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## parks

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Parks

**D**ay one: "You're driving me mad," jarred an elderly man at my seven-year son Asad. A stern reaction, I thought (being a mother) for all the child did was blow the horn of his new shimmering black bike to get the way cleared for another fast lap of the park. That obviously disturbed the man who'd been walking in the dusty uneven park of Gulberg, Lahore. An apology, some friendly gestures and it was time to go home.

Day two: The park in-charge or *mali*, disallowed Asad to cycle in the park, saying 'uncles' and 'aunties' object to two-wheelers buzzing around them.

The boy left his bike by the side and began to play cricket with others his age.

And the day after: All geared up for a match with his newly found 'park friends', he arrived at the ground, to be stopped by the *mali* yet again for reasons the same — the grown-up object, he said, this time the hammering these young aspiring cricketers give to a tennis ball.



Understandably, children may test the patience of fitness freaks walking or jogging in public parks wanting to be fit. But are parks only for grumpy men and women wanting to shed a few kgs on the way, not for children? This short ride to the park, if nothing else, filled Asad's heart with joy (some time out in the open with Dada); it gave him immense confidence ("I'm a big boy. Mama allows me to ride my bike on the road to get to the park.")

The truth is there is not much opportunity for children to play out in the open — that is of course if the garden in their house is not sprawling enough. Take the case of Lahore's two major parks, Lawrence Gardens and Race Course Park. Sports are not permitted in the lawns of Lawrence Gardens, except in the most picturesque of all Gymkhana Cricket Ground inside the Park — which is only for members, with non-members making up the spectators. In Race Course Park, toddlers are permitted to cycle on the cemented path near the musical fountains but nothing for a little older, more energetic lot. So where do they go to burn that enormous reserve of energy within them? On the streets where zooming cars and heaps of garbage collected by roadsides give mothers' heart beat a miss every few paces?

Sharleen Khan who runs the newly opened childrens' activity centre in Lahore called 'In n' Out' says that there seems

to be no serious effort on government's part to provide children with opportunities to indulge in constructive play. "These parks of Lahore are beautiful but offer nothing for the young souls. Children's Complex is of course one exception. Then again very few people know about it."

She adds: Children don't need restaurants. They need playful activity. Why do you think they want to go to McDonald's? It's mostly to play not to enjoy a good meal."

Sharleen Khan is a British national living in Lahore for the last couple of years. She says, "When I take my five-year old daughter to a public park, I don't think about the safety measures. I don't know when and how often they are checked. A roundabout in Children's Complex has been hanging from its pedestal for the last two years. No one has made an effort to fix it."

Karachi is no different. "I cannot let my two children out of sight or for that matter in the fresh air for lack of facilities and safety measures," says a fellow journalist working in Karachi. She however, admits that Clifton's famous Auntie's Park and Hill Park have developed well. "These are sites where parents can relax as their children play. Besides these, I for one, cannot think of another reasonable place where children can be left on their own," she comments, gives it one more thought and adds, "There should be parks with distant traffic, no pollution and hazard free-environ-







ment for both mothers and children to relax."

Islamabad is worse. There is no provision for children's play ground in the capital's master plan, informs colleague Nadeem Iqbal. "To compensate for this the authorities have converted the green areas between road junctions into play grounds, specifically cricket grounds. So when a six is hooked, instead of crossing the boundary line, if any, it hits the wind screen of a passing car," he explains.

The concept of facilities for children, according to him, is non-existent in that part of the country, "with the exception of the Japanese Park in Islamabad which was developed long time ago by the Japanese and few swings in the Rawalpindi's Nawaz Shareef Park. But there too maintenance is a problem."

There is a jogging track in F-9 Park where scooties are not permitted. "But yes, if you sneak in as a group, you may be mistaken for a secretary's family and allowed in with no matter how many wheelers the child is riding," he adds.

Such is the case of public facilities for the young ones around us. Kamran Lashari, who is the director-general of the Parks and Horticulture Authority of Lahore, concedes that there are not enough facilities for the children in public parks, "since they are conceived to be areas only for walking and jogging." He agrees that there are no planned activities for children to burn their energies. Pointing

out some practical problems, he says, "Parks need serene atmosphere. Too much activity is not welcomed. But population stress hampers such concepts from being implemented." Further, "To keep these public places well maintained, clean and safe is impossible as our society has not learnt to respect public property. We're unable to control vandalism."

The solution, he believes, lies in handing over public parks to private organisations that can charge a nominal entrance fee to keep the leisurely activities running. "But when grounds are converted into formal play grounds they serve a limited interest. Poor children who spend all their time here flying kites, playing cricket or any

other sport are driven out, and left on the street to loiter around." He holds that the problem has to be solved systematically.

Hassan Mangi, Director National Commission for Children Welfare and Development, says the government will be finalising a sports policy by April this year which keeps in view the 'right of the child to play and leisure' (article 31), recognised by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. "Our inter-ministerial commission is now trying to promote the cause of the child through the new concept of 'participation'. For the purpose we are encouraging the government to initiate recreational activities appropriate for children's age through

schools and community organisations."

Sooner the better, for "outdoor play is an essential aspect of development that is ignored by the policy makers in Pakistan. Providing a balanced environment — in schools and play grounds — where they can interact with a diverse group of population is an important component in their upbringing," says Mahjabeen Sadiq, a Karachi-based education psychologist.

"We have to learn to respect our offsprings. There is emphasis on respect for elders and not for children. We have to start treating children as children," says Sharleen Khan.

Till then we play the wait and see game!