

Measuring childfriendliness in Rotterdam

by Corrine Oudijk, project manager Child Friendly Rotterdam, City of Rotterdam
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In 2006, Rotterdam adopted a new policy to make Rotterdam more child-friendly. Although implementation of this policy needs time, many positive results have already been attained, particularly in the public space. Also, various ambitious social plans were set up to make a number of Rotterdam neighbourhoods more child-friendly. These developments were measured by means of the Rotterdam Child Friendly Monitor (in Dutch: KiWi Monitor). This article describes the project, the monitor and the results.

Direct reason for starting the Programme Child Friendly Rotterdam was the introduction of Children Count ('Kinderen in Tel'), a national research tool to estimate the wellbeing of Dutch children each year. The results of this research were first published in a report in 2006, which showed that Rotterdam was the least favourable city for children to grow up in. Although Rotterdam disputed the underlying arguments of the research by claiming that the measuring tool only took into account socio-economic factors, the city took up the challenge and developed the programme Rotterdam Child Friendly in the same year.

Rotterdam Child Friendly

The Programme Rotterdam Child Friendly aims to:

1. **Improve safe traffic routes and safe play areas:** child-friendly routes towards school and towards after-school activities.
2. **Improve facilities and activities for children and youngsters:** among others, through adequate activity programmes in local community centres, converting schoolyards into neighbourhood yards, extending the number of playgrounds and improving the quality of local playgrounds and sports facilities. Also, through supplementary training programmes to enhance the quality of youth work, including youth worker 'assessments'.
3. **Create an attractive public space:** clean and in good order, with a sufficient number of wide pavements, playgrounds and green play areas.
Rotterdam has implemented a large-scale action programme, 'Clean, safe and in good order'. This programme has been supplemented with stipulations for improving childfriendliness in redevelopment areas, for instance wide pavements (minimally three metres wide and located on the sunny side), more public squares and more green play areas. Green play areas can be realised by, for instance, converting wasteland into ecological gardens.
4. **Build more child-friendly houses:** houses with a total living space of minimally 85 m² and either with direct access to the street or with an elevator. Task of the responsible municipal department, in collaboration with relevant housing corporations.
5. **Create community spirit in neighbourhoods:** making a neighbourhoods physically safe and child-friendly only partly contributes to the wellbeing of children. A stimulating, challenging environment is just as important in this respect, with activities that help children to develop their natural skills, such as sport and play activities on communal squares.

Eleven Rotterdam neighbourhoods were identified as 'experimental areas'. A number of these were disadvantaged areas, others were not. Over the past three years, eight of these neighbourhoods, among which several disadvantaged areas, have become demonstrably more child-friendly.

In recent years, childfriendliness has become an integral part of regular municipal policy. On behalf of the physical planning departments, an urban planning vision for child-friendly neighbourhoods was made. Also, on behalf of the social services departments, an 'inspiration book' was made to stimulate a coherent pedagogic approach for all institutions and organisations working in disadvantaged areas.

Rotterdam measuring tool

The Programme Rotterdam Child Friendly provides a measuring tool for assessing the social effects (i.e. the outcome) of the municipal policy in the areas involved. Where possible, both objective and subjective data are used, since a combination of these two types of data provides the most reliable results.

Objective data were obtained from national data gathered by the Central Statistical Office (population, housing, etc.) and from municipal data (green areas, sports and play facilities, etc.). Subjective data (opinion of the population on the social effects of the municipal child-friendly policy) were gathered from a poll held among Rotterdam inhabitants of 16 years and older every two years.

Another source of information was a survey conducted by the regional health service among first and third grade secondary school pupils (13 and 15 year-olds). The available data were carefully checked on reliability and validity. As the latter data were insufficiently reliable, the opinion of this age group of 13 and 15 year olds was excluded from the survey.

Although data availability will vary from country to country, it should be possible for many European countries to conduct a meaningful survey on to the indicators described below and thus gather informative data on the measure of childfrienliness of neighbourhoods or cities.

1. Safe traffic routes and safe playing, walking and cycling areas

Objective data: the number of casualties with victims, per 1,000 inhabitants in one neighbourhood.

Measured over a period of 5 years, which was necessary because of the small number of data.

Subjective data: opinion on safety in neighbourhoods, in terms of playing, walking and cycling.

2. Available facilities and activities for children and youngsters.

Objective data: sufficient number local child care centres, community centres and sport and play facilities.

Subjective data: degree of satisfaction about local facilities.

3. The public space: clean, in order and recreational green

Objective data: municipal data on greenery within the city (whereby the researchers applied their own definition of 'recreational green') Additionally, the assessment by the cleaning service department on 'clean and in order'.

Subjective data: the degree of satisfaction about the neighbourhood in terms of: clean, in order and enough recreational green.

4. Child friendly housing: single-family houses and apartments of minimally 85 m² and an elevator

Objective data: percentage of houses per area that meets set requirements, balance between settlement and departure of families, percentage of families with one bedroom per child.

Subjective data: not applicable.

5. Community spirit in neighbourhoods, contacts with neighbours, communal activities

Objective data: total number of settlements in and departures from the area. A large number of people moving house leads to social instability in city areas.

Subjective data: local opinion on the way people interact in the neighbourhood, the measure of 'feeling at home in one's neighbourhood' and the level of being involved in neighbourhood activities.

Responses to these indicators were standardised and translated into 'grades'. The standardisation were possible based on national data or on averages in the big cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht). A neighbourhood is considered demonstrably child-friendly when improvement is graded with at least 0,2 points.

Results in the social sphere

In all neighbourhoods youth participation is emphasized as being highly important. The participation of parents and children in signalling problems and implementing changes in the neighbourhood is considered an important success factor. Also, there is general consensus about the fact that physical improvements are not effective without a good social structure and proper activities for children and youngsters. The availability of an elementary school with at least six hours of afterschool activities is also considered an important success factor for childfrienliness.

The interviewees in the various neighbourhoods furthermore indicate that improving childfrienliness takes time and that collaboration with other partners, such as housing corporations, project developers and universities is essential for this process.

The improvement in **road safety** can most probably not be attributed to the programme, as the majority of the plans have not yet been realised. However, in all neighbourhoods attention has been paid to road safety: road safety lessons were given in the schools, children identified unsafe areas in their neighbourhood, various dangerous crossings were improved and in a number of neighbourhoods

and initiatives were taken for creating a child-friendly route. A number of these child-friendly routes will be built by the Rotterdam department of Urban Development and Public Housing within the near future.

In a number of neighbourhoods **youth facilities** have been improved. Twelve schoolyards were turned into communal squares, which can also be used for playing and sporting activities after school. In most neighbourhoods, new sports grounds and/or playing areas were built.

In the Beverwaard, a neighbourhood in the southeast of Rotterdam, Rotterdam Child Friendly funds were used to create a water playground. This playground not only meets the needs of children, but also serves as temporary water storage in case of heavy rainfalls. In two neighbourhoods, wasteland was transformed into temporary ecological gardens, where children and youngsters can explore nature. The plans for changes in the youth centres have not yet led to demonstrable improvements in programme scheduling in the local community centres and youth centres. The presence of a primary school offering minimally six hours of afterschool activities per week is seen as an essential prerequisite for a good living environment for families.

In a number of neighbourhoods the **public space conditions** (clean, green and in good order) have been considerably improved. Some disadvantaged neighbourhoods, however, have become less clean and/or are experiencing more nuisance in the area. In these neighbourhoods much energy has been put in creating participation opportunities for children and youngsters, stimulating language and communication skills and/or developing a pedagogic community approach.

In two neighbourhoods the number of **child-friendly houses** has increased. In the Rotterdam neighbourhood Spangen a plan to give first and second generation middleclass immigrants incentives to stay in the area was realised by building a Le Medi, a walled apartment building with green inner courtyards. A number of housing corporations have vowed to enlarge houses by converting two into one in restructuring projects or by build houses that meet the minimal requirement of 85 m² and an elevator.

In the other neighbourhoods the positive score on child-friendly houses can be attributed to a decreasing number of people moving house as a result of the economic crisis. In fact, the crisis offers Rotterdam new opportunities for investing in neighbourhoods and thus encouraging residents to stay, even after the economic crisis has passed. Rotterdam hopes to realise this aim by implementing a restructuring programme that is explicitly focused on offering families attractive housing and living environments.

Child Friendly Rotterdam: the future

The programme Child Friendly Rotterdam was officially terminated in 2010 and subsequently taken up by the responsible municipal departments. Information on the programme remains available via the official website of the city of Rotterdam: www.rotterdam.nl/kindvriendelijk.

From 2010 onwards, all Rotterdam neighbourhoods are monitored in terms of childfriendliness. Aim is to gradually expand the number of indicators.

The measure in which other European cities might benefit from the Dutch experience and the Child Friendly Monitor largely depends on the availability of relevant data.

Corrine Oudijk
Project leader Social Domain Child Friendly Rotterdam
E-mail: c.oudijk@dsv.rotterdam.nl
Telephone: 0031 – 6 – 250 07 337