

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings for Older Adults: Senior Playground

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Senior playground¹, outdoor exercise spaces built specifically for older persons and installed directly in neighbourhood parks, has spread across South Korea as a new model of senior welfare infrastructure and a concrete realisation of the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) framework's first domain: outdoor spaces and buildings.

It may look like nothing more than a few benches and pieces of exercise equipment tucked into a small neighbourhood park. But within that modesty lies an answer to a larger question: what it means to grow old in relation to urban space. This article examines why and how the senior playground came to be, and what it still leaves unresolved.

What Matters More With Age: Proximity

What does a city that works for an ageing population look like? Most cities were built around productivity. A well-designed city meant smooth morning commutes, transit lines pointing quickly toward employment centres and schools, and road infrastructure that kept traffic moving. As populations age, different spatial logic starts to matter. What organises daily life for older persons is no longer the commute, but proximity. A park within walking distance, a bench and some shade to rest, a level footpath that does not require a struggle to navigate, a subway entrance or covered bus stop connected directly to the park. For many older persons, these are not amenities. They are the conditions of an independent life.

Outdoor space near home matters more as people age, not less. Regular outdoor activity is among the strongest predictors of healthy ageing, linked to reduced functional decline, sustained cognitive health, and ongoing social connection (Choi, 2020). What determines whether older persons go outside is not a matter of personal preference or willpower, but access.

A study tracking older persons in Shanghai over 102 consecutive days found that 46.3% of daily activity took place within 1.5 kilometres of home, driven by the quality of nearby parks, footpaths, and transit (Bu et al., 2021). Yet that same radius is often built in ways that do not

meet older persons' needs. Korea's own data show the same gap: 87.2% of adults aged 65 and older want to age in place, yet stairs, steep slopes, and inaccessible transit remain common features of daily movement (Ministry of Health and Welfare & KIHASA, 2024). What urban design for an ageing population ultimately requires is outdoor space that is close enough to reach on foot and built to match how older persons move and what they need.

Infrastructure, Brought into the Neighbourhood

Korea's first senior playground opened in Gongju, South Chungcheong Province, in 2021. It has since spread rapidly across the country: by late 2025, more than 60 sites had been installed nationwide, spanning Gyeonggi (17 sites), Gyeongsang (11), Chungcheong (10), Jeolla (9), Jeju (4), and Gangwon (2), alongside Seoul's growing programme (Kim & Im, 2024).

Seoul launched its programme in 2022, opening the first site in Guro-gu. Managed by the city's Department of Senior Welfare, the programme has expanded to 13 sites now operating across the city, from Songpa-gu and Gwangjin-gu in the east to Gangseo-gu and Eunpyeong-gu in the west, each installed within an existing neighborhood park.

Senior Playgrounds in Seoul: Sites Completed

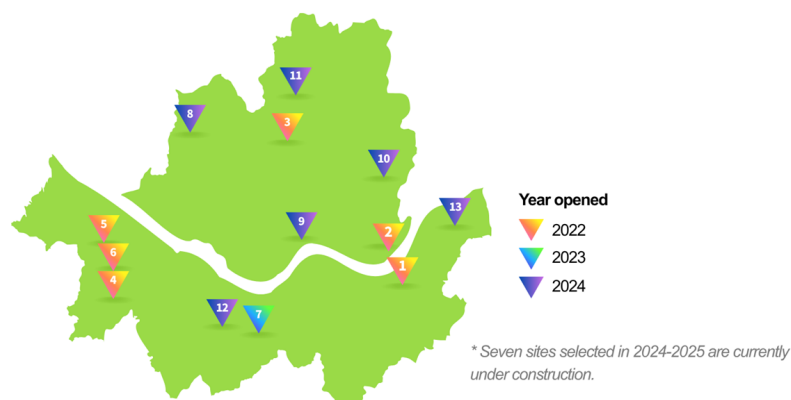


Figure 1. Locations of Senior Playgrounds in Seoul (Author's own description)
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government

The programme's goals are to extend healthy life expectancy and reduce medical costs, while addressing the depression, anxiety, and social isolation that come with reduced physical activity in older age. With monthly medical costs for Koreans aged 65 and older running at roughly 2.6 times the national average (Kim & Im, 2024), the initiative is designed to reduce

that burden through the preventive effects of exercise while supporting emotional wellbeing at the same time. According to the 2023 National Survey of Older Koreans, "education/training for health promotion in later life" ranked second among older persons' expressed policy needs, just behind support for health check-ups. The senior playground is public infrastructure built to answer exactly that demand (Ministry of Health and Welfare & KIHASA, 2024).

The design philosophy positions the senior playground as "a community health hub that goes beyond a simple exercise space or rest area, realising the concept of preventive care through spatial design that takes into account the physical characteristics of older persons" (Kim & Moon, 2025, p. 48). Where standard park equipment targets muscle mass and endurance, and children's playgrounds develop gross motor skills, the senior playground focuses on what older persons actually need to sustain daily independence: balance, joint flexibility, fine motor control, and low-intensity movement that carries no injury risk.

Seoul's design guidelines set out 77 types of facilities across three categories: 15 types of social exchange facilities, including benches and gathering spaces; 47 types of physical strengthening equipment, including hand bicycles, running tracks, stepping stones, and balance bars; and 15 types of emotional wellbeing features. All equipment is connected by barrier-free pathways (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2025).

Cognitive Health Design Items of Senior Playground



Figure 2. Equipment categories and specific apparatus (77 in total) installed at senior playgrounds
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government

The physical environment, not just the equipment, is designed around the specific conditions of its users. The sites explicitly prohibit bicycles, electric scooters, smoking, and alcohol,

creating a protected space for people whose mobility and reaction time differ from the general park population. Colour, material, and finish (CMF) choices reflect the psychological characteristics of older users: high-contrast colours with strong brightness and saturation provide visual stimulation, while matte or low-gloss finishes reduce glare. Floor surfaces use materials such as urethane to improve slip resistance and shock absorption, with a cushioned quality that reduces physical strain (Kim & Moon, 2025). Information panels pair a dementia-prevention checklist with explanations of each piece of equipment's cognitive and physical benefits (Song, 2025).

On opening day at Gwangjin-gu's senior playground in August 2021, a 72-year-old resident from Junggok-dong described the difference directly. "My knees and back have been bad for years, and the regular park equipment was out of the question for me. Here, everything is easy enough to use." A 78-year-old visitor from Jayang-dong put it this way: "It's fun, like playing. You can exercise safely, and the surroundings are beautiful. It lifts your spirits right up." Longer-term users describe a similar shift.

Signage and Equipment



Figure 3. A senior playground site showing information panels, instructions, and equipment arranged
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government (2025)

The senior playground programme is also a response to what a 2026 Seoul Institute report called 'spatial' generational fragmentation (Kim, 2026): younger residents use parks across the city, while older persons' visits cluster overwhelmingly within their immediate neighbourhood. To address this, the programme places one playground per district inside an existing park, rather than building new, dedicated facilities.

A citywide satisfaction survey conducted in 2024 found 95% of users satisfied, citing proximity to home, opportunities to socialise with friends and neighbours, and the age-

appropriateness of the equipment as the main reasons (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2025). A user described the change this way:

“ P (age 70): I used to stay home because I hated just sitting in the seniors' centre² all day, but since this opened, I come out every day to exercise and talk with friends. The equipment on regular walking paths is too heavy for me, but here everything is at my level. ”

Senior Playgrounds in Use: Gwangju and Jeju



Figure 5. Senior playground users at sites in Gwangju and Jeju.
Sources: Senior Box Office (2023); Gwangju Buk-gu Office (2023, left); Seogwipo City (2023, right).

What other users describe goes beyond physical movement. Bae (2024, pp. 67–69) noted that outdoor spaces for older persons installed in parks carry social and psychological effects that extend well beyond health improvements:

“ Y (age 77): A big reason I come here is to see other people. I don't make plans to meet anyone. I never know who'll be here. Sometimes I end up alone. But there are always people at the playground, so even then I have someone to watch, someone to notice. You don't feel lonely when you're exercising. ”

“ H (age 71): When I exercise here, I get to watch how people live. Young mothers and fathers with their kids. You can see all of that from inside the playground. [...] They probably notice me exercising and feel something too. I think that's a kind of intergenerational exchange. Exchange isn't only conversation. It's noticing each other, recognising each other's presence... ”



J (age 72): The best thing about exercising at the playground is that **there are people around**. That's what I like most. You get lonely as you get older. When you're young, there are people everywhere. As you age, that changes. [...] **At the playground, you keep running into people.** That's why I come here.



What Remains to Be Done

As the program expands, challenges emerge across three levels: physical, operational, and institutional.

The first is the physical reach of accessibility. The senior playground's design standard applies barrier-free principles throughout the playground itself. Whether the surrounding footpaths, park entrances, and nearby transit connections meet that same standard has yet to be systematically studied. A visitor at **Gwangjin-gu's** senior playground flagged this, saying that he wished getting to and from the site were easier and asked for a bus stop near the nearest senior centre (Lee, 2021).

The second is the operational challenge. Sites are being built, but some users find even completed senior playgrounds difficult to engage with. Research analysing the policy outcomes of outdoor senior playgrounds found that older persons who struggled to use the equipment pointed to difficulty understanding which part of the body each piece of equipment targets, how to use it correctly, and what exercise intensity is appropriate and noted that the QR code-based guidance installed on equipment was not well suited to their needs (Kim & Im, 2024, p. 212).



M (age 72): The equipment looks new and good. But when I do use it, honestly, I'm not sure which part of my body it benefits. **The barcode-scanning method that young people use to check in doesn't seem right for us older folks.** It would be helpful if staff explained more clearly which equipment is good for which part of the body, and how to use it properly.



D (age 78): It would be nice if a trainer came even once a week to give **guidance**. **Safety issues can arise**, and if we received proper instruction on how to use the equipment, I think this policy could genuinely help address older persons' health problems.



Concerns about long-term maintenance have also emerged. As outdoor installations used by a wide range of people, the equipment is prone to wear and breakage, and users have pointed to the resulting injury risk as something they must watch out for themselves (Bae, 2024, p. 73).



J (age 73): Some equipment looks fine on the outside, but when you actually try to use it, you find it's broken or out of order. Quite a few pieces feel like they could cause an injury. **Being outdoor facilities, I suppose wind, rain, and snow cause damage. They really need regular inspection.** I've come close to getting hurt a few times myself, and it seemed to come down to poor equipment maintenance. Older persons get injured easily. The focus needs to be on preventing accidents while people exercise.



The evidence from international research indicates that physical infrastructure works best when paired with community programming. A 2024 quasi-experimental study across six Australian municipalities found that when senior fitness park installation was paired with structured community programming, older persons' park visits increased 3.55-fold though the effect appeared not immediately after installation but at 12 months, once the sites had settled into use (Levinger et al., 2024). Practitioners on the ground make the same point. "Building it matters, but how you operate it matters more" (Choi, 2025).

Across sites nationwide, a range of management models has emerged. Most remain pilot in nature and have yet to be institutionalised, but some local governments have begun putting dedicated programmes and staff in place. Gwangjin-gu in Seoul and Namdong-gu in Incheon have deployed professional instructors on site. Wanju in North Jeolla Province employs qualified fitness instructors directly, running three sessions per week; Gwangju Buk-gu in South Jeolla runs a district government-led programme once a week. Hamyang in South Gyeongsang delegates to the local senior citizens' association; Seogwipo in Jeju links daily site activation to the senior employment service programme (Senior Box Office, 2023). The Seogwipo model is particularly instructive: by linking site activation to an existing senior employment scheme, it achieves both sustained daily programming and job creation for older persons without additional budget.

The third is a question of how senior playgrounds are classified in policy. Senior playground was conceived as a health promotion intervention, and Seoul's senior welfare ordinance classifies it as exercise facility provision. That classification means the programme is evaluated against health metrics within the welfare department, leaving little room for the policy levers of urban planning to engage. But what the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) framework's "outdoor spaces and buildings" domain asks is broader,

whether the outdoor environment as a whole, the footpaths leading to the playground, park entrances, benches, lighting, and wayfinding, is designed with older persons in mind. A well-equipped designated zone is a partial answer to that question, not a complete one. For the senior playground to become more than a piece of sports infrastructure, it needs to be reframed: not as the completion of a facility installation, but as the starting point of a broader shift toward age-friendly urban design.

Conclusion: What It Means to Get Outdoor Space Right for Older Populations

The WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) framework asks city governments to create age-friendly environments across eight domains, including outdoor spaces and buildings. Outdoor space is where older persons build daily routines, maintain social connection, and sustain a sense of belonging in the city. Getting that environment right is no longer optional; it is infrastructure. That is truer still for a super-aged society like Korea's.

The senior playground is a concrete step in that direction. By making use of existing park sites without large-scale construction or significant expenditure, it creates dedicated outdoor space for older persons while simultaneously supporting health promotion and social connection giving the model real potential for replication. Beginning in Gongju and spreading across the country, the senior playground offers a replicable ageing policy approach. Its outcomes are measurable in the number of sites, users, and satisfaction rates, and its placement close to where older persons live gives it a clear advantage in terms of access. What remains is to continue incorporating user feedback, to move from individual site installations toward integrated urban design, and to strengthen connections with existing welfare programmes such as health check-ups and exercise prescriptions.

Endnote

1. This brief uses senior playground, the official term adopted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Academic literature refers to the same facility type variously as senior playground (Ko et al., 2018; Kim & Moon, 2025) or outdoor senior playground (Kim & Im, 2024).
2. Senior centers ('Gyeongnodang' in Korean) are state-subsidised community halls found

in nearly every Korean residential block. They provide indoor gathering space and basic amenities for older adults, but are typically passive in format, a place to sit rather than a place to move.

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