Children & Cities:
Planning to Grow Together

by Juan Torres

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About the Institute

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Ce rapport est disponible en français.

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FOREWORD

I remember walking to school when I was six years-old. The journey was about a half a mile. There was a crossing guard at one point and other children walking along the way. But my mother was at home with my younger brothers. I got to school on my own. My own children are now 9 and 11 and it has only been this last year that they have started to walk to school on their own. We are fortunate to live in an older neighbourhood where the public school is in walking distance and the route to school is fairly direct and safe.

But my kids are in the minority. Today in Canada only a third of children walk to school regularly. In the United States, this figure is even lower. More and more, children are being driven or bussed to school, even over short distances. In the process, children are losing touch with their neighbourhoods, losing the opportunity to discover and explore their communities on their own terms.

Walking to school is one instance in a child's day but it reveals much about our increasingly urbanized world. Two new papers from *The Vanier Institute of the Family* explore the issues of children and urbanization and their use of time. **Juan Torres** from the Université de Montréal's Institut d'urbanisme has written an insightful critique of children's role in our cities. He looks at the ways in which urban planning has evolved to accommodate the needs of motorized adults and what this has meant for healthy child development and the evolution of vibrant, user-friendly communities.

Belinda Boekhoven from Carleton University looks at a related set of issues around the time use of children and adolescents. Traffic congestion and safety issues are but two of the factors behind children's loss of free time, particularly time devoted to outdoor play. Children and adolescents are much more likely to be involved in organized activities than in the past. And while participation in sport, the arts, faith groups and the like has been shown to be very beneficial for child development, Ms. Boekhoven argues, there are risks too if children and adolescents don't have access to opportunities to develop qualities such as self-motivation or self-reliance.

These papers make us step back to consider the communities we live in and the lives we lead – from the perspective of our children. Dr. Torres makes the case that we would all benefit if children and youth played a greater role in urban planning. Agreed. Children have much to contribute in rethinking the ways we live in cities, share neighbourhoods, and grow together.

Katherine Scott
Director of Programs
October 2009

ABSTRACT

This article concerns the role of children in our communities. A review of research shows that children play a limited role in the decision making processes that shapes their environment. What is more, as they have become increasingly dependent on parental cars for activities and travel, children are loosing touch with their immediate neighbourhoods, a trend reflected in the declining number of children who walk or bike to school. However, Canada adheres to several international commitments enshrining the obligation to take the needs and perspectives of children into account in urban planning. The article draws on a number of research studies, including participatory projects and studies of children's mobility, to highlight the importance of neighbourhood schools in terms of community life, child development and family well-being.

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A t the turn of the millennium, humanity reached an urbanization level of 50 per cent. For the first time in the planet's history, one out of every two people lived in an urban setting. Although this fact has been widely acknowledged, less attention has been given to an equally striking fact: according to UNICEF, children now account for one-third of city dwellers – around one billion people – and half of them live in poverty.[1]

Children represent a large percentage of urban populations. Moreover, they are an *important* part of cities: they live and grow there, sometimes under extreme hardship. But rich or poor, in the north or in the south, children are rarely taken into consideration in city planning. They are generally excluded from the decision making that shapes their environment, their neighbourhoods, and the places they visit and use daily. We see children as users of specific places such as schools and parks, but it is adults who give shape to these places and control how children use them.

Of course, adults do not act in bad faith. Outstanding places for young people do exist, thanks to the work of talented planners. Canadian city parks like Vancouver's Stanley Park or Montreal's Mont-Royal Park, for example, have marked generations of young people. However, a rather paternalistic approach to children predominates in urban planning. Behind this paternalism is a fairly simplistic perspective of childhood and some very widely held beliefs – for example, the notion that adults have the right and the responsibility to make decisions for children, to decide in their stead. We justify this thinking by referring to the lack of experience and the limited perspective young people may have with respect to urban issues. We believe that childhood is a precious period of life that must not be tainted by "adult" concerns. And we believe that adults, in remembering their childhoods, are able to make appropriate deci-

sions for today's youth.[2] In any event, the results of urban planning are rather disappointing. Today we can observe, just about everywhere, how cities are mainly planned for adults, especially for adults with motor vehicles.[3, 4]

As they become more and more spread out, cities are making cars indispensable and discouraging the use of non-motorized, active forms of transportation like walking and biking that are accessible to most people, including children.[5] In Canada, statistics for 1996 to 2006 show a decline in walking and biking among Canadians, which together account for only 7.7 per cent of trips[6]. In countries like Sweden and Norway, walking and biking account for a respective 32 per cent and 26 per cent of trips.[7] This "motorization" has had a major impact on young peoples' lives, since it confines them to environments where they are less and less autonomous. Their mobility depends on adults, especially parents. Moreover, in addition to the nega-tive environmental impacts of automobile-based mobility,[1] there are other equally harmful impacts such as loss of vitality and conviviality in the streets, and individual and collective insecurity and impoverishment. And with a decline in walking and biking, there is less opportunity for physical activity, a tool in the fight against obesity. This is not a trivial issue. Obesity, recognized as an epidemic by the WHO, is impacting Canada, putting children at greater risk of adult disability and premature death.[8]

Cities that promote walking and biking are healthier, more user-friendly, and more efficient. They are also, of course, better places to grow up in that they allow children a certain degree of autonomy essen-tial to their development.[9] Being able to go to daily destinations like school on foot or by bike allows young people to discover and experience their neighbourhood and responsibly use and share the streets.

Many experts agree that cities promoting walking and biking are predominantly cities with neighbour-hoods that are user-friendly, compact, and complete. These cities offer services and activity sites that are accessible (nearby) and worthwhile for all.[10] "All" is the key word here, which is why children are so important, since they have a unique perspective and their own needs and aspirations. Children have a distinct perception of their environment, different from that of adults. Since the 1970s, numerous experi-ments conducted in various countries have corroborated this, revealing that children are clever observers of their environment. As the celebrated American urban planner Kevin Lynch affirmed, children's ideas are of prime importance in planning cities that are more sustainable, user-friendly, and inclusive.[11, 12]

This article concerns the role of children in city planning. It examines the significance of their role, both as participants in the decision making that shapes their environment and as users of the city. The article draws on a number of research studies, in particular, studies on participatory planning experiences involving chil-dren, like *Growing Up in Cities*,[11] as well as research on the subject of children's mobility, for example, the study carried out in 2008 by *Groupe de recherche ville et mobilité* at Université de Montréal.[13]

This paper is organized into two parts. The first examines general ideas regarding children and their role in urban planning. These ideas allow us, in the second part, to focus on a concrete problem that exists across Canada and elsewhere: the decline in child-friendly modes of travel such as walking and biking for trips to school.

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[1] According to Environment Canada data (2006), motorized transportation accounts for more than a quarter of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, a proportion that doubles with respect to large Canadian cities.

1. IDEAS REGARDING CHILDHOOD AND CITY PLANNING

Although an ordinary and seemingly very specific part of life, childhood is actually a complex notion that has evolved over time. For example, childhood is today defined in terms of age. Because of legal considerations, we generally consider a child to be anyone under 18 years of age, which in most countries is the age of majority or civil liability. This has not always been the case. This first section examines various views of childhood and how they impact city planning.

1.1 Children and Planning: Changing Ideas

1.1.1 Children versus Adults?

Childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age refer to stages in the aging process. They also reflect how we understand the flow of life.[14] But the meaning behind these words has changed significantly over the years.

In our society, the status of child has traditionally been defined in contrast to the status of adult. The term "infant," whose Latin root means "one who does not speak" (*infans*), also implies this contrast with the adult who is capable of articulate expression. That said, although childhood is different from adulthood, it is nonetheless a transitional phase – children are seen as individuals capable of becoming adults and taking full control of their lives.[15]

This understanding of childhood appeared in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment.[16] Within this perspective, children are viewed as symbols of the future, as suggested in such common expressions as "children are society's future" and "children are tomorrow's citizens." But in banking on the future, this approach loses sight of the present and neglects the role that children currently play as community members. Authors such as James, Jenks, and Prout have elaborated on these ideas and document different variations of the "childhood/future" approach – some of which are still widespread.[14]

For example, for some, children are understood as innately "bad" and must consequently better themselves to become adults. This view, based on the ideas of philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), considers punishment as an appropriate tool to correct children and turn them into "good" people. The opposing view, in which children are seen as innately "good," is based on the ideas of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) who argued in his treatise, *The Social Contract* (1762), that humans are born free. From this perspective, becoming an adult means losing the innocence we are born with.

A third view, based on the ideas of John Locke (1632–1704), starts with the principle that "good" and "bad" are concepts that adults construct and children learn. Children are therefore neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but instead inexperienced. With time, experience allows them to distinguish between good and bad as they become adults. Noted psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) takes these ideas further. He describes the progression from childhood to adulthood as a process that depends not

only on the acquisition of experience, but also on the natural transformation of intellectual abilities. Becoming an adult, therefore, involves the development of thinking skills, especially with regard to abstract notions such as mathematical figures and moral principles.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) writes about childhood as a developmental period in which we learn to repress certain personality traits (especially instincts). Becoming an adult thus requires the adaptation of individual behaviours to social life by controlling instinctive impulses. The Freudian approach served as the basis of other theorists' work. For example, Erik Erikson (1902–1994) built on the idea that people develop by progressively acquiring abilities. Childhood, then, is a period in which to learn to build trust and act deliberately and autonomously, as well as to learn various skills and develop an identity.[17]

All of these views of childhood share one thing in common: children are seen as "adults in the making" or even "people-to-be."[18] Whatever the difference with respect to adult age, childhood is seen as a process to overcome this difference (e.g., by improving behaviour, developing intellectually, and controlling instincts). Children are considered dependents, forced to follow a certain path in order to rise above their "imperfect" (evil, irrational, instinctive, etc.) nature, to become autonomous adults.

1.1.2 Children as Shapers of Their Environment

Although the predominant view of children sees them as "adults in the making," many people recognize their importance and their active role within their communities. In other words, it is recognized that childhood is not only the path toward adulthood but also a time in which children can build ties with their communities, and even transform them. Within this perspective, children are as what Wartofsky calls "agents," interactive individuals who are both influenced by their living environment and capable of influencing it.[19]

Understanding children as agents means recognizing that they can help bring about change in their communities and even change the way people think about childhood.[14] Street children, child soldiers, children working in factories, and many other children engaged in struggles against exploitation – these are groups of children who play very active roles in their societies and lead us to re-examine our views of children as well as intergenerational relations.

Children should be understood as much more than "adults-to-be." They play an important and active role in our societies. Specifically, with regard to the topic of this paper, they bring a rich, unique, and extremely important perspective to the planning of our neighbourhoods and cities.

1.2 Children in Cities: A Long-held Concern

1.2.1 Origins

The function of cities has always been to bring human activity together. They are places where business, political power, and cultural life converge. However, it was not until the 18th century, during the Industrial Revolution, that cities underwent a process of rapid development. With the arrival of mechanization and the division of labour, downtown areas became employment hubs attracting more and more people. The intense and rapid expansion of industrial cities was a completely new phenomenon. In a short time, one could witness the rise of entire neighbourhoods built to house factories and workers. This growth, although essential to economic development, gave rise to numerous problems – especially in terms of planning. The need to live near one's workplace (walking was the main form of transportation in cities) and tremendous demand for affordable housing led to the construction of highly populated areas that were often poorly equipped (few green spaces, inadequate services, hygiene problems, etc.).[20]

Although the life expectancy of children increased during the Industrial Revolution[21], working class families faced difficult living conditions: long and poorly paid work days, job insecurity and inaccessibility, and a lack of such services as health and education. It is in this context that society began to reexamine the role of children in cities.[22] Environmentally sensitive, children were considered the most vulnerable of urban dwellers. Although they had made a place for themselves in urban life (by going to school and even working in factories), cities were poorly adapted to their needs. People began to question whether children should be living in urban areas and whether cities were good environments to grow up in.

1.2.2 Quest for the Ideal City

Industrialization increased over time and although many urban problems remained, there was a growing awareness that cities needed to be developed to support economic activity. Still, despite the poverty justifying exodus to cities, people looked back on rural living with nostalgia. Country and city were considered as opposing extremes – one allowing access to the natural world, the other providing job opportunities.

As the end of the 19th century approached, Ebenezer Howard sought to obtain the best of both city and country by proposing a revolutionary type of city: the garden city.[23] These self-sufficient cities included homes, jobs, businesses, services – all the advantages of city living, but on a smaller scale (30,000 inhabitants, 2,400 hectares), and surrounded by natural areas called "green belts." These cities thus made it possible to benefit both from proximity to the country and economic activity providing local employment. And unlike the older cities requiring numerous upgrades to remain operational (like the widening of streets and the redevelopment of certain sectors), garden cities were planned to meet new lifestyle needs – they were actually adapted to technological advances!

A number of garden cities were built, mainly in the United Kingdom. But the trend fell out of favour in the 1930s, largely due to the rise of "functionalism," an approach championed at the International Congress of Modern Architecture. According to this trend, inspired by the celebrated architect and urban

planner Le Corbusier, cities should offer optimum functionality by taking advantage of something that would forever transform the landscape: the automobile. By basing their work on motorized transportation, planners could envision what had previously been difficult to achieve, i.e., separating incompatible activities, such as industrial production and residential living, into distant and distinct zones.[24] This separation is the basic idea behind a tool that is still widely used in urban planning – zoning.

Today, the urban sprawl resulting from automobile-based mobility and traditional zoning, along with shrinking public space, has led many to question functionalist theories and attempt to recreate mixed-use, compact living environments. For example, following in the tradition of the garden city movement, the trend known as "new urbanism" aims to create user-friendly environments conducive to walking, biking, and public transit, modeled after the small cities of the pre-automobile age.[25]

However, despite these and other initiatives, large cities continue to develop, along with their strong points (cultural vitality, economic diversity, etc.) but also their drawbacks (social inequality, environmental degradation, etc.). In developing countries in particular, large cities are considered much more attractive than increasingly impoverished rural environments. Even in Canada, per-capita income is much lower in rural areas than in urban ones in every province.[26] Questioning whether children should or should not live in cities is a pointless exercise. Instead, the most pertinent question seems to be: "How can we make cities better places to grow up?"[27]

1.2.3 International Legal Frameworks Promoting Child Participation

To plan high quality environments suitable for all, the perspectives of children are essential. This idea is supported by Agenda 21, adopted in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This international program promotes collaboration between authorities and residents to create better living environments.[28] Child participation is considered as a key strategy for sustainable development. Chapter 25 of the document, which concerns children, explicitly states: "It is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their futures. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account."[29]

Several years later, in 1996, the Habitat II Conference held in Istanbul marked the adoption of the Habitat Agenda. In its declaration, adopted by 171 countries, the Habitat Agenda clearly supports the involvement of children in city planning: "The needs of children and youth, particularly with regard to their living environment, have to be taken fully into account. Special attention needs to be paid to the participatory processes dealing with the shaping of cities, towns, and neighborhoods; this is in order to secure the living conditions of children and of youth and to make use of their insight, creativity, and thoughts on the environment."[30] Moreover, at this conference, child well-being was identified as the ultimate indicator of healthy human settlement, democratic society, and good governance. Ten years later, at the third World Urban Forum (Habitat III) held in Vancouver, it was once again recognized that the participation of children in making decisions with respect to their living environment is valuable and necessary.[31]

These declarations are backed up by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, and ratified by Canada in 1992. The *Convention* includes a number of sections directly relating to the participation of children in urban planning, such as Section 12 on the right of children to freely express their opinions about issues that affect them.[32]

1.2.4 Forms of Child Participation in Planning

The international movement to recognize child rights fueled a school of thought that had begun in the late 1960s, advocating the participation of children in planning.[33, 34] Over four decades, a number of studies carried out in Finland, France, and Switzerland revealed that young people are not only highly creative but also analysts who are very aware of their environment.[35] In spite of this, the participation of children in urban planning remains more of an exception than the norm. And when children are included, their role and power to act varies considerably from one context to another.[36]

Among other things, one difficulty with child participation in planning lies in the huge challenge it represents for professional practice. More than the simple delegation of power from adult to young person, child participation requires a rethinking of the planning process. It implies a break from the traditional approach in which the planner is an expert who takes charge of shaping an environment for users. In the participatory approach, planning is instead an interactive process in which planners and users work together to shape environments, and together learn to see things in new ways and act accordingly.

In essence, planning can be thought of as a learning process through which participants are not only able to envision changes that improve their living environments but also to transform themselves.[37] It is an opportunity for tremendously valuable learning, for children in particular, as they can develop a sense of responsibility with respect to their environment and a sense of commitment to their community, as well as self esteem, knowledge, and skills.[11]

Communication, obviously essential to collaboration, is a significant challenge in that the adoption of a common language suitable for all (including the youngest) can be difficult. Roger Hart, co-director of the research group Children's Environment, identifies various models of participation and distinguishes them from what, despite appearances, are not participatory approaches.[38] For example, manipulation, "presence for appearance's sake," and false representation (tokenism) are not participatory practices. They are highly structured, closed processes – or at least non-representative ones – that lack the conditions for free and informed participation. Moreover, such processes do not allow for real communication between children and planners. This is true, for example, in processes where young people are expected to participate through adult methods such as formal consultation sessions and the submission of briefs. Activities that are more informal – in which children are physically engaged – are more conducive to children expressing their knowledge and ideas about change in their neighbourhood.[39]

According to Hart, there are five authentic forms of participation.[38] The first involves initiatives where children voluntarily take on tasks assigned by adults, who in turn explain how to accomplish the tasks and why children are taking part. In the second type of participation, children are formally consulted, but may not be involved in the decision making process or in implementing any proposed

changes. In these cases, children are told how their input will be used. The third corresponds to projects that are initiated by adults but then completed through joint decision making with children. The fourth involves processes that are initiated and led by children, with adults playing a secondary support role. Some argue that this model embodies a rather romantic vision of participation in which children alone can shape their environment.[40] Lastly, the fifth form refers to projects that are initiated by young people but then developed through joint decision making with adults. Along with the third model, this type of participation can be characterized as "proactive" and "visionary" as it allows for children and adults to interact and benefit from their respective strengths to build more user-friendly communities.[40]

Although different, these five forms are all authentically participatory in that they involve the free, informed, and meaningful participation of children. That said, these forms correspond to different contexts and various situations and are quite simplistic, whereas the planning process can be highly complex. A single planning process might include the characteristics of various participation modes – or even evolve over time.

It is worth noting that the participation of children depends not only on the planning process put in place but also, and to a large extent, on children's social and family background. Family situations can be difficult, which can compromise the ability of parents to support their children in participatory initiatives. When work, travel, household chores, help with homework, and other commitments take up most of parental time, few resources remain for "elective" activities such as involvement in community life, even though these activities can have a very positive impact on children, families, and society.

1.3 Children as City Users

Despite the various possible forms of participation, children are rarely involved in the planning of their living environments. They are generally relegated to the role of "simple user". And even as simple users, children play a limited role in community planning, since their activities are largely controlled by their parents and carried out in environments that are generally planned to facilitate adult activities and needs.[3, 4]

For example, we see that as youth mobility has become increasingly dependent on cars, young people are being confined to their homes and isolated from peers and outdoors activities.[41] Indeed, in Canada's metropolitan areas, the presence of children aged 5 to 12 years in a household actually contributes to dependency on the automobile for daily trips.[42] Many associate this loss of autonomy in terms of mobility with a decline in physical activity among young people, especially in North America. In Canada, for example, half of children aged 5 to 12 and two-thirds of adolescents aged 13 to 17 are considered physically inactive, which can lead to serious health repercussions.[43]

Walking and biking, forms of travel that involve physical activity and give children a degree of autonomy, are discouraged in environments that are more adapted to cars than to pedestrians or cyclists. [44, 45] Still, it should be noted that the mobility of young people is above all influenced by their parents. Parents are the ones who exercise control over their children's trips and the forms of travel

they use, and this control is directly related to parents' concerns about two subjects in particular: traffic and the risk of violence.[46]

According to Statistics Canada's 2007 figures, 83 per cent of households have at least one vehicle.[47] When a family has a car, a child's loss of autonomous mobility is generally offset by "chauffeuring," or the car trips parents make to drive their children to daily activity sites, school in particular.[48] This practice is all the more common given that the car is a basic tool in the organization of family activities. For many parents, it might be more practical to bring children to school by car on the way to work, especially in the morning, when time is of the essence. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Ministry of Transport estimates that nearly 20 per cent of morning rush hour traffic is due to parents bringing their children to school in cars.[3] Conversely, the proportion of students going to school on foot or by bike has been steadily declining for decades, dropping to 20 per cent in European countries.[49] In North America, the estimates are similar.[50] However, far from countering a loss of autonomy among children, chauffeuring can perpetuate and even aggravate it. It is part of a vicious circle because when parents drive children around, they aggravate the problems they are trying to avoid: an increase in traffic and accident risk, a decline in street conviviality, environmental degradation – things that make us perceive streets, neighbourhoods, and cities as unsuitable places for children.

This reality could have significant long term impacts for some in that children keep the habits they form for a long time: "Having been 'trained' to take for granted conditions of mobility dependent on the parental car or conditioned to an environment that gives priority to the motor car, these citizens of tomorrow will have a natural 'tendency' to take the car as their point of reference."[3] When children go to school by car, they lose the opportunity to walk in their neighbourhoods and learn to use the street as pedestrians and cyclists. This is a reality that many deplore, since neighbourhoods can be extremely instructive places for children, as much so as schools and homes.[51]

In the following section we look at the relationship between children and neighbourhood planning more closely by examining the issue of school location. School location – and the related question of transportation between home and school – is an important concern in many communities across North America. This review reveals that, traditional planning practices are inadequate as they do not facilitate the participation of children (the main people concerned!) nor do they consider the role of children as neighbourhood users or their capability in terms of mobility.

2   CHILDREN AND NEIGHBOURHOODS: A RELATIONSHIP WEAKENED BY DISTANCE TO SCHOOL

2.1 The Urban Reality

Cars allow us to travel long distances in a short amount of time. Their popularity, starting in the 1950s, made it possible to plan residential neighbourhoods further and further away from urban centers. Over time, the option of living further away led to what is called "urban sprawl," a spread-out or diffuse way of occupying land that has ironically made cars increasingly indispensable.[5] The planning of distant neighbourhoods gave rise to quiet residential areas where families could find relatively affordable and spacious housing. However, as they were far from stores, services, and workplaces – and, in general, poorly served by public transportation – these neighbourhoods forced residents to make long trips, by car, every day. For example, in Canada people who live 30 km from their workplace spend an average of 48 more minutes commuting than those who live only 5 km away.[52]

In "sprawl" zones, mobility is affected by three main characteristics. The first is urban scattering. In more remote neighbourhoods, there are generally fewer inhabitants, less available housing, and fewer jobs per square kilometer than in neighbourhoods that are closer to central urban areas. In less densely populated areas, it is difficult for nearby services and businesses (grocery stores, pharmacies, restaurants, etc.) to achieve profitability; similarly, it is difficult to develop and implement viable public transportation systems (frequent stops, variety of routes, etc.). As a result, urban scattering has had a big impact on personal mobility.

Another characteristic of urban sprawl is the separation of activities into residential and commercial zones, industrial sectors, and so on. This separation has a significant impact on mobility since it forces people to travel long distances to get to work and school, run errands, etc., especially for those making multiple stops at multiple destinations in a single trip.

Urban sprawl includes a third characteristic: road network discontinuity. Suburban neighbourhoods are often separated by farmland, railroad tracks, and highways that require significant detours and form real obstacles to mobility, especially for children.

Together, urban scattering, the separation of activities, and road network discontinuity leads to greater travel distances and discourages active transportation such as walking and biking which are child-friendly forms of travel.[10] Many argue that urban sprawl exerts an enormous influence on community life and on children in particular as it affects their autonomy, social life, and development.[53]

We have built cities that actively discourage walking and biking among children, certainly when we compare the experiences of today's children and those of their parents. Data from many of the world's cities on trips to school, for example, document this decline in active transportation – particularly in North America. In the United States, the use of cars to transport children to school has risen sharply,[54] whereas the proportion of children who walk to school has dropped from 50% in 1960 to only 10% in 1995.[50] In Canada, the data available show that eight in ten primary students walked or rode a bike to school in 1971, while not even one child in ten did so in Quebec in 2004.[55]

2.2 The Impact of School Management

Distances to school have increased, and walking and biking among school children has declined, not only in the suburbs but also in central neighbourhoods. In suburbs, public schools tend to centralize students (i.e., accept students who live further and further away into bigger and bigger schools).[56] Central neighbourhoods are also experiencing a centralization effect, since a decline in enrolment in recent decades has forced many schools to accept students living outside of their traditional catchment areas or to shut down altogether. What's more, places like Quebec have seen a proliferation of "specific vocation" public schools that strive to stand out through their programs, teaching methods, or other means in order to attract students who live outside their immediate communities.[13]

Student centralization – a typical strategy of private schools – is increasingly being adopted in the public sector to optimize resources.[13] It is feasible thanks to the increased mobility of children who are driven to school by parents or by school bus when this service is available. However, growing distances between home and school has resulted in the loss of "neighbourhood schools" – places that traditionally allowed students to develop strong ties with their communities and neighbourhoods.

It should be noted that although long distances make walking and biking difficult, a significant proportion of families still live within walking distance of school but choose to use the car nevertheless. In the metropolitan areas of Montréal and Trois-Rivières, for example, automobiles are used more often than walking for home-to-school trips starting at distances of 600 m, even though it is possible to cover the same distance in less than ten minutes![13] Across the country, nearly two out of three families report that their place of residence is within walking distance of their children's school, yet only one child in three goes there on foot and one in five by bike.[57]

Parental mobility habits partly explain the use of cars.[58] It has been observed that not only trips to school but all trips in the city are increasingly motorized. For example, a 2007 study by Morency, Demers, and Lapierre shows that in Montréal more than half of trips under 1.6 km (or less than 20 minutes by foot) are motorized.[59] Overall, as school trips become motorized, the relationship between schools and neighbourhoods is weakening; streets are becoming packed with cars instead of schoolchildren walking and pedaling in their neighbourhoods.

2.3 Schools and Neighbourhoods: A Fruitful Relationship

The school is a fundamental institution in our society, but it can be argued that it is placing a greater burden on family life. For example, the school schedule and calendar exert a tremendous influence on the pace of family life, and even on society as a whole. The location of schools is increasingly important when it comes to choosing a family home, especially given the fact that today the majority of parents work outside of the home and are less likely to stay in the same job over the course of their working lives.[60] Since schools are so important, it is not surprising that school trips are increasingly a family affair, influenced not by the physical characteristics of a neighbourhood or a child's ability to walk several streets, but by parental worries, habits, and aspirations.

Today, the makeup of cities, demographic changes in society, school system management strategies, and the pace of family life is weakening the relationship between schools and neighbourhoods. The decline in walking and biking is one

example that reflects the loss of opportunity for children to use neighbourhood streets and to make the city their own.

Obviously, parental concerns about security justify a protectionist attitude with respect to children: faced with the fear of accident or violence on the streets, the benefits gained from children's autonomy do not seem to matter much. However, when we stop thinking about children simply as vulnerable beings and start recognizing their power to act, we can easily see that when children are present in the streets, the streets are more alive and therefore safer and more user-friendly.

For children, the opportunity to carry out activities in the neighbourhood and become involved in their community is very important. Experiments carried out around the world as part of the UNESCO *Growing Up in Cities* program corroborate this.[11] Created in the 1970s by Kevin Lynch and carried out in more than 30 cities in various countries, young people and adults in the program work together to evaluate and change their neighbourhoods. Although its primary focus was mainly disadvantaged areas, the neighbourhoods hosting this program have been very diverse, both physically and culturally. Through interviews, focus groups, walking tours, photo displays, and many other activities, participants prepared a portrait of their environment and changes envisioned.[2] Even if these changes were modest, they had a big impact on children, allowing them to feel useful and a part of their community. *Growing Up in Cities* allowed children to see their city – and their own ability to act – in a new light.

In Canada, the *Growing Up in Cities* program was carried out in Halifax, Gatineau, Vancouver, and, in 2005, Montréal. Significant similarities were observed in terms of what children in Canada and elsewhere thought about cities. For children, the factors that make a place a "good" place for growing up included safety, freedom of movement, social integration, the opportunity to carry out diverse and meaningful activities, the presence of gathering places, a strong community identity, and a sense of solidarity. Conversely, the factors making a place a "poor" place for growing up were social exclusion, boredom, fear of harassment and crime, racial tension, heavy motor traffic, unclean public spaces, inadequate essential services, and a sense of powerlessness.[11, 61]

Neighbourhood schools where children can walk or bike independently offer many of the features children want in a high quality living environment. Such schools are extensions of public space, i.e., places like side streets and parks that allow children to interact with their neighbours, interactions that are important to the social development of communities.[61] The neighbourhood school is also a destination that is readily accessible on foot or by bike. It thus gives children the opportunity to use the neighbourhood with a degree of autonomy and to learn to get around safely, and, in so doing, reassure their parents. What's more, nearby schools give families the opportunity to walk and pedal on neighbourhood streets, creating a sense of vitality and making the neighbourhood a friendly place.

CONCLUSION

Children are important members of society and represent a significant proportion of urban dwellers. However, they are rarely included in the decision making that affects their living environment, and little consideration is given to them or the unique manner in which they use the city. Today, cities are mainly planned for motorized adults. They are poorly adapted to the needs and expectations of children who rely on other modes of travel like walking and biking.

Many international programs, supported by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, advocate child participation in the planning of living environments. Experiments carried out in various countries since the 1960s show that such participation is not only possible but also desirable in that it ensures a broader understanding of urban issues while taking advantage of youth creativity. What's more, such participation is considered an ideal learning opportunity in which young people and adults can work together to improve their living environments and grow as individuals and citizens.

Various forms of participation are possible depending on the specific nature of each process and work context – yet they are rarely utilized. At the same time, children's activities are increasingly restricted as they have become more dependent on the parental car for transportation. The decline in walking and biking for school commutes clearly illustrates our dependence on the automobile and, as a consequence, the detachment of children from their neighbourhoods.

The planning of neighbourhoods that promote child-friendly modes of transportation is crucial to the creation of inclusive cities that are adapted to all and promote the development of strong local communities. Today it can be difficult to balance family life with traditional ways of using the neighbourhood – like walking and biking to school. However, the attachment of children (and people in general) to their neighbourhoods is nonetheless important. Children have much to contribute in rethinking the ways we live in cities, share neighbourhoods, and grow together.

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