

# GRASS-ROOT PITCHES AND SPONTANEOUS PLAY

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on an analysis of a nation-wide programme for stimulating spontaneous play and physical activity among children and teenagers in Sweden. The programme, which is a part of a € 100 000 000 governmental initiative called the Handshake is designed to encourage local authorities, schools and sports clubs to build grass-root pitches and multi-functional sports grounds in residential areas and/or in the vicinity of schools or other municipal functions (RF, n.d.). The programme which draws on experiences made in Norway (Limstrand, 2005) and which is further strengthened financially by the UEFA 50-year anniversary (UEFA, n.d.), aims to stimulate inactive children and teenagers to physical activity outside organized sports and school time physical education. The objectives of the study are to explore what it takes to establish spontaneous play and sport activities at grass root pitches and multi-functional sports grounds, how and by whom these facilities are used and finally some short-term effects.

## METHODS

Findings are based on data from an ongoing research project carried out at an upper secondary school in a city in the north of Sweden. The primary data are taken from observations of the activities at the facilities where variables such as age, gender, individual/group activity, spontaneous/organized activity, equipment, change of clothes, rules, time etc. were studied. The facilities were studied 9 times in total during 1 week in spring time, 1 in summer time and 1 in the fall. Interviews with users, PE-teacher, school nurse, principal, caretaker, local authority representative, sports club representative, manufacturer of the facilities were conducted both as a complement to observation data but also with questions regarding the design of the facilities, needs for adjustments, efforts made to encourage use of the facilities, maintenance, vandalism, rules and known side effects or consequences.

## RESULTS

Preliminary results show that all parties involved had high expectations on the facilities and were also very happy with how the facilities turned out. However, some respondents point out the lack of equipment for individual exercise, in particular for groups interested in inlines, skateboard, BMX etc. and the PE-teacher have concerns about the heavy focus at traditional sport events at the expense of equipment for play and games. Situated in a school yard the facilities are used mostly during daytime. Activities are not organized by any other than the children themselves and most are active in groups. The synthetic turf attracts many users but swings and rest areas are the most popular. The “soccer boys” and “ice hockey boys” are dominating the facilities, leaving girls and less active boys as spectators and “hang-arounds”. During evenings and weekends the facilities are used by groups of older teenagers and young adults, shutting younger teenagers and children out. The facilities are not available to reserve for sports clubs but, as some respondents point out, are still used for that purpose occasionally.

## DISCUSSION

Conclusions drawn so far are that the location and the design of the facilities are very important in attracting users. The facilities attract first and most physically active users with the less active children and teenagers as spectators. Norms and unspoken rules for usage are established within the user group to the benefit of

the already physically active. The success of the governmental programme to stimulate inactive children and teenagers to physical activity outside organized sports and school time physical education is not proven by the results in this study. On the contrary, results show how resources are being used to the benefit of the already active and that the target group for the programme is reached only at the marginal.

## **REFERENCES**

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