



OPINION

Third places improve our children's quality of life

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With Universal Children's Day on November 20 and the recent publication of the Vital Signs of Greater Montréal Report, it is important to draw attention to "third places" that help our children reach their full potential.

Third places are welcoming and safe spaces in the community that are complementary to home and school. They are gathering places that provide children with learning opportunities and direct access to adult role models or mentors, and where young people are encouraged to be active, learn, make connections, dream and believe in themselves and their future.

We know that children who participate in extra-curricular activities have a better chance of succeeding in school and in life. Third places are physical places that have been shown to play a crucial role in the healthy development of children. A third place can be a cultural centre, a neighbourhood library, a park, an arena or an outdoor pool; it can be a sports and community centre, like one of our YMCA centres; it can even be a dedicated space within a school, like a youth zone, where all kids can be themselves and feel accepted and welcome, no matter their origin, their gender or their family's income.

We must create favourable environments for children that offer a continuum of services from early childhood to adulthood. These environments should encourage healthy and active lifestyles, foster personal development and independence, and promote school perseverance and educational success. They should also help our children gain leadership skills and become more civically engaged.

We must join forces with parents and work closely with schools, private and public institutions and the health and community sectors. Using a global and participatory approach, we can coordinate our actions, strategies and services to better meet local needs. This way, we will reach more children in more communities, especially in underprivileged neighbourhoods where needs are greater. The current debate on how we think about school provides a real opportunity for stakeholders in child development to come together and create an integrated approach to development and to redefine spaces.

Several recent studies such as the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 14 have shown that our children's health and well-being fall short of what we should expect from a developed country like ours. This is why early intervention is so important. We must pay close attention to crises such as dropping out of school that could tip the balance towards more serious problems, like mental health issues, delinquency, high-risk behaviours and even social withdrawal.

The whole community benefits from this kind of preventative action. We have no other choice than to find innovative solutions to social problems and social inequalities in health and to improve our ability to take action for a better quality of life of our children. One such solution is third places.

We at the YMCA would like us all to come together and build a world in which children are thriving, following their dreams and leading healthy, active and engaged lives. If we all support a vision of child development that makes third places a priority, I am certain the next generation will have a bright future ahead.