

Introducing the child friendly city network: One of the most effective programmes in the world today to transform our cities into places of well-being

by Jan van Gils

Co-founder of the European Network of Child Friendly Cities

A Child Friendly City is a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children's rights

Most cities in Europe struggle with youth unemployment and youth delinquency, with young disaffected people who do not have a sense of belonging, or an idea of the meaning of their life, sometimes demolishing public spaces and harassing other people. Invariably the general public, the media and the politicians call in unison for more police on the street and for more severe punishments for the young delinquents. And often the situation does not improve and the behaviour of all parties concerned just continues.

However, the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood was aware that these standard ways of acting and reacting do not yield the longed for results. For this reason the Working Group began looking for initiatives in European cities, which did not focus all their attention on repairing things that had gone wrong, and punishing the perpetrators more severely, but which focused instead on initiatives and measures to build up from the grass roots a child friendly culture in the city.

We were therefore very happy when we discovered the Child Friendly City Network, which is a global network based in the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, and in which 54 countries from all over the world now participate. Besides this global network, there are also regional networks in Asia and in Europe.

The European Network for Child Friendly Cities (ENCFC)

We call our network the European Network *for* Child Friendly Cities (ENCFC) and not the European Network *of* Child Friendly Cities. In other words it is not a network of Child Friendly Cities, but the network wants to help cities to network on a regional and national level with regards to child friendliness. Within the European and global context cities can learn from each other, but they do not form a formal network of cities. In different cities different languages are spoken, the cultures are different and the same holds true for the social and economic situation of each city. It is therefore better and more effective to create national networks of cities faced with similar challenges plus a European network to organise the exchange of experiences at the European level. We want to be more than a Network of Child Friendly Cities, we want to be a Movement of Child Friendly cities.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Often public policies are aimed at helping children to live a good life in the future, but they do not consider the present. A child's right to life includes his/her right to live today, in the present and this must be considered

The most important starting point for the ENCFC is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the image of the child that is an integral part of it.

Often public policies are aimed at helping children to live a good life in the future, but they do not consider the present. A child's right to life includes his/her right to live today, in the present and this must be considered. The right to play, for example, is the right to play today. This aspect is very important for ENCFC.

It is a primary objective of the ENCFC to implement the UN Convention at the local political level. All current efforts are at national or even international level, whereas children actually live at the local level and this is where results will be most acutely felt. Children live today and live at a local level. The whole convention is a comprehensive tool and it should be taken on as a whole.

The sociology of childhood

I am a trained social pedagogue which means that in my studies I was not confronted with the subject of education or with disabled children and instead focused more on the social aspects of a child's life. I became interested in the sociology of childhood. Children are a social group in today's society with a typical place and a typical role. When we look at statistics we rarely find specific statistics about children as a social group, because most of the time children are considered to be an appendix to their parents.

- It is helpful to consider children as a social group as is done for other groups in sociology. In this way the toolkit of sociology becomes available and by doing so many new insights have emerged. For example, let us look at the roles played by children as a group: actors
- citizens
- participants.

We do not want to isolate children in child friendly cities, we (and children themselves) do not want to live in children's cities. Children should be part of society, contribute to it, participate in it

I did a study for the Research Centre 'Childhood and Society' (in Brussels, Belgium) into how children experience the poverty with which they are faced¹. In most studies parents and teachers are interviewed to learn more about children's poverty. But it is also important to gather the children's perspectives. In fact this piece of research had to be done without using the word 'poverty', as the children and young people did not recognise themselves as being poor. To respect this perspective of the children and the young people who were interviewed and at the same time to understand more about their experiences, they were invited to describe their living conditions (in a variety of different ways). In this way I tried to build a bridge between the children's experiences and the adults' ideas about poverty. The following conclusions can be drawn from this:

- children are a social category
- we must not only take care of individual children, but also the social group of children. Children are often kept indoors, they are too often isolated as people want to protect children and keep them safe. Now people are protected from the real world right up until the age of 24. In the past, children were able to work at the age of fourteen and in some ways became independent at that age and took on responsibility. They were, for instance, able to buy their own bicycle. Their citizenship, their actorship started quite early. Now children are in education until they are 22/24. We need to give them more responsibility. We do not want to isolate children in child friendly cities, we (and children themselves) do not want to live in children's cities. Children should be part of society, contribute to it, participate in it. By treating children in this protective way we actually do them harm, and are not treating them in a way which helps them to reach their full potential. By giving children and adolescents more responsibility we make them part of society.

Child friendly cities are therefore not only attractive for children but for all people.

A child friendly city is not a city where children play and laugh the whole day: this is only part of the story. They are living in a society and should play a role in all aspects of it. This approach is based on another vision, another view of children. The underlying concept is that children are subjects with their own ideas and ambitions, living in relation to others, and with rights, and are actors capable of steering their own lives. The challenge for adults and society is to be sensitive to the needs of the child and to help him/her to unfold in accordance with his/her uniqueness.

The social geography

Cities are becoming bigger and bigger and this trend will not stop given what specialists are currently predicting. In future 70% of people will live in cities, thus children will be in the cities to an even greater degree than they are at present. In Europe we have seen a

decline in the percentage of children living in cities, but this trend has reversed (especially in the big cities), and it may indicate that also in Europe the percentage of children in cities will increase.

In the cities you find the biggest problems, the biggest challenges, but they are like laboratories where new solutions to the problems and challenges are constantly being sought. If you are looking for new solutions to social challenges, go to the cities. Here the most innovative new approaches can be found, for example, innovative approaches to integrating immigrants or people who did not go to school; and innovative responses to juvenile crime. These innovative approaches are developed through the interaction of universities with creative people who are active in practical situations in the cities. For this reason I have taken a special interest in cities in order to gain new ideas about how to improve the quality of childhood.

In the northern hemisphere we can observe some important developments, for instance, the notion of the 'right to cities', as described by David Harveyⁱⁱ There is also a process of 'gentrification' going on, which means that rich people tend to create their own secluded and well maintained neighbourhoods with good playgrounds and facilities for their own children. This 'gentrification' needs to be monitored, because the city should be for everyone. This has to do with democracy. The gentrification in some Latin American cities has gone so far that neighbourhoods have been surrounded with high fences and security guards will only permit authorized people to enter the area. If we are not alert similar developments may occur in European countries.

To summarise:

I have developed three important sets of approaches:

- the UN - Convention on the Rights of the Child
- the Sociology of Childhood
- the Social Geography of Childhood.

The History of the Network of Child Friendly Cities

The 1996 UN World Conference on Human Settlements declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and good governance.

The basis for the work of the Network is the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the current format was discovered at the UN World Conference on Human Settlements, held in Istanbul in 1996. The Conference declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and good governance. After this it took a few years before this indicator became well-known. UNICEF picked up this concept and set up a secretariat in its office in Florence, Italy. At that time there were many interesting initiatives in Italy in this field, and a book was published in Italian entitled something along the lines of 'Cities for Children'ⁱⁱⁱ .

The 1996 UN World Conference on Human Settlements declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and good governance.

At the same time (1998) ECOSOC (the European Economic and Social Committee) published the paper 'Children First'^{iv}. This paper was inspired by the problems in Belgium with the Dutroux affair, and written by Georgios Sklavounos. The ECOSOC concluded that there was a need for a holistic approach to combat the abuse of children. It should be holistic in two senses: holistic in that several domains should be integrated and co-ordinated as there are: justice, education, urban planning, mobility, youth policy, etc.; and holistic in that children should not be isolated from other citizens. Children are citizens too. Since a holistic approach is best enacted and realised at a local level, the creation of a European Network of Child Friendly Cities was suggested.

Georgios Sklavounos (Greece), the author of the report, in cooperation with Gloria Svenson (Sweden) and I began by founding this network. The Recommendation of the Council of Europe in 2008 concerning the Child in the City was another important stimulus for this initiative.

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the network is the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the local level. The target groups are: local political authorities, local policy makers and other local actors, including local NGOs and informal groups. The ENCFC is a response to the need for the regional and local authorities to involve children and young people in the decision making process regarding policies relevant to them. By doing so, ENCFC is helping to create an inclusive and participatory culture with responsibility for all citizens, which is a requirement for maintaining solidarity, democratic values and fundamental rights.

Holding conferences

One of the key activities of the ENCFC is to hold conferences and to involve people in the work we are doing. We have held the following conferences:

ENCFC Conferences held

Year	City	Theme of the conference	Number of participants
2002	Bruges, Belgium	Child Friendly Cities	100
2004	London, UK	Environmental and social safety and children's participation in urban planning	170
2006	Stuttgart, Germany	Children's mobility in the city	160
2008	Rotterdam, The Netherlands	Tools for monitoring child friendliness and child friendly urban space	260
2010	Florence, Italy	Assessment tools, participation, children's poverty, right to play	250
2012	Zagreb, Croatia	Health, right to play, intergenerational, the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the local level	180

The conferences offered a meeting place for working on the topic of child friendly cities, and offers an opportunity to those who often work in a quite isolated way to meet colleagues, who are in the same position.

We also lobby EU Institutions on child related subjects, mostly via the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), the Committee of the Regions, and the Council of Europe. The CEMR brings together the national umbrella organisations of the municipalities of all EU member states.

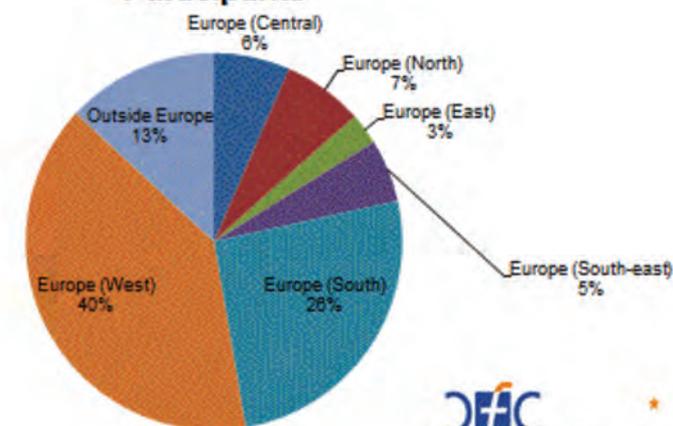
We encourage the creation of national networks as it is on that level that it is possible to take care of the specific approaches, cultures and languages of the different countries. The ENCFC is currently active in the following countries:

- Austria
- Belgium (Flanders)
- Belarus
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Cyprus
- Denmark
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Ireland
- Italy
- Portugal
- Spain
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- The Netherlands
- Turkey
- United Kingdom

The level of activity differs from country to country. Each organisation has to struggle to maintain its activities, because the theme of children and childhood is not at the top of the political agenda. These country networks also differ in scope: some cover almost all the cities in the country in question, and others focus, for example, only a core group of ten cities. The ENCFC is flexible. Our motto is: 'do what you can and need to do'.

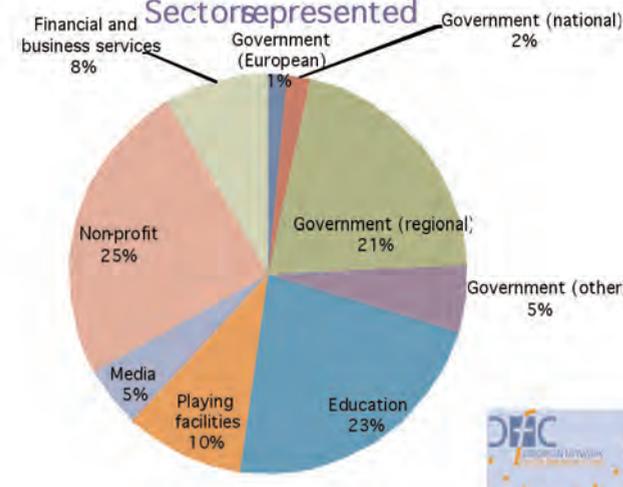
Our conferences are one of our key activities and we are happy that so many people join these conferences from so many different countries, including from outside Europe. Those who attend from beyond Europe are mainly from Asia, the USA and Canada.

Child in the City 2010 Participants



The participants come from the following sectors:

Child in the City 2011 Sectors represented



We notice that the theme of 'Play' is a hot topic at all the conferences. For example, some 50% of all the abstracts sent to us before the conference in Zagreb were about play, in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. all different aspects of play such as the safety of play, the urban planning of play facilities etc.

A second topic which is found to be important at every conference is 'participation': the involvement of children in decision making processes at the local level on topics of interest to them (playspaces, traffic safety, nature,) But besides these themes every conference includes other themes such as: children's mobility, children's poverty, children's health, intergenerational approach, culture etc.

The ENCFC always wants to work from the grassroots up. In the beginning I said that we have perceived that the most innovative approaches to a variety of social challenges are to be discovered in the cities. For this reason we want to give room to those working with children in the field. Sometimes very good practices are presented.

This is how a national ENCFC network functions: The following stages are typical, but of course each country approaches matters in its own way:

- create a network of local authorities, or a group of cities. Find the people in the local government responsible for children and youth, and bring these people together from a number of cities.
 - start to supply these people with information and guidance and discuss it. Is this information and guidance useful for their situation?
 - Identify various national and local networks such as organisations working on children's rights, urban planning, youth policy, etc.
- Σ Contribute presentations to relevant events.
- organise and disseminate good practices with regard to children and youth policies in urban areas. Many national UNICEF committees in a number of countries play an important role in starting up this process.

For your information we do not have a European secretariat. Nobody is employed at that level. All the work is done by the organisations that function at the national level, and they are so enthusiastic that they also take care of the activities at the European level via a sort of network organisation.

Key Areas for ENCFC

ENCFC is inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and bases its work on it. In this context the followings 'Rights' play an important role in the approach of the ENCFC:

1. The Right to Participate
2. The Right to Play
3. Assessment Tools, Checklists, Monitoring Tools and Action Plans.

1. The Right to Participation

In this area many initiatives are taken, on the national, regional or the local level. At the local level I can mention the example of a project which facilitated the development of rules for a playground next to a school. Often such rules are set without any participation by children. The ENCFC stimulates the authorities to include the children in this process. Another example: a ENCFC partner helped a library to involve the children and gave suggestions for books that the library should buy. The children also came up with the idea of spending a night altogether in the library. Working in this participative way creates a relationship between the children and the library.

To give another example: children are given the opportunity to speak to an audience of adults regarding a particular project: more cleanliness on the street, (there was a lot of glass on the street) ENCFC members have arranged these types of presentations followed by a discussion and they were rich and rewarding, and at the same time this gave the children the opportunity to speak in public.

At the Zagreb (2012) conference local groups of children discussed four themes: play, participation, health and intergenerational and formulated ideas and suggestions to present to the whole conference community, and then they will say to the conference community: 'now it is your turn to develop ideas and to comment on our plans.'

If we take the subject of the social participation of children in society the following points are worth noting:

- being part of society
- being an inhabitant of the street. With regards to this aspect let us take as an example children playing in the street on their bicycles, and/or repairing their bicycles themselves. The adults can be helpful by offering some tools, but the children like to repair their bicycles themselves and this activity creates a wonderful atmosphere.
- the request of the children to have a street free of cars for particular days. We have seen, for example, children sitting on the pavement with their feet on the street, thus preventing cars from parking there. This is social participation, and we must share these types of happenings with local politicians. You can call this behaviour subversive, but you can also call it 'participation'. Sometimes a little bit of subversion can be liberating for all parties.
- the last example to mention is about a research project concerning the participation of poor children. The researchers were looking for the very specific approaches and ideas of the children with regard to the following matters:
 - family
 - in my neighbourhood
 - education and school
 - free time
 - my thoughts about my future

The conclusions were presented to the children and they could give feedback first of all with a plus or a minus and later they gave more explanation .

Useful publications on children's participation are the 1992 UNICEF publication entitled 'Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship' by Roger Hart (please also reference this at the end of the document), and the Children's Participation which appeared here for the first time. Recently many books have been published on the theme of children's participation^{viii} .

These are examples of social processes and we should pay attention to them and study them.

Another illustration

Children are not allowed to vote, but they are citizens of the city and local politicians should be aware of these citizens who do not vote. What are the best ways in which to handle this democratic deficit? The Flemish network has been thinking over and discussing this question and they came up with the idea of creating a Children's Charter.

The objective of the Children's Charter is to create a tool through which local politicians can be mobilised with the help of children themselves. The charter was created by children aged 9, 10 and 11. The network printed 14 big posters on 14 different topics, inviting and challenging children to pick four posters they wanted to engage with. All these posters were commented on by the children, were returned and became the "Children's Charter". One of the simplest points to emerge was that "adults can learn a lot from children". The next point was "Hello waiter, I'm not a ghost" (it's about being overlooked in a bar by the waiter). The next was "being well behaved for 10 hours is too much". In relation to sport; "let me explore what I want to do" as a reaction to sports clubs that force children to take out membership for a minimum of a whole year. In relation to culture "to hear, to see but to do is better" (sic). In relation to school "you can do better, dear school". In relation to mobility "I prefer to ride my bike". In relation to youth work 'children know why', paraphrasing the slogan of a well-known advertisement for a beer brand children say they like youth work: why? For housing the statement was that 'each child is looking for a house with a garden and a street to play in'. Ten thousand copies of the Charter were printed and copies were disseminated to every local politician in Flanders. Does an initiative such as this have an impact? It is difficult to prove. These types of initiatives will not change the world, but they do help to create a climate which is beneficial for children in Flanders. Also, it helps adults to start to look at children in a different way: children are also citizens, they are part of society and they have democratic rights. Politicians must be creative in understanding their wishes regarding the local community.



An example of a Children's Charter

2. The Right to Play

Until about 10 years ago, when speaking of the "right to play" the debate focused on playgrounds. Since then, we have seen that it would be beneficial if different types of playgrounds were to be developed. Not all playgrounds need to be "adventurous", set in a natural environment, include water, having skate equipment etc. What is important is that the local authority officials, who are responsible for playgrounds, follow a systematic approach. This is an illustration of the systematic approach regarding the age and the 'radius of action' of children;

- playgrounds, close to the home for the younger children (up to 10 years of age) so that it is easy for parents to keep an eye on the children;
- playgrounds for children of 10 years old and above can be a bit further away from the home, because they want to do things that the parents should not see (f.e. smoking a cigarette, destroy plants, falling out, making secret plans,;);
- a third category of playgrounds are playgrounds where the whole family can go.

Take, for example, Brugge in Flanders. In this city the local authorities decided to build the infrastructure for children to skateboard in the city. The whole set up became so sophisticated that nowadays children come from the whole province to skate in Brugge.



Skateboarding facilities in Brugge, Belgium.

But the city authorities realised that the skateboarding needs of children and adolescents are different:

- there are the 'professional' skateboarders
- there are recreational skateboarders
- and there are beginners.

The needs of these different groups are met with different types of installations that are spread across the city. On the other hand you should be aware as a city planner that certain types of infrastructure are very attractive to skateboarders and will be used by them, even if they were built for another purpose. When these types of amenities are constructed this should be taken into account and the right materials should be used, that will not be easily damaged. If the city does not do this you may find yourself interacting with the adolescents in a way that is not very fruitful. The city officials will complain the whole time that young people are damaging things but they have ignored the 'nature' of young people. It is better to plan and construct things robustly from the beginning. *Urban planners must also ensure that young people feel welcome in public spaces.* Public places can be constructed to meet the needs of adults. However, *an important question for a city government to pose is 'how attractive is this place for children and young people?'*

4. Assessment Tools, Checklists For Development, Monitoring Tools And Action Plans

Within the ENCFE assessment tools, checklists for development, monitoring tools and action plans have been collected. They can be used as an inspiration for other cities and can be adapted to local situations.

These are some illustrations:

The main points of the Children's Manifesto sent to local politicians in London are as follows:

"This manifesto focuses on how London's local government can improve the lives of all London's children, young people and families by:

- Supporting vulnerable children and young people
- Reducing child poverty
- Protecting our children and young people
- Providing sport, play and recreation
- Providing child friendly environments and safe communities
- Supporting families
- Keeping children and young people healthy
- Educating our children and young people
- Increasing children and young people's involvement

A strong basis for this work is children's right to safety, to play, to be cared for and to be listened to. We call for the active commitment of all candidates to implement these rights as set out in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child."

In Croatia members of ENCFE have invited cities to complete a questionnaire and meet certain criteria – if they do this successfully they are branded a "child friendly city". The criteria include, for example, environmental issues such as healthy environment (clean air, safe drinking water), no smoking in rooms where children spend their time, safety in traffic, ...^{ix}.

In Spain, they are focusing on participation. In Barcelona, they created councils of children in every quarter with an ambassador who represents children and children's issue to local politicians. These are examples of how we can learn from many countries.

In particular, the UNICEF assessment tool is very useful. UNICEF have designed questionnaires for adults involved in the care and education of children, questionnaires for children, for young people, for parents of children and parents of young people, and for politicians. This is a real process tool that can be partly applied by cities, that should be adapted to the local situation and that should be used again after a few years. It focuses on the most important issues which need to be followed up, such as:

- Home environment
- Health and social services
- Play
- Educational resources
- Safety and protection
- Poverty
- Participation and citizenship

What are the Child Friendly Cities Actually Doing?

Using what Monique Salomon and Paul Engel described in 'Networking for Innovation' (the following elements can be distinguished in the European Network Child Friendly Cities:

- One of the elements is that the participants of the ENCFC continuously develop their *knowledge* about children and childhood. In this context it may be useful to cite the definition of knowledge used by Monique Salomon and Paul Engel in 'Networking for Innovation (1997). "Knowledge is the set of concepts, meanings, skills and routines developed over time by individuals or groups as they process information. Knowledge is in principle in people, 'between the ears'. It is intrinsically related to social practice. Actors generate, transform, integrate, exchange, disseminate and utilize knowledge while going about their daily business."
- ENCFC has grown into a knowledge network. Monique Salomon and Paul Engel use this term to describe 'individual people who join together to deliberately generate, share and use ideas, knowledge and information. Each participant is both a source and a user of information.'
- ENCFC has also grown into a *knowledge and information system*. Monique Salomon and Paul Engel use this term to describe 'a linked set of actors, individuals, organisations, institutions and networks. Multiple linkages emerge as a result of their networking in search of innovation.'

Within the EFCFC the most attention is paid to the following themes: Projects in the field of play, children's mobility, participation in urban planning, participation in local policy, drugs, youth, the visibility of children, culture. New themes that are coming to the fore are: ecology, climate change, health, international solidarity, disabled children and poverty. In this context can be mentioned that national networks in France, Croatia, and Spain have developed coherent programmes to stimulate cities to become 'child friendly cities

The 'cuteness' effect

if cities want their young people to be involved in society, to grow up as citizens, they have to develop – with the adolescents – appropriate initiatives

Because children look cute, adults forget that they still actually make and have problems. However adults tend to have more time for young children (because of their cuteness) while they have less sympathy for young people. It is more difficult for politicians to develop a pro-active policy with regard to young people than to react repressively or not to acknowledge their presence in the city. The pro-active approach has to be developed because if cities want their young people to be involved in society, to grow up as citizens, they have to develop – with the adolescents – appropriate initiatives. It is a challenge for cities to find a balance between young and old, between pro-active and re-active policies and approaches.

Of course cities can and do introduce aspects of child-friendliness into their city marketing policies and of course they focus on the cuteness of children. But they should not forget that child-friendliness includes *all* the rights of *all* children; they should not misuse the label of being a child-friendly city to hide serious problems.

CONCLUSION

The child friendly cities concept is a strong concept because it concretises the UN-convention on the Rights of the Child. The strength of the convention is that there is a worldwide consensus on the basic values and ideas on childhood; the weakness is that it is quite general. The CFC concept allows the local communities to make the convention more concrete, to apply it at the local political level. It doesn't reduce children to their helplessness, dependency or 'receiverness', it stresses children being citizens, contributing to social life. It contributes to the emancipation of the child but the same time it's a handy tool. That's why more and more cities are using it as an important part of their policy: both in small and big cities, in rich and poor cities, in cities with different cultures etc. Of course it's not a panacea, it's a (dynamic) component in a developmental process in which other factors are more powerful as the economy, the interests of adults etc. Above all, the Child Friendly Cities are a movement, stimulating the quality of life in the local communities.

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Jan Van Gils

Jan Van Gils (1950) is married with 4 children and 3 grandchildren and lives in Mechelen, an historical city in the middle of Belgium. He is a doctor in Pedagogic Sciences (University of Louvain, Belgium).

He founded and directed the Research Centre Childhood and Society in Belgium of which he retired in 2010. The centre was focusing on qualitative research projects in which children themselves voice their experiences.

Play, being children's most characteristic behaviour, is a central point of his interest within the context of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child. He's strongly involved in several international projects and organisations that intend to promote the child's rights, with special attention for the child's right of participation and the right to play. He was president of the IPA (International Play Organisation) (1998 -2005), he's co-founder and president of ENCFC (European Network Child Friendly Cities) and president of ICCP (International Council for Children's Play).

He is an expert on qualitative research projects in which children themselves voice their experiences, children's play in several contexts, children's rights.

For more information see www.childfriendlycities.org. and <http://www.childfriendlycities.eu/>