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# IN WHANGANUI

Perceptions and experiences of play  
from sector stakeholders, whānau and  
tamariki in Whanganui



Ko te ahurei o te tamaiti  
arahia ō tātou māhi.

Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work.

This report explores the findings of a study led by Innovation Unit, commissioned by Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa and supported by Sport Whanganui.

Innovation Unit is a not-for-profit social enterprise that works to develop new solutions for social issues and create impact at scale. [innovationunit.org](http://innovationunit.org)

Sport New Zealand is proud to be the kaitiaki/guardian of our country's Play, Active Recreation and Sport System. [sportnz.org.nz](http://sportnz.org.nz)

Sport Whanganui is a charitable trust working to build active, healthy, and connected communities in the Whanganui, Rangitikei and Ruapehu districts. [sportwhanganui.co.nz](http://sportwhanganui.co.nz)

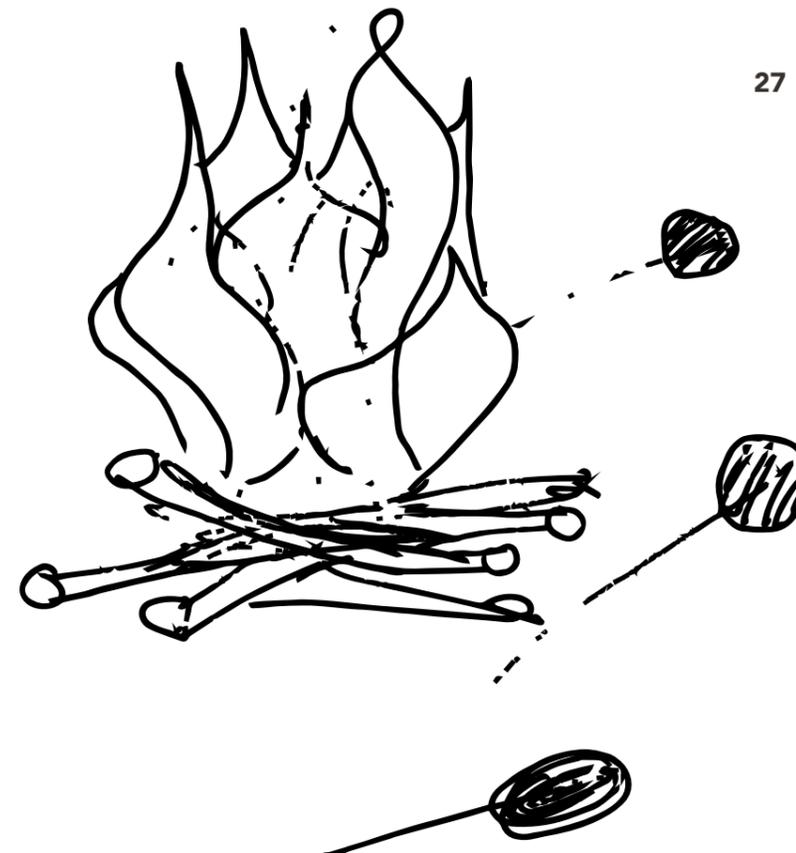
Drawings throughout by Whanganui children and adults.

.....  
**Thank you to the sector stakeholders, whānau, and tamariki who shared their precious play memories with us.** Your experiences will help us to understand what it will take to give more children quality play experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

.....  
**Thank you also to the team at Sport Whanganui** who did an amazing job of bringing together a great group of people across the sector and connecting us to tamariki and whānau in the community.  
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## Why play

How might we create more quality play\* experiences and lay the foundations for a life-long love of being active?

Play is a vital part of children's physical and cognitive development, and helps them build the skills, competencies, and attitudes they need to be active for life, including: fundamental movement skills, social and emotional connections, resilience, independence, and leadership<sup>9</sup>. However, the play opportunities children have access to is changing due to social, environmental, technological, and economic trends. 'Play deprivation' is becoming an increasing international concern<sup>7,8</sup>.

We know that children have the time, place, and permission to play in their communities, when:

- play is widely understood to be a crucial part of physical, cognitive, social/emotional, and spiritual development for young people
- adults understand their role in enabling play and everyone shares responsibility for supporting play
- young people have access to varied playful experiences within their local environments, including risk-taking, challenge, and the opportunity to be active.

Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa is committed to increasing opportunities for children to access quality play experiences, and has started a project to explore what play looks like in Aotearoa, today.

To better understand different communities' perceptions and experiences of play, and what helps

\*For the purpose of this project, we decided to avoid defining what is and isn't within the scope of 'play', to instead hear how the communities themselves understood and described it.

# STATE OF PLAY

What play looks like in Whanganui today and what is unique about play in this area

Play helps tamariki build social and emotional connections, resilience, independence and leadership skills.<sup>9</sup>

– or hinders – children's play, Sport New Zealand has partnered with Regional Sports Trusts, and Innovation Unit to help them hear from a diverse range of people across Aotearoa. The findings will inform Sport New Zealand's planning and strategies for play, and spark a nation-wide conversation about the role of play in the wellbeing of young New Zealanders.



## Unique aspects of play in Whanganui



*"The awa connects us" - Sector stakeholder.*

### Connection to te awa

The Whanganui River, has a significant physical and spiritual influence on Whanganui. Historically, iwi relied on the river for food and transportation, and the awa has always been important to play and recreation. Today, it is also integral to sports such as waka ama and rowing.

Mana whenua continue to hold deep knowledge and a sacred connection to the awa, and in March 2017 the river was given its own legal identity (Te Awa Tupua), demonstrating its significance to the people of Whanganui.

*Ko au te Awa, ko te Awa ko au.  
I am the river and the river is me.*

- Whakatauki of Whanganui iwi



*"We have a creative culture and adults [are] modelling creativity." - Sector stakeholder*

### Creative culture

Whanganui has a thriving creative scene and culture, with many artists choosing to live here, and the local art centres such as the New Zealand Glass Works | Te Whare Tūhua o Te Ao, and Sarjeant Gallery | Te Whare o Rehua. Events such as the Whanganui Walls street art festival and Lights on Bikes make art accessible for everyone to experience and enjoy.

The city's creative culture is widely known and enjoyed by residents and visitors alike, making play and creativity a focus for adults as much as young people. Sector stakeholders told us there are a lot more incidental play opportunities available such as a super size snooker table on the main street, a chess set at the river market, and other social spaces around large city artworks.



*"The city is becoming more child-friendly." - Sector stakeholder*



### Easy access to nature, parks and fields

Sector stakeholders talked about the diverse landscape surrounding Whanganui with mountains, beaches, and especially the river providing a lot of opportunities for play, such as jumping off the bridge and waka ama. Due to the smaller urban area of Whanganui and its cycleways, it is easier to get around, connect between suburbs, and move between 'green pockets' than some larger cities. Interestingly, despite this, 82% of people usually travel to parks and open spaces in Whanganui by vehicle<sup>3</sup>.

Whanganui also has lots of parks and fields. 57% of tamariki in Whanganui played on a playground in the last 7 days (compared with 52% national average<sup>5</sup>). Kowhai Park was mentioned as the standout destination playground, although one stakeholder criticised it for being dated. Other spaces mentioned included sporting facilities, Cooks Gardens, and Virginia Lake. The 'Eco-school' farm was seen as a great example of nature-based play where children can learn in an outdoor environment in all weather, throughout the year.



"Always had beautiful Kowhai park, which is unique" - Sector stakeholder

# PLAY OVER TIME

What sector stakeholders, whānau and tamariki say play looks like today in Whanganui and what's changed over time

# Play 'back then'

Similar to other regions, sector stakeholders and parents we spoke with in Whanganui said they remember play from their childhood being about freedom and risk.

Play 'back then' centred around being unsupervised and being able to roam and explore, take risks, be creative and active, be in the taiao (natural environment), and meet and play with other local tamariki. The majority of memories were of unstructured or incidental play with very little time restrictions or adult involvement, as well play through mahi such as helping in the garden, fetching blueberries, or washing the dishes. There was a sense of community where neighbours knew each other, and children felt safe because there was always someone looking out for them. Exploring risk was a large part of these memories and many felt that this was missing for tamariki today.

Play activities people shared included:

- **Beyond the backyard:** quarry, creek, sand dunes, steep hill, marae, climbing and jumping off trees
- **Games:** spotlight, football, cricket
- **Role play:** dress ups, missions, school and teachers
- **Imagination play:** building go karts, building huts
- **Mahi:** digging in the garden, growing kai, cooking

Illustrations by sector stakeholders



## How play has changed over time

Parents and sector stakeholders said there have been some significant changes in the way children play. Overall, there was a strong perception that play is less free and enjoyable for tamariki today than it was for them in their childhoods.



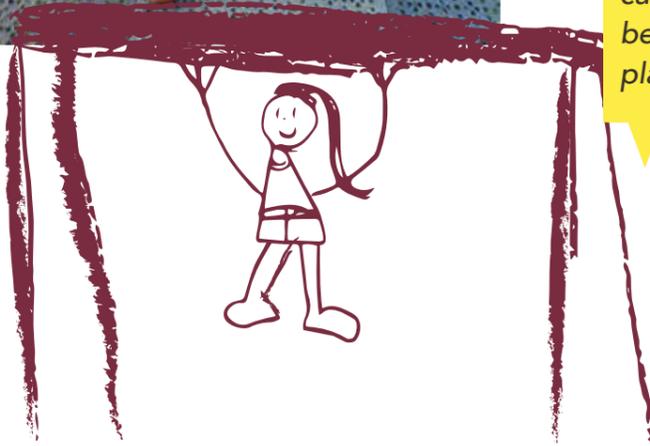
### More structure, less creativity

A stronger focus on play at playgrounds and structured opportunities rather than unstructured play and being outside was mentioned by sector stakeholders. They saw that potential reasons for this could include the lower cost of play equipment and less time spent outside reducing the need for tamariki to create their own play opportunities, and a stronger focus on sports and high performance pathways.

Additionally, teachers spoke about the opportunities they saw to incorporate play into school curriculum. However, this could be challenging to do within highly structured class times-tables and with risk-averse leadership teams who feel personally liable due to the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

*"I don't remember ever playing in a playground as a kid." - Sector stakeholder*

*"We're trying to control too much for our kids, they'll lose the ability to play if we keep controlling them. We have to be careful not to ruin it for them. We need to be careful as a community to not manage play out of their lives." - Sector stakeholder*



### Change in family and community structures, growing social divide

Participants mentioned that parents are busier nowadays, with both parents working full-time jobs, leaving them less time to provide play opportunities. Families are more transient, or their children have to move between two households when their parents are not together. As a result of these societal changes, sector stakeholders noted that the sense of community has weakened, impacting the confidence of tamariki to play in their neighbourhoods.

Additionally, living costs have increased. Many families are experiencing financial pressure and sector stakeholders saw that the socio-economic divide has grown locally, with some children having better access to outdoor spaces, resources, and play opportunities. For families who live further away from town or don't have access to transport, playmates and play spaces close to home become more important. Although most children are within walking distance to a playground, this isn't always the case for those living rurally, and there are communities identified as play deserts within Whanganui. In a recent survey, young people revealed they often don't have enough to do or anywhere to go in their neighbourhoods<sup>3</sup>. Sector stakeholders also noted that the sense of community was historically much stronger especially in rural areas.

*"One kid from our programme said 'Whoa, this is the most trees I've ever seen'. Kids that live in more deprived areas rather go to skateparks; they don't have enough access to non-adult-directed play and are not connected to nature."*

*- Sector stakeholder*

*"Biking. I don't do it often because mum has got work, and she works on the weekends. I can bike around my house on my own though."*

*- Tamariki, boy*

*"If we're busy, he kinda misses out."*

*- Parent*

*"[The kids are] the ones that are wanting to do it and we're having to say yay or nay on whether or not we can afford to do it".*

*- Parent*

*"I live next to a field which makes it easier."*

*- Tamariki*

## Increased safety concerns, less risk taking

Parents and sector stakeholders talked about how they believed that parents' perceptions of safety had significantly changed from the freedom and risk-taking of their childhoods. They saw that reasons for this could include more play happening indoors, increased population meaning more traffic on the roads, schools not offering adventurous play such as monkey bars and fort-making, and a general heightened focus on safety and risk (which was perceived as not always being a bad thing).

Active NZ research shows that in Whanganui, 18% of parents and 31% of children worry that tamariki might get hurt when being active<sup>5</sup>. This matches the national picture on perceptions of risk, or getting hurt, while being active.

*"Town is a lot busier now, [there's] so much more traffic, and less patience for cyclists. It's not safe for kids on their bikes, and I worry about my son going somewhere by himself." - Parent*

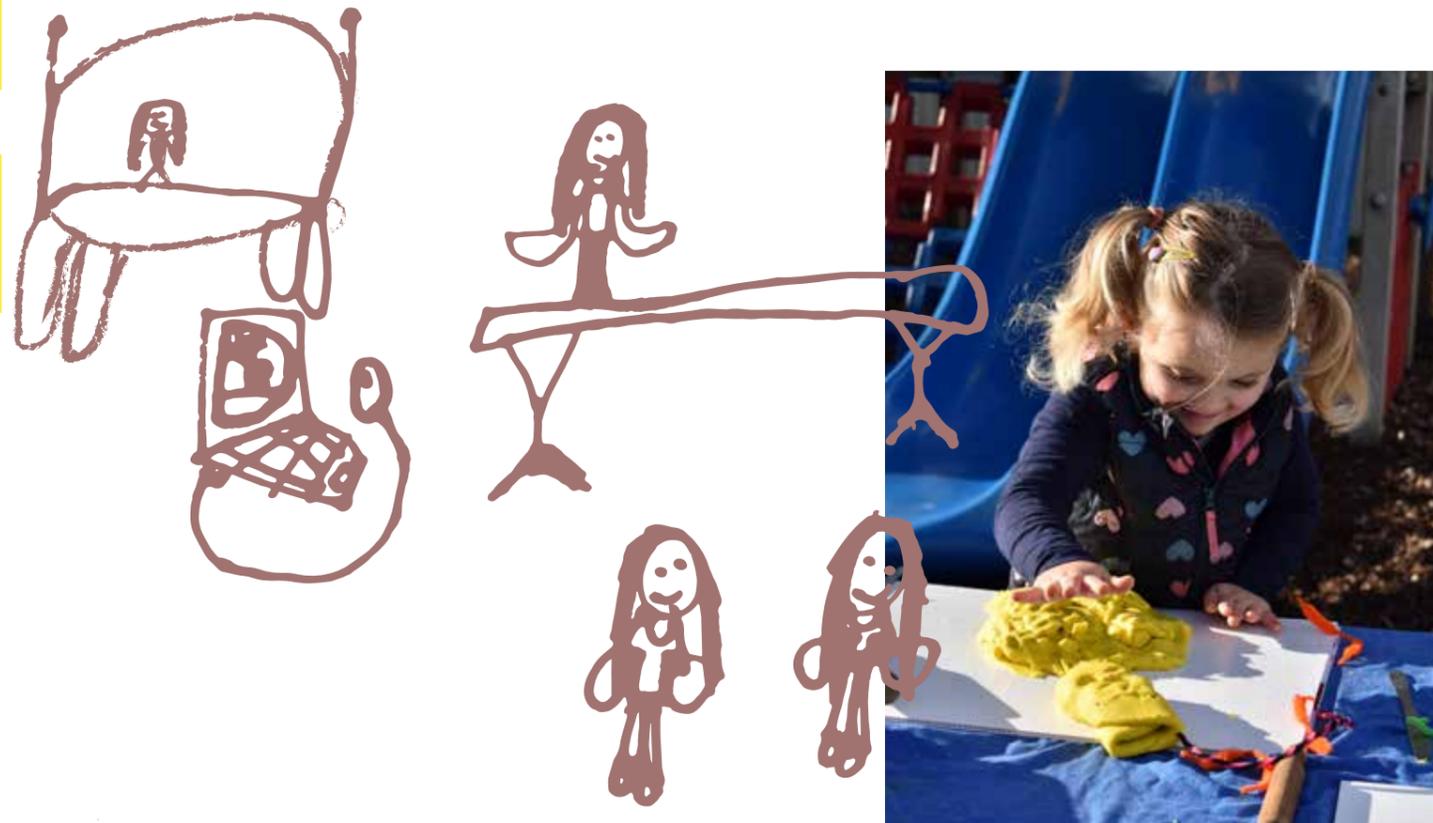
*"There is not the same freedom for the kids anymore to just go to the dairy up the road" - Parent*

## More technology-based play

Sector stakeholders discussed how personal devices have created a shift in the focus from physical to technology-based play. TikTok, online and video games, and Netflix were mentioned as both play activities, and distractions.

*"Play isn't the same because of technology, because TPK has now put wifi on the marae. How do you keep kids off tech at marae, off the wifi?" - Sector Stakeholder*

*"Minecraft is apparently the best game out. And they play forever online on Minecraft because they can all play together." - Parent*



## What has stayed the same

Although sector stakeholders felt there had been significant changes to the way tamariki play - or don't play - in Whanganui, some stakeholders acknowledged a few elements of play that remained the same.

*"The desire to play is still there." - Sector stakeholder*

*"The power of the imagination as a kid was strong. I know it's still there with our kids deep down" - Sector stakeholder*

## Activities and equipment

Sector stakeholders and parents said that a strong focus on games is still a large part of play today, and many play activities that they did when they were younger are still popular, such as:

- Imaginative play: on their own, with friends, or family, playing dress up, art
- Toys: Lego, doll houses, board games, elastics, cards
- Games: gutterball, four-square, housie
- Māori play: Waiata, kapa haka
- Sport and active recreation: swimming, bikes
- Spaces: forts, huts, sand dunes and playing in the sand, outdoors, nature, parks, playgrounds.

## Places and spaces

Open spaces, parks, playgrounds, outdoors, and nature were still seen as common elements and enablers of play for tamariki today. However, the sector stakeholders did see that tamariki spent less time in the natural environment, and more at designated play spaces such as playgrounds.

*"The opportunities are still there, the question is, are they utilised?" - Sector stakeholder*

# BARRIERS & ENABLERS

What helps or gets in the way of sector staff and families providing play experiences for tamariki

## Community

### Adult perceptions, understanding and confidence around play

Sector stakeholders discussed how play opportunities are influenced by the important people in children's lives (such as parents, whānau, and teachers). The perceptions these people have around play, their understanding of its importance, and their confidence to encourage it can affect the time, space, and permission tamariki are given to play.

Broadening the definition of 'play' was seen as an enabler, as was increasing the visibility of people playing at all ages. One school teacher saw that play was often seen by adults as something separate from learning or 'work time'. Another teacher spoke of the influence social media was having on their students, creating the perception that being young and playing "isn't cool".

*"People are the most important. If we don't have a parent or teacher who understands [the importance of play]... educating people around play [helps]."*  
- Sector stakeholder

*"Broadening our understanding and limitations of play helps - not just physical activity but also things like drawing or sketching."* - Sector stakeholder

### Tamariki play capability and confidence

There was a concern from some sector stakeholders and teachers that some tamariki lack the social and emotional skills, physical abilities and confidence to play. In the national Active NZ survey, 66% of Whanganui 8-11 year olds surveyed agreed that they felt 'confident to take part in lots of different activities', which is lower than the national average of 73%<sup>5</sup>.

One teacher talked about the challenge of wanting to provide more freedom to tamariki for play, but that it could often end up in fights or incidents, and confrontations with unhappy parents. However, one sector stakeholder felt that the issue lay with adults providing structure or instruction to tamariki based on the assumption they couldn't entertain themselves.

Teachers noticed a difference between rural and 'town kids', with children who lived in the country being 'more resilient, more interested in getting outside, more willing to get messy or dirty, and more aware of their physical limitations'<sup>6</sup>.

*"Do we think our tamariki don't have the confidence and skills to play? So we add structures etc to help."*  
- Sector stakeholder

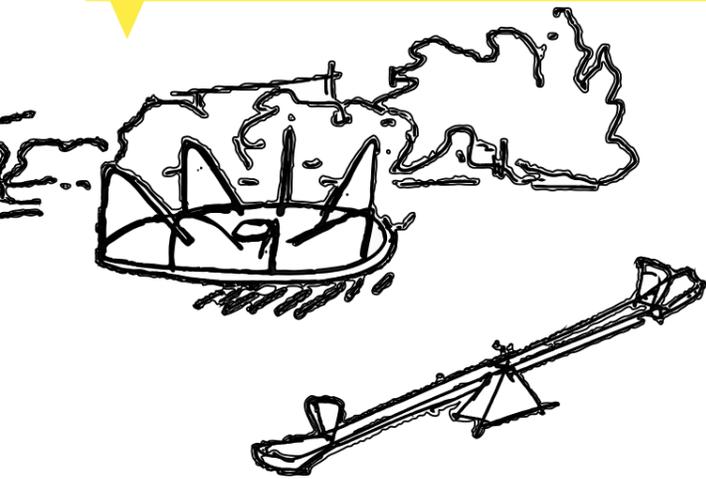
## Design

### Safe spaces

Perceived safety risks can have a strong influence on play opportunities, with 69% of local parents in a recent survey being concerned about tamariki playing in their neighbourhood due to traffic and dogs<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, this differed among young people with 91% stating they feel confident playing in their neighbourhood, even without a grown-up<sup>2</sup>.

Stakeholders said that it helps when the council invests in creating safer spaces. Examples included keeping playground equipment in good condition, adding fences around playgrounds so that tamariki don't run onto the street, and making play spaces visible and welcoming. Various initiatives are being trialled to bring play back into streets and neighbourhoods, such as cul-de-sac cricket, play streets, community BBQs, and pop-up play events.

*"A local playground got burnt/destroyed. [It's] such a good community, but people were nervous to come out because they don't see other people coming out."*  
- Sector stakeholder



### Welcoming play environments

Sector stakeholders saw that play spaces and opportunities need to meet the needs of tamariki and families and, most importantly, be fun and welcoming for all. This included spaces that are:

- suitable for multiple purposes and people of different ages
- well maintained and have a range of equipment for different levels
- usable in all weather and seasons, including rain shelter, shade, and lighting
- made of, or feature natural spaces and materials,
- well connected to other areas (e.g. through paths and cycle lanes)
- have the facilities and set-up required to accommodate those with different abilities

People noted that tamariki were naturally attracted to spaces where other people or tamariki were already playing, and that local 'fun days' or events could help activate spaces. One community provider talked about the importance of making opportunities culturally relevant, such as hiring staff that reflect the diversity of the community and can speak te reo Māori, and creating opportunities that have a strong cultural foundation, such as connecting to te taiao/nature.

It was said that there was a lack of local indoor spaces for winter time, and natural play spaces that weren't focused on plastic playgrounds.

*"Kids want to go and play at places where there are already other kids..."*  
- Sector stakeholder

*"Slide is sticky and doesn't work properly."*  
- Tamariki

### Accessible play spaces

After identifying a lack of accessible play spaces and places, Sport Whanganui is working with the Whanganui District Council to improve the accessibility of the town's play spaces.

Challenges around accessibility were confirmed by a teacher who works with disabled young people, who was frustrated by the gap in accessible local spaces which meant that their students were completely excluded from those opportunities. Spaces that were seen as 'more accessible' still had very limited facilities and only met the needs of some students. While there are some opportunities for young people with disabilities to participate, this is often limited in school and club environments. Finally, this teacher described how secondary school environments lack the focus and facilities aimed at play, which can mean that students with a younger mental age than their peers aren't having their play and developmental needs met.

*"The Splash Centre is a classic. The change table is in the family room, and has no safety sides, so we can't leave a student on there. It's barely long enough for some of the students, and there's not enough space so it's really tight with a wheelchair and a couple of teachers in there. There's no ability for hoisting, and the hoist that goes into the pool isn't designed for wheelchair users who are non-mobile. And that place has the best equipment out of all public sports facilities in Whanganui."*  
- Sector stakeholder

### Exciting play equipment

Tamariki in the Marton survey were very positive about play equipment that let them have 'exciting physical experiences' such as going fast or high, with nearly half of the tamariki mentioning play equipment when asked about their favourite place/activity. Sector stakeholders also talked about how having the right equipment on hand can be an enabler to play, such as balls, hoops, tennis balls etc, or providing gear appropriate for outdoor play such as wet jackets, mud trousers, and spare clothes.

*"Swinging high on the school swings."*  
- 7 year old girl

*"Doing flips on the trampoline."*  
- 7 year old girl

*"The flying fox at the school."*  
- 11 year old girl



## Sector

### Working together

While there are clearly some strong relationships in Whanganui around play, sector stakeholders discussed how silos within and across different organisations or sectors can make it difficult to enable play in the region - especially if competing agendas get in the way.

Prioritising play, and having true community buy-in was seen as enablers for play. There are many examples of communities in Whanganui working at a grassroots level to activate spaces in their neighbourhoods (e.g. cul-de-sac cricket, Play Streets, community BBQs).

Schools were seen as strong community focal points and enablers when they prioritised play, but when school grounds were closed to the community this contributed to a perceived separation between school, home, and the wider community. One sector stakeholder talked about the unintentional silos between schools and Early Childhood Education providers, which can make it difficult to coordinate and streamline play curriculum as children transition.

*"Schools are often a hub for a community [but] closing schools up is doing the opposite of what was intended. It kills the connection of the community to the school. There's less people around, more damage, the community feels less connected to those schools and don't feel invited."*  
- Sector stakeholder

### Funding and time

Unsurprisingly, sector stakeholders talked about how funding and time can be both an enabler and barrier. Inconsistency of funding was also raised, along with the challenge of navigating inflexible projects contracts.

*"Money/funding is big, to be able to pay for staff, for people that deliver."*  
- Sector stakeholder

*"It takes a lot of time because it has to go through a lot of people to get the tick of OK."* - Sector stakeholder

# FUTURE OF PLAY

Opportunities and next steps

## Opportunities

Sector stakeholders saw that in the future Whanganui might provide opportunities for play to be:

### Inclusive and inter-generational

Kaumātua, tamariki and rangatahi can play together. Events and public spaces cater for all abilities and needs, and there are a range of family-friendly indoor and outdoor options across the town. There is a focus on regenerating the community and fostering trust, and a return to taonga tākaro (traditional Māori games). Cost isn't a barrier for anyone to participate.

*How might we create public play spaces and opportunities that everybody can access?*



### Future-proofed

The environment is protected and made more accessible so that the community can interact with it safely for play activities, such as diving, hunting, and mahinga kai/gardening. The health of the environment is seen as interconnected with the health of the community.

*How might we:*

- *exercise kaitiakitanga of te taiao (guardianship of the natural world) so that generations to come can play?*
- *incorporate play into environmental regeneration activities?*

### Place-based

Play reflects the community and environment where it happens. Tamariki and the wider community inform the design of open spaces and therefore have a stronger knowledge of and connection to place. Local stories of people, the awa, and the whenua are woven throughout these places. Māra Hūpara (traditional Māori playgrounds), where creativity is fostered, become common-place.

*How might we:*

- *better tell our local stories through play spaces?*
- *include tamariki and the wider community in the design of play spaces and opportunities?*
- *connect with the awa for play?*
- *encourage tamariki and whānau to play on the way to destinations?*
- *showcase Whanganui's creative culture through play?*

### Prioritised

Play is incorporated in all community design projects, equipment is upgraded and maintained, and more human resources are available to support the community to re-embrace risk, creativity, and thinking outside the box. Play and spending time with others is seen as an important activity to enhance wellbeing.

*How might we:*

- *make play a priority?*
- *work better together across organisations and sectors to enable play across the region?*
- *find a healthy balance between learning risks and child safety?*

### Enhanced by technology

Technology is more appropriately leveraged, using augmented and virtual reality to increase and improve creative play opportunities.

*How might we:*

- *create a better balance between on and off-screen play in our community?*
- *better leverage technology in our community to enhance play experiences?*

## Next steps

This report is just the start of an exciting movement at both a local and regional level. Although it focused on Whanganui city as a starting point, Sport Whanganui will be looking to branch out and build relationships in the wider region as well.

At a local level, the next steps for this kaupapa will be to:

1. Share back, test, and build on what we've heard with the community
2. Create a local play champions network - supporting each other to identify and grow play opportunities across Whanganui
3. Increase awareness of the importance of play with the wider community through accessible information and promotion
4. Collectively develop an inclusive play framework for Whanganui
5. Support groups to access external funding for play initiatives
6. Create new partnerships, initiatives, and collaborations across the region.

If you'd like more information about play in Whanganui, or to be involved in these next steps, contact: [info@sportwhanganui.co.nz](mailto:info@sportwhanganui.co.nz)

At a national level, Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa will continue moving across Aotearoa to learn more about what play looks like and how it's changed, what's special about play in Aotearoa, and opportunities to create more play opportunities across the motu.



# INDEX

How this report was created and references

## How this report was created

### Whanganui region

After exploring play in Christchurch and Invercargill, Innovation Unit and Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa worked with the Sport Whanganui team to hear from sector stakeholders, whānau, and tamariki in the Whanganui community. Over the next few months, we will follow a similar process for two additional regions.

### Play 'huddle'

Innovation Unit facilitated one workshop in Whanganui, with a diverse group of staff from local council, education, health, and community sectors.

### Intercept interviews with tamariki and whānau

Sport Whanganui visited local school holiday programmes to speak with parents and 25 tamariki (aged 6-12) about what play looks like for them.

### Phone interviews: sector staff and parents

We interviewed three Whanganui parents and five sector staff who didn't attend the play 'huddle', about their perceptions and experiences of play. It's worth noting that this report is biased towards a sector point of view, and that more conversations with whānau could bring further balance to the conversation.

### Additional research

We also referenced existing local play research, including a 'Play survey' of 30 tamariki, four teachers, and one parent in Marton, and Active NZ 'New Zealand Participation Survey' over the years of 2017, 2018, 2019.

### Analysis

We spent time going through the collected data to explore common themes, tensions, and opportunities to consolidate the knowledge from the workshops, interviews, and existing research into this report.



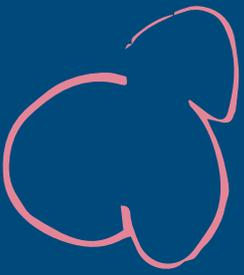
Images from top: 'Huddle' with sector stakeholders, tamariki drawing of play, making sense of research data.

## References

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### Photographs

- Jacqui McGowan – waka, lightning boy
- Maartje Morton – pink girl and balloon boy
- John Smart – two boys with arms up

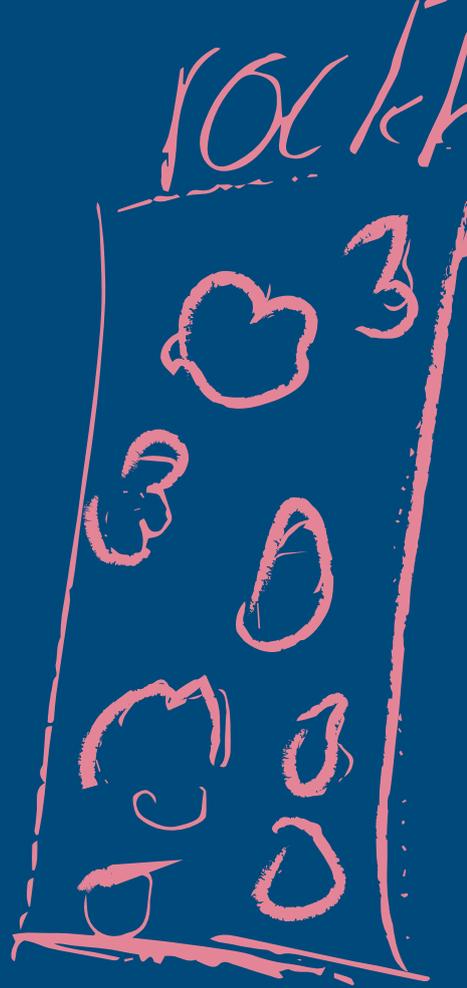


Ship



Swing

Basket



Rock

Roller



Coaster

