

## International Campaign “I’M GOING OUT TO PLAY”

Studies often offer contradictory results. While on the one hand, the positive aspects that new technologies provide us are highlighted, such as easy access to information, less effort and more independence in obtaining research results, on the other hand it is stated that, potentially, there is a great risk in the improper use of these means which expose our children to a gradual impoverishment in language development, as well as expose them to a sedentary lifestyle, obesity problems or health problems such as depression, anxiety, lack of concentration, lack of social skills, behavioral problems and problems even in the sleep cycle<sup>1</sup>.

During 2023, the initiative of an Irish city of 18 thousand inhabitants, Graystone, has strongly attracted attention to this issue<sup>2</sup>. Finding an aligned vision, local residents and schools decided to limit access to smartphones for children under the age of 13, and also to evaluate this proposal as a policy to be implemented nationwide.

Catalonia also offered a framework of recommendations in relation to this issue. In Northern European countries, it has been decided to ban the use of mobile phones and tablets at school. The same prohibition also came into force in Australia which banned, in addition to the use of mobile phones in schools, the use of social networks for children under the age of 16<sup>3</sup>. The World Health Organization has issued serious recommendations to families regarding the use and impact caused by devices for children, especially pre-school children<sup>4</sup>. Even Italian pediatricians<sup>5</sup> are in agreement with these recommendations, advising parents against the prolonged use of electronic devices<sup>6</sup>.

But even before taking this alarming panorama for granted and although we are convinced of the need to take a position on the problem, we ask ourselves, what will be the response of families? What alternatives will they find to compensate for these prohibitions? What will be the alternatives to the screen in children's daily lives? Who will replace the "modern nanny" who is responsible for keeping children calm and quiet so that adults can ensure their activities and interests? What could we offer to childhood that is more precious, meaningful and more attractive to them than being enchanted in front of a monitor or screen?

As followers of Francesco Tonucci's thoughts and proposals, we believe that the most effective response is the return to free play, getting children to play again, from a very young age, every day with their friends in their neighborhood, without adult supervision. It is important that adults, parents *in the first place*, give confidence to children and their skills, which are often underestimated, and promote independent movement outside the home, so as to avoid social isolation and prolonged use of electronic devices.

The regulation of access to electronic devices is an insufficient strategy, because it does not build a strong and attractive alternative path for children and, furthermore, it does not consider the fact that the more bans are imposed by the adult world, the more curiosity and attempted transgression will be generated in children.

Since 1991, the year of birth of the international project "The city of children", Francesco Tonucci has

<sup>1</sup> Concordia University, Nebraska, 2020 <https://www.cune.edu/academics/resource-articles/examining-effect-smartphones-child-development>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fanpage.it/innovazione/tecnologia/in-questa-citta-tutti-i-genitori-si-sono-messi-daccordo-per-non-dare-lo-smartphone-ai-loro-figli/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/tecnologia/en-un-pueblo-irlandes-los-padres-se-pusieron-de-acuerdo-y-prohibieron-el-uso-de-smartphones-entre-nid06062023/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jun/03/much-easier-to-say-no-irish-town-unites-in-smartphone-ban-for-young-children>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2024/11/29/espanol/mundo/australia-prohibicion-redes-sociales-menores-16.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.who.int/es/news-room/detail/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>

<sup>7</sup> <https://sip.it/2018/06/18/smartphone-tablet-gia-nel-primo-anno-vita-no-al-telefonino-pacificatore-arrivano-le-raccomandazioni-della-societa-italiana-pediatria/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://it.in-mind.org/article/bambini-e-bambine-davanti-a-uno-schermo-qual-e-limpatto-della-tecnologia-sul-loro-sviluppo>

been promoting an energetic and tireless battle, arguing that childhood must exercise its right to play and must do so autonomously, leaving home to find classmates, occupy public space, have the opportunity to take or avoid risks, face the decision to transgress or respect the rules dictated by the family. It is not a nostalgic vision of childhood life, but a need for children's development and an urgency of cities that have lost their main indicator of environmental health: the presence of children playing freely in public space.

It is urgent to give children the opportunity to build real relationships, true friendships from an early age, because only through this real experience of sociality can they understand how to then relate even with virtual environments.

Francesco Tonucci insists that this should happen very early, from the first years of life. Before going to school, children should already have real friendships built outside the home thanks to daily meetings, being able to choose where, how, with whom and what to play. The technologies will arrive later, when they are useful and necessary, and will be used correctly. Today Tonucci considers that this is the most credible and sustainable proposal to counter the power and fascination that electronic devices have on childhood.

Children's free play will also lead to the reconstruction of a social life in the neighborhood, because it is precisely the presence of neighbors that will help reduce parental fears. As Tonucci says, the verb to play cannot be conjugated with the verbs to accompany and supervise but only with the verb to leave. Only the condition of autonomy will make play free and allow the child to compete with this fundamental experience for his growth.

The international project "The city of children" has mainly a political purpose because it concerns the city and therefore involves all administrative and social skills transversally. With this perspective, Francesco Tonucci urges politicians, but also teachers, healthcare professionals and families themselves, to discuss the importance of free play in order to allow it in the public space of their cities by eliminating the bans that prohibit it.

We need mayors, administrators, urban planners who listen to children and their needs, who take sides in favor of childhood, because the needs of children represent the needs of all other social categories. By making this change of perspective it will be possible to transform a city into a city suitable for children, that is, suitable for everyone.

We need the support of paediatricians and psychologists to dialogue with families and inform them about the risks to which children are exposed if deprived of the experience of free play in favor of play constantly supervised by adults. To make it clear that letting children spend their time with virtual games means promoting digital autonomy over real autonomy.

From the world of school, we need managers and teachers who are committed in this direction and to do so we need to free up children's extra-curricular afternoon time because it is not school time, which can be occupied with homework, but it is time that must be given back to the children. Playing should be one of the most important tasks that schools entrust to children

The "La città dei Bambini" project promoted by the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies of the National Research Council of Rome (ISTC-CNR) and coordinated internationally by the Francesco Tonucci Association, by virtue of a collaboration agreement, has important experiences that support these changes.

Some examples:

- Since the beginning of the project in the city of Fano, but also in various cities of the network, free play has been promoted as a central activity: "The City to Play" of Fano or "The Day of Play and Coexistence" of Rosario, have been replicated in many other cities of the network

such as Huesca, San Giorgio a Cremano, Jundiaí, etc. The aim has always been to implement actions that start from listening to children and which allow them to respect their right to play in public space, involving also the neighborhood in encouraging the presence of child citizens on the streets.

- In this sense, one of the most original initiatives is to have a network of "child-friendly traders" in the cities. The shops, recognizable by a sticker on the window, provide assistance to children who find themselves on the streets. We mainly talk about using the telephone, using the bathroom or getting a glass of water, simple interventions that can be very useful for children if they need it and that give families peace of mind.
- On the other hand, the experience of the Brazilian city of Jundiaí "Ruas para Brincar" is particularly interesting because it actively involves the neighborhood. If the neighbors reach a 75% agreement, they can request "The road to play": a neighbor responsible for the initiative receives easels with the image of the "The city of children" project, to close the road to cars. It is very common on these occasions to see neighbors sitting outside chatting and socializing with each other while children play freely in the street.
- In times of pandemic, the international project "The city of children" organized a petition to the mayors of the network. The idea was to give the city to children for a day before reopening it to cars as a sign of recognition for children who had been stuck at home for a long period without being able to exercise their right to play.

This petition in Argentina meant important work with the National Secretary of Childhood, Adolescence and Family (Senaf) and the Argentine Federation of Municipalities (Fam) thanks to which, children from 200 Argentine cities went out to play in the streets closed to vehicular transit in their cities. Senaf has promoted training experiences that have allowed many Argentine cities to establish "this day to play" as a monthly event.

- A final important and emblematic experience was the drafting of "Pronunciation 16" made by the Argentine Children's Rights Guarantor Marisa Graham. The Guarantor listened to the children of the Argentine Network Councils and created this official document asking the world of adults (politicians, families, educators, etc.) to return free time to childhood so that children can exercise their right to play.

Following the proposals of Francesco Tonucci and with the solid experience of the network as support, the Francesco Tonucci Association calls all the cities, the bodies of the international project "The City of Children" and its allies, to undertake an international campaign in favor of free, autonomous, daily play for children. Giving the public space of one's city to children too. We think this proposal could be a strategy to stem the problem of the use of digital devices, replaced by the phrase of girls and boys: "I'm going out to play".

The campaign was launched through a webinar presented with the Inter-American Children's Institute of the Organization of American States IIN-OEA, where Francesco Tonucci presented his philosophy in relation to children's free play, calling on the world of adults to take care of the right to play and autonomy of childhood.

You can find the video of the webinar here: [https://youtu.be/m4zY-KvJS7s?si=JsOPigLPIZ3YW\\_a8](https://youtu.be/m4zY-KvJS7s?si=JsOPigLPIZ3YW_a8)

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