions of a child-friendly environment with examples from an investigation of the child-friendly ideas of Finnish youths (from Horelli, 2007, p. 271)

<i>Normative dimensions</i>	<i>Abstract definitions</i>
1. Housing and dwelling	Flexible and secure housing alternatives Processes that transform the dwelling into a home
2. Basic services (health, education and transport)	Basic (public and private) services nearby that facilitate the everyday life of children
3. Participation	Opportunities to participate in planning and development
4. Safety and security	The guaranteeing of physical and psychological safety by the state and the municipalities: child welfare and the prevention of violence An environment which is tolerant and pluralistic
5. Family, kin, peers and community	Safe transport systems and public places in general Opportunities for close social relationships with family, kin and friends
6. Urban and environmental qualities	High standards in the physical elements of the local environment; provision of a variety of interesting opportunities and arenas for activities
7. Provision and distribution of resources; poverty reduction	The provision of financial resources and work opportunities to young people who have a role to play in the local economies
8. Ecology	The protection of nature and the application of the principles of sustainable development in the construction of the built environment and the society
9. Sense of belonging and continuity	A sense of cultural continuity and a sense of belonging to a certain place at a certain time
10. Good governance	Flexible local governance that takes into account young people's opinions in the decision-making; the provision of participatory structures, such as youth councils and various participatory projects

participating in the Finnish–Italian studies were 12 years old.

Comparing Child-friendliness in Helsinki and Rome

In Helsinki, the neighbourhood of Pihlajamäki was chosen for the study of environmental child-friendliness to be compared with the neighbourhood of Monte Mario in Rome (Haikkola *et al.*, 2007). Both neighbourhoods were built around the same time, in the 1960s and 1970s, and according to similar general planning ideals. The location

of the neighbourhoods in respect to the city centres is at a distance of approximately 10 kilometres. Monte Mario, however, with approximately 20 000 inhabitants, has twice the population of Pihlajamäki and a greater density. The density reflects differences in size as well as different city building traditions in sparsely populated Finland and densely populated Italy. A Finnish team did the research in Pihlajamäki and an Italian team worked in Monte Mario. Participating in the study were different groups of people, one of which was a group of 29 children. It is the results of that group, when asked

about what is a child-friendly city, that will be discussed here.

Asked to write down 10 things about an ideal child-friendly environment, the Finnish children mentioned the following qualities: “recreational services, public areas, the social environment and safety” (Haikkola *et al.*, 2007, p. 328), fitting the categories in Horelli’s framework of *safety and security* (dimension no. 4), *urban and environmental qualities* (no. 6) and *basic services* (no. 2). For the Italian children, the following qualities were important: “green areas and services” (Haikkola *et al.*, 2007, p. 332), fitting the categories of *urban and environmental qualities* (no. 6) and *basic services* (no. 2). This means that three dimensions closely reflected the views of both groups of 12-year-olds. Summing up the environmental physical qualities appreciated by the children, it was determined that “more mentions of negative characteristics were given in the Italian sample than in the Finnish one” (p. 340). Because of its “availability and easy access for the children to the positive elements of the environment”, the Finnish neighbourhood was found to be more child-friendly, providing “free spaces for children’s activities, different recreational opportunities, and a feeling of social safety” (p. 340).

Three Swedish Neighbourhoods, Three Different Kinds of Community

Our study consists of three groups of 12-year-old schoolchildren, with two groups living in the metropolitan area of Stockholm, the capital, and a third group in the countryside town of Gällivare. The choice of the different neighbourhoods was made for a combination of planning and social reasons. The planning reason was linked to the Horelli investigation, which focuses on planning models and environmental qualities. The social reason was added in this investigation as we have a noticeable presence of immigrants in Sweden,

making the cultural background of the inhabitants of neighbourhoods an important aspect, influencing use and evaluation of environment.

The suburb of Bredäng, with a population of about 9000 people, relates to Stockholm in a geographically similar way that Pihlajamäki relates to Helsinki and Monte Mario to Rome. Like these two suburbs, Bredäng was built according to a modernist plan in the 1960s. It has the similar spread-out pattern of buildings, easy access to nature and well-equipped sports fields, playgrounds and parks as well as a road system with separated traffic. As in Pihlajamäki and Monte Mario, the inhabitants of Bredäng are intimately connected to and dependent on the city centre for jobs, transport, services and shopping in a typically suburban manner. People in Bredäng can reach the centre of Stockholm by metro in 20 minutes. In contrast to Pihlajamäki, however, a majority of the people (60 per cent) living in Bredäng are recent immigrants. The parents in the Bredäng immigrant families were born in a country other than Sweden, mainly in Asia, and they immigrated to Sweden as adults. Their children, born in Sweden, are the first generation of Swedes in those families.

The Kristineberg neighbourhood, with a population of 6000 people and a small percentage of immigrants (18 per cent), is situated in the Kungsholmen area in the very centre of Stockholm. For many years, the area has been successively urbanised, but today it is changing rapidly, with the highest rate of intensified building in Sweden. In the change of attitudes since the late 1980s and early 1990s, urban living is becoming increasingly fashionable with young Swedish families who value close proximity to jobs, cultural and social institutions, shops and entertainment. Families with these values find Kristineberg an attractive neighbourhood.

The third neighbourhood is situated in Gällivare, a community located in the vast countryside of Lapland, at a distance of

more than 1000 kilometres to the north of Stockholm. The population in central Gällivare, the town, is approximately 10 000 people, which is a little more than that of the suburban neighbourhood and of the inner-city neighbourhood. The Gällivare population is homogeneous, dominated by ethnic Swedes, the total number of immigrants being less than 300 individuals. The community of Gällivare is intimately connected with mining industry. It is a place where work in mining or in mining-related businesses is at the centre of the lives of the inhabitants. Gällivare cannot offer its inhabitants a wide range of variety in jobs or leisure, which means that it has problems with keeping its young people. Its geographical situation close to great national parks makes it a place tourists travel through on their way to excursions into the wilderness. Most of the housing areas in the town of Gällivare were built during the 1960s, with only a few older and newer buildings. The spread-out building pattern embodying the planning ideals of that time reflects the spaciousness of the surrounding natural environment. The three neighbourhoods that these children live in differ clearly as regards density and access to outdoor places as well as the social situation of the children.

Twelve-year-old Children's Relating to Environment

Environmental psychology studies have found 12-year-olds generally to be physically active in their neighbourhoods, easily finding their way around on their own when given the opportunity to do so (see Spencer and Blades, 2006). That was the reason we chose this age for studying the effects of intensified building on children's mobility in urban neighbourhoods (Berglund and Nordin, 2005; Cele, 2006; Björklid, 2009). The world of 12-year-olds is very much a matter of what they experience with their senses. They often

communicate their experiences more easily through their behaviour than through verbal communication. Their answers are terse, with the children not verbally elaborating on or justifying their viewpoints at length. They use words as direct references to places or phenomena in the environment, identifying them, not giving a lot of explanatory information. Responses by 12-year-olds can be said to be context-bound in the way that what influences their answers are objects and experiences at hand, meaning that children of this age relate themselves to the temporary and physical situation in which they give their responses. One consequence is that children's answers about child-friendly cities will reflect their views on and impressions of their present environment. In comparison with teenagers and adults, who more easily can disregard their impressions of the situation, 12-year-old children cannot do so but instead make them part of their responses. To children, physical environment is connected to and part of social life, the two not being mentally and experientially separate (Nordström 1990). To understand responses by 12-year-olds, it is important to be familiar with the children and their environment. This is a familiarity that children of this age generally can count on from parents, teachers and other adults in their everyday surroundings.

Views on Child-friendly Environments

Teachers in a school in the inner-city neighbourhood, affected by intensified building, were contacted to participate in this study, as were teachers in schools in the two other neighbourhoods, unaffected by densification, for comparison. To facilitate comparisons with the Finnish–Italian studies, we chose to use the same phrasing about child-friendly environments in addressing the question to the 12-year-olds. Sheets of paper were handed out to the children by their teachers

Table 2. Number of participating 12-year-old schoolchildren from three geographically different areas in Sweden

	<i>The northern community</i>	<i>The suburban area</i>	<i>The inner-city area</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of 12-year-old schoolchildren	20	16	17	53

with this question printed on them: "What is a city like which is friendly to children? Please write down what you find to be a child-friendly city". The schoolchildren were then asked to write down their answers to the question. They could fill in the 10 lines drawn on the sheet below the question and continue with more, if they wanted to. The teachers were instructed not to give the children any suggestions about what to write, but only to say that the children should write down what came to mind. The teachers then collected the sheets. The total number of children participating was 53 (Table 2). The reason for choosing a broad question like this one is that it makes children come up with their own answer and stimulates spontaneous reaction, both of which give valuable information about how children understand the question. The question is both easy and difficult for the children to answer. It is easy because the children can decide themselves what to answer, realising that there is no right or wrong answer. It is difficult because the question is at the same time abstract and diffuse. To be able to give the question any meaning, it is natural for 12-year-old children to react 'concretely' and use 'clues' from the environment to produce a meaningful answer.

An in-depth study was conducted separately with 10 suburban children (Forsell, 2005). This study used the children's answers to the question about a city's child-friendliness as the starting-point for interviews with the children as well as for interviews with the children's parents, teachers and school staff about the child-friendly qualities of the suburban environment.

The responses from the children in the three neighbourhoods, analysed according to Horelli's dimensions, are shown in Table 3 by the number of responses in each dimension. Three dimensions account for the majority of the responses from the children: *basic services* (no. 2), *safety and security* (no. 4) and *urban and environmental qualities* (no. 6). The other dimensions do receive responses by the children but only a few, suggesting that these dimensions might be of little relevance to the children. The dimension of *basic services* stands out as the most important dimension for the children in the northern community, accounting for almost half of their responses. The dimension of *safety and security* is most important for the suburban children. The dimensions of *urban and environmental qualities* and of *basic services* are equally important for the inner-city children. The dimension of *safety and security*, in which the suburban children score high, receives almost no responses from the children in the northern community. It receives almost a quarter of the responses from the inner-city children. Finally, the dimension of *urban and environmental qualities* receives few scores from the suburban children, while it gets more than a quarter of the responses from the children in the northern community and almost a third of the responses from the inner-city children.

The most striking differences among the children are between the suburban children and the children in the northern community in the two dimensions of *safety and security* and *urban and environmental qualities*. In the dimension of *safety and security*, the suburban children score much higher than the children in the northern community, while

Table 3. Analysis of responses from the schoolchildren in the three different neighbourhoods (percentages are shown in parentheses)

<i>Normative dimensions</i>	<i>Children in the northern community</i> (<i>n</i> = 20)	<i>Suburban children</i> (<i>n</i> = 16)	<i>Inner-city children</i> (<i>n</i> = 17)
1. Housing and dwelling	–	4 (3)	2 (2)
2. Basic services (health, education and transport)	68 (45)	45 (31)	36 (32)
3. Participation	–	–	–
4. Safety and security	4 (3)	50 (34)	27 (24)
5. Family, kin, peers and community	4 (3)	7 (5)	3 (3)
6. Urban and environmental qualities	43 (29)	14 (10)	37 (32)
7. Provision and distribution of resources; poverty reduction	1 (1)	6 (4)	–
8. Ecology	10 (7)	3 (2)	2 (2)
9. Sense of belonging and continuity	12 (8)	7 (5)	3 (3)
10. Good governance	7 (4)	11 (6)	2 (2)
Total number of responses	149 (100)	147 (100)	112 (100)

in the dimension of *urban and environmental qualities*, the children in the northern community score higher than the suburban children. The inner-city children score more like the suburban children in the dimension of *safety and security*, while they score more like the children in the northern community in the dimensions of *urban and environmental qualities* and *basic services*.

Although this is empirically a small study, making it difficult to generalise the results, the different ways that the groups of children answer do indicate that the different neighbourhoods they live in influence their answers, as do their cultural backgrounds. There appear to be common reactions by the children in the metropolitan area, showing that the dimension of *safety and security* is more important to them than to the children in the northern community, which indicates possible effects of social development in the different geographical environments. The notion that shared cultural background also makes a difference is indicated by the fact that the dimension of *urban and environmental qualities* is more important to the children with a Swedish upbringing and background than to the children of immigrant families.

The two dimensions *safety and security* and *urban and environmental qualities* will now be analysed in more detail along with the dimension of *basic services*, as these dimensions appear to constitute the core meaning of the concept of child-friendly cities to the children in this investigation.

“Safety and Security”

Safety and security matter to the children in this study in both a physical and social sense. This dimension covers conditions threatening children’s safety and security through violence and danger. Examples are given from traffic and from outdoor public places as well as from social situations at school, in the neighbourhood and at home. This is an important category to the inner-city children mainly because of traffic. Four of the nine inner-city schoolboys score in this category as do seven of the eight schoolgirls. Typical responses are: “There should not be so many cars”, “Lower speed”, “More crossings”. In addition, four of these schoolgirls mention that: “One should not have to be afraid that something will happen”, “More control of narcotics”, “Everyone must respect others”.

Only three responses from the children in the northern community are scored in this category, one given by a boy and two by girls, one about being bullied and the two others about traffic.

Many of the views expressed by the suburban children and scored in this dimension concern the treatment of children by parents and by other children. The relationships between children and parents are expressed in responses like the following: "Children should not have to listen to their parents quarrelling", "Parents should not destroy the dreams of their children", "Parents should not hurt or hit their children". Relationships to other children are expressed in responses like: "Not everybody has to like everybody else but they should not say bad things about them", "Children should not fight", "Children should have good friends". The suburban children further write that there should be no accidents, no narcotics, no murderers, robbers or weapons. Comparing the different responses from the three groups of children in this dimension, it is clear that the question of safety occupies the minds of the suburban children in difficult ways. Giving a strong emphasis to safety and security, these children indicate that they themselves might not see their environment as safe. This assumption was supported by the in-depth interview study by Forsell (2005). That study made it clear that being an immigrant child poses serious difficulties when the child lacks the support of her parents to help her handle impressions and values in Swedish society that conflict with those in her original culture, the one the family previously belonged to and sometimes still adheres to. Some children seemed to live two different kinds of lives—one at home according to norms of the 'old' culture and another in their neighbourhood and at school. It was also clear in that study that many of the immigrant children had to rely on themselves in handling difficult social situations.

"Urban and Environmental Qualities"

In this category, both positive and negative responses about the physical environment were expressed. Positive responses expressed desires for more parks to play in, for swimming halls and more grass. Some specific responses from the schoolchildren are scored in this category, like "A dirt strip for bikes", "More grass in the schoolyard", "Better swings" and more general responses like "You can walk", "Better nature (no litter)". This dimension reflects the interest expressed by the schoolchildren in nature and in being outdoors to play and to be together with other children. Some children stress the importance of the environment being well-cared-for and clean. Negative responses express concerns about physical decay like "People throw things in the street, which they should not do", "People are littering the environment", "Less noise". This is a dimension with few responses from the suburban children, whereas it appears to be about equally important to the children of the northern community and those of the inner city. The children in the northern community often express their environmental interests in a strikingly pleasurable tone like "Run, swim and have fun", reflecting a positive and relaxed relationship with the outdoors.

"Basic Services"

The responses scored in this category reflect the infrastructure that the 12-year-old children wish for themselves and illustrate their different social, economic and cultural situations. All the children score responses in this dimension. The most responses are given by the children in the northern community followed by the inner-city children and then by the suburban children. Many of the responses from the children in the northern community concern their school. School is the public environment that concerns and engages many of these children. School is seldom or never mentioned by the other children

The children in the northern community put forth several suggestions for improvements at school. Their wishes for the school concern all sorts of things from better and more fun schoolbooks to better chairs, more late mornings, more excursions with teachers and better food. They also write that it should be quiet in the classroom while at the same time suggesting that they should be allowed to play cards during lessons. Some responses also concern the whole community, expressing wishes for more shops and places for entertainment. Their community can be said to be characterised by geographical isolation. This isolation is perhaps one reason why the children ask for resources that are not available but which they know about from visits to other, more prosperous and centrally located towns in the country. The way that these children talk about common issues suggests that the place where they live is a place of identity for them and that the term ‘community’ covers the two senses of that word—one the geographically limited administrative body called ‘Gällivare’ and the other being the sense of belonging together with the others living at that place, ‘the meaning of being a person from Gällivare’.

The responses from the inner-city schoolchildren in Stockholm express wishes for themselves, like better parks to play in, more playing fields, grass and sports halls, but also more shops, entertainment facilities of all sorts, libraries, computers, books, cinemas and restaurants.

The suburban schoolchildren are concerned with general, almost ‘global’, wishes like: having “schools in every country so that we can learn how to talk to each other”, supplying “medicine for every sickness” and “fruit so that you can live a good life”. When these schoolchildren write that “There should be more jobs”, “All doctor’s visits should be free of charge”, “Children should eat healthy food”, their answers appear to reflect an adult-like concern about everyday life.

Different Responses, Different Neighbourhoods, Different Lives

Both the Finnish–Italian and the Swedish studies are small qualitative studies, making it important to interpret the findings with caution. There is an imbalance in the number of children participating, with almost three times as many participants in the Swedish study as in the Finnish–Italian studies, which complicates comparisons. The results confirm the importance of the environment to children and show environment to be socially and physically intertwined for children in the different groups in different ways. As stated in the Finnish–Italian study, the qualities that stand out as being important to children refer to experiences in their neighbourhoods, emphasising “*proximity* as a central issue in children’s lives” (Haikkola *et al.*, 2007, p. 333, emphasis added). For the children in all the studies, environmental qualities refer to their everyday local neighbourhoods. To a large extent, their views reflect the physical character of those neighbourhoods. It is in their neighbourhoods that 12-year-olds spend most of their time so it is what they experience here that they know something about and that they evaluate the importance of as well as express wishes for improvements in.

Two kinds of results will be discussed: results pertaining to environmental qualities as measured by the dimensions of the Horelli framework; and some observations of cultural differences. Results pertaining to environmental qualities show that the Finnish–Italian children scored most of their responses in the same dimensions as the Swedish children—i.e. *safety and security* (no. 4), *urban and environmental qualities* (no. 6) and *basic services* (no. 2). The Finnish–Italian and Swedish studies make it clear that the social situation for the children, their family situations and their cultural background have a fundamental influence on what they perceive and experience. The social problems

encountered by the Finnish and Swedish inner-city children are of a different nature from the problems of the Stockholm suburban children. People behaving strangely in the Finnish shopping centre, mentioned in the Haikkola *et al.* study, or unfamiliar people in the streets of the inner-city neighbourhood in Stockholm, are all at a distance from the safety at home for these children, while for some suburban children there is no safety at home. The analysis of the interviews with the suburban children, using the environmental psychology concepts of place identity and place attachment to interpret the results of that study, confirms that poor place identity experiences for children make the physical environment very much less of a resource. To children in stable families, on the other hand, their physical environment provides an opportunity to try out activities in their slowly evolving attempts at emotional and social independence. This means that safety has a fundamental value for children and that only when that has been satisfied does physical environment play an emotionally important role. This interpretation of the results is supported by the findings by Migliorini and Cardinali (2008) in their study of children's sense of safety and well-being in the neighbourhood. They conclude that a child's

personal sense of safety seems not related to structural elements of neighbourhood and that the influence is probably indirect (Migliorini and Cardinali, 2008).

In our dialogues with the researchers in the Finnish–Italian study, we were looking for environmental qualities distinguishing 'Northern' from 'Southern' environmental values in children's responses to the question of a child-friendly city. In the Finnish–Italian studies, difference between the Finnish and Italian children referred to access to and appreciation of outdoor places. The outdoors presumably plays a prominent and different role for the children in Pihlajamäki compared

with the Monte Mario children. Although both neighbourhoods were planned according to the same city planning ideal of houses in greenery, 'greenery' was much more in abundance in Pihlajamäki. The Finnish building tradition of a spread-out building pattern suggests an opportunity for Finnish children to relate in a more individual way to nature than the Italian children can with their much more crowded outdoors. While nature was considered a quality of inherent value to the Finnish children in the Finnish–Italian studies, environment seems to be greatly appreciated by the Italian children as a meeting-place with friends, stressing a social perspective that does not seem as pronounced with the Finnish children.

The 'Northern' attitude, with its positive value of environment as nature, is clear in the responses from the Swedish children, particularly those in the northern community, to whom nature appears to possess a quality of its own and be part of their sense of belonging to where they live. This was shown in two ways: some children mention names of neighbourhood places that they like and seem to relate to in a personal way to; some children express concern about and commitment to nature, writing that all local people must take care of 'our' nature. The suburban children, with their immigrant background, do not mention and do not stress qualities of their physical neighbourhood as being important, but are occupied with people living in their neighbourhood, in a way that the two other groups of children are not. The inner-city children do mention urban and environmental physical qualities, but not in the positive manner that the children of the northern community do. To some of the inner-city children, 'strangers' pose a problem. In the northern community, there are few strangers, while in the public environment of the inner city, in the centre of Stockholm, there are many. Another difference was related to access to the outdoors. To children in the

northern community, access is easy, without complications and there are vast spaces for use. To inner-city children, access is difficult and only a few small places are theirs to use on their own, often involving special permission from and depending on arrangements made by their parents.

The Finnish–Italian–Swedish ‘Northern–Southern Dialogues’ started because we saw them as a means to understanding the consequences for children of the rapid intensification of building now taking place in Stockholm. We can now ask ourselves whether the inner-city children’s environmental situation will soon resemble that in Monte Mario and whether we find that to be for the good of future children in that neighbourhood. Can children’s environmental responses tell us something interesting about the general urban development in Sweden today? Children’s environmental evaluations can help us to learn not only about children’s environmental relationships, but also about our own environmental situation and the development of our societies. Children’s views and experiences can help us to understand and make us better informed about the specific implications, at both the neighbourhood and everyday levels, of the changes that we initiate through major infrastructure decisions, the tangible consequences of which we often do not know and cannot imagine (O’Brien *et al.*, 2000; Christensen, 2003; Agervig Carstensen, 2005; Cele, 2006).

Discussion

Two difficulties have become clear in this study in categorising children’s responses to the normative dimensions—one is the general problem of linking children’s daily experiences with planning issues; the other is how to categorise responses from children expressing trouble and distress. These difficulties imply a risk that full justice is not being done to the children’s responses. Both have to do with the fact that because of their age,

12-year-old children speak as much about the environment where they live as about environments that they would like to have. In their responses, the children are strongly influenced by their present experiences when expressing their wishes, making their contextual situations stand out. The dimension of *safety and security* in particular seems to speak of the situation for the children.

In Horelli’s theoretical framework, the idea of ‘community’ is central and her ‘normative’ engagement is for children to be seen as being part of and playing a role in the community, sharing common concerns about society with adults. In the responses from the children in this investigation, the children do not mention having taken part in any participatory planning activities. However, responses from the children in the northern community seem to reflect a sense of belonging with others in a group which cannot be found in the two other groups of children and which may have to do with the children’s feeling for and identification with their community. One of the boys, speaking up for children, writes that children have the right to have their voices heard at the pupils’ council at school and that teachers should find out what children think. This boy admonishes everyone—children *and* adults—to take care of nature by stopping their littering and starting to clean up. Getting the idea to formulate such an admonition seems to presuppose an attitude that there will be someone to listen to it, someone who perhaps is used to listening and caring about admonitions from children. As mentioned earlier, school is a socially important world for these children, whereas school is hardly mentioned at all by the children in the two other groups. School and school activities seem to express a sense of solidarity in the children. The sense of solidarity that the responses from these schoolchildren convey may be a reflection of an appreciation by the adults in the community both of their children and of the schools. Children seem to be positively

valued by adult society there. While the investigation was taking place, one of the schools was celebrating its 25th anniversary, which received coverage in the local newspaper. In an article with a big photo of children playing in the schoolground, readers were told that, to celebrate the anniversary, the community politicians and the school administration had decided to buy more playground equipment for the children at that school. The investment in new playground equipment is an expression of the engagement by the adult community in their children, supporting the claim by Horelli that “environmental child-friendliness is a community product” (Horelli, 1998, p. 225).

The engagement by the suburban children in children’s issues is different. These children express solidarity with children everywhere. No adults are included in a positive way in the responses from the suburban children and there are no expressions of a sense of belonging anywhere. The inner-city children mention other children, friends and playmates individually, possibly reflecting the reality of a child living in a big city with many people and opportunities to choose from, but also living rather individualistic lives, centred on the family but not on school or the community.

The different responses from the three groups of children make it clear that ‘community’ in the sense of ‘belonging together’ is not a meaningful concept to the suburban and inner-city children, but it may be so to the children of the northern community. The difference between the three groups of children highlights the importance of relationships between adults and children both at an individual level—parent–child—as well as at a community level—children–teachers, planners and politicians.

It might be because they identify themselves with a group and because they feel attachment to the place where they live that safety and security is not a problem to the children of the northern community. The observation that safety and security *are* a problem for the suburban children may be due to a lack of

basic—emotional and social—security. For 12-year-old children who lack good parental relations, this lack is a critical problem. The *safety and security* dimension therefore can be said to reflect an emotional quality, of prime psychological importance for children’s well-being. The importance of the parent–child relationship, construed from the psychological relationship between the child and her environment, is reflected in how free the child feels to explore the environment on her own. For children to have an environment to explore, the environment must be available by the community. This is where community becomes important. Child-friendly environments therefore reflect the relationships between children and parents as well as the concern about children in the community where they live.

In her discussion of the Child-friendly Cities initiative, Chatterjee states that there is no direct link between the place concepts of city planners and those of children (Chatterjee, 2005, 2006). Children’s place concepts are different from those of adults and from those of physical planners and policy-makers, she notes. Therefore the ‘double demand’ referred to in the introduction of this paper, which is common in children’s environment studies with a CRC perspective, may be too taxing and difficult, even impossible, to meet in environmental studies with children. It is one thing to ask children for their environmental experiences, as emphasised by Cele

Children are capable of expressing their experiences and views ... It is quite another—and much more complicated thing ... to create a child-friendly society or environment (Cele, 2006, p. 213).

As formulated by Björklid

in the final analysis it is the adults who, based on their adult knowledge, experience and viewpoint, must make decisions and take responsibility for those decisions (Björklid, 2009).

Physical environment, embodied in children's place concept, is closely connected with their physical activities and immediate environment, as stressed earlier. City-wide strategies, according to Chatterjee, should be aimed at creating a

diverse range of physical and social settings and ensuring safe access to those settings. These settings should be geographically dispersed, ranging from the immediate environment of the child, to neighbourhood and citywide locations (Chatterjee, 2005, p. 19).

As a result, children will be given opportunities through their activities to take possession of their city at a pace they choose, to become knowledgeable about it according to their mental, social and emotional resources and thereby to feel at home in the city. This too is in accordance with what Horelli calls "child-friendly structures", which she describes as

a network of places with meaningful activities where young and old can experience a sense of belonging whether individually or collectively (Horelli, 1998, p. 225).

For such activities, Thwaites and Simkins have recently developed an interesting planning principle and a tool from a city planning perspective (Thwaites and Simkins, 2007). It has also been the ambition of the Swedish National Road Administration to develop traffic systems in cities for children's independent safe transport on foot or by bike to school (Gummesson, 2007).

Horelli and her colleagues in the Finnish-Italian studies remark that one dimension did not seem relevant to the experiences of the children in these studies, that of *participation*. In their first study, Haikkola and Horelli, working with teenagers 13-18 years of age, found this dimension to be significant. The explanation for the lack of importance of this dimension in the Finnish-Italian and Swedish studies may be that the children in these studies are younger, highlighting the importance

of age. Participation, Horelli says, refers to "opportunities to participate in planning and development", something which is greatly appreciated by teenagers, because they understand societal processes and know how to play a role in those processes. This is an important developmental feat. This feat means that teenagers are not as emotionally dependent on adults as children are, but that they can relate emotionally in a more independent way with adults. It is possible for teenagers to play a role *vis-à-vis* adults because they realise emotionally and intellectually that they cannot take it for granted that adults automatically will know and safeguard their interests. Making teenagers participate in planning is thus not only a question of democratic ambitions for young people, but also a recognition of their developmental potentials (see Görlitz *et al.*, 1998). However, once they are old enough to want to and be able to engage in participatory structures, young people generally have lost the direct approach to environment that is typical of children.

Providing opportunities for children to have a direct approach to their environment can be considered to be at the core of the concept of child-friendly environments. It is the understanding of the importance of this direct approach by children to their environment that has made Freeman (2006) emphasise the necessity of 'a shift in the focal point of planning and decision-making' to a local perspective. Such new planning would

involve and build on the understanding generated by those who have the most intimate knowledge of the area, and it will engage those who are most affected by the development and decisions. Benefits of a more inclusive system of planning accrue at three points: for children, for society and for the professionals involved (Freeman, 2006, p. 83).

Woolcock and Steele similarly stress the importance of the local perspective when they propose

local councils to develop child friendly community indicators and implementation documentation that enables easy use at a local council level (Woolcock and Steele, 2008, p. 40).

A child-friendly perspective on cities, then, when taken seriously, involves changes in city planning practices. Colleagues of Freeman note that children's

experiences *extend into* arenas such as transport, housing, shopping and the interactions between different urban domains. It is essential that planners understand the variety of children's experiences and the implications of planning decisions in each (Gleeson *et al.*, 2006, p. 153, emphasis added).

By establishing her theoretical framework with its normative dimensions, Horelli has suggested one step towards such an extension.

Acknowledgements

The project entitled 'Children and Urban Places—Access, Use, Influence' and running from 2002 to 2006, was funded by the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning (Formas; see www.formas.se). This multidisciplinary research project was directed by M. Nordström, U. Berglund, P. Björklid, K. Nordin and S. Cele. The author would like to thank Professor Pia Björklid, Associate Professor Liisa Horelli and Dr Urban Nordin for their comments.

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