

SPOTLIGHT

There is an apparent apathy in the nation's collective psyche towards the most precious lives of our society, the very soul of our future—our children. Even unwittingly depriving our children of their physical and psychological nurture is a form of abuse.

Children need open spaces to thrive. Sports, besides developing their bodies, promote social interaction and prepare them for confronting the realities of life. It facilitates team spirit, inspires competitive resolve and the ability to cope with stress in a safe setting. Today our

children spend their days engaged in their concrete prisons, their minds being stolen by the false reality of the television, and fake scenarios of video games.

Laboratory studies reveal that rats, separated during childhood from their playing companions grow up into adults with unnaturally aggressive behaviour (Developmental Psychobiology, 22, 159-172). The findings suggest that the more rats are exposed to stressful situations the less sensitive they are to stress hormones. The dynamics of merry-making, much often involving play fighting, presents a flight or fight



DAYS OF PLAY FADE AWAY

SHAHAN HASNAEN

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

response in an otherwise secure environment. Further evidence suggests that humans and primates also develop short-temper if restricted from playing as children (American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 53, 221-226.) Without adequate space to play with others, children become isolated, self-centered and delusional. These psychological impacts can translate into addictive tendencies, depression and excessive anger in adulthood.

SK Rezina Parveen, a Child Counsellor at Ain O Shalish Kendro says, "Children should touch grass to understand what it is, instead of being told what it is. The importance of learning through

experience is crucial for the development of children into independent thinkers."

Rapid urbanisation is leading to the disappearance of the few open grounds left for children. Within the last decade, the population of Dhaka city has risen by more than 56 percent. Today only 21.6 percent of the land in Dhaka is open space, which includes parks, playgrounds, water bodies, cultivated land, graveyards etc. The erstwhile Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) was responsible for the maintenance of 54 parks and 11 playgrounds scattered around the city. However, the few available spaces are gradually being snatched by encroachers.

For instance, the Dhanmondi No. 8 playground had been closed to the public, fenced and gated, by land grabbers under the watch of the DSCC. Last year, the playing field was reopened to the public, following an order of the High Court Division, affected by much protest on the

part of environmentalists and the Citizen's Committee. However, plans are still underway to construct a building on the field, reflecting the persistence of land grabbers in their pursuit of public property. A classic case of commercialisation of a public space was the building of The Wonderland Park, a private enterprise which occupied a major chunk of land in Gulshan for over two decades. Fortunately the land has been reclaimed and is being opened to the public.

Dr M A Matin General Secretary, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) says, "It is more distressful to witness the

degradation of the scant green space we have left, more than it is to see the congestion of already developed land. Our open spaces are being lost to encroachment by different parties including shop vendors who occupy the land by paying rent to local gangs who grabbed the property by illegal means. Homeless members of society often take shelter in open spaces as they have nowhere else to go."

Security is a major issue for residents of Dhaka city. According to BSAF statistics, there were 118 cases of child abduction in the city in 2014. Few parents are comfortable with their children roaming

free in public. Many potential recreational places for children are no longer safe; many of these places are often gathering spots for drug users and peddlers. Indeed government measures to increase the security of places such as Ramna Park which has many areas sectioned off as playgrounds for children, would be more welcoming to parents and children. Further, the problem of security most tragically impacts female children and adolescents who barely have any freedom to move around in the city. The terrifying sexual harrasment incident in open space on Pahela Baishakh, speaks for itself.

Many places used by children for

recreation such as the Nayabazar Park, had been converted into dumping grounds and parking spots for trucks and rickshaws, though improvements are in progress. Any open space attracts opportunists who seek to exploit the land in ways that serve them.

Besides the unavailability of playing spaces, the disappearance of pre-existing places appears to be discouraging. Arif Mozumder, age 17, is a sports enthusiast and a witness to the loss of green fields in Dhaka. He says, "Being a resident of Purana Paltan, every day we went to play cricket at the nearest field, Balur Math. Now all that remains there to remind us of



NO SPACE TO GROW

APURBO JAHANGIR

The lack of playing fields in our city has been a major reason for concern among Dhakaites, especially for parents and children. As crime rates are increasing day by day, more parents are becoming afraid of letting their children use public fields. "This city is not at all safe for my children. Yes, maybe I am depriving them from playing with their friends in the field, but it is better than having them kidnapped," says Maliha Chowdhury, a mother of two.

With new television programmes and next generation gaming, technology is rapidly replacing physical sports among youngsters. "I am a huge fan of Fifa, but I never played a proper football match in real life. I don't think I am missing



out on anything, as playing it on my XBOX seems a lot easier and less of a hassle," says ten year old Adammo.

A lot of schools are now being built without proper fields. "Our annual sports matches always take place in public fields. We don't have a field which we can call our own, which is quite disappointing for sports enthusiasts like me," says Rayan Rahman, a student of Udayan Uccha

Madhayamik Biddalaya. Schools such as Gateway International or Cordova have their annual sports day on some other school fields. Even the schools which have fields are not letting their students play after hours for a safety issues.

Whatever the future holds for this city, it is just a matter of time when playing in the fields will be nothing but a dream, a subject of literature, a painting in a museum for the urban life.



our childhood is an apartment building casting its shadow on the city." On the other hand, playing fields like the famous Abahani Math and Gulshan Youth Club, once abounding with children have become exclusive with new rules being implemented to make access restricted to the public. This reflects the neglect of children from low income groups, who are excluded from the privilege.

Indeed, a major obstacle in expanding the recreation zones for children is accessibility. Today, playgrounds that are still in use include the DOHS grounds, Arambagh and Modhubag Maths. These places are in close proximity with and serve the local community and are within safe walking distance for the children around the area. With playing fields spread out like islands, it is difficult for children to use them regularly. However, open spaces like Ramna Park or Osmani Udyan have ample land to be converted into playing spaces for kids. Initiatives can be taken by the authorities to provide equipment, restrooms, water source for drinking and most importantly heightened security to convert empty land into useful centers of public activity.

Though it is difficult to expand open spaces with the demands of the increasing population, all it requires is a simple ■