

# Play forward

Life in Communities Report  
June 2026



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# Why play, why now?

## We're always curious about how life is going in our communities.

At Ingka Centres, we're on a journey to create spaces where people can not only shop, but also meet, get inspired, eat, learn, experience something new and spend time. They're what we call "meeting places". The way we make them come to life is simple: by putting people's needs, wishes and desires at the heart of everything we do.

In 2023, we set out to dive deep into local communities in five countries. Why? To better understand people's habits, needs and aspirations for

spending time outside the home. This rollercoaster of unexpected discoveries and new insights resulted in our very first Life in Communities Report.

A standout finding in the first report was that people of all ages are looking for new and different ways to unwind, relax and connect with others outside the home. That, and the learnings from the IKEA Play Report, made us curious to explore the power of play out of home – and the potential benefits to meeting places, brands and communities.

## Welcome to the second edition of the Life in Communities Report!



**11.8 visitors/sec**

For every bounce of a ball (more or less), about 11 visitors enter Ingka Centres meeting places.

# Executive summary

The first Life in Communities Report revealed an appetite for new ways to spend time outside the home. Could play be the key? This report provides insights into the meaning and power of play for adults – and its potential role for meeting places, brands and communities.

## Play is universal

Everyone deserves to play – 8 in 10 adults agree. From stress relief to connection and possibility, most say play enriches their lives and over half see it as vital to their daily routine. But it's also under pressure from time, money, access and social norms. At the same time, 46% think they'll have more time and resources for play in the next five years.

## Ways to stay and play

When adults do play out of home, they lean towards the outdoors and cultural activities. Based on the research, a palette of ideas gives grown-ups six playful reasons to linger in meeting places: Nature in the city, Calm corners, Community hangouts, Play with purpose, Tech playgrounds and Creative corners. Each appeals to at least half of adults globally, with strong pull among families with children, younger adults, and those in markets like China and India.

## Next steps for playful places

When meeting places are designed for curiosity, connection and joy, they become more valuable for people,

more vibrant for communities and more resilient for business. The commercial opportunity is clear: playful environments drive longer visits, stronger spending and greater loyalty. Four shifts are recommended to co-create playful spaces:

1. Make play a core design principle.
2. Build a network of playful spaces.
3. Work from the palette of play ideas.
4. Co-design with local people.

Let's bring play to the many, together.

## Find out more

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# Methodology

**3,000** adults

**6** countries

**8** expert voices

**2** studies

**1** report

This report sets out to explore the meaning of play for adults and how it can shape the design of future meeting places. The research combines a futures-driven qualitative study with an interview-based quantitative study.

## **Futures and qualitative insights**

Foresight and innovation consultancy Future Minds began by exploring how play is changing, and what that means for cities and meeting places. Interviews

with eight experts and front-runners were combined with a review of trends and literature about play, wellbeing and urban life, plus case studies of playful urban spaces and civic projects.

## **Quantitative survey**

Market and opinion research specialist Ipsos then tested the ideas from the qualitative study through an online survey in China, India (NCT Delhi), Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

A total of 3,000 interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample among people aged 18+ (500 interviews per market).

## **Report**

The report is a synthesis of the two studies. Together, they offer a grounded view of why play matters now, how adults play today, what they want next, and how meeting places, brands and communities can respond.

*Note: In this report, “global average” refers to the average, or mean, answer to a certain question by all respondents, in all countries surveyed.*

# 1. Press play

Play isn't just for kids –  
it's how people and  
places come to life.



# What do we mean by play?

**Activities you do for fun and happiness – online or offline, indoors or out – that promote wellbeing, creativity and connection for everyone.**

# Play for the people

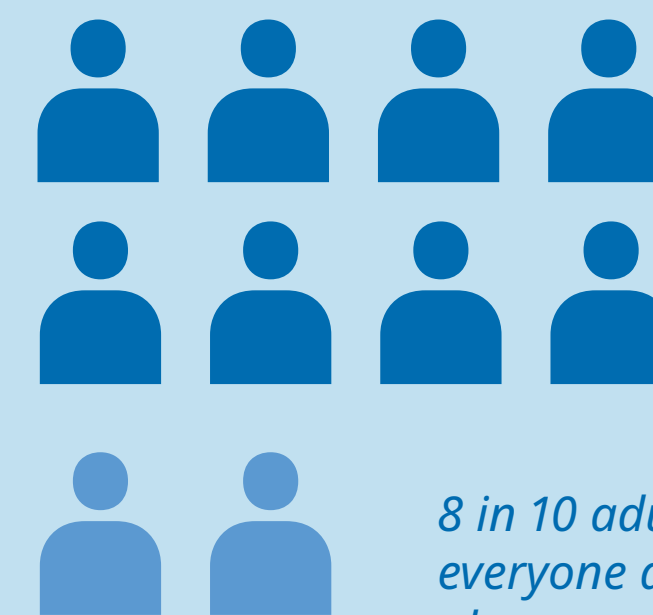
Close your eyes and think of play.

Did you picture toys, playgrounds, children? Maybe you caught yourself wishing for more of it in your own life. You're not alone. Play is more than kids' stuff – it's a core human need.

But somewhere between school and spreadsheets, many people quietly unlearn it. It gets thought of as childish, silly, a nice-to-have.

It isn't. Most adults not only believe in play – more than half say it's a vital part of their daily routine, carved out even when life is busy.

That's not optional, or a luxury. It's a priority. And playful, intentional design can unleash it.



*8 in 10 adults agree that everyone deserves time for play, regardless of age.*

Only  
**15%**  
of adults  
think play is a  
waste of time.

**20%**  
think play is just  
for children.

**52%**  
see play as a vital  
part of their daily  
routine.

**“It’s too  
important  
not to do.”**

Karen Feder,  
Lab for Play Design



# Fun pays off

Play feels good. Do you feel it too?

If so, you're on the side of the many. For most adults, play improves life balance, deepens relationships, and makes the everyday more fulfilling – even when things turn serious or uncertain. Think of it less as a mood-lifter and more as a life skill. Oxygen to keep a sense of possibility alive and help people cope, even when the pressure is on. As important to wellbeing as breathing or belonging.

Harnessing the power of play brings a great commercial opportunity. People remember the visits that surprised them, delighted them, connected them to someone else. They come back. They bring others with them.

For meeting places, brands and communities, joy isn't the soft option. It's the smart one.

**“Our social skills are eroding ... Play helps invite people to talk to each other while they're doing something joyful.”**

Ryan K. Rosen, Founder, Friendly Futures

**70%**

say finding a balance between work and play enhances their wellbeing.

**3 in 4**

adults agree that playful activities increase emotional connection between people.

**61%**

feel that incorporating play into their routine enriches their lives.

**Time out**

L	O	X	E	E	R	P	O	L	E	D	B	P	T
E	E	X	A	P	U	B	P	H	N	O	E	A	E
Y	G	R	R	L	P	J	R	U	R	R	P	U	P
E	O	M	R	E	E	P	O	Y	O	N	H	J	O
L	C	O	R	N	E	R	K	L	P	L	N	X	R
P	Y	E	O	U	G	L	R	E	O	O	B	E	Y
E	A	P	J	A	S	E	H	H	B	U	R	N	H
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L	M	P	Y	R	N	R	M	K	O	M	J	D	E
H	R	L	Y	P	G	L	E	N	G	X	G	Y	U

PLAY  
~~TIME~~  
RELAX

GROUND  
SHOPPING  
HAPPY

JOY  
LOUNGE

BREAK  
CORNER

# No laughing matter

Play might be important, but it's under pressure.

In the past 50 years, children's freedom to play has declined dramatically and their mental health has followed. For grown-ups, play is often dismissed as frivolous, despite evidence showing that more play equals less stress, better coping and greater life satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

Over half of adults believe the world is in a play crisis. Tellingly, they're more worried about everyone else than themselves: while only 29% say their play time has decreased over the last five years, a striking 63% believe others are playing less than a decade ago. We're all fine, apparently – it's just everyone else that's struggling.

Technology gets much of the blame – 69% say screens have replaced

traditional play – though a defiant 47% believe they personally manage the balance just fine.

So, while play isn't disappearing, it's fragile. Squeezed by time, money, tech, and the places we move through every day.

**“We've been socialised to believe that play is a waste of time. But play is not the opposite of rigour – it's the cure against it.”**

Tabitha Dell'Angelo, Founder, Urban Education Program

## Who worries the most about the play crisis?

Age group  
**18-34**  
(59%)

Gender  
**women**  
(54%)

Country  
**India**  
(76%)

Income level  
**medium**  
(57%)

*A global play crisis refers to a widespread decline in the availability, accessibility or quality of play opportunities for people worldwide, often due to economic, social or environmental factors.*

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation 2024 & 2025

# All to play for

And yet, something is shifting.

Families are reclaiming joy and playfulness in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Nearly half of adults think they'll have more time and resources for play in the next five years, and only 14% expect to have less. That's not pessimism. It's pent-up demand.

Adults are already playing in more places than you might think. Over a third split their play equally between home and out of home. And when asked what they'd most like to do in public spaces, they prioritise nature, culture and the freedom to explore.

So, what do meeting places and brands do about it? The question isn't if people want to play outside the home. (They do.) It's whether play is possible in the places they visit – or if the visit is just about "getting on with it" and going home.



**40%**  
Spending time  
in green areas



**37%**  
Going to the  
movies/cinema



**22%**  
Urban  
exploration

*Most wished-for activities  
in public spaces*

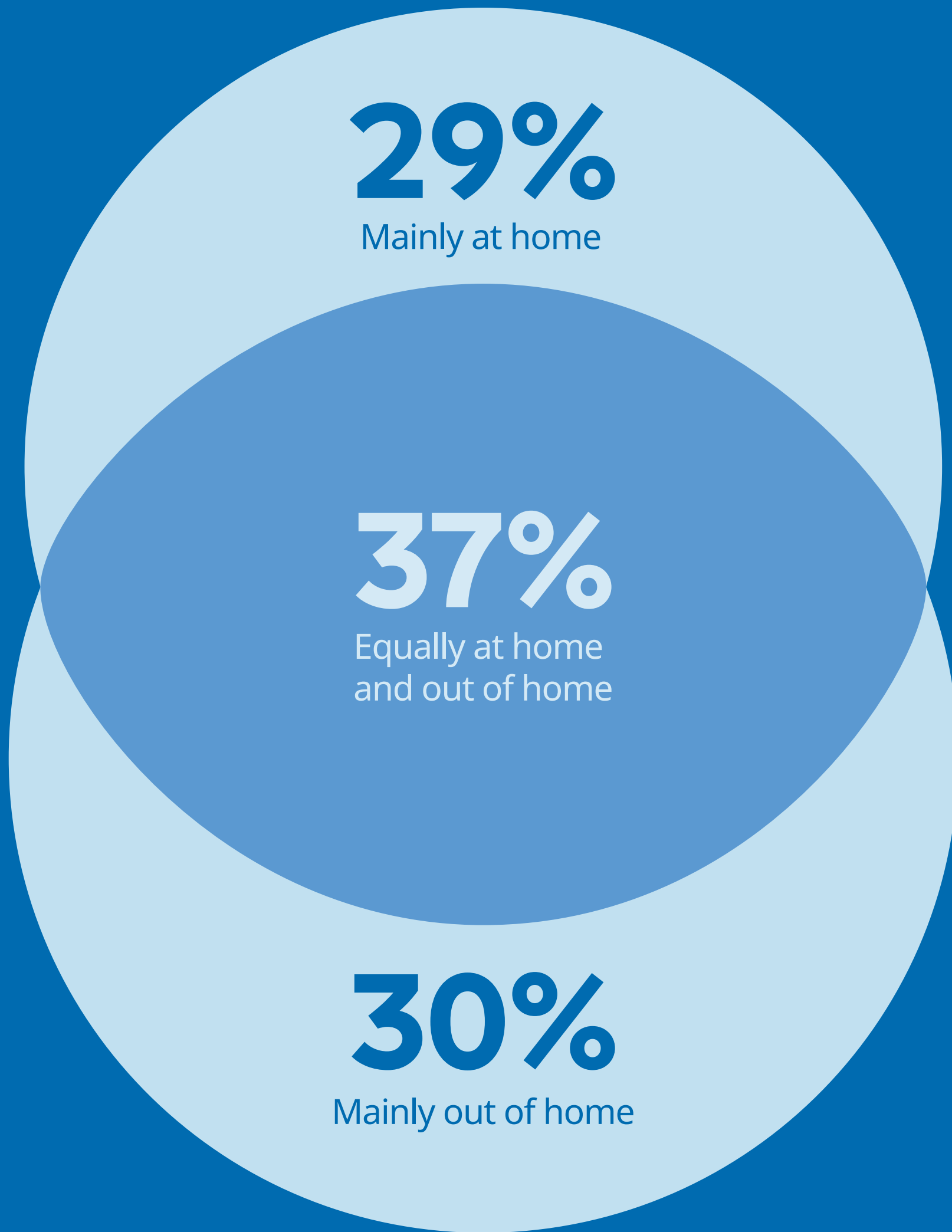


## The optimism gap

Asian countries are twice as hopeful as European ones about their future play prospects. What's driving the difference?

<sup>2</sup> IKEA Play Report 2024

# Where do grown-ups play?



**46%**  
of adults think they'll have more time and resources to play in five years from now.



# 2. Fun and games

How adults spend their play time – and what gets in the way.

# Counting the minutes

Think about it: how much time do you spend on play each week?

Perhaps surprisingly, over 95% of adults say they're still playing, at least a little. A couple of hours is the weekly limit for most, with play squeezed into stolen moments around all those everyday "musts".

In general, grown-ups' play time hasn't changed much over the past five years. Some play less, others more, but the largest group is roughly where it was.

A reassuring kind of stability? Not necessarily. In a fast-paced, ever-changing world, it's the small pockets of time facing the biggest extinction risk.



## Walk the talk

In China, 63% of adults play for over 2 hours every week. That's 28% points higher than average!

Adults' weekly play time in minutes (rounded percentages)

**35%** > 120 mins

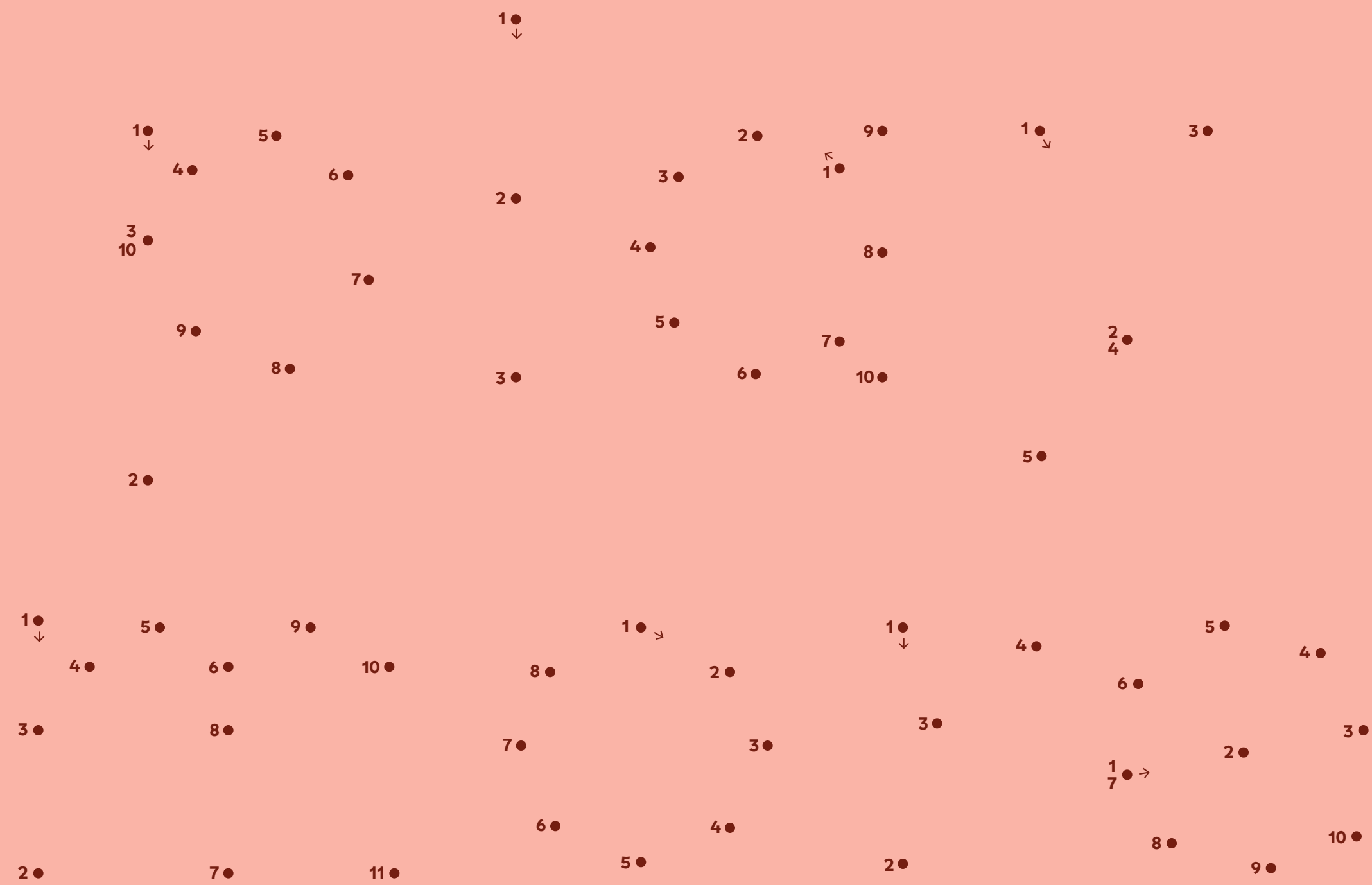
**46%** 30-120 mins

< 30 mins **15%**

0 mins **5%**



## Time out



# Adults' own play time vs 5 years ago

**29%**  
Less time now

**36%**  
About the same

**32%**  
More time now

# Playing out

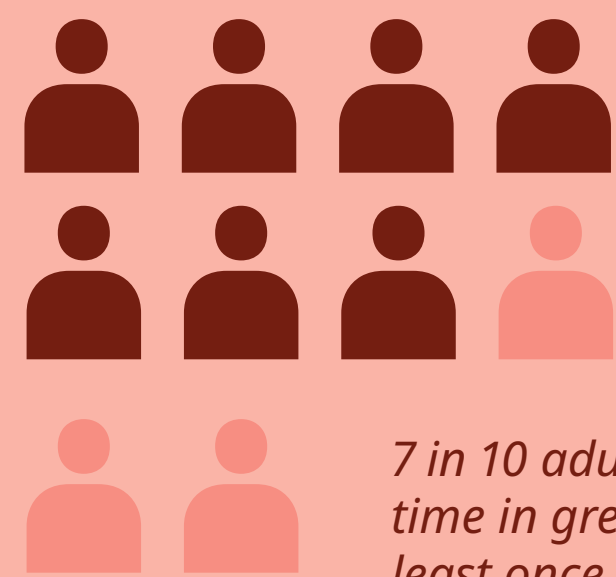
Out of home, grown-ups can be a playful bunch.

Their favourite place to do it? Outdoors. Over two thirds of adults spend time in green areas every month – their top play activity by far – while almost half enjoy exploring urban environments. Many like to indulge their cultural, sporting and artistic sides too.

Look closer and some clear patterns emerge. Beneath the mix, people tend

to lean one way or another: towards movement, exploration, imagination, competition or creativity. Different people play differently. Always have.

The opportunity for meeting places, brands and communities isn't to cater for everyone at once – it's to understand the local mix and design for it.



7 in 10 adults spend time in green areas at least once a month.

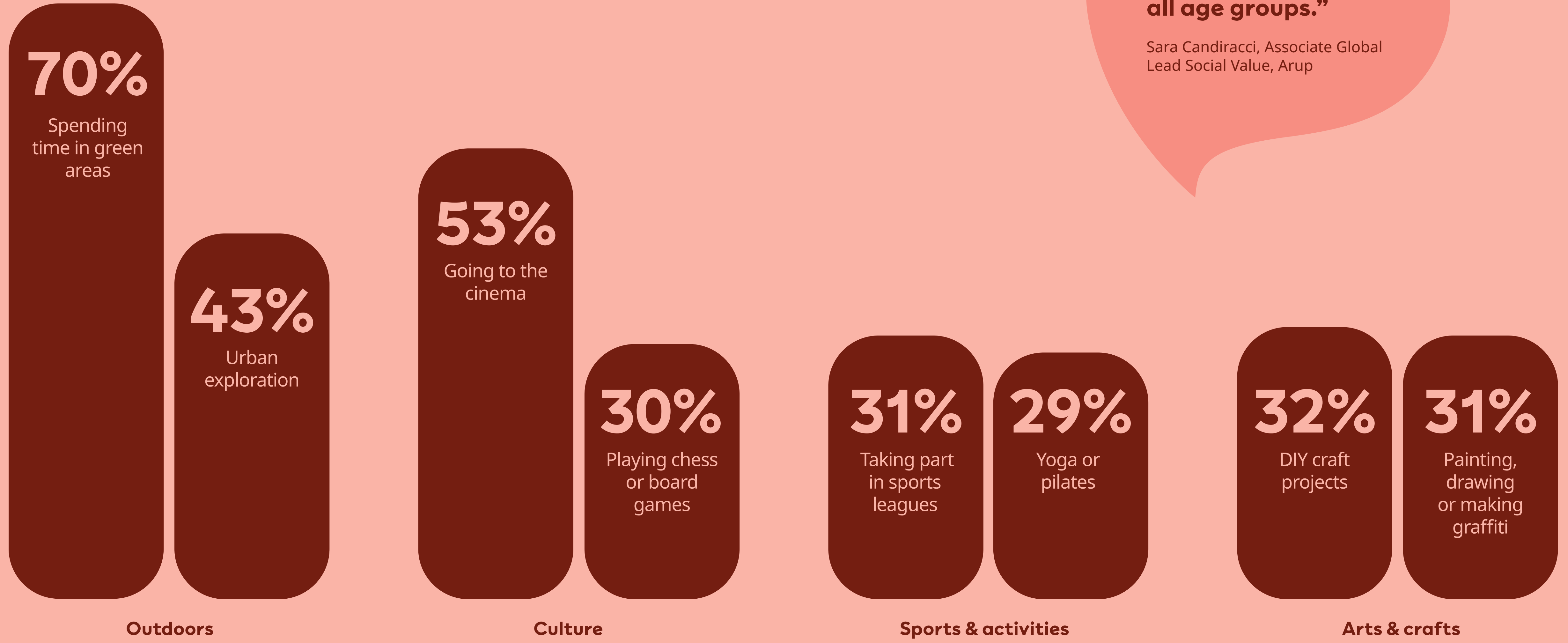


## The 15%

Are Swedes making the most of nature? 85% have access to local green areas but only 70% enjoy them frequently. So, what are the rest up to?



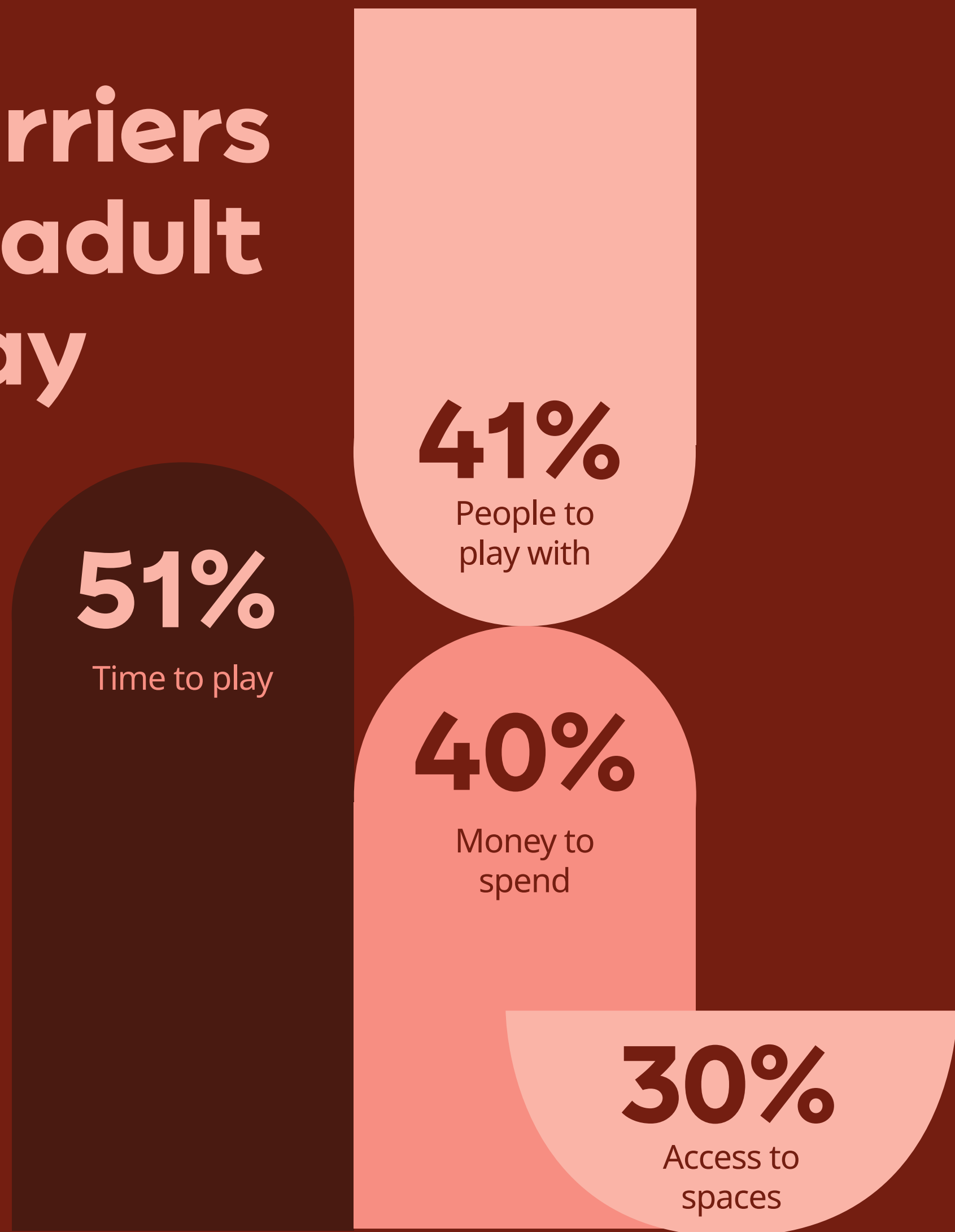
# Most common out-of-home activities for adults



**“Access to nature is very important for all age groups.”**

Sara Candiracci, Associate Global Lead Social Value, Arup

# Barriers to adult play



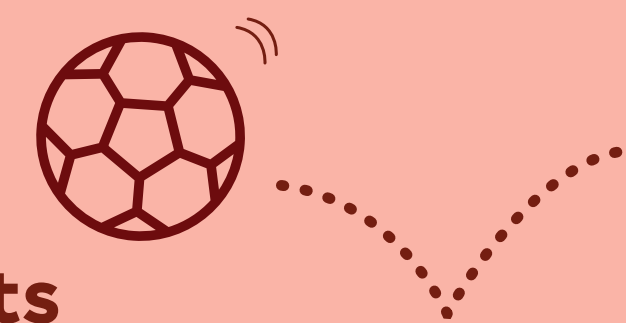
# In play's way

Of course, the path to play is rarely a clear one.

The obstacles are familiar: a lack of time, money, people to play with, places to do it.

The biggest culprit, affecting over half of adults? The clock. In a busy life, play is often the first thing to go – not because people don't want it, but because everything else gets there first.

Places matter too. Although 52% of adults feel their community has good public spaces that encourage play, almost a third say access to those spaces is shrinking. For meeting places, brands and communities, that's both a warning and an opportunity.



## Blockspots

Where do the barriers hit hardest? For money it's the UK, for people it's China, and for spaces it's India. Time? That's global.

# In. Shop. Leave.

The idea of playful public spaces might be attractive in principle, but it's far from friction-free in practice. In fact, three in four adults see at least one barrier to playing in shopping centres and other meeting places. The solution? Understand the barriers and adapt the invitation.

Grown-ups are often in a hurry, and the data agrees. For one in three, a centre is a place for errands, not experiences – they just want to get in, do what they need to do, and leave. Cost is also an obstacle, particularly for women. And then there's the social side, with almost one in four adults – especially younger ones – held back by a fear of embarrassment.

Meeting places, brands and communities have a golden opportunity to flip the script. By making play accessible, affordable and judgement-free, they can turn “in, shop, leave” into “in, play, stay”.

**33%**

I just want to do what I need to do and then leave

**28%**

I can't afford to spend money on play activities

**23%**

It would be embarrassing for me to engage in play activities out of home

**14%**

I have no need or desire to play

*Barriers to adult play in shopping centres*



**“Adults lack play confidence ... but if you create an environment where they feel safe and not judged, they can relax and start playing.”**

Sara Candiracci

# I have a wish...

We asked adults what they'd like to do in public spaces. Consider this their wish list.

At the top, green is still the dream – four in ten feel the pull of nature. Cinema comes in a close second, only 3% points behind this time, compared to a 17-point gap in current habits. Somewhere between wish and reality, films are moving up the credits.

The rest of the list ranges from exploring to scoring to drawing.

Around one in five want to roam their surroundings, while one in six are energised by sport, yoga or pilates. Creative activities round out the top ten.

In China and India especially, there's a strong appetite to weave play into daily life – from nature and sport to hands-on workshops and classes.

For meeting places, brands and communities, this could be the start of a brief. The first touch of paint for a more playful future.



## Grow into green

Does nature grow on us? Older adults put green areas first, while 18–34s prefer the cinema.



# 3. Painting the future

New colours for playful meeting places – and how to use them.



# Five shades of play

People play differently. But scratch the surface and the same patterns appear – a shared human framework that cuts across age, culture and geography.

Which play type are you? How about your visitors, customers and community members? Everyone has at least one type, usually more. And while their form and focus can shift across generations and personalities, the types remain universal. Think of them as a common language, spoken differently by everyone but understood by all.

The five play types are a powerful starting point for designing spaces that speak to the many. Miss the mix and you miss the people. Get it right and you build something worth coming back to.

**Move:** Being physically active. Especially women, over 35s, and adults in China and India.

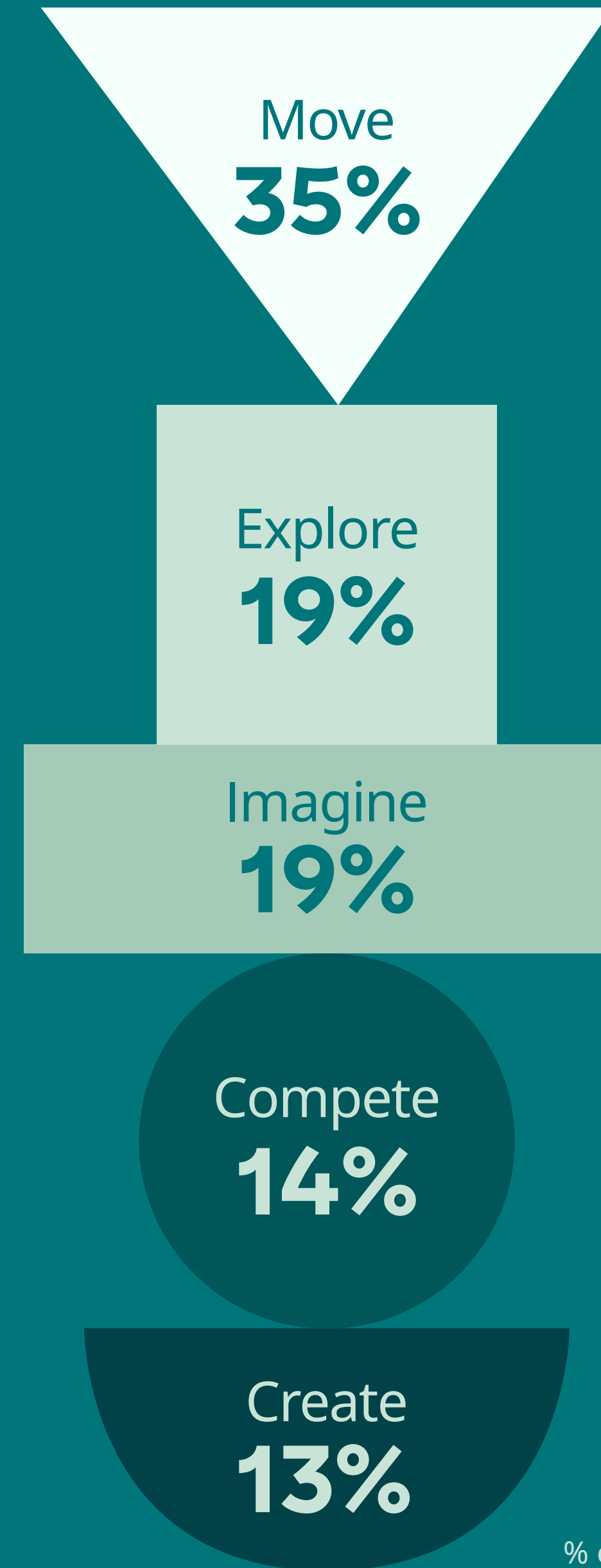
**Explore:** Discovery and curiosity. Especially men, over 35s, and adults in Poland and China.

**Imagine:** Stories and immersion. Especially families with children, and adults in Spain and Poland.

**Compete:** Challenge and games. Nationally representative by age and gender. Highest in India and Spain.

**Create:** Making and expression. Especially men, under 35s, and adults in Sweden and the UK.

## Play types



% of adults



# A playful palette

**“We play in different ways. Are we ready to embrace that kind of play too?”**

Louise Aagard, Lab for Play Design

The world is changing and so are the spaces where play can happen. Six opportunities are emerging for meeting places today, each shaped by real shifts in how people live, connect and feel.

Many of those shifts are happening right before our eyes. Cities are getting busier and nature harder to reach.

Modern life is getting lonelier and more fragmented. People want their time to mean something, with creativity playing a bigger part in how they live and define themselves.

The early signals of change are already appearing – from rewilded city parks and biophilic design with elements of

nature to playful community labs and sensorial, immersive experiences.

For meeting places, brands and communities, the question isn't whether to respond. It's how quickly.

# Six ideas for play in public spaces



*% of adults interested*

# Which way to play?

# Roots

- **Nature in the city** is blooming among Move play types (70%).
- Age-wise, this idea finds most fertile ground among the 35-plus crowd (68%).
- At 80%, China is the country with the greenest wishes.

*vs 67% global average*

# or routers?

- **Tech playgrounds** connect with 69% of families with children.
- Young men are hardwired for this idea: 18-34s +14% points vs 35-65s, men +11% points vs women.
- Compete is the most plugged-in play type (57%).

*vs 52% global average*

# Solitary

- **Calm corners** are softly embraced by Explore play types (61%).
- Quietly ranked as the #2 idea in most countries.
- Women are especially at peace with it: +7% points vs men.

*vs 59% global average*

# or sociable?

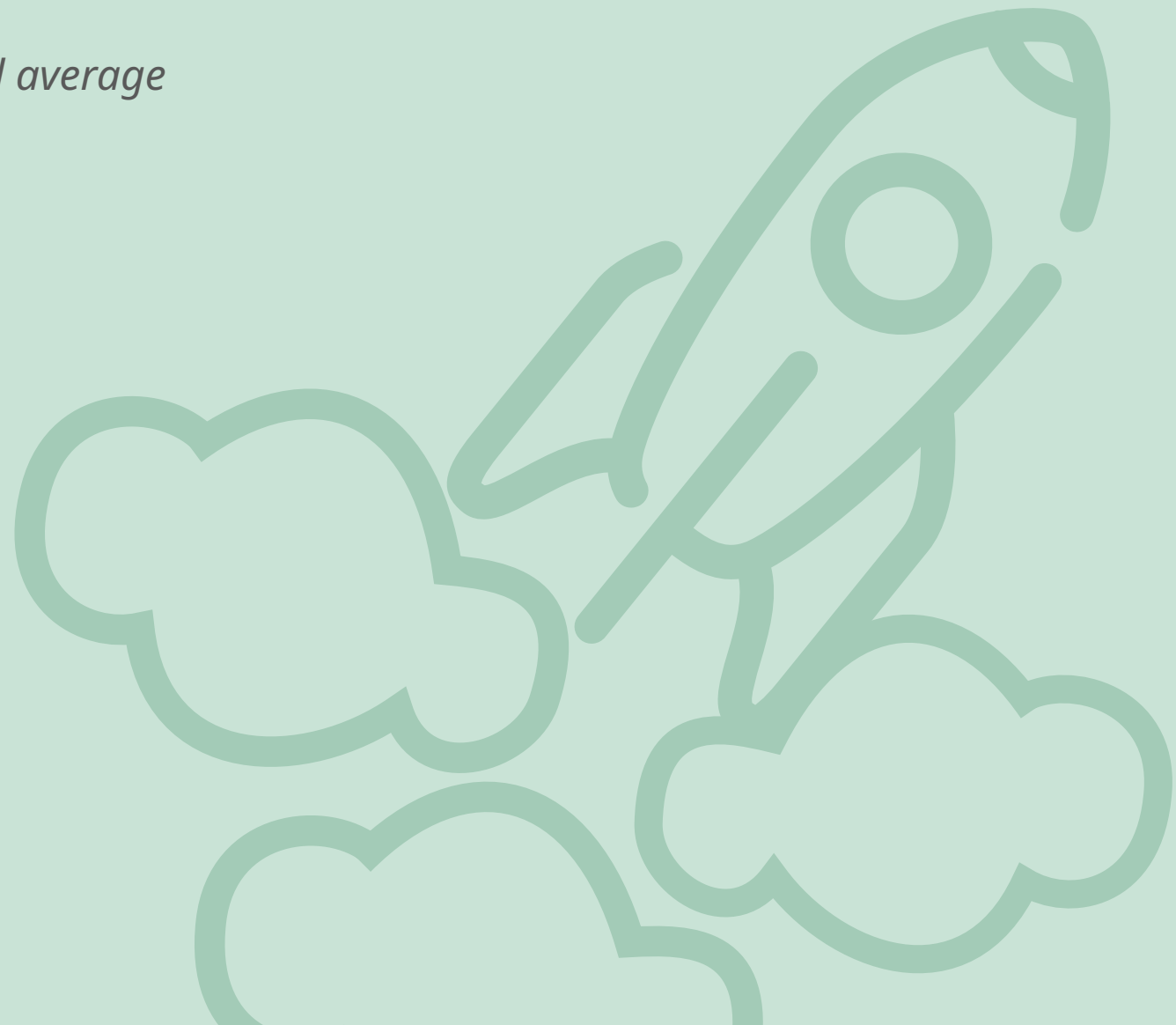
- **Community hangouts** draw in 68% of families with children.
- Compete and Move lean hardest into this idea (62%).
- Young adults are also feeling the vibe: +6% points vs 35-65s.

*vs 57% global average*

# Mission

- **Play with purpose** is the most meaningful choice for families with children (72%).
- India is ahead of the curve on this one: #2 idea and +19% points above average.
- Move, Explore and 18-34s also show strong belief in the idea.

*vs 54% global average*



## or magic?

- **Creative corners** are a natural habitat for Create play types (60%), with Imagine also open.
- This idea gets the juices flowing in under 35s (56%).
- Female creativity is alive and kicking: +9% points vs men.

*vs 51% global average*





# Doodle meets design

It's design time!

Ideas are one thing, bringing them to life is another. You've seen why they matter and who they're for. Now comes the fun part: the how.

From a bin to a handrail to a walkway, every design choice sends a signal: who's welcome, what's possible, how people might feel. Making the right call for the right place and people is where the real work begins.

Inviting play doesn't need grand gestures. A swing-like bench or a tiny keyhole entrance can spark curiosity. It's the small, clever moves that make play happen.



## Nature in the city

Think about living, playful spaces that grow, change and invite exploration. Why not start with a pop-up garden or scent-filled planter box that people can touch and smell?



## Calm corners

Consider spaces of quiet and reflection, sanctuaries for inner journeys. Start small: a nook with soft lighting and cushions can do more than you'd think.



## Community hangouts

Imagine spaces that invite co-creation, celebrate difference and foster belonging. A weekly board-game night or community art project to bring people together, perhaps?



## Play with purpose

Picture challenge-based places where people prototype solutions and build together. A repair café or sustainability workshop can be as fun as it is meaningful.



## Tech playgrounds

Think about playful hybrids where digital layers spark physical interaction. What if the space had an interactive wall or a responsive floor that changes with movement?



## Creative corners

Consider open-ended zones for storytelling, roleplay and artistic mess. Why not open up a space for local performances, peer-led workshops or a pop-up maker table?

# Endgame

So, how do we play this?



# The state of play

Play matters at every age. Yes, it bends under the strains and stresses of the everyday. But for most grown-ups, a little play time can provide some welcome relief. A touch of magic in the everyday.

This opportunity puts meeting places at a fork in the road. They can stay as purely transactional corridors, places to “get things done”. Or they can grow into something richer: destinations to pause, wander, meet, learn, play, and share moments that matter. Play can be the difference between stopping by and staying put. The opportunity is in that space between habit and aspiration.

The six ideas and the appetite behind them – with green spaces and movers at the forefront – show this is both possible and wanted. It’s time for meeting places, brands and communities to get painting.



**“The grass may be walked on.”**

Louise Aagaard

**“Designing for joy isn’t decoration – it’s a strategy.”**

Gary Ware, Founder, Breakthrough Play

# Your move

Play is more than a splash of colour on top. It’s a design strategy for inclusion, health and connection in everyday life. A public good and a commercial imperative. Channelling the power of play into meeting places means embracing a few important shifts:

**1. Make play a core design principle, not a finishing touch.**

Bring play into the brief from the start. Strive for design moments that invite curiosity, connection and joy – enhancing efficient flows and sales, as well as the overall experience.

**2. Move from one playground to a network of playful spaces for all.**

Go beyond a single play area. Treat play as something for everyone – a patchwork of playful moments across the site that people can discover and make their own as part of everyday routes.

**3. Use the palette as a shared language and lens.**

Let the six ideas around nature, calm, community, purpose, tech and creativity be a shorthand across teams and partners. They’ll make it easier to spot, develop and combine opportunities over time.

**4. Co-design locally and inclusively, with the people who’ll use it.**

The right mix of ideas will look different in each place. Involve a wide range of locals in shaping and colouring the offer, always paying attention to inclusion, equity and accessibility.

Remember, big shifts often start small. It’s all about testing, trying, renewing and improving along the way. And constantly asking who it’s for, how it makes them feel, and who might be missing.

**It’s playtime!**



# Play it forward

At Ingka Centres, we believe play matters. Not just for fun, but for how people connect, spend time, experience our meeting places and their communities. Playful environments convert brief visits into extended stays, transactions into relationships, and retail spaces into destinations for socialising and joy.

We've learned that play works best when it's built together – by us, retailers and communities – turning places into destinations that people love. We're on a journey of integrating play into our meeting places, but we're already seeing some exciting examples playing out in the real world.

Last summer our Livat meeting places in China welcomed Pippi Longstocking, blending local creativity with our Swedish heritage. Millions of visitors of all ages enjoyed playful experiences. We've also been exploring many other playful activities across our European

meeting places, including pillow fights and e-sports tournaments.

And we're excited about how we're integrating relaxing and playful community spaces and nature into many of our meeting places – including Lykli Gurugram in India, which will feature a garden with focal tree, where the local community can gather to share a meal, hang out and enjoy nature in a bustling urban area.

We can't say it enough: playing is serious. It's a force that influences behaviour, fosters connection and shapes how people choose where to spend their time.

Join us. Let's bring play to the many. And let's play it forward together.

## **Matt Drage**

*Communications & Marketing  
Director at Ingka Centres*



*Focal tree garden at Lykli Gurugram, India (3D sketch)*

# Tack!

Play forward  
Life in Communities Report  
June 2026

Interested to find out more? Get in touch with us!

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