



## How does the built environment affect children's activity levels?

### What is this research about?

Knowing the factors that affect the health of a community can help to counteract the barriers to improving health. Ensuring that a neighbourhood encourages people to be active is one way to improve community health. Studies have found that factors, like the perceived safety of neighbourhoods and the ease of access to parks, playgrounds and recreational centres, affect how active communities are. Adults and children may be affected by these differently.

One factor that has not been explored is how walkability of neighbourhoods affects children. Walkability is an assessment of how well the design of neighbourhoods promotes active transport (AT) like taking a walk, going for a bike ride, going rollerblading or skateboarding. Design elements that affect walkability are sidewalks, street layouts, diverse land use, and proximity to amenities. Urban areas are often more walkable than suburban areas. This paper explores how walkability in neighbourhoods affects children's ability to be active.

### What did the researcher do?

This research was part of the Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project. The qualitative portion of

### What you need to know:

The Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project asked children and families what about their neighbourhood made it easier for them to live an active lifestyle. The walkability of neighbourhoods is important as it promotes active living in children. Ease of access to schools, playgrounds and parks, and perceived safety are key factors that promotes active transportation in children.

the study included a sample of 24 families from 18 neighbourhoods in Saskatoon. The families represented low-, medium- and high-income neighbourhoods as well as three neighborhood design types as outlined in the study: urban, semi-suburban, and suburban. The neighbourhoods were different in their population density, the type of street design, and land use.

Two interviews were completed with each family, one with the child and one with the parent. The children were given cameras to take pictures of what affected the walkability in their area and these pictures were used during the children's interviews.

### What did the researcher find?

What makes neighbourhoods walkable for children is shaped by the ease in which they could engage in the primary activities they do (going to school, visiting friends, accessing playgrounds) countered by concerns for safety. For children active transport is connected with school and with visiting friends, places where children are able to travel independently. In Saskatoon not all children are within walking distance of their school; children in urban neighbourhoods are generally closer to school than their counterparts in suburban neighbourhoods. While important, AT should not be the only type of physical activity children have. Access to sports and recreation centers is also important for children's health. This is especially true for low-income neighborhoods. When safe spaces to play are not available in the neighbourhood measures to improve safety and provide recreational opportunities become imperative.

### How can you use this research?

Urban planners will learn how children's activity levels are affected by the neighbourhoods they live in. By focusing on removing barriers the health of children in all types of neighbourhoods can be improved.

Communities will learn how safe spaces and affordable programs can help remove barriers to children being physically active right within their neighbourhoods.

### About the Researchers

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Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project is an obesity intervention that explores how the build environment affects children's physical activity

levels.

[www.smartcitieshealthykids.com](http://www.smartcitieshealthykids.com)

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### Keywords

*Parents, Neighbourhood, Built environment, Children, Qualitative method, Safety, Physical activity.*

### Research Impact

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