

How to transform public spaces to encourage intergenerational play

Abu Dhabi's commitment to a family-friendly future

Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority

Every day, a young mother from Al Falah faced the same dilemma: where could she take her two young children, a 2-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy, to play? With few nearby parks, she needed either to get everyone in the car or embark on a long walk along plain concrete sidewalks. As a result, she often stayed home with her children instead.

According to a 2022 report, 80% of children in the UAE engage in less than one hour of physical activity per week (Alrahma et al., 2023). To provide context, the UK's National Health Service recommends that children under 5 years of age should engage in at least three hours of physical activity *per day* (NHS, 2024). Adults, too, do not get enough exercise: only 20–26% report achieving levels of physical activity that meet global recommendations (Alrahma et al., 2023).

At the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, a government organisation committed to the holistic wellbeing of children from the early stages of pregnancy to the age of 8, one of our main strategic priorities is to transform Abu Dhabi into a family-friendly emirate. By prioritising the needs of young children and their families in urban planning and neighbourhood design, we aim to create cities that benefit all residents and foster more inclusive, livable communities. Our approach begins with encouraging children and their caregivers to return to safe, outdoor public spaces. This not only boosts physical activity and health but also promotes broader

wellbeing by strengthening community bonds, deepening connections with nature, and celebrating local culture.

Creating vibrant hubs of connection and joy

In February 2024, we launched a tactical intervention at the Al Falah Village Center, which includes a mosque, a small park, and a retail plaza. We began by collecting observational data in the public realm on activities, user groups, and behaviour patterns. Were children present? What types of play were they engaging in, if any? Were the adults interacting with the children in their care, or using their electronic devices?

↓ Families from the neighbourhood playing at the Al Falah intervention





To start with, only 15% of visitors were children aged 8 years or younger, 3% were senior citizens (aged 65 and over), and caregivers spent only 3% of their time interacting with their children. Informed by these insights, we focused on making the outdoor space more appealing to families. This was accomplished by providing built infrastructure, as well as with the addition of small events and programmatic activities using play to promote social, cognitive and physical development.

Four changes were clear successes:

- 1 **Picnic tables** encouraged communal behaviour and prolonged interactions as people across generations shared food, drinks and play activities.
- 2 **Movable play equipment**, such as foam blocks, fostered independence in toddlers.
- 3 **Hammocks** were very popular, as a comfortable place to sit and share, and contributed to the site's identity.
- 4 **Flexible cycling and sports equipment**, like movable football goals and floor paintings of lines for children to follow on their bikes, inspired more playful physical activity led by the young children.

“Our approach begins with encouraging children and their caregivers to return to safe, outdoor public spaces.”

The response to these interventions was positive and immediate. The number of children using the space tripled in just over four weeks, and those children spent almost twice as much time playing. We observed a 42% reduction in people using their devices, and a significant increase in connections across generations as the interventions encouraged more family members to gather, including teenagers and older community members.

The young mother in Al Falah who once stayed at home now connects with other caregivers in the Village Center on a regular basis as they watch their children explore and make friends. All the visitors report feeling welcomed, safe, and having an increased sense of belonging. Research from other contexts backs up the observation that interventions like these can build social capital and mutual support

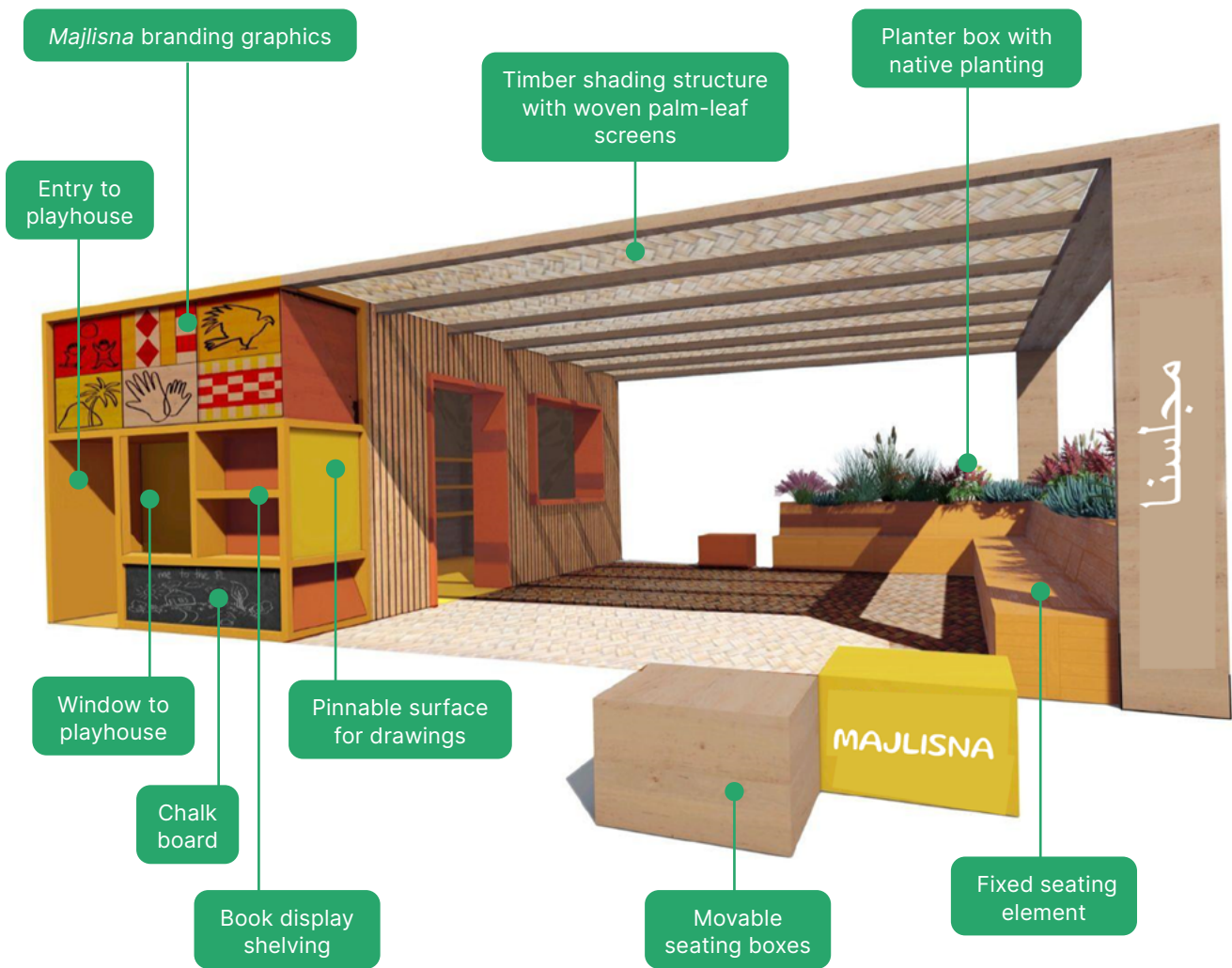


Illustration: Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority

↑ One type of model of the *Majlisna* play hub

for caregivers (Prince, 2024), turning small spaces into vibrant hubs of connection and joy.

Some elements, however, did not work as anticipated. The provision of large chess pieces, for example, which were inspired by international leading practices, did not resonate with the local community. This demonstrates the importance of context-specific solutions and the value of testing interventions before making them permanent.

***Majlisna* encourages families to play together**

The learnings from the Al Falah intervention are serving as the foundation for *Majlisna* (from the Emirati concept of the *Majlis*, a space for family and

communities to gather), a broader, ongoing initiative to transform public spaces across Abu Dhabi.

Majlisna draws on the cultural significance of the traditional Emirati *majlis*, reimagining them as multi-functional areas for active play, social interaction, and community engagement.

Creating interactive environments, *Majlisna* aims to strengthen the physical and mental wellbeing of young children and caregivers, and to deepen families' connection to their cultural heritage and natural environment, through five core components:

- 1 **A play hub** – a permanent physical structure that will act as the gathering point for outdoor play and activities, and serve as a place to store loose play parts

- 2 **Loose play parts** – including toys, bicycles, craft materials, books and games, which can be used by play facilitators, caregivers and children
- 3 **Play extensions** – permanent elements that complement the play hub, including trampolines, climbing walls, cycle tracks, hammocks and picnic tables
- 4 **Play prompts** – digital, interactive prompts to stimulate intergenerational play, curated to suit the needs of different locations through scannable QR codes
- 5 **Play facilitators** – including trained volunteers who can promote active, flexible, creative play.

“Social connection lies at the heart of *Majlisna*.”

Each component can be adapted to suit the needs of different types of sites. For example, in a narrow alleyway or *sikka*, the focus may be on play extensions and play prompts, while larger areas may incorporate all five components. Flexibility is a big part of the initiative, and the emphasis is on providing the opportunity for children and their families to play together in any particular environment.

The initiative is being developed in collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders, including volunteers, caregivers, social workers, municipalities and real estate developers. As the Director General of the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, Her Excellency Sana Suhail, stated:

“The Majlisna initiative is about creating spaces where families can come together, play, and connect in meaningful ways. By investing in such spaces, we are investing in the wellbeing of future generations, building a community where every child has the opportunity to thrive and grow.”

Social connection lies at the heart of *Majlisna*. When families come together and interact in public spaces, it fosters positive behaviour change and strengthens the resilience of diverse communities. By creating environments that nurture the wellbeing of both children and caregivers, we help build a foundation for healthier, more connected societies. If this initiative proves successful, the plan is to scale *Majlisna* across Abu Dhabi, extending its benefits to neighbourhoods throughout the emirate.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2025-20

References

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