

The Second Annual Healthy Cities Conference 2023

Title: WHO plays? Older adults, play, and age-friendly cities

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The world's population is aging. In response, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Age-friendly Cities (AFC) framework. The framework aims to motivate local governments to proactively review their planning decisions and policies to meet "age-friendly" criteria within their local urban environments. The WHO-defined desired best practice outcome of building and maintaining relationship is particularly important given the current epidemic of older adult loneliness and social isolation (WHO, 2021). Many scholars contend that at the very heart of building social relationships is one of humanity's fundamental behaviours: play. First as infants with our caregivers, then as children with our peers, our most meaningful social relationships are forged through playful interactions. But what about play in older age? Considering the universality of play across cultures and its clear health benefits, our research asked: to what extent play is integrated into WHO-recognized age-friendly practice? What, if any, are the spatial and temporal trends linked to age-friendly practices that contemplate play? What outcomes(s) of play and play-related attributes are reflected in the WHO AFC best practices? We examined 140 best practices focused on building and maintaining relationships from the WHO Global Database of Age-friendly Practices using latent content analysis. We found that play was only integrated into 4% of the AFC practices. Play-related keywords fun and joy were slightly more present (9% and 7%, respectively). However, other play-related keywords like spontaneity, imagination, and humour were almost completely absent. We found that cases related to play associated keywords were significantly focused on only two of five WHO outcome categories: participation and interaction. Moreover, our results demonstrate that the geography of best practices related to play was very limited. The findings provide an empirical foundation for a wider discussion on the future of age-friendly planning and policy and the potential of older adult play.

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