Children, Communities and Connectedness: Exploring the social and the material

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Over the past decade, there has been a focus among policy-makers, international and civil society organisations, and researchers on building communities that are supportive of children. The child-friendly cities movement represents a globally influential example of such efforts, while national and local policies and programs seek to foster communities that are positive for children. Such initiatives are important and reflect efforts to improve the lives of children. They are, however, often ad hoc and driven by (often elite) adult assumptions about what children want and need. They also lack a theoretical foundation, resulting in the absence of a lens through which to engage in deeper analysis of their aims, design, and applicability beyond a specific context.

This paper seeks to contribute to a theoretical foundation for thinking about children and communities. It does so from the basis of research with over 100 children across six sites in Australia, using a rights-based and participatory methodology.

The paper argues that connectedness is fundamentally important to children’s well-being, sense of self and sense of belonging. At the heart of connectedness is relationships with other humans, from intimate to transient. Yet, children’s connectedness encompasses non-human relationships, things, and physical places. The concept of materiality is used to examine how we can understand both the importance and the interaction of the social and the material in children’s lives. In doing so, this paper seeks to achieve three aims. First, to illuminate the complexity and nuance with which the children who participated in this research described a ‘strong and supportive’ community. Second, to contribute to the development of a child-inclusive theory of community that recognises the value of people and things, the influence of space, place and temporality, and the role of power in shaping children’s lifeworlds. And third, to provoke and contribute to debate around the value of materiality to childhood studies.

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