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**Author(s):** Jouhki, Essi

**Title:** Politics in play : the playground movement as a socio-political issue in early twentieth-century Finland

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Jouhki, E. (2023). Politics in play : the playground movement as a socio-political issue in early twentieth-century Finland. *Paedagogica Historica*, Early online.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155481>



# Politics in play: the playground movement as a socio-political issue in early twentieth-century Finland

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To cite this article: Essi Jouhki (2023): Politics in play: the playground movement as a socio-political issue in early twentieth-century Finland, Paedagogica Historica, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2022.2155481](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155481)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2022.2155481>



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Published online: 10 Jan 2023.



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ARTICLE



## Politics in play: the playground movement as a socio-political issue in early twentieth-century Finland

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### ABSTRACT

This article studies the history of playgrounds in Finland and focuses on the emergence and implementation of the objectives of the international playground movement in the early twentieth century. Specifically, it examines the relations between supervised playgrounds, women's emancipation, child welfare policies, and political discussion on social class. In doing so, the article illustrates the transnational circulation and implementation of early twentieth century "child-saving" ideas, such as the playground reform. The analysis is done by cross and close reading a wealth of contemporary texts on playgrounds, such as magazines, newspapers, and archival materials. By tracing the interwoven aspects of the playground movement and the history of Finland, especially the significance of the Civil War of 1918, this article argues that supervised playgrounds were utilised in reconciling the socio-political issues of the newly independent state.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 June 2022

Accepted 30 November 2022



### KEYWORDS

childhood; child-saving;  
Finland; history; playgrounds

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, public playgrounds have become essential parts of urban architecture and the everyday life of children and their families. In many countries, and especially in the Nordic countries, playgrounds are often regarded as places where children are allowed and even encouraged to indulge in independent play and mobility.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, public play spaces reflect both spatial and educational policies, which determine where and how children are expected to spend their leisure time. Consequently, the modern concept of childhood assumes that children's everyday activities should be supervised by adults.<sup>2</sup>

This assumption should not, however, be viewed strictly as a modern invention with no historical context. As Jeroen H.J. Moody and Zoe Dekker have respectively highlighted, in the past, too, children's safety and "best interests" have been

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<sup>1</sup>Marketta Kyttä et al., "The Last Free-Range Children? Children's Independent Mobility in Finland in the 1990s and 2010s," *Journal of Transport Geography* 47 (2015): 1–12; Veera Moll and Essi Jouhki, "Leikin paikka: Rakennettujen leikkirympäristöjen kehitys 1970-luvun Helsingissä," *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu* 59, no. 1 (2021): 10–32.

<sup>2</sup>Kim Rasmussen, "Places for Children – Children's Places," *Childhood* 11, no. 2 (2004): 155–73; Elizabeth Gagen, "Too Good to Be True: Representing Children's Agency in the Archives of the Playground Movement," *Journal of Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 53.

the priority of pedagogues, social workers, legislators, psychologists, and parents.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the end of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the “child-saving movement”, which sought to save at-risk and troubled urban children from harmful conditions, such as falling into delinquency, poverty, and abuse.<sup>4</sup> As a part of this development, thousands of public playgrounds were built throughout Western countries affording children organised opportunities and spaces for their recreation as well as protection and moral guidance.<sup>5</sup> Since the rise of the so-called playground movement, public play spaces have come to be so much taken for granted in our urban environments that we tend to overlook their historical significance.

This article examines the history of public playgrounds in early twentieth-century Finland. It pays particular attention to the emergence and implementation of the playground movement in the capital city of Helsinki. By taking Finland as an empirical case, the aim of this article is to discuss and to analyse the Finnish playground reform in relation to the contested socio-political issues, such as the development of child welfare policies and the post-Civil War ideological turmoil. Moreover, by looking at how the ideas of the international movement were received and adopted in Finland, this article addresses the flow of ideas between societies and beyond nation-states.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, it contributes a transnational perspective to the relatively one-sided history of the playground movement.

The historiography of the playground movement is traditionally drawn from David Cavallo’s influential book *Muscles and Morals: Organised Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920*.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, Cavallo’s book is an exhaustive overview of the American playground reform and its development. Since *Muscles and Morals*, the history of the movement in the United States, Canada, Ireland, Britain and Australia have been extensively mapped,<sup>8</sup> while playground histories in other Western countries have rarely been discussed in detail.<sup>9</sup> In Finland, for instance, playgrounds have mainly been a subject of interest in local park histories and in the context of sports and urban histories

<sup>3</sup>Jeroen J.H. Dekker, “Children at Risk in History: A Story of Expansion,” *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1/2 (2009): 17–36; Zoe Moody, “Transnational Treaties on Children’s Rights: Norm Building and Circulation in the Twentieth Century,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 1/2 (2014): 151–64.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony Platt, “The Rise of the Child-Saving Movement: A Study in Social Policy and Correctional Reform,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 381, no. 1 (1969): 21–38.

<sup>5</sup>Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organised Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Joe L. Frost, *A History of Children’s Play and Play Environments: Towards a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>Deirdre Raftery and Marie Clarke, eds., *Transnationalism, Gender and the History of Education* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017); Moody, “Transnational Treaties on Children’s Rights.”

<sup>7</sup>Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*.

<sup>8</sup>See e.g. Elizabeth A. Gagen, “Playing the Part: Performing Gender in America’s Playgrounds,” in *Children’s Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, ed. Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine, Critical Geographies (London: Routledge, 2000), 213–29; Frost, *A History of Children’s Play*; Ann Marie F. Murnaghan, “Disciplining Children in Toronto Playgrounds in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2016): 111–32; Margaret Kernan, “Developing Citizenship through Supervised Play: The Civics Institute of Ireland Playgrounds, 1933–75,” *History of Education* 34, no. 6 (2005), 675–87; Jodi Frawley, “Haunts of the Street Bully: Social Reform and the Queensland Children’s Playground Movement, 1910–1930,” *History of Education Review* 29, no. 1 (2000): 32–47; and Barbara Chancellor, “A Century Defending the Child’s Right to Play: Beginnings of the Playground Movement in Melbourne, Australia,” *Journal of Playwork Practice* 3, no. 1 (2016): 7–22.

<sup>9</sup>For some exceptions in Sweden, see Märit Jansson and Åsa Klintborg Ahlklo, eds., *Plats för lek: svenska lekplatser förr och nu* (Stockholm: Svensk byggtjänst, 2016); and in Hungary, see Luca Csepely-Knorr and Mária Klagyvivik, “From Social Spaces to Training Fields: Evolution of Design Theory of the Children’s Public Sphere in Hungary in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *Childhood in the Past* 13, no. 2 (2020): 93–108.

of the postwar era.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, this rather narrow historiography of the playground movement has not taken into consideration different cultural, societal, and even national variations. Finland presents an interesting case in terms of studying the transnational spread of the playground reform and its differing implementations.

A great many of the studies on the history of playgrounds in the Western world have been based on official accounts and documents of those in charge of their organisation. Accordingly, such playground histories have often been written from the perspective of adults and play reformers,<sup>11</sup> while the agency of the actual playground children have gone largely unrecognised.<sup>12</sup> Historians endeavouring to write the history of childhood have shared this continuous methodological impediment – children in the past have rarely left behind records of their own history and agency.<sup>13</sup> In this article, children's agency is only briefly explored, as the focus is primarily on the actions and aims of the play organisers and policymakers. However, the fascinating theme leaves opportunities for further studies.

Much like the histories of childhood, playground histories, too, have often encountered a lack of coherent or indeed a total absence of archival records. In the case of Finland, especially the absence of a national and centralised playground organisation has steered this study to miscellaneous fragments from different sources, such as earlier historical accounts of the many private organisations involved, the minutes and annual reports of the City Council of Helsinki as well as newspaper clippings and contributions to magazines. One especially informative source is the magazine *Kisakenttä* (*Playground*, 1911–1933), intended as the voice of Finnish-speaking female gymnasts. It was founded and edited by Anni Collan<sup>14</sup>, a pioneer in Finnish female gymnastics and advocate of outdoor play. *Kisakenttä* expressed a wide interest in supervised play activities as they were considered important elements in the physical education movement of the time.<sup>15</sup> Later in the 1920s, the playground question was discussed in other periodicals, especially in the field of child welfare, and selected examples of this discussion are analysed in dialogue with *Kisakenttä*.

When reading the sources, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate playgrounds from public parks, sports fields, and other informal open spaces used frequently by children. This is a

<sup>10</sup>Leena Laine, "The Finnish Play Movement: Nationalism, Citizenship and Women's Resistance," *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, no. 7 (2006): 25–40; Katri Lento, "A Question of Gender, Class and Politics: The Use and Provision of Sport Grounds in Helsinki c.1880s–1960s," in *Sport, Recreation and Green Space in the European City*, ed. Peter Clark, Marjaana Niemi, and Jari Niemelä (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2009): 25–40; Moll and Joughki, "Leikin paikka," Marjo Nieminen, "From Backyard to Light: Urban Environment, Nature, and Children in a Finnish Short Film from the 1940s," *Paedagogica Historica* 57, no. 4 (2021): 363–80.

<sup>11</sup>Kernan, "Developing Citizenship through Supervised Play," 676; Murnaghan, "Disciplining Children in Toronto Playgrounds," Jon Winder, "Revisiting the Playground: Charles Wicksteed, Play Equipment and Public Spaces for Children in Early Twentieth-Century Britain," *Urban History*, First View (2021): 1–18.

<sup>12</sup>Some examples of child-oriented playground histories, see Gagen, "Playing the Part;" Gagen, "Too Good to Be True;" and Michael Hines, "They Do Not Know How to Play': Reformers' Expectations and Children's Realities on the First Progressive Playgrounds of Chicago," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 10, no. 2 (2017): 206–27.

<sup>13</sup>Ian Grosvenor, "Seen But Not Heard': City Childhoods from the Past into the Present 1," *Paedagogica Historica* 43 (2007): 405–29; Nell Musgrove, Carla Pascoe Leahy, and Kristine Moruzi, "Hearing Children's Voices: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges," in *Children's Voices from the Past*, ed. Nell Musgrove, Carla Pascoe Leahy, and Kristine Moruzi (: Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1–25.

<sup>14</sup>Anni Collan (1876–1962) was a sports teacher at the sports department of the University of Helsinki (1909–1918) and inspector of female sports for the National Board of Education (1919–1944). She was an advocate for female sports and founded the first Finnish-language female sports magazine, *Kisakenttä*, and acted as its editor-in-chief (1911–1920 and 1928–1933). She was the president of the Women's Gymnastics Federation's Finnish-speaking department (1917–1921) and the Finnish Girl Scouts Association (1924–1941). She had a major interest in traditional folk dance and play traditions, and she wrote several books on play culture and female physical education: Leena Laine, "Collan, Anni," *Kansallisbiografia* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997), <http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:sk:kgb-005369>.

<sup>15</sup>Laine, "The Finnish Play Movement".

common challenge in all playground histories due to certain terminological vagueness. At the turn of the century the term “play” was used with much the same connotation as “recreation”, so playgrounds could essentially refer to any open recreational places.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in Finland the concept of “play” was a generic term covering a wide variety of physical activities, such as popular folk games and dancing, singing games, team games, and other sports.<sup>17</sup> To avoid confusion, here playgrounds are defined as open play spaces for children specifically built and maintained by the city, as opposed to sports fields or public parks.

All relevant source materials used in this study have been digitised by the city of Helsinki and the Finnish National Library.<sup>18</sup> These digitised materials were systematically scrutinised for playground mentions with Finnish keywords “leikki” or “leikkikent\*”. The results were categorised thematically and analysed by combining narrative and critical approaches of textual analysis, such as close reading.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the diverse source materials have been combined into a single interpretation through the source pluralist approach. As introduced by Janken Myrdal, the method is especially useful when studying unmarked phenomena, obscurities or other seemingly “unofficial” themes which have left behind only fragmentary evidence.<sup>20</sup> The different textual sources were read multiple times by continuously addressing them with critical questions about their origins, intentions and the information they aimed to convey.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the results were compared and cross-read, constantly reflecting on their historical and textual contexts, to discuss and analyse them in terms of how they serve to gain a more profound understanding of the subject of study.

The scope of this article is two-fold. First, it will explore the origins and the ideas of the international playground movement and how it was addressed and implemented in Finland. Second, it examines the important question of how the early playgrounds were connected to more widespread socio-political phenomena.

## The playground movement in transnational perspective

The history of public playgrounds as we understand them today can be traced to late nineteenth-century North America and the establishment of “sand gardens” in Boston in 1885, an idea first originating from German gymnastics and outdoor gymnasia. The rapid popularity of these sandpits led from philanthropic to public support for playgrounds, and soon the Boston Parks Department established the first public playgrounds equipped with swings, ladders, seesaws, and, of course, sand gardens. The idea of compound play areas quickly spread to other North American cities, Philadelphia and Chicago being the very first.<sup>22</sup> The early American “model playgrounds”, according to Joe Frost, consisted of gender-

<sup>16</sup>Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 89; Winder, “Revisiting the Playground,” 2.

<sup>17</sup>For a linguistic discussion of the term, see Laine, “The Finnish Play Movement,” 27.

<sup>18</sup>Annual reports and printed documents of the City of Helsinki (1890–1929), Digitised printed documents of the City of Helsinki, [https://www.hel.fi/static/tieke/digitoidut\\_asiakirjat/index.html](https://www.hel.fi/static/tieke/digitoidut_asiakirjat/index.html); Newspaper collections of *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Uusi Suomi* and *Työmies* (1890–1929); and magazines *Kisakenttä* (1911–1929) and *Lastensuojelulehti* (1921–1929), National Library of Finland, Digital collections, [https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/etusivu?set\\_language=en](https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/etusivu?set_language=en).

<sup>19</sup>Further on close reading, see Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading (Second Edition)* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2019); Ilona Pikkanen, *Casting the Ideal Past: A Narratological Close Reading of Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä's History of the Finnish Theatre Company (1906–1910)* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2012), 20–3.

<sup>20</sup>Janken Myrdal, “Source Pluralism as a Method of Historical Research,” in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, ed. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 156–7.

<sup>21</sup>Pikkanen, *Casting the Ideal Past*, 21; Jyrki Pöysä, *Lähiluvun tieto. Näkökulmia kirjoitetun muistelukerronnan tutkimukseen* (Joensuu: Suomen Kansantietouden Tutkijain Seura, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, 23–32; Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 94–6.

specific areas, gymnastic apparatus, indoor facilities, around the year play areas, park-like surroundings, and supervision by playground teachers.<sup>23</sup> By 1910, growing public interest and the founding of the national Playground Association of America (PAA) paved the way for the standardisation of playgrounds and the spread of the idea to Western Europe.<sup>24</sup>

In the wide literature on the history of playgrounds, the vast expansion of the play reform is commonly addressed as a movement which began as a local reform and grew into a national, and finally, transnational phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> The attempt to organise the play activities of city children on supervised, municipally owned playgrounds transcended national boundaries, as the play reformists in Northern America and Europe were inspired by the shared aim of improving children's health, morals, and wellbeing through play.<sup>26</sup> However, it needs to be understood that the playground movement was not a sporadic idea, but it was built upon and in interrelation with several contemporary movements of the Progressive Era with common ideas and concepts related to children's rights and wellbeing.<sup>27</sup>

First and foremost, the playground movement was much influenced by the wider child-saving ideology with the guiding principle of the "best interests of the child". During the latter half of the nineteenth century, leading philanthropists and social reformers in the Western world were determined to rescue "at risk" children – especially working-class and the ethnic minorities – from a number of assumed social and moral dangers, such as crime, homelessness, child abuse, and poverty, caused by rapid urbanisation.<sup>28</sup> Over time, the movement engulfed several smaller movements, including the playground reform, school gardens, and organised camping, with similar objectives of saving children.<sup>29</sup>

Second, the playground movement was linked to the physical education movement originating in Germany, where the health and fitness benefits of vigorous outdoor exercise, supervised play included, were considered universally desirable. For instance, a pioneer in playground histories, Elizabeth Gagen, has demonstrated the interconnectedness of play and physical education reforms in governing children's bodies and sense of national identity in the early twentieth-century United States.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the playground movement was associated with the park movement, which aimed at improving the urban environment through scenic parks, gardens, promenades, and other public spaces for all

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<sup>23</sup>Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 96.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 102–8.

<sup>25</sup>See, Ann Marie F. Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geographies," in *Establishing Geographies of Children and Young People*, ed. Tracey Skelton and Stuart Aitken, Geographies of Children and Young People (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 8.

<sup>26</sup>Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, 1, 151. Examples of the implementation of the playground movement in Canada Ann Marie F. Murnaghan, "Exploring Race and Nation in Playground Propaganda in Early Twentieth-Century Toronto," *International Journal of Play* 2, no. 2 (2013): 134–46; in Ireland, Kernan, "Developing Citizenship Through Supervised Play," and in Hungary, Csepely-Knorr and Klagyivik, "From Social Spaces to Training Fields."

<sup>27</sup>Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, 1–4; Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geographies," 8; Moody, "Transnational Treaties," 153.

<sup>28</sup>Jeroen J.H. Dekker, *Educational Ambitions in History: Childhood and Education in an Expanding Educational Space from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010); Dekker, "Children at Risk in History;" Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 63–4.

<sup>29</sup>Jeroen J.H. Dekker, *The Will to Change the Child: Re-Education Homes for Children at Risk in Nineteenth Century Western Europe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001); Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 75–6.

<sup>30</sup>Elizabeth A. Gagen, "Making America Flesh: Physicality and Nationhood in Early Twentieth-Century Physical Education Reform," *Cultural Geographies* 11, no. 4 (2004): 417–42.



citizens – children included.<sup>31</sup> The first Boston sand gardens grew eventually into a wide-ranging transnational movement which emphasised the importance of organised physical activity in functionally planned play environments. However, according to Ann Marie Murnaghan, playgrounds were not simply public sites for play and recreation, but pedagogically and politically charged places of adult discipline and the moral education of children.<sup>32</sup>

### Playgrounds and urbanisation: the first playgrounds in Helsinki

At the turn of the twentieth century, Finland was part of the Russian Empire, granted the autonomous status of Grand Duchy of Finland (1809–1917). Finland had retained its Lutheran religion and the official language and form of government from the preceding time of Swedish rule. In 1812, Helsinki had been appointed the new capital of Finland and the city had begun to grow rapidly, while the rest of the nation remained distinctly agrarian. Scenic public parks, such as those at Kaivopuisto and Esplanaadi (see [Figure 1](#)), were built as recreational places for the bourgeoisie while the working-class had their common parks, such as



**Figure 1.** Children playing in a sandbox at Esplanaadi park in Helsinki, around 1912. The clothing of the children indicates their bourgeois status. Photographer Ivan Timiriasev, Helsinki City Museum.

<sup>31</sup>Frost, *A History of Children's Play*, 62–3, 89–90; Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geographies," 8.

<sup>32</sup>Murnaghan, "Disciplining Children in Toronto Playgrounds," 120, 128; Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geographies," 8.



Korkeasaari and Eläintarha.<sup>33</sup> Small children were welcome in all parks, where there were already sandpiles for their specific use. However, the scenic park ideal of the time did not welcome children's games, and the growing number of children and young people had to find their play spaces elsewhere, usually in cramped and dark yards and vacant lots.<sup>34</sup> According to Katri Lento, it was only from the 1890s onwards that reformist ideals of healthy urban spaces and the rising popularity of sports made way for new types of parks, where sports facilities and playgrounds were introduced as an essential part of the park design.<sup>35</sup>

In 1898, Councillor Mauritz Hallberg petitioned the City Council of Helsinki to set up public playgrounds for children.<sup>36</sup> In his reasons, Hallberg spoke of side-effects of urbanisation and the distress it caused to the health and recreational opportunities of children and young people in the city: the rapid expansion of the city had forced children onto the dusty streets and left them to their own devices. By this he most likely referred to the poor conditions in the ever-expanding working-class districts at the outskirts of the city. To amend the problem, he proposed the city make use of eight existing public parks and vacant lots he deemed suitable for the purpose.<sup>37</sup> In 1899, the City Council granted funds for building two larger playgrounds at Kaisaniemi and Kaivopuisto, and two smaller playgrounds in the densely populated workers' districts of Punavuori (Tehtaanpuisto) and Kamppi (Lapinlahdenkatu).<sup>38</sup> As demonstrated in Figure 2, in the following decades the number of playgrounds in Helsinki gradually increased, but they continued to be built in suburban areas.

Helsinki was the first city in Finland to provide publicly funded playgrounds for children, and other cities soon followed suit. There is no incontestable way of telling what the earliest playgrounds looked like, but the general outline can be imagined based on the few surviving photographs (see Figure 3) and certain written descriptions from the late 1910s. For instance, in 1919 *Kisakenttä*, a playground reformist Aino Saarelainen, described a typical Finnish playground: "In Finland, playgrounds are understood as small parks with a few swings and a sandbox and a fenced field where stepping on the grass is strictly forbidden." She continued with a list of how the Finnish playgrounds should resemble the American playground model: lush vegetation, versatile play equipment, an indoor building with storage room, even a

<sup>33</sup>Lento, "A Question of Gender, Class and Politics," 28; Maunu Häyrynen, *Maisemapuistosta reformipuistoon: Helsingin kaupunkipuistot ja puistopolitiikka 1880-luvulta 1930-luvulle*, Entisaikain Helsinki 14 (Helsinki: Helsinki-seura, 1994).

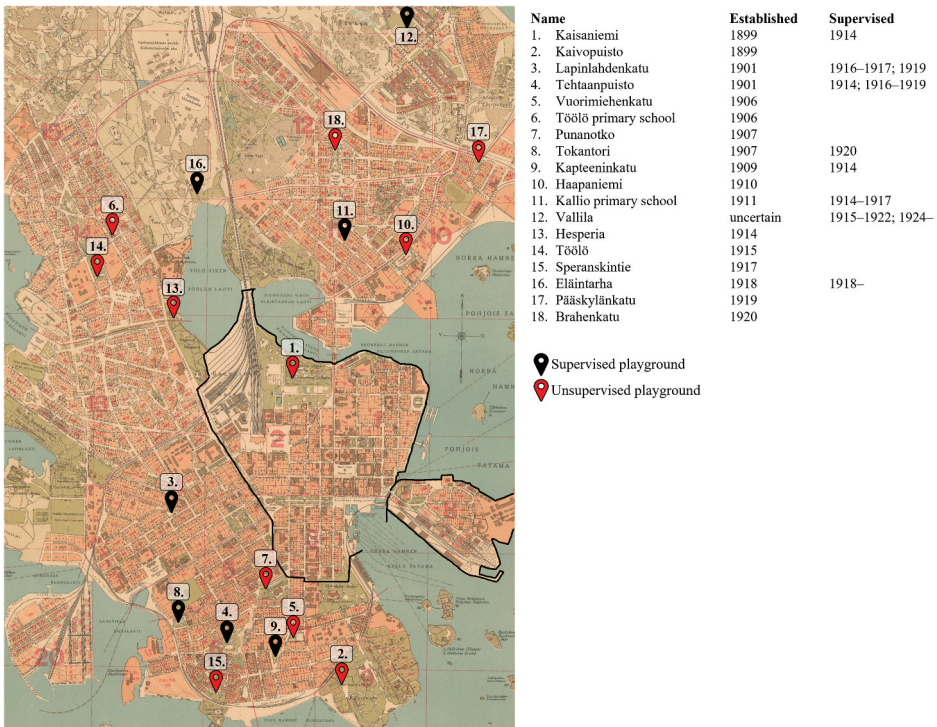
<sup>34</sup>Jere Jäppinen, "Meillä on laulu, meillä on nuoruus, meillä on aurinko. Helsingin leikkikenttien vaiheita," in *On meillä nasta tati: leikkikenttien vanhoja laululeikkejä*, ed. Liisa Helenius and Jussi Hynninen, 1331 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden Seura, 2011), 98.

<sup>35</sup>Lento, "A Question of Gender, Class and Politics," 26.

<sup>36</sup>Hallberg (1851–1924) was a Swedish-speaking mechanic who became a politician and a businessman. He began his career as a council man in Helsinki (1889–1903) and later as a long-standing member of the Finnish Parliament (1882, 1888–1906, 1910). He was granted with the of Councillor of State in 1908 for his societal merits: Tuukka Talvio, "Hallberg, Mauritz," *Kansallisbiografia* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997), <http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:sk:kgb-004287>.

<sup>37</sup>Hallberg to the City Council (28 October 1898). "No: 16 Documents concerning the establishment of playgrounds for children," in *Helsinki City Council. Printed Documents of 1899* (Helsinki City Archive, 1899).

<sup>38</sup>Monetary Council to City Council (28 February 1899), "No: 16."



**Figure 2.** Public and supervised playgrounds in Helsinki by 1920. Bounded area represents the historical central-city area of Helsinki (city districts 1–3 and 8). The playground data is collected from *Annual report of municipal administration of the city of Helsinki*, vol. 12–33 (Helsinki: Helsinki City Statistics Office, 1899–1920). The list is compiled according to when a playground is first mentioned in annual reports. Due to imprecise recording, in some cases, it can be only assumed that the playground was built at least by and no later than the year mentioned. Map base from Helsinki Map Services: Historical Materials, Guide Maps, City of Helsinki 1917–1918. Online map coordinates available at: <https://kartta.hel.fi/link/bwZQPM>.

small library and year-round supervision.<sup>39</sup> Most of the ideals listed by Saarelainen did not fulfil until the 1950s, when the first all-year playgrounds were opened in Helsinki.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the outlook of the early Finnish playgrounds was rather desolate, as the photograph of Tehtaankatu playground dating to the same year illustrates (Figure 3): an open gravel pitch with a few benches and a sandbox. Supervised playgrounds, on the other hand, were more versatile compared to regular playgrounds, as the play leaders brought with them some loose play props, such as balls, sand shovels, wooden clubs and pins, and other small items.<sup>41</sup> Compared to contemporary playgrounds in other countries loose play props were a relatively unique feature in Finland, whereas a wide range of stationary play equipment were emphasised in the United States and Great Britain.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Aino Saarelainen, "Leikkikenttätöiminnan säännöstely," *Kisakenttä* n:o 6 (1919), 166–9.

<sup>40</sup> Moll and Jouhki, "Leikin paikka," 10–32.

<sup>41</sup> Anja Kinnunen, *Leikkikenttätöiminta Helsingissä vv. 1914–1955* (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston voimistelulaitos, 1958), 25–6.

<sup>42</sup> On the development of play equipment, see.g. Winder, "Revisiting the Playground."



**Figure 3.** The Milieu of Tehtaankatu playground, organised by the child welfare center in 1919. Children are playing a round game with the play leaders. Helsinki City Museum. Originally printed in Liisa Helenius and Jussi Hynninen ed., *On meillä nasta täti: leikkikenttien vanhoja laululeikkejä* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2011).

### For health and safety of children: emergence of the playground movement in Finland

In turn-of-the-century Finland, Councillor Hallberg had initiated a discussion on public play areas. This precipitated a development in building designated play areas for children, but the actual playground movement arrived in Finland in the writings and actions of physical education reformers, namely middle-class female gymnasts and the Finnish Women's Gymnastics Federation (*Suomen Naisten Voimisteluliitto*). As Leena Laine has established, the concept of play (*leikki*) and outdoor games had been part of the female physical education movement since the beginning of the century.<sup>43</sup> However, although the two are extensively interconnected, the playground movement should be differentiated from a more prominent Finnish women's "play movement", which was directed primarily at adult gymnasts. For instance, the Federation and a local female gymnastics club in Helsinki (*Helsingin Naisvoimistelijat*, HNV) had already organised special play courses for young adult women since 1904. According to Laine, instructed children's play was just one manifestation of this wider play movement.<sup>44</sup>

Anni Collan, a pioneer in women's physical education, was the driving force in introducing the international playground movement to a wider public in Finland. She initiated the discussion in the first issues of *Kisakenttä* in 1912. Later, in 1914, she travelled widely in North America and acquainted herself better with the implementation of playgrounds in Chicago and Philadelphia. After her travels, she wrote a book *Leikkikenttäliike Ameriikassa* (*The playground movement in America*, 1915) based on her observations and called even more urgently for the introduction of children's playgrounds and school sports grounds.<sup>45</sup> The movement itself, however, had already been

<sup>43</sup>Laine, "The Finnish Play Movement," 29–30.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 32–3.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.; Lento, "A Question of Gender, Class and Politics," 32.

introduced in 1909, when *Uusi Suometar* published a detailed article on the Playground Association of America, public playgrounds and their role in popular enlightenment.<sup>46</sup> The next year, another quality daily *Helsingin Sanomat* wrote about the American movement in its sports section and praised the organisers' efforts in the cities of Chicago and New York in successfully combating the evils of urbanisation through supervised playgrounds while offering constructive recreational opportunities for children and young people.<sup>47</sup>

The first full article featuring playgrounds in *Kisakenttä* in 1912 had a more practical agenda. It was essentially a summary of an article published in *The American Education Review* and presented the constitution and social benefits of supervised playgrounds in America. Like the article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, it cited the example of Chicago, where the juvenile crime rates were reported to have dropped by 28% after the building of playgrounds. Moreover, it emphasised that while the initial objective of playgrounds had been to keep working-class and immigrant children off the streets, they also had positive educational values, such as inculcating good manners, promoting citizenship and solidarity and in encouraging activity and taking up responsibilities among children.<sup>48</sup>

These early articles reflected a wider transnational circulation and discussion on playgrounds and the changing conception of childhood. Not only did they describe the successful practices of the playground movement, but engaged in, especially *Kisakenttä*, theoretical discussions on the concept of play and childhood.<sup>49</sup> Since the beginning of the century, Ellen Key's influential book *The Century of the Child* (1900) had marked a new approach to children and their actions.<sup>50</sup> Whereas children had previously been expected to be obedient and self-disciplined, the new ideals inspired professionals to embrace a romanticised child-centred perspective and perceive children as inherently good, almost holy, and thus free to act upon their individual preferences. Educational psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of play for children's socio-psychological development.<sup>51</sup>

A certain contradiction is aptly illustrated in articles in *Kisakenttä* applauding children's natural tendencies for play, but simultaneously arguing that a trained adult was necessary to guide their play patterns towards instructive play and morally acceptable behaviour.<sup>52</sup> It appears that when it came to independent play, children were not perceived truly free but in need of adult discipline and guidance. Consequently, the playground movement highlighted the importance of "saving" children through supervision and professional play leaders.<sup>53</sup> However, the scientific discussion does not always

<sup>46</sup>The author of the article is unknown, but presumably belonged to the physical education movement: "Kansanvalistustyön wainiolta," *Uusi Suometar* (31 October 1909).

<sup>47</sup>"Hiukan leikeistä ja leikkikentistä Amerikassa," *Helsingin Sanomat* (28 August 1910).

<sup>48</sup>"Leikkikenttiä," *Kisakenttä*, no. 2 (1912): 7–11; also in "Uskontunnustus leikkikenttiin nähden," *Kisakenttä*, no. 3 (1913): 51–2; "Mitä Ameriikassa vaaditaan leikinjohtajalta ja leikinjohtajalle," *Kisakenttä*, no. 4 (1913).

<sup>49</sup>For instance, "Uskontunnustus leikkikenttiin nähden" [translation of an article by Henry S. Curtis] *Kisakenttä*, no. 3 (1913); "Leikin luonto ja tehtävät," *Kisakenttä*, no. 6–7 (1915): 126–8.

<sup>50</sup>Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York & London: Putnam, 1909). Original work *Barnets århundrade* published in 1900.

<sup>51</sup>Emiliano Macinai, "The Century of the Rights of Children: Ellen Key's Legacy Towards a New Childhood Culture," *Journal of Theories and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2016): 76–7; Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geographies," 3–4.

<sup>52</sup>"Mitä Ameriikassa vaaditaan leikinjohtajalta ja leikinjohtajille?" *Kisakenttä*, no. 4 (1913); "Leikin luonto ja tehtävät," *Kisakenttä*, no. 6/7 (1915): 126–8.

<sup>53</sup>Murnaghan, "Play and Playgrounds in Children's Geography," 8.

translate into practice, and both studies and personal testimonies indicate that, especially in Finland, children continued to explore the streets of the growing cities relatively independently and unsupervised.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in public discussion, the most pressing concerns appeared to be related to socio-economic issues, such as improving the unhealthy living conditions of children. Articles and reader's letters-to-the-editor in a working-class newspaper *Työmies* (*Worker*), for example, did not call for adult supervision but rather drew attention to the overall lack of suitable, safe, and sanitary play spaces on the outskirts of the city.<sup>55</sup>

### “Fresh air and sunshine”: implementing the playground movement

In the spring of 1913, the Gymnastic Teacher's Association (*Suomen Voimisteluoopettajaliitto*, SVOL)<sup>56</sup> submitted a petition to the Monetary Chamber of Helsinki petitioning for specifically designed playgrounds and sports grounds and for the recruitment of pedagogically trained playleaders to oversee them. The signatories complained that the playgrounds in Helsinki were too small, too scarce, and, overall, poorly organised.<sup>57</sup> The petition was supplemented with a *pro memoria* from Tor Waenerberg, a local physician and the nephew of one of the signatories Elin Kallio, and later, as the petition was processed, from Bertel Jung, the first-appointed city planner of Helsinki (1908–1916). Waenerberg presented an impassioned statement on the behalf of the poor children in the city:

Fresh air and sunshine are the best-known remedies for tuberculosis; the dire lack of these contributes to disease and lowers resistance . . . That is why the city authorities absolutely must procure for those little ones living in dingey, overcrowded hovels a chance to be outdoors for as much of the day as possible without subjecting them to moral or physical peril.<sup>58</sup>

While Waenerberg emphasised the health benefits of children's outdoor play, Jung recognised the importance of playgrounds in terms of both urban planning and social wellbeing. He was initially reluctant to concede the need for more playgrounds, but after an extensive exploration of examples in America, England, Germany, Austria, and Denmark, he was convinced by their actions and recommended major reforms in all existing parks in Helsinki.<sup>59</sup> The handling of the petition was followed with great interest in *Helsingin Sanomat* and other local papers, and public opinion was favourable to building new “American-style” playgrounds.<sup>60</sup> In the meantime, the female gymnasts organised small-scale play activities for women and children over the summer of 1913.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Antti Malinen and Tuomo Tamminen, *Leikitäänkö? Lasten kaverisuhteet 1900-luvun Suomessa* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022), 79–81.

<sup>55</sup>“Olot laitakaupunilla kesäaikaan,” *Työmies* (18 June 1910); “Helsingin herrat ja Helsingin työläiset,” *Työmies* (29 November 1913).

<sup>56</sup>The board of the SVOL consisted of leading Finnish physical education reformers, both men and women, such as Elin O. Kallio and Ivar Wilskman.

<sup>57</sup>The SVOL letter to the City Council (2 April 1913), in “N:o 50 Motion to set up certain play and sports fields in Helsinki,” *Printed Documents of the City Council of Helsinki 1914* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki, 1915), 18–20.

<sup>58</sup>Pro memoria by Tor Waenerberg (2 April 1913), in “N:o 50 Motion,” 25–6.

<sup>59</sup>Pro memoria by Bertel Jung (27 February 1914), in “N:o 50 Motion,” 6–17.

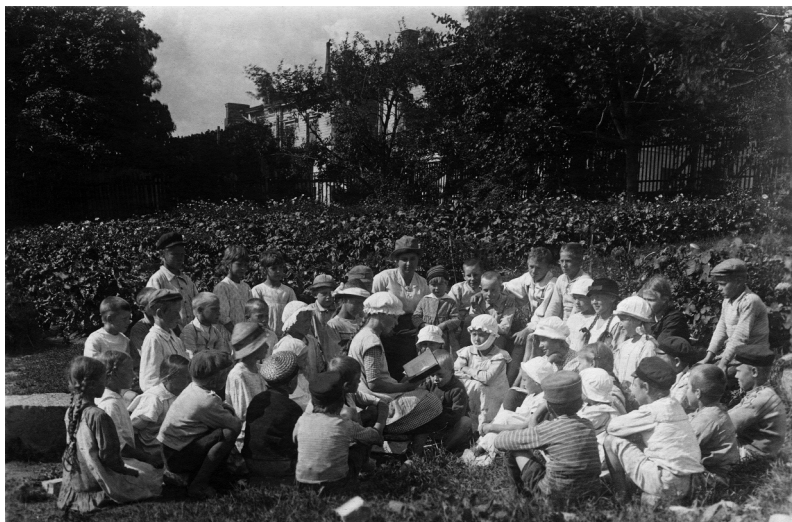
<sup>60</sup>“Leikki ja urheilukentät,” *Helsingin Sanomat* (4 March 1914); also Terä, “Leikki- ja urheilukenttäkysymys,” *Työmies* (19 February 1914).

<sup>61</sup>Laine, “The Finnish Play Movement,” 33.



The following spring, the City Council finally approved the proposal, and four official supervised playgrounds overseen by the SVOL were opened in Helsinki in June 1914.<sup>62</sup> These playgrounds were located in two smaller parks in the city centre (Tehtaankatu and Kapteeninkatu streets) and Kaisaniemi park and in the schoolyard of Kallio Elementary School, but their locations varied over the following years. By the end of the 1910s Helsinki had some 20 public playgrounds, of which Eläintarha and Vallila playgrounds were supervised regularly (see [Figure 1](#)). They were open only for five hours a day on weekdays in the summer months when schools were on vacation. During the first summer, the most popular playgrounds at Tehtaankatu and Kapteeninkatu had some 60–100 daily attendees.<sup>63</sup> Children between the ages of 4 and 14 years were welcome, but most of the children were aged from 6 to 12.<sup>64</sup> The playgrounds were generally staffed by one to two adult play leaders and a younger assistant, who supervised the children and organised sports and round games, sang children’s rhymes, and read stories (see [Figures 3 and 4](#)). They were, in all cases, women with background in gymnastics and who had taken a special play leader course organised by the Finnish Women’s Gymnastics Federation. They were referred to by the children as “aunties”.<sup>65</sup>

Supervised playgrounds began in other larger cities almost simultaneously. In the industrial city of Tampere, they also started privately in 1914, at the Varala Course Centre for female gymnasts. In 1918, the young women trained at Varala were recruited to



**Figure 4.** Playground children on a field trip and gathered for storytelling time, c. 1919–1921. The woman with a hat in the middle is the play leader and the girl with plaited hair reading the book is presumably a younger assistant. Helsinki City Museum.

<sup>62</sup>The Monetary Chamber to the City Council (28 May 1914). “N:o 50 Motion,” 1–4.

<sup>63</sup>SVOL report of outdoor play for children, young people and adults for summer 1914, “N:o 18 Motion for outdoor play and games in Helsinki,” in *Printed Documents of the City Council of Helsinki 1915* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki, 1916), 6.

<sup>64</sup>Younger children were allowed only when accompanied by their older siblings: Kinnunen, *Leikkikenttätoiminta Helsingissä*, 31–3.

<sup>65</sup>Kinnunen, *Leikkikenttätoiminta Helsingissä*, 9.

supervise three public playgrounds in the city.<sup>66</sup> Two years later *Kisakenttä* reported that, in addition to Helsinki and Tampere, playground activities were organised at least in the cities of Turku and Viipuri, and the municipality of Lohja.<sup>67</sup>

The playground issue was considered important among both play reformers and the policymakers, but it was not resolved immediately – nor even during the following years. In 1915 the SVOL gave an overview report of their first summer playgrounds suggesting that further improvements needed to be made: the appointed locations were not suitable for play, equipment and storage facilities were inadequate, and, most surprisingly, the other park users, even the park employees, were not familiar with the playground concept and “frequently disturbed and even at times prevented the children from playing”.<sup>68</sup> To meet some of the complaints made by the SVOL, the city agreed to recondition three new playgrounds and assigned more suitable locations.<sup>69</sup> These complaints serve as an illustration of the difficulties faced by the first playgrounds: It was evident that, despite all attempts to provide suitable play areas, playgrounds complemented neither the aesthetics nor the code of behaviour in public parks. It took another decade and dedicated work from the play organisers for the playground concept to finally establish their place within the city.<sup>70</sup>

It is a fascinating question to ask why the female gymnasts, and not for example school-teachers, played such an important role in the Finnish playground movement. First, women in general had played an integral role in the international expansion of the playground movement. For instance, the Boston women’s clubs were seminal in implementing the first playgrounds in Boston,<sup>71</sup> and in Chicago, a private philanthropist, Jane Addams, was known for her Hull House Settlement and the first model playgrounds.<sup>72</sup> Second, the conversation in *Kisakenttä* demonstrates that the Finnish female gymnasts were already familiar with the playground movement and found it resonating with their own agenda of promoting physical education and activity among girls and women.<sup>73</sup> Finally, and perhaps from the most practical reasons, playgrounds came naturally to the gymnasts as the activities took place during the school summer vacation, when teachers were widely unavailable.

## Playgrounds and politics: the women’s movement and ideological issues

For Collan and other Finnish reformists, the playground movement had a dual purpose: supervised play promoted children’s physical health and, more importantly, it was considered an efficient form of social help among working-class families.<sup>74</sup> A two-part article published in 1915 in *Kisakenttä* illustrated the problem the Finnish playground

<sup>66</sup>Pirkko Savisaari, *Varalan urheiluoipisto 1909–2009* (Tampere: Varala, 2009), 34.

<sup>67</sup>“Uutisia,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 6–7 (1920): 124–5.

<sup>68</sup>SVOL report of summer 1914, “N:o 18 Motion,” 5. A similar discussion went on in the press. See, Lauri Pihkala, “Mikä on Helsingin leikkipuistojen tarkoitus? I,” *Helsingin Sanomat* (30 October 1915).

<sup>69</sup>“N:o 18 Motion,” 1–3.

<sup>70</sup>Jäppinen, “On meillä nasta täti,” 101.

<sup>71</sup>Jerry G. Dickason, “The Origin of the Playground: The Role of the Boston Women’s Clubs, 1885–1890,” *Leisure Sciences* 6, no. 1 (1983): 83–98.

<sup>72</sup>Frost, *A History of Children’s Play*, 70.

<sup>73</sup>The female sports movement in Finland began in the late nineteenth century and was motivated by the complete absence of female sports education in the Finnish school curriculum. The pioneering women sought education to become first female sports’ teachers and began their work at schools and private societies. See Laine and Sarje, *Suomalaisen naisvoimistelun maailmat*, 17.

<sup>74</sup>Laine, “The Finnish Play Movement,” 32.



reformers were facing: most children attending playgrounds came from unhealthy living conditions and suffered from an irregular rhythm of life as well as malnutrition. The article recommended that in order to guide and educate such children, a good play leader should be aware of the local “societal and industrial circumstances” and should strive to achieve an open connection with the parents. Playgrounds were, after all, a relief for the mothers as well.<sup>75</sup>

The female gymnasts’ play activities should not be dismissed as non-political voluntary work, because they engaged with a number of highly contentious political themes, such as the women’s movement, female emancipation and social class. After achieving the universal right to vote in 1906,<sup>76</sup> middle- and working-class women found common ground again in other fields of female emancipation, such as female sports. Since its founding in 1896, the Women’s Gymnastics Federation had had a clear objective of social responsibility and addressing the physical and social needs of working women through gymnastic exercises.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, at the time, women were categorically excluded from general sports clubs, hence all-female gymnastics groups were an appealing alternative for women across all social classes. The collaboration between the Federation and working-class women included course activities targeted specifically at working women and the establishing of the Varala Course Centre in the city of Tampere in 1909.<sup>78</sup> Later in the 1910s, Varala became central in educating professional play leaders. In light of the above, supervised playgrounds in mid-1910s Helsinki were a natural continuation of this relationship and co-operation between women from different social strata. However, it soon became clear that the following years would put this bond to the test.

### Protecting the children: playgrounds and child welfare

From 1914 to 1917, female gymnasts and the Gymnastic Teacher’s Association oversaw the summer playgrounds, which were largely for working-class children. They were paid a modest allowance by the City Council, but it was often insufficient to cover the wages of the play leaders, and in 1918 the association was no longer able to carry out the task.<sup>79</sup> The year 1918 is a pivotal moment in Finnish political history: Finland had gained its independence the previous year, but the birth of the new nation was immediately followed by a short, yet bloody, Civil War. The war divided the nation into the victorious bourgeois “Whites” and the defeated socialist and labour “Reds”, and this deep-rooted division determined the public, mental, and emotional lives of the Finnish people for several decades to follow.<sup>80</sup> The repercussions of the War affected in particular mothers

<sup>75</sup>“Leikkikenttä ja ympäristön yhteiskunnalliset olosuhteet I,” *Kisakenttä*, n:o 10 (1915); “Leikkikenttä ja ympäristön yhteiskunnalliset olosuhteet II,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 11 (1915).

<sup>76</sup>Eric Blanc, “Comrades in Battle: Women Workers and the 1906 Finnish Suffrage Victory,” *Aspasia* 11, no. 1 (2017): 1–18; Irma Sulkunen, “Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship in Finland: A Comparative Perspective,” *NORDEUROPAforum*, no. 1 (2007): 27–44.

<sup>77</sup>Laine, “The Finnish Play Movement,” 26–7. According to Laine, the female gymnastics’ philosophy was philanthropic and idealistic, with the goal of utilising gymnastics to bridge gaps between various social classes: Leena Laine, *Työväen urheiluliikkeen naiset* (Helsinki: Otava, 2000), 17–19, 34–5.

<sup>78</sup>Laine, *Työväen urheiluliikkeen naiset*, 19–24, 34–5.

<sup>79</sup>“A committee report on supporting certain non-profit organisations from the Helsingin Anniskeluosakeyhtiö funds,” *Printed Documents of the City Council of Helsinki 1918* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki, 1919).

<sup>80</sup>Henrik Meinander, *A History of Finland* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011); Mervi Kaarninen, “Red Orphans’ Fatherland: Children in the Civil War of 1918 and Its Aftermath,” in *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000*, ed. Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 163–85.

and children who had supported the Reds, as more than 14,000 children were in need of public aid due to the death of one or both parents. Moreover, the mothers were stigmatised in White ideology as a social and political threat who could not be trusted with the important task of bringing up the next generation. As a result, the children of the Red families needed to be protected from their parents and their ideology.<sup>81</sup> It was quickly understood by the state authorities that the Red children had to be (re)educated to be good and loyal citizens of the new independent Finland.<sup>82</sup>

By the end of the decade, the playground question in Helsinki was linked to these political and ideological currents of the newly independent state. The organising of playground activities and the withdrawal of the Gymnastic's Teachers Association were discussed in the City Council in spring 1918 on the initiative of kindergarten teachers, who volunteered to take over the activities for a similar allowance. They felt that it would be most unfortunate if the playground service were to cease just when it had finally gained the trust of the parents. Moreover, the need for supervised play was urgent:

... because among the vast hordes of children in these parks there is an element with a pernicious influence on their peers and which society, if possible, should place under prudent surveillance. In many homes the conditions are such that with the best will in the world there is no way to keep an eye on what the children are doing outdoors.<sup>83</sup>

The commentary on the initiative does not explicitly define what the “pernicious influence” was, but given the immediate postwar context, it most likely referred to the unattended groups of working-class children and young people who were perceived as behaving crudely and being morally dangerous.<sup>84</sup> The Council agreed on the importance of the cause but decided to reject the application due to lack of funds.<sup>85</sup>

However, in June 1918, a small announcement in *Helsingin Sanomat* invited mothers in Helsinki to bring their children to supervised playgrounds to enjoy fresh air and sunshine.<sup>86</sup> The advertisement had an appealing title “Mothers! Little ones! (*Äidit! Pienokaiset!*)” and it was distinctly aimed at the mothers: the word choices encouraged them to leave their children under safe supervision while they could run errands and wait in the queues caused by the shortages. It even persuaded the mothers to come and greet the play leaders before leaving their children in their care, as if to make sure of their intentions.<sup>87</sup> Although the advertisement does not specify which mothers it aimed to reach, the fact that the three playgrounds mentioned were all in working-class districts (see Figure 2) suggests that the target audience was indeed working-class mothers. The playground organisers were, undoubtedly, facing a new problem: how to reach and regain the trust of these families in such political circumstances.

<sup>81</sup> Kaisa Vehkalahti, *Constructing Reformatory Identity: Girls' Reform School Education in Finland, 1893–1923* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 8–9.

<sup>82</sup> Kaarinen, “Red Orphans' Fatherland,” 171.

<sup>83</sup> “A committee report on supporting certain non-profit organisations from the Helsingin Anniskeluosakeyhtiö funds,” *Printed Documents of the City Council of Helsinki 1918* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki, 1919).

<sup>84</sup> Urban working-class youth groups, “*sakilaiset*,” were especially notorious in Helsinki: Kari Koskela, *Huligaanit. Katuelämää Sörkässä suurlakosta sisällissotaan* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002); Antti Malinen and Tuomo Tamminen, *Leikitäänkö? Lasten kaverisuhteet 1900-luvu Suomessa* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022), 159–62.

<sup>85</sup> “A committee report,” *Printed Documents of the City Council of Helsinki 1918*.

<sup>86</sup> “Äidit! Pienokaiset!” *Helsingin Sanomat* (3 June 1918).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

The 1918 summer playgrounds were organised by the Education Board of Helsinki, and the costs were covered partly by temporarily charging the families a small registration fee of one old Finnish mark.<sup>88</sup> The following year, their administration was given to a newly founded private Child Welfare Centre (*Lastensuojelukeskus*).<sup>89</sup> The main agenda of the centre consisted of sending urban children to summer camps in the countryside and organising summer playgrounds for those compelled to stay in the city.<sup>90</sup> The play leaders continued to be recruited from among the established female gymnasts. This disorder among the organisers may seem insignificant at first, but by the 1920s the nature and constitution of supervised play had undergone a substantial change: it was no longer only private actors providing outdoor activities and social help, rather it had become a matter of municipal child welfare and social and political importance. In a way, the movement's original goal of supervised, municipal playgrounds was finally achieved. Consequently, these changes resonate with the reforms of Finnish child welfare policies and ideologies at the turn of the 1920s.

Since 1852, Finnish child welfare issues had fallen within the framework of poor relief and the Poor Law. In this setting, the state had concentrated mostly on delinquent children while the care of the defenceless and destitute had relied heavily on private and municipal actions.<sup>91</sup> As a part of these actions, the first folk kindergarten for the children of poorer families was established in Helsinki in 1888. The early kindergartens were few in number and often private – municipal kindergartens were not established until 1919. Accordingly, the service was only available to few, and in many cases was associated with poor relief.<sup>92</sup> The debate on amending the child welfare legislation continued throughout the beginning of the century, but the new Child Welfare Act came into force relatively late, in 1934.<sup>93</sup> The City of Helsinki had been a pioneer in implementing municipal child welfare before the Act was passed, and had established an independent municipal Child Welfare Board in 1922.<sup>94</sup> Just two years later, supervised playgrounds were incorporated into municipal policy and were placed under the full maintenance of the Board.<sup>95</sup>

The playground question was related to the changing ideals and paradigms regarding children and child welfare. According to Timo Harrikari, in the beginning of the century the main arguments for child welfare were related to protecting *society* from delinquent children. Following the Declaration of Independence and the Civil War, a consensus on

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>The Centre operated 1919–1921 and was closed when Helsinki established its municipal Child Welfare Board. In 1922 and 1923, playgrounds were operated by a private *Förening för barnens och ungdomens väl* (Society for the Benefit of Children and Young People), which functioned under the Board.

<sup>90</sup>See e.g. a front-page item "Pääkaupungin lapset kesällä," in the daily *Uusi Suomi* (6 August 1921).

<sup>91</sup>Vehkalahti, *Constructing Reformatory Identity*, 2–3.

<sup>92</sup>*Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland. Background Report Prepared for the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* (OECD, 2000), 20; Maija Meretniemi et al., "Helsingin Ebeneser-talo: osa suomalaisen varhaiskasvatuksen historiaa ja nykypäivää," *Kasvatus & Aika* 11, no. 3 (2017): 106–9.

<sup>93</sup>In other Nordic countries, child welfare issues had been separated from the Poor Law at the beginning of the century and municipal Child Welfare Boards had been established: in Norway in 1900, in Sweden in 1902 and in Denmark in 1905 and 1911. The Act also covered kindergartens, which were brought under the municipal welfare boards. The official Act on Children's Day Care was passed in 1973: see Timo Harrikari, "The Making of the First Child Welfare and Juvenile Crime Acts in Finland 1897–1943," *Social Work & Society* 9, no. 2 (2011): 177–93; Vehkalahti, *Constructing Reformatory Identity*, 7; *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland*, 20.

<sup>94</sup>Panu Pulma and Oiva Turpeinen, *Suomen lastensuojelun historia* (Helsinki: Lastensuojelun keskusliitto, 1987), 171.

<sup>95</sup>Annual reports of the municipal administration of the City of Helsinki, vol. 27–37 (Helsinki: Helsinki City Statistics Office, 1914–1924).

child welfare and youth politics was arrived at for educating future citizens and protecting *children* from external ill – including harmful ideologies such as socialism. Instead of punishing delinquent children and blaming their parents, the new paradigm of “protective supervision” aimed at supporting and educating the families.<sup>96</sup>

After the founding of the Child Welfare Centre in 1919, playground advertisements and detailed end-of-season reports on the summer activities began to come out annually in local newspapers.<sup>97</sup> These recurring texts are an illustrative example of the new child welfare paradigm in practice. Much like in the 1918 advertisement, the mothers are addressed respectfully and the tone of the texts is neither patronising nor accusatory, but rather encouraging, supportive, and persuasive. Moreover, the newspaper reports painted a picture of a summer holiday full of fun, safety, and educational activities.<sup>98</sup> In a sense, they served to form opinions and disseminated a positive image of playgrounds not as mere poor relief but as a genuinely pleasant and constructive activity for children. Arguably, they were also about lowering the threshold for child welfare and thus extending the ideals of protective supervision further to the families. For the female gymnasts, who continued to provide the professional play leaders, the issue of child welfare was as important. *Kisakenttä* discussed the importance of supervised play throughout the 1910s, concluding that playgrounds served three functions: providing children with recreational activities and fresh air, companionship from other children, and, finally, safety and adult guidance. All of these had the common goal of preventing children’s ill manners and negligence.<sup>99</sup>

Bertel Nyberg<sup>100</sup>, the head of the Child Welfare Centre, was a central figure who in the beginning of the 1920s wrote extensively in favour of playgrounds and emphasised the connection between supervised play and correctional education. Consequently, in a national child welfare magazine *Lastensuojelulehti*, Nyberg praised supervised playgrounds as a “neglected yet highly efficient form of preventive intervention in child welfare”.<sup>101</sup> According to him, instead of merely keeping children off the streets and away from crime, the focus of playgrounds had acquired positive and corrective educational ideals, such as “the promotion of health in outdoor conditions, the awakening of feelings and enthusiasm, compliance with rules and regulations, being educated for companionship, honesty, courtesy, endurance, decency and joy in life”.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>96</sup>Harrikari, “The Making of the First Child Welfare and Juvenile Crime Acts,” 185, 190.

<sup>97</sup>“Leikkitoimintaa lapsille,” *Helsingin Sanomat* (5 June 1921).

<sup>98</sup>For example, “Kesän leikkikenttötoiminta,” *Uusi Suomi* (24 August 1922).

<sup>99</sup>Especially “Leikkikenttä ja ympäristön yhteiskunnalliset olosuhteet II,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 11 (1915); “Lasten leikkikentistä,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 7 (1918); Aino Saarelainen, “Leikkikenttötoiminta säännöstely,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 6 (1919); Anni Collan, “Liikuntokasvatus ja lastensuojelutyö,” *Kisakenttä*, no. 1 (1923).

<sup>100</sup>Bertel Nyberg (1882–1968) was one of the central figures to develop private child welfare in Finland. He acted as the head of Child Welfare Centre (1917–1921), and was a founding member, the general secretary (1922–1945), and the executive director (1945–1955) of the national and long-standing organisation for foster care Save the Children (originally *Koteja kodittomille lapsille*, later *Pelastakaa Lapsset*). He held positions of trust in several child welfare organisations and wrote extensively on the history of childhood and child welfare.

<sup>101</sup>Bertel Nyberg, “Leikkikenttötoiminta. Sen tarkoitus ja toimintamuodot,” *Lastensuojelulehti*, no. 2 (1923), 69.

<sup>102</sup>Bertel Nyberg, “Leikkikenttötoiminta. Sen tarkoitus ja toimintamuodot,” *Lastensuojelulehti*, no. 2 (1923): 70 .

## “Mothers, send your little ones to playgrounds!”: popularity of the playgrounds

For historians studying playgrounds, the source materials available have often been produced exclusively by officialdom and organisers. As Margaret Kernan has stated, from such a perspective, it is difficult to assess the extent to which their intentions were achieved.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, if little is known about the children’s experiences,<sup>104</sup> almost as little is known of the parents or other guardians and their conceptions of playgrounds. This last section aims to illustrate some common attitudes towards playgrounds and how supervised play was received by families.

This article has established that the supervised play activities were targeted specifically at working-class families. As stated earlier, the otherwise bourgeois playground movement had enjoyed the trust of working-class women during its first years, but after the Civil War, this connection had to be renegotiated to some extent. Moreover, the administrative changes meant that play activities had become part of the municipal child welfare service, which in many cases bore the stigma of poor relief. In this context, it would be tempting to assume that sending one’s children to supervised playgrounds would have been looked down on, but the source materials indicate no such attitudes.

When looking at the attendance rates of three supervised playgrounds in [Table 1](#), they appear to have been surprisingly popular: they had a growing number of children registered and approximately one-fifth of them attended daily. However, it is important to note that urban children in Helsinki had access to a variety of places for play, including natural environment. Moreover, the numbers in [Table 1](#) are only averages – the actual number of attendees fluctuated depending on the weather, the month, and the locations. Rainy days were naturally less popular, while sunny days attracted more children.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the attendance rate for a single playground and one play leader was relatively high.

**Table 1.** Numbers of children registered and daily average attendances of the first three municipal summer playgrounds in Helsinki in 1922–1930<sup>a</sup>.

Years	<i>Eläntarha</i>		<i>Vallila</i>		<i>Vuorimiehenkatu</i>	
	Children registered	Daily average	Children registered	Daily average	Children registered	Daily average
1924	359	65	250	60	–	–
1925	407	76	212	53	–	–
1926	369	86	294	80	–	–
1927	515	83	426	80	–	–
1928	376	46	364	70	225	–
1929	463	118	491	98	344	65
1930	492	66	524	92	400	61

<sup>a</sup>Countable records are available only after the municipalisation of playground activities in 1924: “Annual report of the Child Welfare Board, 1924–1930”, in the *Annual Report of the Municipal Administration of the City of Helsinki*, vol. 37–43 (Helsinki: Helsinki City Statistics Office, 1924–1930).

Some fragments of information can also be gathered on the playground children. At the beginning of the summer, each child had to register as an attendee, and their names, ages, and sometimes first languages were noted in the playground journals. No record, however, was kept of the children’s socio-economic backgrounds or other personal

<sup>103</sup>Kernan, “Developing Citizenship through Supervised Play,” 676; also Hines, “They Do Not Know How to Play.”

<sup>104</sup>For example, see Elizabeth Gagen’s contribution in Gagen, “Too Good to Be True;” Gagen, “Playing the Part.”

<sup>105</sup>Kinnunen, *Helsingin leikkikenttätöimintä*, 32.

information.<sup>106</sup> In Western Finland, and Helsinki in particular, the children's most common first languages were either Finnish or Swedish, but also some foreign languages, such as Russian, English, and German.<sup>107</sup> In contrast to American playgrounds,<sup>108</sup> immigrant children were not a special target group as the Finnish population was still relatively homogeneous.

These fragments of information also suggest one possible explanation for the popularity of supervised playgrounds – a certain degree of anonymity. Sending one's children to playgrounds entailed no commitment to anything and no traceable records were kept. Moreover, even though playground organisers advertised directly to the mothers – on the assumption that it was the parents who decided on attendance – it is likely that some children also attended without their parents knowing. This alone, however, does not explain why supervised playgrounds were so well received. Another plausible explanation is the incontestable need for safe play environments, as articulated in the newspaper writings and petitions to the city council. The relatively high number of registered attendees at the newly opened Vuorimiehenkatu playground in 1928 (see Table 1) supports the conclusion that an urgent need for supervised playgrounds had indeed accumulated.

Finally, to find the most likely answer, one must return to the very beginning of the playground movement and the significance of the female sports movement in Finland. Pedagogically trained adult play leaders had been at the very heart of the international playground movement, and in Finland, it was the female gymnasts who predominated in the profession. All the leaders were trained on special play leader courses organised by the Finnish Women's Gymnastics Federation, and the same leaders were often recruited for several consecutive summers.<sup>109</sup> For instance, an invitation to participate in playground activities in 1923 featured a long-serving play leader Elisa Korhonen, who was praised for having worked at the summer playgrounds since 1919 and for being “an excellent auntie”.<sup>110</sup> Most importantly, despite their bourgeois background, the female gymnasts' movement and working-class women had shared a common ground since the beginning of the century. This continuity and a certain trust are perhaps the most crucial factors behind the popularity of supervised playgrounds in Helsinki. In the 1918 advertisement the play organisers had to persuade and assure the mothers, but 10 years later they simply declared: “Mothers, send your children to playgrounds!”<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the Finnish playground reform engaged with and was influenced by the international playground movement. As a result, supervised playgrounds and instructed play were established in Finland as a semi-private endeavour by middle-class female gymnasts, who were active in the contemporary physical education movement. They

<sup>106</sup>The original playground diaries have not survived, but the attendance rates have also been reported in the annual city reports. Moreover, the contents of the diaries have been described in a 1955 Master's thesis by Anja Kinnunen: see Kinnunen, *Leikkikenttätöiminta Helsingissä*.

<sup>107</sup>Kinnunen, *Helsingin leikkikenttätöiminta*, 32.

<sup>108</sup>For instance, Murnaghan, “Exploring Race and Nation in Playground Propaganda in Early Twentieth-Century Toronto;” Kernan, “Developing Citizenship through Supervised Play;” and Gagen, “Playing the Part.”

<sup>109</sup>Kinnunen, *Leikkikenttätöiminta Helsingissä*.

<sup>110</sup>“Kesän leikkikenttätöiminta,” *Uusi Suomi* (9 May 1923).

<sup>111</sup>“Äidit, lähettäkää lapsenne leikkikentille,” *Uusi Suomi* (29 May 1927).



connected instructed play with female emancipation and perceived it essentially as a social aid for mothers, while providing their children with fresh air and recreational activities under the watchful eye of reliable adults. The year 1914 was pivotal for the movement, as it witnessed the founding of the first supervised playgrounds in Helsinki.

The case of Finland has demonstrated the transnational character of the playground movement, and how differently its idea has been implemented depending on geographical, social, and political circumstances. The vast body of international literature on the playground movement has already established how the early twentieth-century playground movement was invested with intersecting political objectives and aims. In a transnational perspective, disciplining poor, immigrant and racial minority children into citizenship and nationhood were at the centre of the movement. The Finnish play reformers were keen to implement the American model as such, but the Finnish playground concept eventually assumed certain distinct characteristics. For instance, race was never an issue to be addressed, whereas the question of building national unity in a post-Civil War context was considered more important. Since its inception, the Finnish movement was characterised by a mixture of female emancipation, physical education and child welfare, and the latter was strengthened through the municipalisation of playground activities in the early 1920s. The new paradigm of “protective supervision” aimed at supporting mothers, but at the same time taking over the education of working-class children and ensuring that they became good citizens.

In a sense, in early twentieth century Finland, supervised playgrounds evolved into a low-threshold child welfare service for working-class families, which was received surprisingly well within a highly contested and volatile postwar political atmosphere. Nevertheless, by the 1930s, supervised playgrounds established themselves as a popular form of summertime activities for the children of Helsinki.

## Acknowledgment

This paper draws from a shared research interest with my colleague Veera Moll at Aalto University, and I am grateful for our lengthy discussions and mutual change of ideas. I also wish to express my gratitude to many other people, especially to two anonymous referees, HESSD seminar at Umeå University and the members at LAPANEN research group, for constructive comments and suggestions along the way.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland [336231].

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