

# Playbourhood

By Preston Pouteaux

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As a young eight year old in Regina, Saskatchewan, my best friend and I came up with a plan: we were going to catch our very own pet gopher. We had visions of triumphantly bursting into the house hailed as heroes by our delighted mothers for bringing one home. We spent hours in the big field beside our neighbourhood designing traps for our new little pet. We got close, but in the end my friend was unceremoniously bit on the shin by a gopher. Gophers, we decided, were not good pets. That was about the closest we came to having one, and our mothers were probably fine with that.

Neighbourhoods are the built and natural environment where we live, work, learn, worship, and play. We each contribute to creating our spaces and each person in your neighbourhood makes a valuable contribution, even kids. I believe that one of the best measures of a healthy neighbourhood is the extent to which children can play freely with each other throughout their neighbourhood. Exploring, happy, playing kids set the tone for our neighbourhoods, infusing vibrancy and a sense of belonging. If the tree-climbers, sidewalk-chalkers, sand-castle-builders, and even the gopher-catchers are told to stay inside, they risk becoming passive observers of the neighbourhood around them. Eventually we all lose the whimsical connectivity that children bring.

One of my neighbours recently who told me a story about their time in Italy. They were astonished by how older people and children socialized, lingered, worked and played so openly and freely together in their neighbourhoods. When she returned to Canada she saw the stark contrast. Except for maybe Halloween when families pour out onto the streets for a little fun together, we are often tourists or bystanders in our own neighbourhoods, passing through or standing aside without really allowing our lives to be woven into the fabric of the neighbourhood around us. Yet when children see themselves as valuable contributors to their neighbourhood, they learn to love it, play safely, and know that they are being watched over by caring neighbours.

The idea of allowing our neighbourhoods to become 'playbourhoods' is a helpful way of seeing our communities as vibrant places for everyone to thrive. In an era where loneliness, low physical activity, and too much 'screen time' are problems in many families, keeping children cloistered may create some short-term sense of safety, but may be dangerous for their health and wellbeing in the long run. To this day, my childhood friend

probably can point to the place on his leg where the gopher took a chomp, but the good times we had running and playing through our neighbourhood created healthy enthusiasm and friendship - it was well worth the scraped knees and gopher wounds.

By slowing down and keeping our eyes on kids running along, or across, our residential streets, we're saying that we value children above our own hurried agendas. By celebrating that kids play in our parks, rather than wishing they would stay in their own back yards, we are saying that kids are vital and important to our community. What small step would help your neighbourhood become a playbourhood?

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