

“Sustainable Communities: Sharing knowledge”

**CHILDREN’S VOICE IN URBAN PLANNING**

**Children’s tracking**

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**ABSTRACT**

“There are no children playing here!” say urban developers when arguing for approval in regulatory planning processes.

*National guidelines to strengthen children’s interests in planning* (T-2/2008) demands that:

- Outdoor areas area to be used by children must be secured against pollution, noise and dangerous traffic.
- In proximity of housing areas there must be places where the children can create outdoors playroom. They must be big enough to be used all year, by all ages and as a meeting place for interaction between young and adults.
- The Municipality must set aside enough area for this and for kindergartens in urban planning.
- When approving zoning changes in land use from playground areas to other zoning uses compensation playground areas must be provided for.

No one better than children to give an accurate description of how and where they use or not the playgrounds and tracks, and what their uncovered needs for improving them are. Children's Track Registration is a method for active participation of children and youth for protecting their interests in municipal planning and ensuring that outdoor places are protected for play and stay. It also provides increase in knowledge for planners and a democratic practice for children.

**KEY WORDS:**

Children’s participation, participatory planning, tokenism, planning process, mapping playgrounds, children’s footpaths, outdoor meeting places, outdoor play, children’s mapping.

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## INTRODUCTION

Broad participation and dialogue in planning processes strengthens and develops local democracy. Children's environment when growing up is crucial for a safe childhood, their motoric development and good health. Planning a society where childhood environment has good meeting places, good opportunities for play and physical activity is some of the most important tasks in area planning.

*National Guidelines to Strengthen Children's Interests in Planning* (T-2/2008) were given in 1989 to protect the interests of the children and young ones (hereafter called children) in urban planning. An evaluation of Municipal application of these guidelines in 2006 showed that although very well known by planners and politicians in the municipalities, other considerations would often prevail when interest conflicts arose. Adults have often little knowledge about children's needs and therefore the latter become the losing party in a conflict.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that gives children rights to leisure and play and to be heard when submitting their opinion in all matters that have consequences for them, (BFD, 2003) is included in the Norwegian law since 2003. Together with the *Planning and Building Act* (§ 1-1, §3-1, 3-2 and 3-3) and the *National Guidelines to Strengthen Children's Interests in Planning* (T-2/2008) they constitute a legal framework provided to ensure the involvement of children in urban planning. The Norwegian Government has been very clear that this legal framework must be enforced more strictly in all planning and building activity, (MD, 2008).

In urban planning children's outdoor spaces are often given little priority opposed to for example parking lots. Increasing urban development during economic upswings leads to increased density in residential areas with small and bad outdoor spaces, where children are primarily affected.

Adult planners and adult politicians design and enforce the plans that often have consequences that will affect the children. It is the adults' responsibility to visualize and document these consequences. The proposed method called *Children's Track Registration* is very appropriate for this visualization.

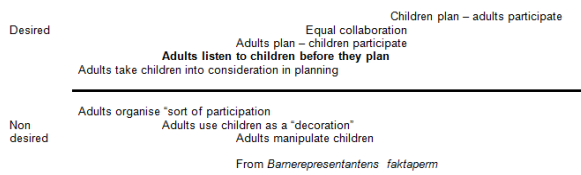
When children were not usually involved in planning processes and seldom heard, sociologist Eva Almhjell, a planner in Vestfold County Administration developed around 1979 a method to ensure children's play area known later on as "*Children's Track*" to be used in these processes. She became aware of the importance of maps and mapping seeing that Norwegian planning authorities had more knowledge about where the moose wandered than where children played. "*Moose track*" was a familiar term in the assessment of nature values used to protect wild life, i. e. where the moose passed by. Inspired by this she came up with the idea of what she called "*Barnetråkk*" or "*Children's track*" as a parallel to "*Elgtråkk*" or "*Moose track*". If children's lands use were to be use-valued, the outdoor play spaces in the community had to be mapped in the same way as done in the "*Moose track*", (Almhjell & Ridderstrøm, 2003).

## CHILDREN'S VOICE IN PLANNING

In a planning process, there are many steps: start, design, political decision and implementation. Democracy depends on the active participation of the citizens, children are citizens that want to participate and been taken seriously. Participation is part of teaching democracy for tomorrow's adults and the future decision makers. Depending on the degree of participation and the case discussed, participation can be different.

According to Almhjell and Ridderstrøm (2003) participation staircase" (fig 1), the top of the staircase is not always the best choice.

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They refer to the planning process in road planning in Tønsberg where their best choice was “*Adults who listen to children before they plan*”. Children’s possibility to influence the planning process is concentrated mostly to the early phase before any political decision is enforced. It is therefore very important that the planners obtain accurate information regarding the planning area early in the process, with documents showing which areas are in use, and when and how they are in use.

Children expect to be heard even though they are informed that planning processes are not finished in a week or two but might take years, and that the politicians are the final decision makers. This is sometimes difficult for them to understand as they are impatient, but it is important to underline that their work will contribute to avoid the loss of outdoor spaces also in the future.

## **ARE PLAYGROUNDS THREATENED?**

“*If you don’t use you lose it*”, is a well-known expression. This is half-way to the truth in the playground case. If there are no children in the playground, this might be partially true, but children often come and go as families move in and out of a neighbourhood. Children also like using playgrounds when visiting families with no children, who might use the playground as an informal outdoor meeting area. Densification processes in towns has diminished the green lunges thus children losing their playgrounds and adults their walking trails. These areas are threatened by development pressure, together with “grey” areas like bicycle roads, narrow roads and paths between houses, and are a target when developers present their intended development plans. It is therefore of outmost importance that these areas are mapped and their use value documented before they are rezoned to other land use.

By drawing maps, the children can tell us something about how they use their local environment, which roads or tracks they use, which places they love and which places they hate or dread. With this participation and data collecting, the children experience to be listened to and the Municipality can update information for urban planning.

## **WHY CONDUCT TRACK REGISTRATION?**

“*Adults follow paths. Children explore. Adults are content to walk the same way, hundreds of times, or thousand: perhaps it never occurs to adults to step off the paths, to creep beneath the rhododendrons, to find spaces between fences*” Neil Gaiman, *The ocean at the End of the Lane*

Children are active users of the outdoor spaces. But often they use other places than the places the municipalities have zoned for play or physical activities. No one knows underbushes and trails, backyards and green corridors better than children. Places seen with children’s eyes are slightly different from those seen by planners. Playgrounds are often filled with playground structures that comply with national standards, but this is not always, what the children would choose themselves. They have own opinions on what is a good space for them.

Adults – planners and politicians have a duty to enlighten how children’s interest are affected when someone embarks in building or area planning. It is important to have detailed information about the use, qualities and lacks in the recreation outdoor places. In urban planning, maps are good support for planners and decision makers. Track Registration is about taking children’s awareness of their uses of outdoor spaces in their community seriously, when they register their use in maps that will be included in municipal mapping archive.

The purpose of the registration is to:

- get an overview of which areas are used by schools and kindergartens,
- visualize their needs in urban planning,
- contribute to good ground documentation for decision making in the urban and management planning also for the future and work with traffic safety issues and

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- protect areas that are in use or are appropriate for play and physical activities.

By participating in a track registration, the children experience involvement in planning and how they can attend their civilian rights at early age. Involvement in track registration creates a dialogue with local authorities and demonstrates what may be accomplished by participating in community development. The maps resulting from the registration must be included in the municipalities' archive thus providing updated documentation available when urban planning for good political decisions and better planning and approval. Children's track registration should be initiated in the initial phase of the Municipal Master Plan process, or a regulatory plan, or even before approving building processes.

Track registration involves several curricula in the primary and middle school. This enables a connection between society participation and school day activities. Some of the subjects where these registrations can be useful are geography, history, art and handicraft, architecture, science.

### **CHILDREN'S TRACK REGISTRATION**

The method called «*Barnetråkkregistrering*» or «*Children's tracks registration*» provides direct knowledge about where and how the children use their nearby environment. The Municipalities use the method especially in connection with the revision of Municipal Master and Zoning Plans. The first version presented by Eva Almhjell in the seventies implied paper mapping until Hanne Marie Sønstegård and Lars Inge Arnevik at Norsk Form and Statens Kartverk presented a digital version. Both alternatives are in use today.

Track Registration is a participation method conducted usually by planners in collaboration with schools, easy to learn and effect, that offers a real possibility to practice democracy with children's involvement when developing and improving the community. The idea behind the method was to promote democracy, culture, health and sustainability and to invite children to map the outdoor play grounds in their community. In the beginning, the aim of the method also included raising

awareness about children's rights and their ability to participate in urban planning processes.

To facilitate the registration the areas are divided in a) used by schools and kindergartens and b) used before and after school time. Both versions have similar preparation process prior to the registration and after work

Children are asked to draw and colour on a computer or on a paper map, where they live, areas, places, playgrounds they use all year round or only summer or winter, and streets, roads or trails they use or have used, and eventually write down suggestions for improvements. It is important that they do not omit areas they consider dangerous and that the supervisor does not change children's words when describing their places or feelings. In the paper version, the children work together in a group with a supervisor who writes down children's remarks, whilst in the digital version one or two children draw directly in a mapping program.



Teachers' registration – photo: Vegvesen.no

Children's own registrations are completed with registrations teachers in kindergartens and schools make of the areas used during school time for outdoor activities.

The teachers can start they own digital children's track registration independently of the local planner but it is recommended to do so in partnership with the Municipality's planning staff.

The method is approved by The Norwegian Data Protection Authority (Datatilsynet) and used by many other municipalities in the country. It is also recognized and used in

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Sweden (*Berglund & Nordin, 2010*), Denmark (Carstensen, mm 2004) Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009) and Scotland (Together, 2014) & (Planning Aid for Scotland, 2011).

**PREPARATORY WORK**

When planning starting children’s track registration, the initiators have to ensure that the method is accepted amongst political and administrative leaders. The members of an initiator group must plan the work, master the method, conduct the registration and ensure future use of the maps in urban planning. They also have to allocate registration time, areas for registration, schools that can participate and make agreements with the headmasters and teachers. Early contacts with the schools will help to include an annual registration in the school activity plan.

It is very important to inform participants what this method is all about, obtain the consent of the parents, and arrange access to the data facilities at school. The latter is crucial in the digital version. Planners must also provide maps scaled 1:5000, updated ortophoto and transparent markers in black, green, blue, and red.



Different types of maps – photo: Norsk form

The information must include what the planner intends to do with the mapped information and a clear description of what they can expect. It also is important to let the children know that this is not a test with right and wrong answers and no answers need to be alike.

Some of the questions that be discussed are:

- What is it like where you go to and from school?

- Which places are fun, boring, scaring, dangerous or creepy and why?
- What is fun or boring, to do where you live?
- Do you miss something in your city you have seen somewhere else?
- What do you want more or less of?

With children’s track registration, a class can explore the local environment, taking them for a walk during school time, in the neighbourhoods to they can think about the questions they can take home as homework, i.e. what they like and dislike about their neighbourhood.

In both versions, the children must:

- mark the home
- define the areas or roads that the children use
- inform about how they play in these areas
- inform about the areas’ character, as they perceive them (description, feeling, danger, safety).
- use the following colours (fig.2)

○ Black	To circle out the home
■ Green	Places used in summer
■ Blue	Places used in winter
■ Green+Blue	Places used in winter and summer
— Blue	Routes used to walk or cycle to and back from school or after school
— Red	Dangerous spots or routes used to walk or cycle to and back from school or after school

**IMPLEMENTATION**

School and kindergarten teachers register schools and kindergartens ahead of the children’s registration so they have practised and experienced what is all about. They mark the school in black and number the outdoor areas used in school time. They fill in

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Mapping at Hogsnes primary school - Vegvesen.no

forms with more details than the children do, as these often think repetitive questions are boring. The areas used by schools for outdoor activities are often given a land use category in plans known as LNF (agriculture, nature and outdoor activities) without specifying that is often used by children. Therefore it is important that these are also mapped.

In the paper version, all participants have joint information before starting and reminding what they have worked with ahead of the registration day. Two grownups are allocated for each group; maps, guidelines and colour markers are distributed.

After they draw on the map they number the playgrounds and a group leader fills a form for each numbered area, with a more detailed description of the places.



Mapping at Hogsnes Primary School photo: Norsk Form

At the end of the work the supervisor collects the maps and forms and carries out a quality control of the areas.

In the digital mapping the class is divided in smaller groups to discuss the map before

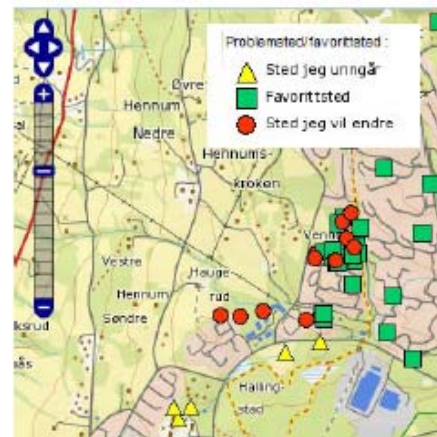
they access the computer: pointing out where they live, where they walk, and what they do in the different places. They have access to the maps in [www.kartiskolen.no](http://www.kartiskolen.no)



Digital Mapping - photo: Stange commune

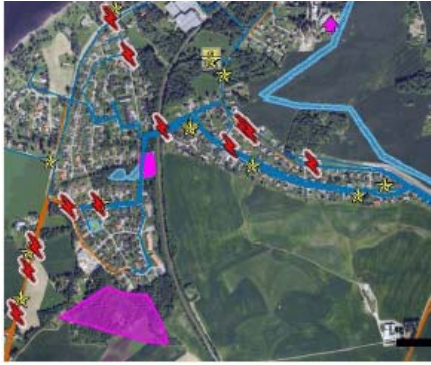
In the mapping program, they can draw in the same way as in the paper version, but with some more tools and symbols: yellow triangles for places they dislike, green squares are favourite places, red circles places where changes are preferred. The registration is individually or in pairs. In pairs one saves time and stimulates to discussion.

The adult supervisor's task is to start the process and help the children to navigate in the maps, to choose the right tools and symbols, and remind the children about roads or paths they use in different seasons of the



Different coloured icons- photo: Norsk form

year. On the computer, each pupil draws their own route to school with a dotted line. The pupils describe the places that they like or dislike under each icon for building, park, forest, place, scenery and describe what kind of activities they carry out in these different places. Some places will be identified as



Mapping winter & summer- photo: Stange kommune

safe and nice whilst others will be shown as dark and unsafe.

When this is finished the teacher and the planner will access to this information on their own account as they are logged on to the municipality's digital system.

The benefit of the paper version is that the children learn about maps and how to use them, they do get a feeling of participation, many points of view come forward and can be deepened with extra questions, and the method is oral so it suits the smaller children very well. The drawback of the paper version is that it requires more after work in the Municipality as the data must be entered in the municipal GIS, children comments must be rewritten and linked numbered areas on the map. Another inconvenience is that the children are less independent and the adults can take a leading role.

The benefit of the digital version is that children do the registration directly and control their own processes, it allows and strengthens digital expertise, the registration can be exported directly to the municipal geographic information system saving a lot of time. The drawback of the digital version is that several markings in the same area can be untidy and difficult to see in the map, when being too independent it might lead to registration that can be unserious and that has to be deleted later on, and there are much more less comments connected to each area.

### **EVALUATION**

After everyone has registered their information, it is a good idea to discuss the result in groups. The purpose is to show it on

a projector and eventually add or correct incorrect information. It is very important that the planners evaluate the collected data and decide which results can be addressed.



Evaluation at the end of the day

It is recommended to write a report with the most outstanding feedbacks to be presented to the children, the politicians and other relevant stakeholders. It is also a wish to have schools conduct update registrations once a year with other children. Copies of the maps are to be sent to the school, so that each child can take home a copy.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Implementing Children's Track Registration provides valuable input from children in planning processes. If children's urban interests are to be taken into account it is very important to present documentation about the areas that are used, when and how they are used. This will contribute to visualize their interests in urban planning, and be taken into account in an early stadium of the planning process. This documentation will also increase planners' general knowledge on children's needs and interests.

This method will contribute to increase:

- **Knowledge:** as it takes maps and geographical information in to the classroom.
- **Democracy:** as a practical participation in community planning for the children. In this way, children will also be aware of the fact that if these areas are not documented they can disappear.
- **Mapping information:** as mapped information gets often more attention than oral one. This increases the knowledge in those involved in decision making in



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urban planning so all the playgrounds can be used and well-kept in all the seasons and for all ages.

- **Inclusion:** as it includes those whose voice does not always come through to the planners in spite of national regulations.

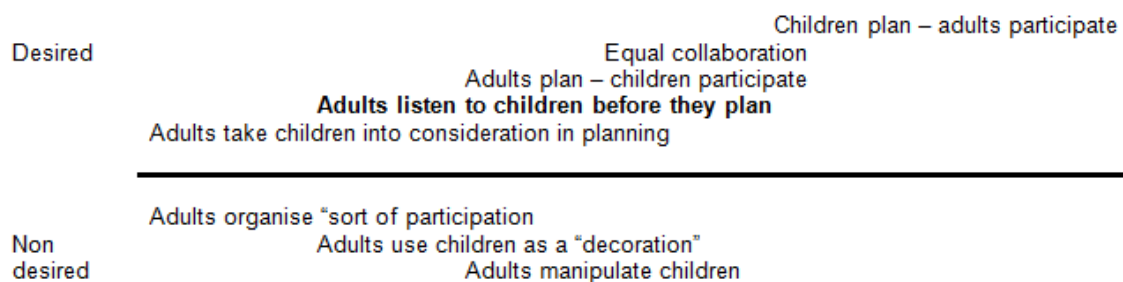
The Municipality has to commit to the registration so it does not end up as a school democracy assignment but as a supportive documentation for urban planning.

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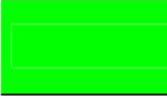
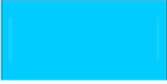
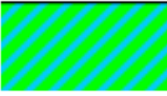


## APPENDIX

Figure 1. The participation staircase Almhjell, Eva and Ridderstrøm, G. (2003)



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Figure 2. Colours and symbols used in the registration.

 <b>Black</b>	<b>To circle out the home</b>
 <b>Green</b>	<b>Places used in summer</b>
 <b>Blue</b>	<b>Places used in winter</b>
 <b>Green+Blue</b>	<b>Places used in winter and summer</b>
 <b>Blue</b>	<b>Routes used to walk or cycle to and back from school or after school</b>
 <b>Red</b>	<b>Dangerous spots or routes used to walk or cycle to and back from school or after school</b>

Project 2014-2016

Norwegian Design and Architecture invited to launch Children's Track Registration, October 2014. The project is supported by Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and is a collaboration between Naturfagsenteret, Bengler AS and Norwegian Design and Architecture. Bodø, Giske and Ski Municipalities participate in the pilot project in 2015. The idea is that this project will be carried out in the rest of the country. The aim is that these registrations shall influence public social planning, and shall be transferred to all municipalities in Norway. In 2016 a separate exhibition will be developed at Norwegian Design and Architecture DOGA with a mobile container that could be set up when visiting Norwegian Municipalities across the country.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**



Eva Spirdal-Jacobsen holds an architect degree from the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. After moving to Norway in 1986 her interest in social and physical planning led her to hold the following degrees in *Geographical information systems in public administration*, University of Tromsø; *Design for all, Universal Design in Local Social Planning*, NHV, Sweden; and a Master in *Social Planning and Leadership*, Høgskolen i Volda, Norway. She has been a senior architect at Møre and Romsdal County Administration the last 14 years and engaging in geographical information, universal design and children's urban environments and how they are taken care of in social and area planning. Her former jobs involved a larger field of study in social, economic and human relations area. She is actually a Board Member of Norsk Kommunalteknisk Forening, and a Creative Technical consultant in GUIAR. She has given lectures and published several articles in technical magazines on the former subjects.

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