

The Social Ecosystem of Hartlepool Parks

Moving from physical infrastructure to civic imagination.

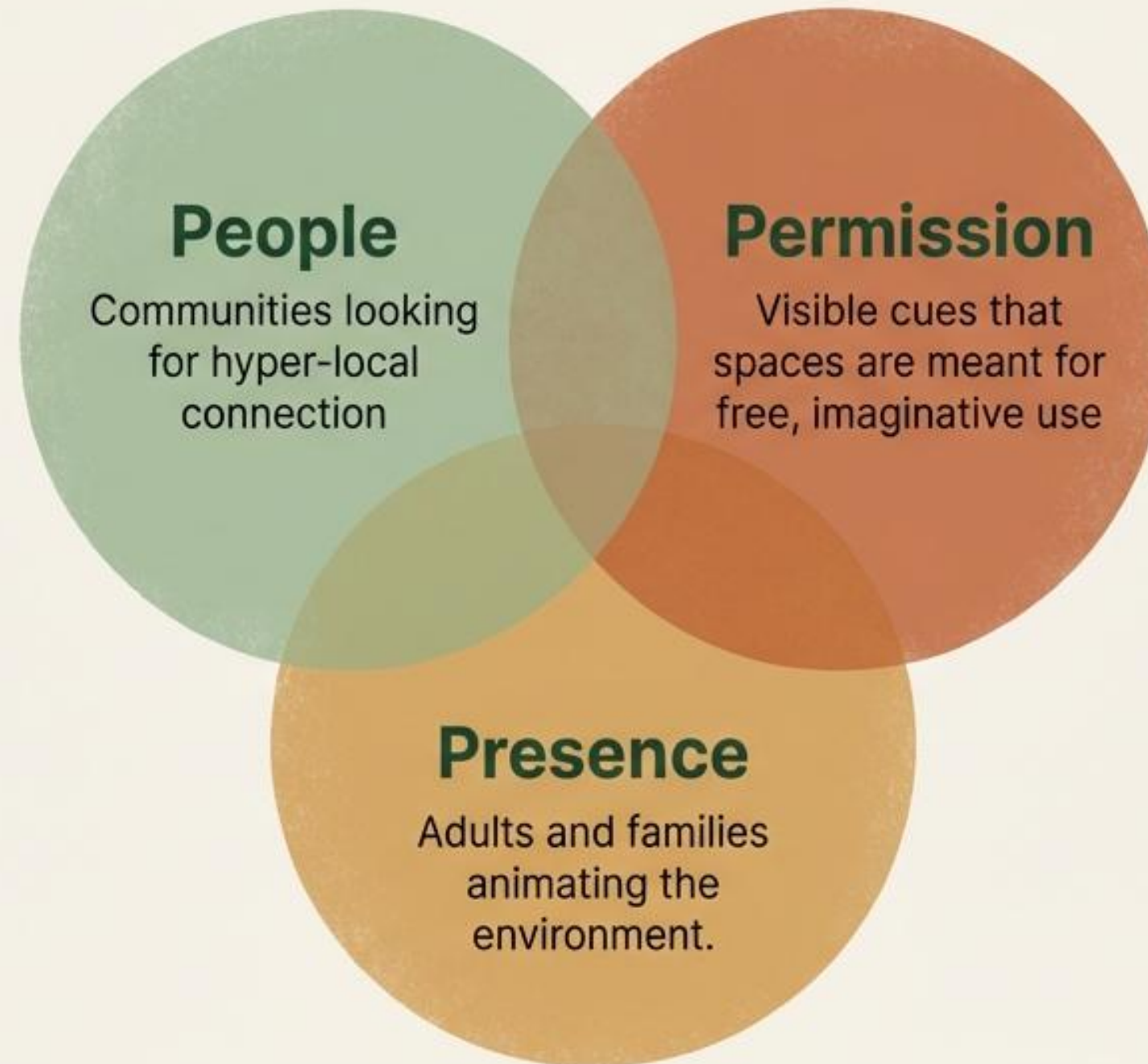


An insight driven provocation and proposal from Hartlepool Sport

Parks are social ecosystems, not just physical spaces.

If the entire insight base of our research were reduced to a single line, it would be this:

Parks need three elements to thrive.

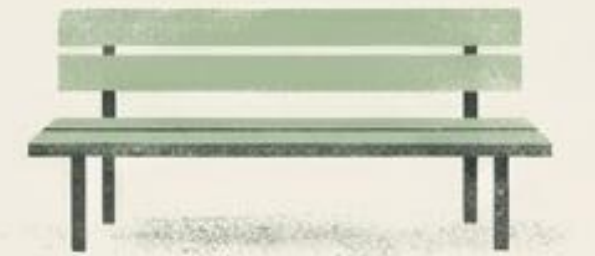


The persistent disconnect between pride and actual usage.

High Emotional Importance

Parks feel free and intermeshed in use community.

- Parks function as direct signals of how much a place cares about itself.
- Residents feel immense pride when spaces are well looked after.
- Decline is read as community neglect.



Inconsistent Usage

- Spaces are frequently avoided.
- Feeling the park is “not for people like us.”
- Empty fields and quiet play structures.

Unsafe rarely means dangerous; it usually means empty.



Perceived

Fear of older youths, lack of visible adults.



Environmental

Broken equipment, overgrown areas, poor lighting.



Psychological

"Fine in the day, but not somewhere I'd send kids on their own."

“Safety is not only about crime. It is about the absence of positive presence. When families, dog walkers, and younger children are visible, spaces feel safe.”

Installing equipment does not automatically produce activity.

Adults think in terms of facilities, equipment, and safety.

Children think in terms of adventure, imagination, and exploration.



**Exploring
hidden paths**



**Making up
games**

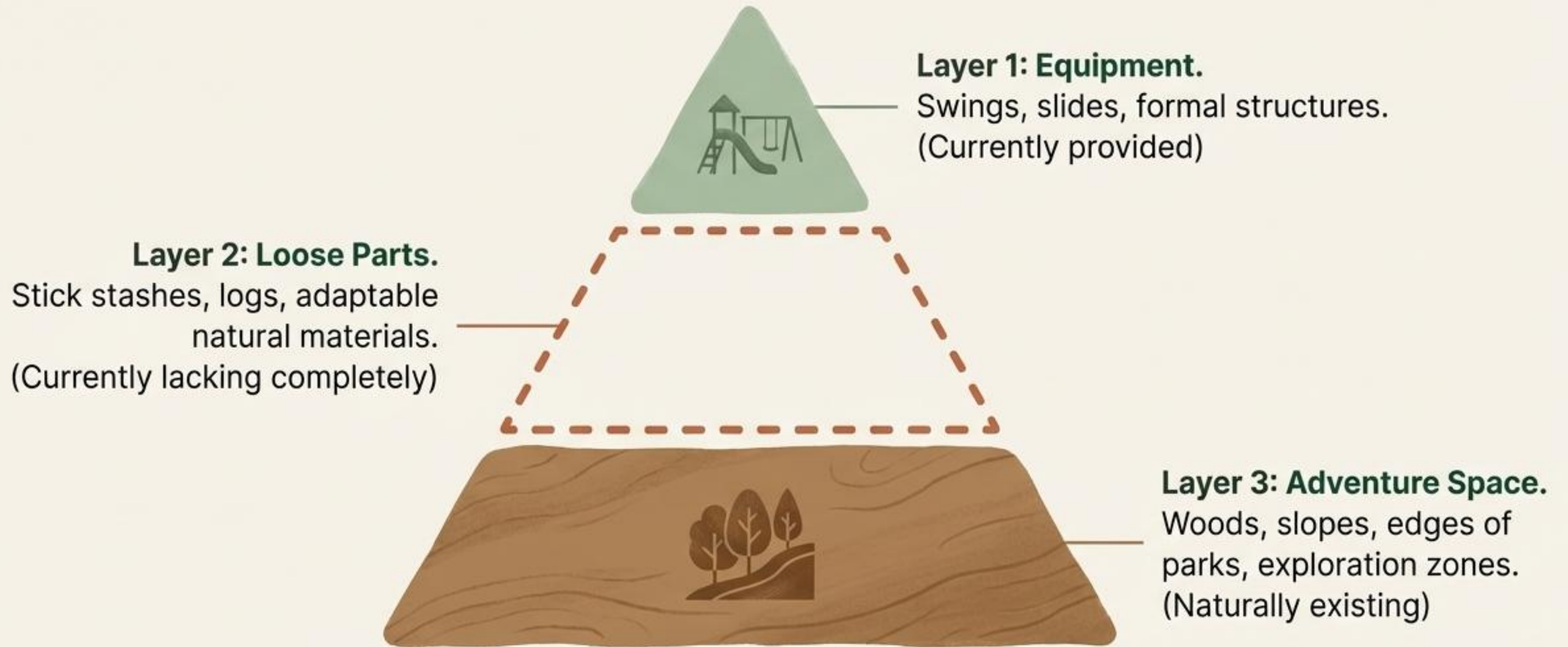


**Building
structures**



**Adapting loose,
informal spaces**

The missing middle of municipal play spaces



THE CORE STRATEGIC PIVOT

Parks succeed when they are socially activated, not simply physically upgraded. Capital improvements alone are rarely enough. Spaces come alive through people, activity, relationships, and local ownership.



Enter the “Stick Stash.”

A designated area in a park where natural materials are deliberately left or replenished for children to build dens, create structures, and invent games.

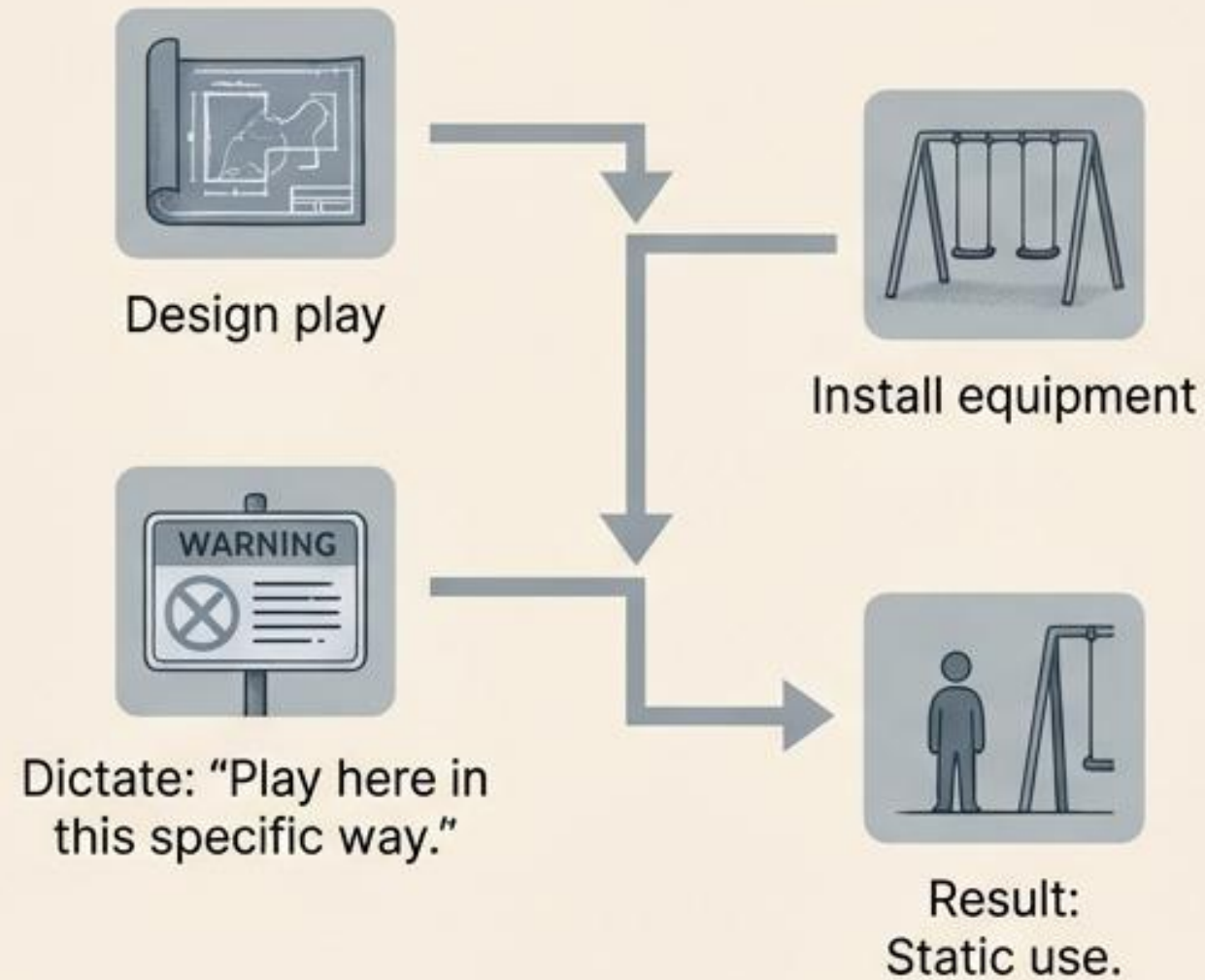
“The more loose parts a play environment has, the more creative and imaginative children become.”

- Architect Simon Nicholson



Shifting from prescribed equipment to boundless imagination.

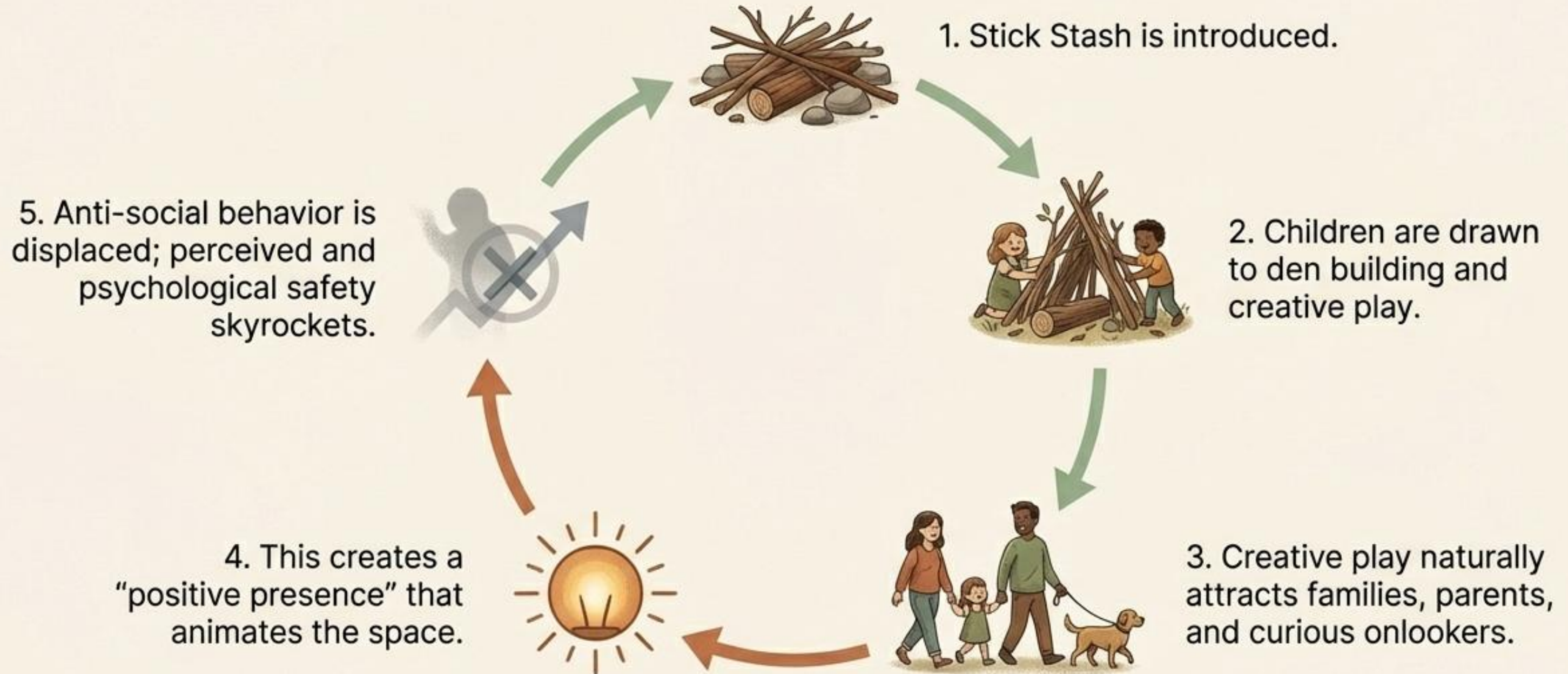
The Traditional Model



The Emerging Model



How loose parts passively solve the safety barrier.



An asset, not a service.

Under ABCD principles, the council doesn't run an activity or manage an expensive facility.



Council Provides

- Materials, Permission, Space.



Community Supplies

- The play, the imagination, the social animation, the ownership.

Residents use spaces more when they feel listened to, invited, and trusted.

High impact, near-zero capital cost.



Source

Council tree works, storm-fallen branches, park maintenance waste, local woodland management. (Cost: Free)



Action

Small signage installed ('Den Building Area: Use the sticks to build something amazing').



Result

A rapid 'Quick Win' that changes the neighborhood's perception of safety and pride almost instantly.

Validated by the National Trust model.

This isn't an experimental theory. Many National Trust sites now rely entirely on natural play zones featuring log piles, den building areas, and stepping logs. They deliberately avoid over-designing play because their data shows what our research confirms:

Informal space > formal equipment.



A high-leverage intervention across multiple agendas.



The Hartlepool Mandate

Every neighbourhood park should have a **'Stick Stash'** – a natural play area with loose branches and logs that allow children to build dens and invent their own games.

Children don't just want playgrounds. They want places where they can leave a mark on the world. Let's give them the materials to build it.