

WHAT DO TEENAGE GIRLS LIKE AND DISLIKE ABOUT PARK PLAY SPACES AND MULTI-USE GAMES AREAS?

Addendum to the report What makes a park feel safe or unsafe? The views of women, girls and professionals in West Yorkshire



A research project led by **Dr Anna Barker** and **Professor George Holmes** (University of Leeds) with **Dr Rizwana Alam**, **Lauren Cape-Davenhill**, **Dr Sally Osei-Appiah** and **Dr Sibylla Warrington Brown**, in collaboration with West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Funded by the **Home Office** (Safer Streets Fund)

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This report presents the findings of a photo elicitation activity with girls and young women¹ to explore what they ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ about park play spaces and multi-use games areas (MUGAs) with a focus on feelings of safety.²

Overview

The photo elicitation activity aimed to understand girls and young women’s views on standard and gender-sensitive play space designs. The 24 Images,³ shown in ten focus groups with a total of 50 teenage girl participants aged 13-18 years old from across West Yorkshire,⁴ included existing play spaces in the UK, Europe and the US, as well as ‘Better design suggestions for parks’ by Make Space for Girls (MSFG).⁵ The Images were circulated amongst participants in the focus groups who were given the opportunity to say what they ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ about them with a focus on feelings of safety.⁶ In what follows we summarise girls’ views on six different types of play spaces: fenced MUGAs and ball courts; mixed-used play spaces; cycling and skating; swings and hammocks; seating and shelters; and park landscapes.

1. Fenced MUGAs and ball courts



Image 1: Standard MUGA with some colour (Sheffield)
<https://www.axoleisure.co.uk/single-post/bespoke-heavy-duty-muga>



Image 2: MUGA with multiple entrances/exits
<https://www.tarmacadamssurfaces.co.uk/tarmac-muga/>

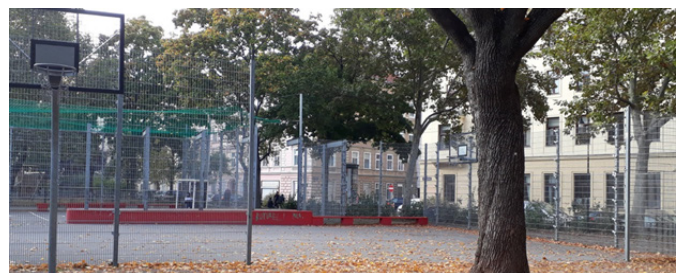


Image 3: Divided MUGA with gender-sensitive modifications (Einsiedler Park, Vienna)
<https://images.app.goo.gl/hKpRrh896FtXRZtU7>
<https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/vienna/> https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/4471/george-pepler-report_200301_final.pdf



Image 4: Colourful basketball court (Joseph Grimaldi Park, Islington, London)
<https://www.streetgames.org/news-2/pink-lady-london>
<https://www.basketballengland.co.uk/news/check-out-this-amazing-court-renovation-from-pink-lady-project-in-the-paint-and-coco-lom/>

In line with the findings of existing research (Walker and Clark, 2020: 10), some participants perceived MUGAs as exclusionary for girls. They felt that these spaces were for boys playing sports, noting typically male-dominated sports such as football, and that girls might not want to enter or use the MUGAs (Focus groups 6 and 8). However, other girls were slightly more positive about the MUGA in **Image 1**, with one group highlighting the importance of a surfaced area for playing sports:

‘It would be mainly boys...it might make you feel more uncomfortable. It’s just like not a very good place.’ Focus group 6 (Images 1 and 2)

‘You can just go play sports in it, instead of like sitting on a field and getting muddy.’ Focus group 10 (Image 1)

Furthermore, some participants thought that girls might be excluded by boys if they did try to use the MUGAs (Focus groups 6 and 8). In response, one participant suggested different sections for girls and boys to mitigate the likelihood of girls’ exclusion:

'I feel like there should be like different sections, so one for males and one for girls. Coz...if a girl goes there, like a group of girls, like they (boys) 'll just kick you out.' Focus group 8 (**Image 2**)

Notably, despite gender-sensitive modifications to the MUGA in **Image 3**, including the addition of a raised platform (dividing the MUGA) and the removal of ball court floor markings from one court (Palit, nd: 21-2),⁷ girls did not make any positive comments about the design itself. Furthermore, one participant perceived the modified MUGA as a similarly masculine space, commenting, for example, that basketball is an activity aimed at boys (Focus group 8). Her comments indicate that modifications to standard MUGAs may not go far enough in creating welcoming and inclusive play spaces and activities for girls.

In contrast, girls had mixed views on the addition of bright colours to the MUGAs in **Images 1** and **4**. Some participants expressed a dislike of the colourful floor in **Image 1** (Focus group 2) or felt that the colours in **Image 4** were 'too bright' (Focus group 1). However, others felt that the bright colour in **Image 4** made the space look 'happier' and more appealing (Focus group 9).

Other girls disliked the enclosed nature of all three MUGAs, commenting on the surrounding trees as well as lack of exits for escape, including in MUGAs 2 and 3 with multiple exits (Focus groups 4 and 9). Girls' dislike of enclosed play spaces links to their negative views on secluded areas of parks.⁸ One group commented that while the trees in **Image 2** provided privacy, the space felt too enclosed thereby preventing natural surveillance from the surrounding streets (Focus group 9). One participant felt that the MUGAs in **Images 1** and **3** reminded her of a nearby park which gets 'taken over' by teenagers drinking, which she linked to its enclosed aspect as surrounded by trees (Focus group 9). Participants' comments highlight that introducing multiple entrances/exits to standard MUGAs (as in **Images 2** and **3**) may not be sufficient to meet girls' needs for visibly open play spaces. As the following comments highlight with regard to **Image 2**, even though the depicted MUGA does indeed have multiple entrances/exits, girls' perceived only one escape route or considered the space to be enclosed by the surrounding trees:

'I don't really like that one because there's only...one entrance to get out...you'd feel trapped.' Focus group 4 (**Image 2**)

'All the trees surrounding it – it's closed in.' Focus group 9 (**Image 2**)

In contrast to the design of the MUGAs themselves, some girls' commented positively on the MUGA's external environment in **Image 3** (Focus group 3). They liked that the park was overlooked by buildings/streets, thereby facilitating passive surveillance and bystander intervention in the event of any problems. Girls in another focus group viewed **Image 4** positively for a similar reason, commenting that the court was overlooked by houses and that the space felt more open (Focus group 9).

The importance of the MUGA's external environment for girls' sense of safety was also highlighted by two groups who commented negatively on the white van next to the MUGA in **Image 1**. They explained that they didn't like the van or felt it was 'just weird how it's just parked there' (Focus groups 1 and 8). These comments, potentially pointing to fear of predatory men,⁹ indicate the importance of providing a visibly safe environment around MUGAs.

2. Mixed-use play spaces



Image 5



Image 6

Images 5 and **6**: Mixed-use play space 'designed by, with and for girls' and young women 16-24 (Rösens Rodda Matta, Malmö). **Images** from Google Street View. <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/malmo/>



Image 7



Image 8

Images 7 and **8**: Mixed-use play space designed 'with and for teenage girls' (Bredäng Park, Stockholm) <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/stockholm/> <https://landezine.com/bredang-park-dance-and-play/>

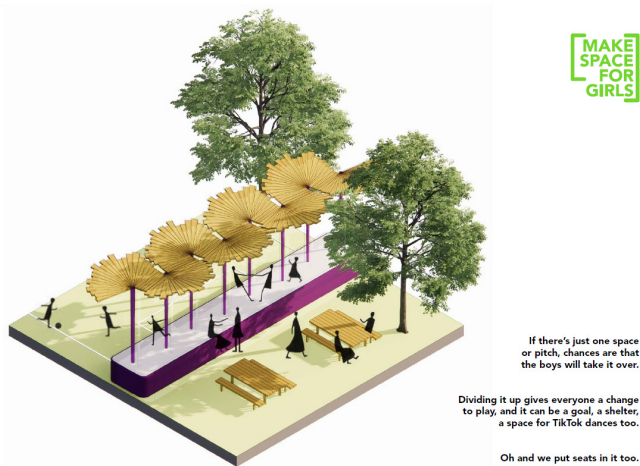


Image 9: 'Dividing a MUGA' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks) <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>

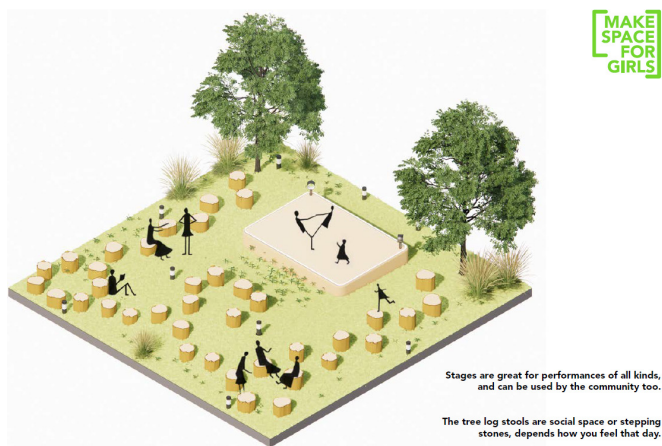


Image 10: 'Performance in the Park' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks) <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>

Despite some differences in opinion, girls were more positive overall about the design of the gender-sensitive mixed-use play spaces than the fenced MUGAs/ball courts. In particular, some girls commented positively on the Stockholm play space (**Images 7 and 8**) designed with teenage girls, as well as the MSFG better design ideas for mixed-use spaces (**Images 9 and 10**). One group commented that the space in **Image 7** seemed like a 'social space' (Focus group 9). Other groups also liked the stage and logs in **Image 10** as providing spaces for different activities, including singing on the stage, sitting on the logs or 'jumping around' (Focus groups 1 and 2). Furthermore, unlike the responses to the fenced MUGAs/courts, participants who commented on **Image 9** were overwhelmingly positive about the space. Notably, they liked that there were separated spaces and a stage, as well as tables that they could use with friends:

'There's a lot of different spaces for different things' 'Like the tables to hang out with friends.' Focus group 2 (**Image 9**)

'You can sing on the stage.' Focus group 1 (**Image 10**)

However, in contrast, girls were often ambivalent or critical about the play space in Malmö (**Images 5 and 6**), which had been designed by an older demographic of girls and young women aged 16-24.¹⁰ Some participants did not appear to view the space (alongside the MUGA in **Image 2**) as particularly innovative in design as 'it's like what we've got already but a bit more colour', also commenting that 'it looks like a

school' or 'unsafe' (Focus group 2). One participant even perceived the space (along with the modified MUGA in **Image 3**) as 'for boys'. While this was an atypical response to the **Images** of play spaces designed with/for girls, her comments are worth highlighting as they indicate that gender-inclusive designs may not always translate from one local context to another. Furthermore, communication with the local population of teenage girls may also be important in raising awareness that provision in their local parks is indeed for them.¹¹ She explained:

'These look like they're for boys. There's not really much stuff that women can actually do, like. If you go to a park you get basketball courts, you get football fields, you get gym stuff, skating stuff – I'm not saying skating's just for men but like... it aims at men, so like there's nothing that aims for women to do in a park.' Focus group 8 (**Images 3 and 6**)¹²

While the majority of participants did not view the mixed-use spaces as gender-exclusionary, some participants did view the Stockholm play space (**Images 7 and 8**) as having an age dimension, notably as 'for little kids' or so parents could keep an eye on their children if they were playing (Focus group 1, 2, 3 and 9). While this was a positive aspect for some participants, which they felt would encourage their own use of the space, others perceived this negatively as not catering for their age-related needs (Focus groups 2 and 3). The quotes below show the diversity of opinion:

'If you had more kids around, then obviously you'd want to join in.' Focus group 9 (**Image 7**)

*'Great for little kids. I would feel like a kid again.'*¹³ Focus group 1 (**Image 8**)

'Little kids annoy me!'

'We need a park where it's not allowed kids!' Focus group 3 (**Image 7**)

Similar to the fenced MUGAs, perceptions of openness/enclosure, including density of vegetation, influenced how girls felt about the mixed-use play spaces – particularly at night. While some felt that the Malmö and Stockholm spaces were open and overlooked, two groups commented that the Stockholm space appeared dark with hiding places, noting the surrounding trees, as well as lack of lighting (Focus groups 5 and 7).¹⁴ In contrast, participants commented positively that the trees were well spaced in MSFG **Image 9** (Focus group 2), highlighting the importance of attention to vegetation density for girls' sense of safety in play spaces:

'There's so many trees round it, and anyone could be there. It looks like in the daytime already, so in night time it would be worse.' Focus group 7 (**Image 8**)

'Trees are OK as long as they are very spacious.' Focus group 2 (**Image 9**)

Similar to MUGAs, girls highlighted the need for good escape routes in mixed-use play spaces. In general girls felt that the 'open' aspect of **Image 10** provided for better escape routes than the Stockholm or Malmö play spaces. For example, some felt that it would be hard to find the exits in **Images 5 and 7**, which they contrasted with their preference for open parks given multiple exits (Focus group 8). However, while two groups felt that the space in **Image 10** was open with good visibility and clear exits (Focus groups 4 and 8), another group felt that they could trip if trying to escape, presumably given the logs (Focus group 7).¹⁵ One participant also commented that **Image 10** could be too open, as it didn't provide a place of refuge:

Girl: 'I think it's quite open so that's good... coz then you can get out.' Researcher:....And anything that you don't like about any of these spaces? *Girl: If like you needed somewhere to go and that's the only space, then you can't really hide....'* Focus group 4 (**Image 10**)

3. Cycling and skating



Image 11: Open skate park

<https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/what-kids-think-new-anglesey-14945636>

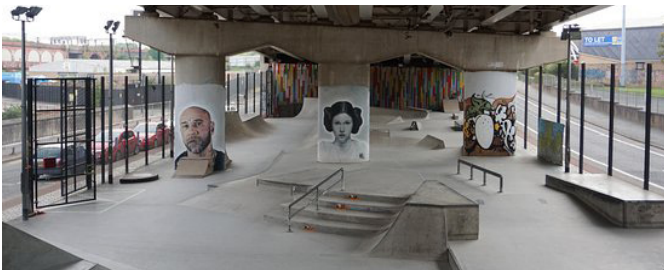


Image 12: Enclosed skate park with art

https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g187069-d4788865-Reviews-Projekts_MCR-Manchester_Greater_Manchester_England.html

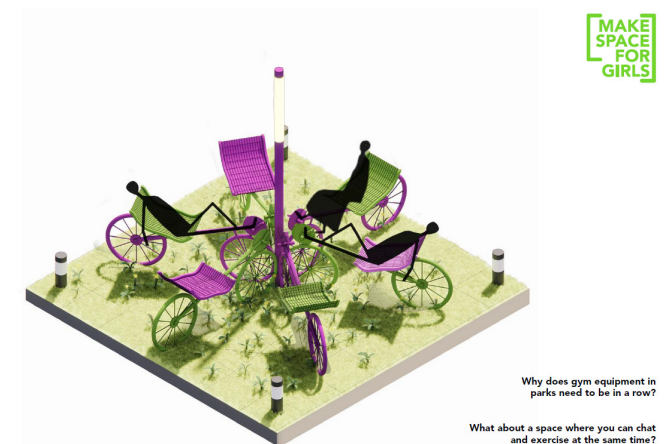


Image 13: 'Still in the gym' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks)

<https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>

As with MUGAs, existing research has found that skate-parks can be male-dominated spaces and exclusionary for girls (Walker and Clark, 2020: 7-9). In line with these findings, two groups commented on the gendered aspects of the skate-parks depicted in **Images 11** and **12**, as either being 'for boys' or feeling intimidated by the masculine element of the artwork (the painting of a man's face in **Image 12**) (Focus groups 1 and 8). A further participant felt that skateboarding was not for everybody, but did not relate this to gender (Focus group 2). The girls explained:

'It looks dull. It's for boys.'

'I like skate parks but not many girls do that.' Focus group 1 (**Image 11**)

'Not everyone likes skateboarding.' Focus group 2 (**Image 12**)

In contrast, one participant who enjoyed skateboarding thought that skate parks were 'fun' and 'social' spaces for girls. Yet she also felt that skate parks could be 'taken over' by teenagers, and so would need the 'right procedures' to be welcoming for everyone. However, in

referring to intimidation by (groups of) teenagers, the relevance of gender to girls' exclusion from skate parks was less clear:

'I obviously like the skate parks, because obviously, it's a place for girls... they can have fun in it, and it's a good space for social... But also, people, like teenagers and stuff, might have taken over it, and people might feel a bit scared to go near it. But I feel like if you put the right procedures in, it could be a fun place for everyone.' Focus group 9 (**Image 12**)

Furthermore, in line with comments on fenced MUGAs and mixed-use play spaces, two groups felt that the skate park in **Image 12** was too enclosed, with the potential for being trapped (Focus groups 5 and 7). In contrast, another participant commented favourably on the skate parks, including on the fencing in **Image 12** as 'more enclosed'. However, her comments are revealing as she did not perceive the space as for her own use; rather she felt that the fencing could contain antisocial behaviour by others (such as graffiti artists or cyclists/skaters) within a particular area of the park.¹⁶ The girls explained their contrasting views:

'If something did happen, they could just shut the gate on you.' Focus group 7 (**Image 12**)

'I would agree with this one because... this is actually like more enclosed space for them [i.e. bike riders/skaters]... Like, not enclosed... but like where they can't like be idiots and like drive in the road, having that fencing around them is good. But if they also like doing graffiti as well they can go in there and decorate it as they want instead of decorating the floor, and just messing up the park.' Focus group 6 (**Image 12**)

In contrast to the Images of skate parks, girls did not view the circular bikes (**Image 13**) as male-dominated or intimidating, although one girl highlighted that wearing certain female-type clothing (a skirt) might prevent girls from using the equipment (Focus group 2). Furthermore, in line with MSFG's rationale for this design,¹⁷ some girls liked the social aspect of the space, explaining that they would use this with friends and could talk among themselves whilst exercising (Focus Groups 1, 2 and 6). One participant felt that the inward-facing design meant that 'everyone's looking at everyone, so it's not being rude or disrespectful' (Focus group 6). However, one girl highlighted that the space would only feel welcoming as long as she was with friends, indicating that facilities designed for group use may also exclude girls from using the space by themselves:

'You can exercise whilst talking to your friends; the best thing ever!' Focus group 1 (**Image 13**)

'I like it, as long as with friends.' Focus group 2 (**Image 13**)

In addition, age emerged again as a key intersectional factor for other girls' dislike of the circular bikes. Some participants perceived the exercise equipment as for 'older' people as well as younger children, commenting that they would feel 'embarrassed' to use the bikes (Focus groups 8 and 10). Another group similarly noted the lack of age-inclusive spaces for teenage girls, commenting that they needed a 'treehouse' (Focus group 1).

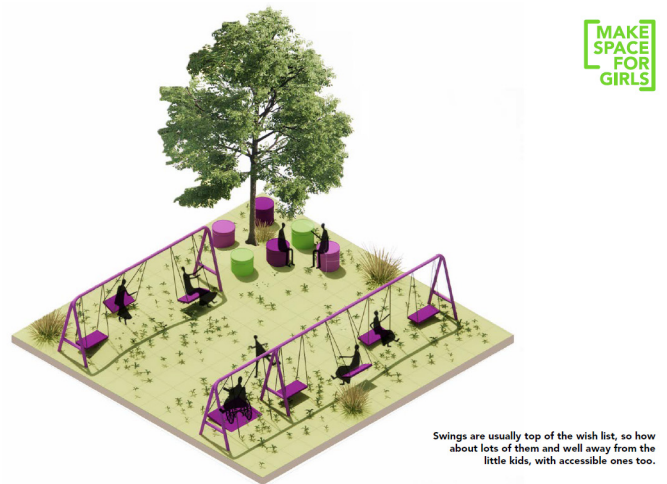
'I'd be embarrassed... fair enough if you're like older... or a kid.' Focus group 10 (**Image 13**)

4. Swings and hammocks



Image 14: Sociable swings

<https://www.lifeinthemumslane.co.uk/2017/08/welland-park.html>



Swings are usually top of the wish list, so how about lots of them and well away from the little kids, with accessible ones too.

Image 15: Swings, including accessible swings (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks)

<https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>



Image 16: Hammocks (Austin, Texas)

<https://twitter.com/MakeSpaceforGi1/status/1415665679735296005/photo/1>

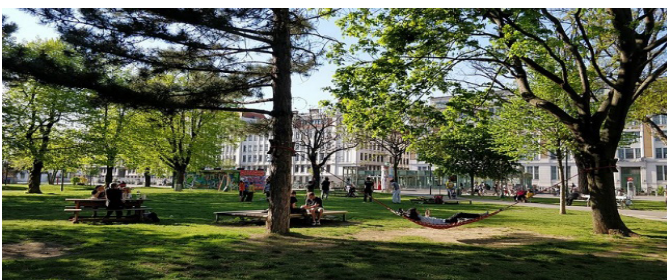
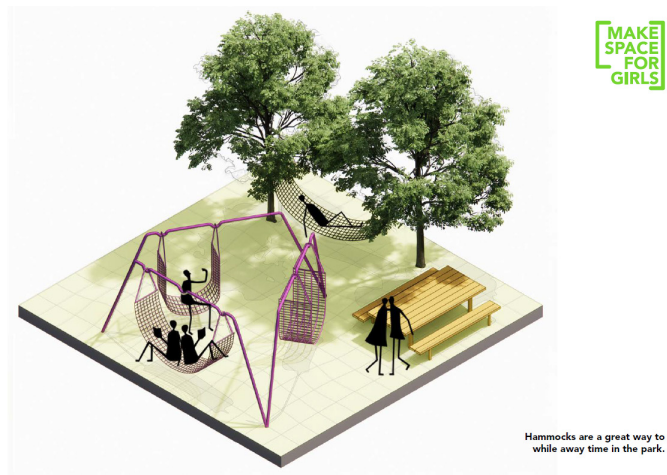


Image 17: Hammocks, Bruno-Kreisky-Park (Vienna, Austria)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bruno-Kreisky-Park#/media/File:Bruno-Kreisky-Park,_Wien,_2019.jpg



Hammocks are a great way to while away time in the park.

Image 18: ‘Lessons from Vienna and Glasgow’ (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks)

<https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>

In contrast to skate parks, existing research suggests that girls like using swings and hammocks, and would like to see more of them in parks, particularly outside of any physical boundaries of children’s playgrounds (Lange, 2021; Walker, 2021; Yorkshire Sport, 2022). In line with existing findings, some participants commented enthusiastically on the swings in **Image 15**, explaining that they ‘loved’ swings or enjoyed ‘hanging out’ on them, with one participant relating this to her age as a teenager (Focus groups 1 and 2). Several groups also commented positively on the accessible swings, viewing them as inclusive for disabled people (Focus groups 1, 6 and 7). Girls’ commented:

‘I love swings and it’s great that there is one for disabled people too, to feel included.’ Focus group 1 (Image 15)

‘Being a teenager, I like to just hang out on the swings.’ Focus group 2 (Image 15)

Some groups also commented favourably on the hammocks in **Images 16** and **18**, with one group perceiving the hammocks in **Image 18** as swing-like given their particular design: ‘I love swings’ (Focus group 1); however opinions were mixed overall. While some girls liked the hammocks, with one participant commenting that she could sleep in them (Focus groups 1 and 6), others felt that they looked ‘boring’, or that the individual hammocks were ‘weird’ pointing to the importance of play equipment which allows for social interaction:

‘I like these cos they’re just like kids and it just seems okay but that is just a bit weird, how it’s just like one person’s on each little hammock.’ Focus group 4 (Image 16)

‘There’s nothing for the kids to do, like it just looks like they’re all bored and just sat around with one thing to play on.’ Focus group 8 (Image 16)

Furthermore, in contrast to girls’ favourable views on **Image 15**, they didn’t make any positive comments on the swings themselves in **Image 14**, although one group commented that they liked the woodchip and that the space felt familiar, reminding them of a park they knew (Focus group 3). In fact, the only comment on the swings was a negative comment on swing design, with one participant noting that users could accidentally kick each other if different heights ‘coz you’d be going really high’ (Focus group 6).¹⁸

In addition to sharing their opinions on the swings/hammocks, girls also commented on other aspects of the Images. As in discussions of other play spaces, questions of openness/escape were central, with dense

vegetation or potential hiding places perceived negatively. Notably, some participants disliked the trees and shrubbery in **Image 14** (Focus groups 6 and 8), with one group commenting that people could be 'hiding' or 'watching' while children are playing (Focus group 8), while another group felt that **Image 17** wouldn't allow for escape after dark.

'If it was dark, and you were walking through there, you'd be a bit creepy, because if someone did come up you can't really go anywhere – you're stuck.' Focus group 7 (**Image 17**)

In contrast, others felt that the space in **Image 17** was open and overlooked (Focus group 5), with groups also commenting favourably on the lack of hiding places in the MSFG better design suggestions for swings/hammock spaces:

'swings...seating area...nowhere really to like hide and then like come out and try scare you or anything.' Focus group 6 (**Image 15**)

'barely places to hide... you'd have like total view of surrounding areas as well.' Focus group 8 (**Image 18**)

On the other hand, some groups commented on the 'social' aspect of the spaces in **Images 17** and **18**, where people could go to relax (Focus group 8) or where parents could watch their children (Focus group 9).¹⁹ One group commented positively on the busyness of the space in **Image 18**:

'[It's] somewhere people can go to chill and where a lot of people would use this as well, so they'll be a lot of people around.' Focus group 8 (**Image 18**)

However, while busy and sociable play spaces were important to some girls' sense of safety, other participants pointed to the potential for criminal or anti-social behaviour. While one group felt that the busy space in **Image 17** would be taken over by boys selling drugs (Focus group 3), another group thought the equipment would 'get broken' or vandalised (Focus group 10).

Girl 1: 'It doesn't look bad but it seems like it would be really busy. Like it looks like it would just be a really busy place.'

Girl 2: 'Like boys would just turn it into a crack den.'

Focus group 3 (**Image 17**)

Furthermore, other girls pointed to the need for personal space in relation to other park users. For example, some participants liked the large open space in **Image 14** as it meant less 'overcrowding' (Focus groups 6 and 7). Single seats in **Image 15** were also viewed positively as other people could sit fairly close together but not be surrounded or 'trapped' (Focus group 5). In contrast, although some girls liked the hammocks in **Image 16**, they also felt that they were too close together (Focus group 3).²⁰ Relatedly, another participant commented on her fear of being trapped in the hammocks in **Image 16**, explaining that it would be difficult to get out if pushed (Focus group 5). These comments, indicating concerns of being surrounded or trapped by other park users, link to girls' fear of being enclosed by physical design features, such as fences and vegetation.

'It's got a lot of space, there's not as much overcrowding.' Focus group 7 (**Image 14**)

'These little one seater circle things are OK. Quite close to each other, but nobody can sit around you.' Focus group 5 (**Image 15**)

5. Seating and shelters



It's much more friendly to face each other when you chat, so curved benches make a much better social space.

And no one has to get a gravelly bum from sitting on the path.

Image 19: 'Social Seating' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks) <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>



Being up high is fun.

So how about some places to hang out up there, with scramble nets for access?

Image 20: 'Up High' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks) <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>



Image 21: Sociable shelter <http://canopiesbyacer.co.uk/gallery-category/teen-youth-shelters/>

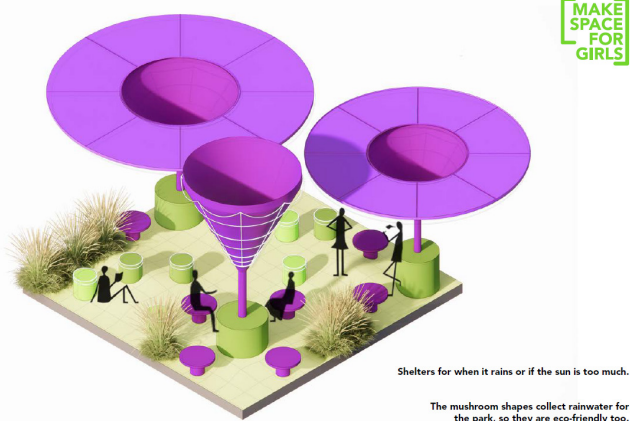


Image 22: 'For when it is too hot or too rainy' (MSFG Better design suggestions for parks)

<https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>

Girls had mixed feelings on the seating and shelter designs. Some liked the sociable aspect of **Images 19** and **21**, meaning that people could sit or chat together. The social seating was also seen as a good picnic or 'chill out' space (Focus group 3).

'I like that people, like, are sat together.' Focus group 4 (**Image 19**)

Participants also mostly liked having shelters in the rain, including to chat with others.

'This is good to have a chat with friends with shelter.' Focus group 1 (**Image 21**)

'You have shelter, and you can go under them if it was raining.' Focus group 7 (**Image 22**)

However, others strongly disliked the social seating given concerns about enclosure and escape; they felt that they could be trapped, and that it would be easy for a group to get in (Focus group 5). Similarly, other girls disliked **Image 20** as not providing good escape routes, and so they felt it would be hard to get down if there were any problems (although, contrastingly, another group liked that there was good visibility, seemingly of exits) (Focus groups 7 & 8). As some participants explained about the social seating:

'We hated the circle table. Coz you're just trapped, and you can't see behind you or anything.' Focus group 5 (**Image 19**)

Other groups also disliked the social seating given that the opaque surround impeded visibility, meaning people could potentially hide behind it, especially at night (Focus groups 3 and 8). Another group were also less positive about the sociable shelter given concerns about visibility after dark.

'If it was dark, it would be really dark, and you wouldn't be able to see anything.' Focus group 7 (**Image 21**)

Participants also had mixed views on other aesthetic and practical design aspects of the shelters. One group liked the sociable shelter in **Image 21** as having a 'nice vibe', commenting that it wouldn't get messy (Focus group 3), while another group commented that it was a 'chill out' space (Focus group 2). On the other hand, another group questioned the functionality of the shelter in providing protection from inclement weather given the gaps in the roof (Focus group 10). Other participants disliked the 'futuristic' and 'space age' design of the MSFG shelter (**Image 22**), with some anticipating issues of misuse or vandalism:

'People will try and throw balls in the funnels. Lots of trainers and junk would end up in there.'

'People would try to sit up there or climb up it.' Focus group 2 (**Image 22**)

Some also disliked the MSFG **Images 20** and **22** as boring (i.e., not 'fun') or 'pointless', with one participant commenting that the seating space in **Image 20** could be dominated by adult women to the exclusion of teenage girls. A further participant felt that the social seating in **Image 19** was a 'good mothers' meeting space'. While she viewed the space positively, she also agreed with a youth worker that the seating 'would be alright for mums leaving kids in the park', commenting 'Yeah, sounds like something my mum would do' (Focus group 6). These comments once again highlight the relevance of age to teenage girls' sense of belonging in play spaces, and the importance of 'fun' or active spaces, albeit not ones that are perceived as too childlike or for 'little kids':

'If it were mainly adults that were female going and sitting there, then... not all the teens would want to go there. And plus it's just like if they [i.e. teens] wanted to mess about on like swings and stuff, it's just not like very fun, it's just like one big seat, space.' Focus group 6 (**Image 20**)

'What's the point of that? You can't climb on it.' Focus group 10 (**Image 22**)

However, in contrast another participant felt that the seating structure in **Image 20** was not relaxing enough, as it would only be used by people climbing.

'I don't like it. People would just climb on it and not just relax.' Focus group 2 (**Image 20**)

These comments together, alongside the groups' overall comments on seating and shelters, indicate that the design of play spaces for teenage girls must find a careful balance between providing 'fun' activities, yet also for sociability, chat and 'hanging out' (with swings or swing-like hammocks seemingly an exemplar of such a balance).

6. Park landscapes



Image 23: Park landscape design 1



Image 24: Park landscape design 2

Image 23 and **24:** Designs for Brickfields Park in Bath
<https://yourpark.org.uk/sample-page-3-2/projects/brickfields-consultation/>

Girls' views on the MSFG park landscape designs were generally positive, albeit with some mixed opinions. The majority of participants liked that the spaces were open with good aspect and low vegetation, meaning that there were good escape routes and with 'nowhere for anyone to really hide' (Focus group 6, **Image 24**). As the girls explained:

'There's a lot of open space, so you could get out of any uncomfortable situation.' Focus group 5

'You can see what's around you and if people are coming.' Focus group 9 (Image 23)

However, others felt that there were not enough exits in **Image 23** and that there was no lighting in **Image 24**, meaning that it could get very dark (Focus group 7). A further group picked out other design features, which they felt were unsafe, notably the poles as well as the bushes which could be used in an assault:

'Someone pushed me in a bush like that once.'

'Too many poles that you can hurt yourself on.' Focus group 3 (Image 23)

While one participant commented that there was 'too much stuff' in **Image 23** (Focus group 3), the majority of girls commented positively on the mixed design landscapes, both from an aesthetic and practical viewpoint, with one participant summing up: '(Image 23) just looks like it could be like a really good park' (Focus group 6). One participant felt that both Images looked 'beautiful' (Focus group 2) while others liked that there were different areas for everyone (Focus group 7), with one participant highlighting the family-oriented picnic space, swings, a sports area (including for boys and girls wanting to play football), as well as space for kids to play (Focus group 6).

'There's like... somewhere to play sports and then there's like swings and stuff and then places like where you can sit on the grass with, like, your family and have like a picnic.' Focus group 6 (Image 24)

Some girls commented favourably on the Images of mixed-use play spaces as providing a more equitable use of park space in catering to a wide range of parks users' needs (Focus groups 1 & 2). In contrast, another participant explained that mixed-use spaces would keep male runners apart from children's spaces. In the context of this group's discussion on their fear of (male) runners, her comment points to the safety benefits for young people of having areas 'for everyone':

*'I quite liked this one because it was so open...and there was a bit- like a bit for everyone so like the runners, so if a man was running he can run on the outside bit of it, and like the kids are more in the central bit.'*²¹ Focus group 7 (Image 24)

Discussion and conclusions

Photo elicitation is a rich qualitative method, particularly appropriate for research on gendered park design in understanding participants' views on particular spaces as well as their everyday 'interact[ions] with their spatial worlds' (Leonard and McKnight, 2015: 636–7). This method may also lessen some of the power differentials in research with young people 'by showing them Images... in which they [are] "the experts"' (Leonard and McKnight, 2015: 630–5). However, there are also some key limitations to this method. Not only is the making and selection of Images subjective, the 'presentation and sequencing of Images' can also affect participants' responses and interpretation (Leonard and McKnight, 2015: 630–5). Furthermore, Images can only ever capture part of the design and essence of being in a space, which participants are asked to imagine through viewing the Image. Images also 'act as memory triggers' in 'evok[ing] memories and emotions and context' (Leonard and McKnight, 2015: 635), with girls bringing their lived experiences of parks and play spaces to the Images in interpreting them. While this process was invaluable in generating reflective discussions (Leonard and McKnight, 2015: 632), it is possible that girls may have given different views on the Images had they experienced these safe spaces in person.

Across focus groups, girls generally expressed a preference for open spaces with good outlook, as typified by some of the MSFG better

design suggestions and park landscape designs. In contrast, girls felt unsafe in enclosed spaces with fewer/less visible exits or obstructed escape routes where they could be 'trapped'. While girls were critical of MUGAs, it is also notable that their dislike of enclosed spaces went beyond fenced courts, with dense vegetation surrounding other Images of play spaces also of concern. Girls similarly expressed a strong dislike for even purportedly gender-sensitive play and seating equipment if it could trap them or provide hiding places for potential attackers. However, natural surveillance from surrounding buildings appeared to mitigate some concerns around enclosure in fenced MUGAs/courts. Some girls also expressed a concern over lack of lighting.

In line with existing research (Walker and Clark, 2020; Clark, 2021), participants generally perceived MUGAs and skate parks as male dominated and exclusionary for girls – including an Image of a MUGA with gender-sensitive modifications. In contrast, other participants expressed divergent views, particularly around skate parks, commenting that they could also be spaces for girls. They could also be helpful in protecting other park users from antisocial behaviour by providing teenagers with something to do. While girls were generally more positive about gender-sensitive mixed-use play spaces (designed with/for girls), they also expressed some ambivalence or dislike of a gender-sensitive play space in Malmö, which one participant perceived as 'for boys'. These comments indicate the importance of local consultation and communication with teenage girls given that gender-inclusive designs may not always translate or be recognised from one context to another.²² Some girls also noted the possibility for vandalism and antisocial behaviour of play spaces or equipment, including by teenagers in their appropriation of space. Their comments highlight that even gender-sensitive designs may not be sufficient to counter male dominance and intimidation in parks and play spaces.

Furthermore, some girls viewed gender-sensitive spaces as either for younger children or older adults, and thereby exclusionary for their age group. For example, some girls viewed a gender-sensitive play space in Stockholm as 'for little kids'. Meanwhile, others perceived certain seating and exercise-bike designs as 'not very fun' (in contrast with swings) or 'embarrass[ing]', either with the potential to be taken over by adult women or 'for older people'. It is notable that girls were particularly enthusiastic about the MSFG design suggestion for swings (as well as for swing-like hammocks), which may provide teenage girls with the opportunity to 'hang out' in a fun and active way. In addition, despite critique of particular seating and shelter designs, girls generally liked the sociable aspects of play spaces and equipment, with girls often commenting favourably on features of social seats, shelters, swings and exercise bikes which enabled them to sit or chat with their friends. However, despite the importance of sociability in play space design, some girls also highlighted their need for personal space in relation to other park users, indicating fears of overcrowding or other park users sitting too close by. This reflects the purpose of parks as 'social and communal places, yet also places where people seek solitude and privacy' (Barker et al., 2019).

Participants largely commented positively on MSFG better design suggestions for mixed-use play spaces and park landscape designs. Girls liked that they provided different activities and areas, for example singing on a stage in addition to sports, as well as spaces to hang out with friends or picnic with family. While some girls felt that this represented a more equitable use of park space, another participant alluded to the safety benefits in having different spaces 'for everyone'. In addition to highlighting inclusive park activities for teenage girls, their comments also show the need for gender-sensitive design across parks more broadly, not only in designated play spaces.

Our recommendations can be found in our main report 'What makes a park feel safe or unsafe? The views of women, girls and professionals' available at <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/108>

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Endnotes

- 1 'Girls and young women' hereafter referred to as 'girls' for brevity.
- 2 This report is published as an addendum to the full report. Barker, A. Holmes, G. Alam, R. Cape-Davenhill, L. Osei-Appiah, S. and Warrington Brown, S. (2022) *What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe? The views of women, girls and professionals in West Yorkshire*. University of Leeds, Leeds. DOI: 10.48785/100/108
- 3 All Images and background information provided by Helen Forman, Urban Design Manager, WYCA.
- 4 Girls participated in the study across ten focus groups (two per West Yorkshire district). Informed consent was gained from all participants, and from parents prior to focus groups with participants under 16. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Business, Environment and Social Services Committee (AREA 20-169).
- 5 We would like to thank Isabel Fox & Harry Groom/Make Space for Girls for use of their Images in our discussions with teenage girls. The Images and better design suggestions for parks can be found at: <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>
- 6 While the Images in this discussion have been grouped according to play space type, the Images were not circulated among the girls in any particular order.
- 7 Modifications also included increasing entrances/exits. https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/4471/george-pepler-report_200301_final.pdf
- 8 Statement 40 'I feel safer in more secluded areas of parks that are hidden from view' emerged as one of the 5 consensus statements among the three girls' viewpoints (40, -3/-4).
- 9 It is also notable that in relation to an MSFG better design suggestion for hammocks (**Image 18**), one girl commented that she didn't like that 'creepy man...there on his own by the trees... especially if it was an older man', interestingly interpreting a lone stick-like figure as male. This indicates that irrespective of design, girls may scan surroundings for potential (male) threats.
- 10 It is interesting that the girls in **Images 7** and **8** appear to be younger children rather than teenagers.
- 11 For example, no participants noted the stage (in contrast with MSFG **Image 10** inspired by the Malmo design), which may be because they did not recognise it as a stage.
- 12 It is also interesting that in the MSFG case study of Malmö, the only users in the Images are cyclists <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/malmo/>
- 13 This comment was also made in reference to the park landscapes (**Images 23** and **24**).
- 14 Interestingly, the Stockholm space does have lighting, however this seems not to be sufficiently visible <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/stockholm/>
- 15 It is interesting that this comment was made about the play space in Malmö, which is not a closed space. However, this Image is taken from just inside the space, and so exits are not clearly visible.
- 16 And also allow the graffiti artists to 'decorate [the skate park] as they want'.
- 17 <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/what-does-better-look-like/>
- 18 This comment was said semi-humorously.
- 19 Commenting on **Images 7** and **18** together.
- 20 Two groups also disliked the MSFG better design suggestion for social seating (**Image 19**) as too 'cramped' (Focus group 1).
- 21 The group had discussed their fear of (male) runners in relation to Statement 4 'Men and boys should take responsibility for changing their behaviour to make women and girls feel safer in parks, for example not walking or jogging too close'.
- 22 As Make Space for Girls highlight, in designing parks for girls, 'the most important step of all is to ask the girls what they want from the places in which they live'. <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/case-studies/>

Contact **Dr Anna Barker** a.c.h.barker@leeds.ac.uk

To cite this report Barker, A. Holmes, G. Cape-Davenhill, L. and Warrington Brown, S. (2022) What do teenage girls like and dislike about park play spaces and multi-use games areas? University of Leeds, Leeds. <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/122>

