

Active and Connected Communities: Evidence Briefing

This briefing paper supports the 'Active and connected communities' section of the [Early Years Mental Health Improvement Framework](#) which has been developed by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. It outlines available evidence of the positive impact that active and connected communities can have on babies, young children, and their families. This includes impacting their learning and development, mental health, and social relationships and connections.

1. Introduction

Evidence shows that equal access to greener surroundings, as well as time spent within green spaces offer children and their families numerous mental, physical, and social developmental benefits. The provision of safe, good-quality green spaces and recreational facilities is essential for increasing opportunities for play, physical activity, learning and engaging with nature.

The availability of these green spaces in turn supports the development of resilience and enables social friendships and connections to grow, both for children and their parents. Having a strong, supportive social network is important for maintaining mental health and wellbeing, and built environment features can facilitate or reduce opportunities for social activity.

Within this context, evidence suggests that action should be taken to create green spaces and improve existing spaces. Places where children and their families naturally congregate should be prioritised within this, such as around schools, play parks or early learning and childcare settings.

The specific ways in which active and connected communities can impact babies, young children, and their families are explored in Section 2 below.

2. Impact on babies, young children, and their families

Active communities

- The importance of greenspaces (such as parks, gardens, and areas of vegetation which offer space for recreational activities) for mental health and wellbeing is well-established. This includes providing an important resource for social activity, coping with the stresses of modern life, and increasing levels of physical activity.¹
- Higher exposure to greenspaces during pregnancy and early childhood have important developmental benefits. An increase in green spaces during pregnancy has been shown to be associated with increased birth weight and a decreased risk for low birth weight.² Higher exposure to green spaces during childhood was also associated with increased levels of physical activity and a lower risk of obesity and neurodevelopmental issues, such as inattentiveness.²

- The provision of good quality greenspace in areas of socioeconomic deprivation may contribute towards a reduction in health inequalities and result in increased levels of physical activity.¹
- Well-maintained, attractive and safe-feeling public spaces and routes are reported to enable social activity and can encourage a sense of community, which brings with it important benefits to mental health and wellbeing.¹ Evidence has indicated that it is important to develop, manage and protect the surroundings in which people live to foster positive social interaction and to avoid or minimise the development of distrust and fear within communities.³
- In contrast, features such as litter, graffiti and broken bottles have been reported to indicate a risk of danger, which creates barriers to access and use.⁴ Play areas that are vandalised or attract groups drinking alcohol have been reported to prevent children from playing outside.^{5,6}

Connected communities impact

- The extent of social support available to parents, for example via regular attendance at social support groups, and the ability to draw on support at short notice, are more common among children with fewer negative outcomes.⁷
- Evidence shows that neighbourhoods provide an important source of resilience for families. Positive parental views of the 'child friendliness' of a neighbourhood (e.g. a good place to bring up children, whether people can be trusted with children) are associated with fewer negative outcomes.⁸ Furthermore, levels of mental health and wellbeing have been associated with indicators of community cohesion (such as feelings of safety and feeling part of a community).^{9,10}
- In contrast, social isolation has been found to adversely affect people's health, regardless of their social background. A spectrum of health problems have been found to be associated with loneliness, including mental health problems, sleep deprivation, and an increase in health-damaging behaviours, such as unsafe alcohol consumption.¹¹
- A review of the evidence suggested that creating opportunities for parents to develop their social networks ultimately benefit their children, and that this may be particularly important in the context of young children, including those pre-school and school-aged.¹²
- Evidence also suggests that more socially cohesive communities can, through effective local action, safeguard services and amenities (e.g. those that might be threatened from budget cuts).¹³ It has also been observed that in more cohesive communities it is easier for public services to develop a dialogue with local people and meet local needs.¹⁴

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