Sharing is caring

A qualitative research on the role of the (semi-)public places in facilitating social interactions and social support

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Figure 1: One Click Group UK. (2018, December 6). A chain of white people to represent a team and teamwork/Colour changed to orange.

Table of contents

Preface

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my master's thesis! I am grateful that my family, boyfriend, and friends were there to emotionally support me throughout the process of writing this thesis. I am also really thankful to my thesis supervisor for her professional advice, kindness, and humor, which helped me get through the writing process.

Enjoy reading my master's thesis!

Nora van Biezen

1 Introduction

Social support is important for all people, particularly when they experience stress (Taylor, 2011). It is especially crucial for all parents (Andrews, Shelley, Rich & James, 2015; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Warner & Andrews, 2019; Williams & Pocock, 2009). The availability of social support is strengthened through social connections in the neighbourhood (Perren, Arber & Davidson, 2004; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Children can provide these social connections for parents in the neighbourhood, as they can act as a social bridge. However, they need meeting places to meet other children (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). These social interactions are primarily found in public places in their neighbourhoods (Rogers, 2012).

Nowadays, numerous families feel disconnected from their community, which impacts the social support that parents can access. A community is a social network of people from a neighbourhood who can provide social support (Rumping, Boendermaker, & Fukkink, 2022). However, policies regarding social support argue that families should strengthen their independence, for example by strengthening their social environments. Government intervention is primarily reserved for cases that require intensive social support (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021).

1.1 Societal Relevance

Social connections among parents play a crucial role in exchanging emotional and practical support, which can help them manage stress (Dias, Geard, Campbell, Warr & McVernon, 2018; McLeish & Redshaw, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Social support also helps parents with effective parenting (Rumping, Boendermaker & Fukkink, 2022). In addition, social support can help parents who have to balance work and childcare (Dias, Geard, Campbell, Warr & McVernon, 2018; McLeish & Redshaw, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). The reliance on social support through their neighbourhood is particularly important in cases where social support from the government is limited (Grootegoed & Van Dijk, 2012; Movisie, n.d.; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021). This raises the question of whether parents engage in social interactions that lead to social connections in the neighbourhood for the exchange of social support.

1.2 Scientific Relevance

Strange et al. (2015) point to the role of (semi-)public places, such as playgrounds, in fostering social support through social interaction in the neighbourhood. However, they do not explain *how* (semi-)public places lead to social interactions, which in turn lead to the exchange of social support for parents. This research will fill this gap by examining how the process in which (semi-)public places stimulate social interactions works.

In addition, little is known about the Dutch neighbourhood context and how it shapes social connections. Most research on parents' social connections focuses on the USA or Australia (e.g. Andrews, Shelley, Rich & James, 2015; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Warner & Andrews, 2019; Williams & Pocock, 2010). This is important to recognise, as Australia's physical environment differs from that of the Netherlands. Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara (2013) argue that people with children living in newly built, affordable neighbourhoods in Australia often do not yet have recreational facilities or local schools in their neighbourhood.

However, Houten Zuid is a VINEX neighbourhood (Vrij Peerdeman & Van Voorden-Van Oorschot, 2010). These neighbourhoods are planned to include such facilities, which newer neighbourhoods in Australia

do not always have. A VINEX neighbourhood is characterised by mixed land use, which combines facilities and job access. VINEX neighbourhoods are located on the outskirts of previously built areas (Alpkokin, 2012). This research will fill the gap by focusing on the Dutch context, how (semi-)public places stimulate social interactions that lead to social connections.

Furthermore, Peterson (2017) argues that more research is needed to understand where different types of social interactions, such as fleeting encounters as well as frequent and deeper interactions, are formed in (semi-)public places. This is important to acknowledge, as policymakers mostly focus on unplanned encounters in (semi-)public places, which are less likely to stimulate frequent and deeper interactions. Only frequent and deeper interactions lead to the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017). This research will fill the gap by exploring how (semi-)public places influence different types of social interactions.

1.3 Research question

This research will explore how parents with children aged 4-12 in Houten experience the influence of (semi-)public places on social support through their emerging social interactions in the neighbourhood. These insights can help policymakers understand how (semi-)public places contribute to social interactions and where opportunities for improvement may exist. This is important to study because nowadays, families feel disconnected from their community, while the government states that families have to build their social environment for support (Rumping, Boendermaker, & Fukkink, 2022; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2021). Moreover, this research will explore whether these social interactions result in social support. This research will consider that characteristics of parents, such as time-daily patterns, as these can constrain the opportunity for social interaction in (public) places.

Aim & main research question

This research aims to understand how parents in Houten experience the influence of (semi-)public places on their social support through their emerging social interactions in the neighbourhood. With emerging is meant that (semi-)public places can facilitate social interactions, which can lead to social connections, which are able to exchange social support. Therefore, the main research question is:

How do parents with children between 4-12 years in Houten experience the influence of neighbourhood (semi-)public places on their social support through their emerging social interactions?

Sub-questions

1. How do the characteristics of parents influence their social interactions in the neighbourhood?
2. How can (semi-)public places influence their social interactions in the neighbourhood?
3. How do social interactions contribute to social support?
4. What do parents need to form social interactions in the neighbourhood?

The first sub-question aims to understand how the influence that (semi-)public places have on social interactions also depends on parents' characteristics in Houten. The second sub-question aims to understand how (semi-)public places influence social interactions. The third sub-question explores how social interactions contribute to the exchange of social support. The fourth sub-question's objective is to understand what parents themselves identify as a factor(s) that facilitates social interaction. This might help policymakers gain a better insight into what is needed to enable social interactions in Houten.

Reading guide

After the introduction, section two explains the theoretical framework. Section three provides context about the research area. In section four, the methodology of this research is described. Section five presents the results. In section six, the main research question is answered in the conclusion. Section seven discusses the key insights of this research. Section eight, the final section, provides a reflection on the research

2 Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework will explain the types of social support that parents can exchange with each other. It will also explain what social networks entail, as social networks help people to exchange social support with each other (Taylor, 2011). Social networks consist of social connections, which are formed through interactions that are possible at (semi-)public places. This research focuses on different interactions in (semi-)public places and how these different interactions lead to the exchange of social support or not. The role of (semi-)public places in influencing social interactions is further explored by understanding the differences between these places, semi-public and public places. Moreover, the characteristics of these places create preconditions and preferences for parents to be at a (semi) public place and to be attracted to at a (semi) public place (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). In addition, characteristics of (semi-)public places also stimulate activities, which influence whether social interactions take place (Farahani, Lozanovsk and Soltani, 2015). Parents are not only influenced by these characteristics that stimulate social interactions, but also through social processes, meaning the people present in the (semi-)public places (Peterson, 2017). Concepts such as children acting as social bridges and public familiarity will be explained, as concepts for social processes (Blokland & Nast, 2014; Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). At last, it should be acknowledged that the role of (semi-)public places depends on parents' personal and household characteristics, for example parents need to have desire for social interactions (van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015).

2.1 Types of social support

In general, social support is defined as the idea that people feel cherished and share a mutually supportive social network (Taylor, 2011). People spend most of their time within social networks that provide support from both sides. If someone receives help from another person, they will expect to return that help when needed. Knowing that others will also provide social support in return results in less stress (Taylor, 2011). Social support is important because parents may feel insecure about parenting tasks or face challenges during childcare. They can respond to these feelings by sharing experiences (emotional support) or by asking another parent for practical help (practical support) (Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015). Social support can also help parents who have to balance work and childcare responsibilities (Giurge, Whillans, & West, 2020; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Social support is thus crucial because parents know they can count on others (Fisher, Howat, & Wood, 2015; Taylor, 2011).

This research focus on the types of social support exchanged, which aligns with the functional approach to social support, that aims to explain the types of social support (Wills, Ainette, Baum, Revenson & Singer, 2012). Parents can experience perceived support, which means that they believe support is available when needed, while enacted support involved the actual exchange of social support (Ayers, Baum, McManus, Newman, Wallston, Weinman & West, 2007). Enacted support may involve exchanging information with other parents, for example on how to deal with children's emotional outbursts (Fisher, Howat, & Wood, 2015; Taylor, 2011). In this way, social knowledge is built because parents share these experiences (Wilson, 2013). This is called informational support (Taylor, 2011), which is a form of practical support (Taylor, 2011). Informational support means that one person helps another better understand a stressful situation and assists with finding ways to deal with it. Based on this, the person experiencing stress can decide how to handle the situation (Taylor, 2011). Building on this, appraisal support refers to the way parents can reflect on their own situations

by comparing them with the experiences of other parents facing similar challenges, such as problems with potting training (Corneil, 1998). Practical support consists of informational support and instrumental support. Instrumental support entails the provision of services, for example picking up children from school in case of an emergency (Taylor, 2011). Emotional support means that someone pays attention to you and actively listens to what you are experiencing, especially during times of stress or upset. For example, a parent who feels overwhelmed by combining work and childcare may use emotional support as an outlet to share their feelings and feel understood (Taylor, 2011

2.2 Social networks

Some studies have focused on how people act because of their social networks, while others have examined how people can use their social networks for certain aims (Granovetter, 1973). This research focus on the latter, that social networks can be used to exchange social support with each other (Taylor, 2011). To provide more context about social networks, if people know each other in the neighbourhood, it is called a close-knit network, and if they do not know each other well, it is called a loose-knit network. If people talk to each other often and in depth, these are seen as strong ties, which are effective networks. People who talk less often and less in depth are weak ties. Weak ties are still important, as they contribute to the idea that a community is present. Through these weak ties, people in a community can be connected with each other, and these weak ties are formed in different ways (Granovetter, 1973).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that people's social networks are increasingly geographically spread. Digitalisation has made it easier to maintain connections with others further away (van den Berg, Arentze, & Timmermans, 2015; Wellman, 2001). As a result, people may prioritise contact with family or friends living elsewhere over acquaintances in their own neighbourhood. Social networks are thus no longer solely locally based. Nonetheless, frequent interactions still occur more often with neighbours or other local residents than with people who live far away (Wellman, 2001). Neighbours are the people you encounter more spontaneously, which makes frequent conversation or supporting each other rather easy (Wellman, 2001). Wellman (2001) argues that this is not a zero-sum game, meaning that people can maintain both distant and local social relationships. Public places continue to play an important role in enabling local social interactions. Therefore, it remains relevant for urban planners to understand how neighbourhoods can stimulate interactions that form these connections (van den Berg, Arentze, & Timmermans, 2015). In addition, it is crucial to study these local interactions, as numerous families feel disconnected from their community, which impacts social support for parents (Rumping, Boendermaker, & Fukkink, 2022).

As stated before, social support is exchanged within social networks, so social networks are needed for social support to be exchanged (Taylor, 2011). Social networks are relationships between people, such as acquaintances or friends (Modie-Moroka, Dube, Setume, Kgalemang, Kebaneilwe, Gabaitse, & Madigela, 2020). These social networks arise through social connections, which are based on shared life events and common interests (Wellman, 2001). Social connections are defined mainly as someone's perception that he/she has close and positive friendships with others. Social connections are formed through frequent interactions with other people (August & Rook, 2020), which can take place in (semi-)public places, for example, in public places where people meet their neighbours (Wellman, 2001).

2.3 Spectrum of the depth of social interactions

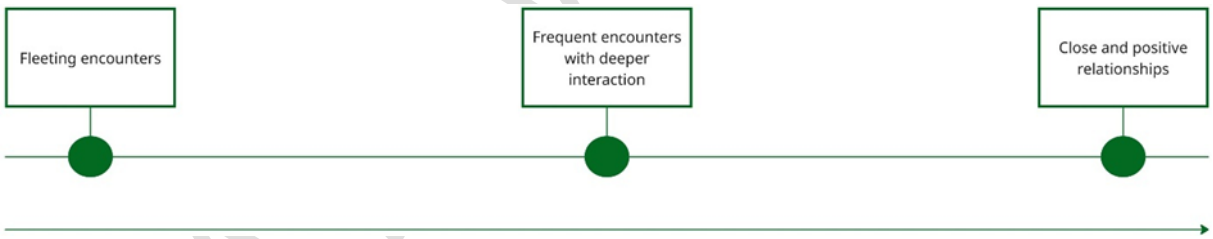
Most research about social networks focuses on who has a social connection and with whom, but often fails to conduct in-depth research on the quality and type of these social interactions before a social

connection begins to exist (Antonucci, 2001). This research focuses on the quality and type of social interactions. It is important to acknowledge that, whether a tie is weak or strong, both can lead to social support (Peterson, 2017). Strong ties mean that people have frequent interaction with each other, at least twice a week, compared to weak ties, which involve less frequent interactions (Granovetter, 1973). Frequent interactions with people who are described as 'less-than-friends' can thus still provide social support (Peterson, 2017). Yarker (2021) argues that weak ties can provide social support for adults without a commitment (Yarker, 2021). However, one-time encounters, such as in libraries, tend to lack the continuity or mutual recognition necessary to foster social support (Peterson, 2017).

Different concepts define types of social interactions. However, those concepts do not have a fixed or straightforward definition, as the literature does not uniformly define encounters and social connections. As a result, social interaction is used as an umbrella term for various forms of social interactions in this research. This research views social interaction as a spectrum ranging from low-threshold contact with others to more in-depth contact. Despite the ambiguity in the literature, definitions have been chosen. Encounters are referred to as interactions between people (Hunt, Papallas & Wessendorf, 2024). These interactions can range in depth, from fleeting encounters (short interactions with little depth, such as eye contact, smiling and nodding, or short greetings) to frequent encounters with deeper interaction (Peterson, 2017), and even to close and personal relationships (Peterson, 2017). The closer someone is to another person, the stronger the tie (Granovetter, 1973).

In Figure 2 is visible that fleeting encounters have less depth in interactions compared to close and personal relationships (Peterson, 2017; Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008).

Figure 2: The depth of interactions



Source: (Peterson, 2017; Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008).

2.4 The role of (semi-)public places in the neighbourhood

Peterson (2017) argues that encounters happen between people in specific places, which are influenced by social processes and the physical environment (Peterson, 2017; Levasseur, Généreux, Bruneau, Vanasse, Chabot, Beaulac & Bédard, 2015). Qi, Mazumdar and Vasconcelos (2024) argues that also social characteristics, besides physical characteristics of (semi-)public places stimulate social interactions (Mazumdar & Vasconcelos, 2024). This section will explore how the semi-public places, public places, physical characteristics, social characteristics and social processes of public places influence social interactions. As stated before, frequent social interactions are needed for social support to be exchanged (Perren, Arber & Davidson, 2004; Peterson, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013).

Difference between the influence of public places and semi-public place: frequent interactions

Literature highlights the following meeting places for children that act as social bridges: parks, playgroups, school playgrounds, sports clubs, playgrounds, and churches as key gathering spaces (Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Peterson (2017) argues that semi-public places facilitate deeper and more frequent interactions compared to public places. Semi-public places that stimulate social interactions include, for example, sports fields. However, some interactions at semi-public places, such as libraries, do not result in social connections. This is because encounters that do not involve frequent interactions or mutual recognition do not develop into social connections, which are necessary for the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017).

Peterson (2017) argues that parks, as public places, are not likely to stimulate social interactions. In contrast, Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman (2012) argue that open green spaces are seen as places where people are more socially involved with others, have more contact, and exchange more social support compared to low-nature areas. A public place is a space that is accessible to everyone and controlled by the state (Mehta, 2014; Ekim & Vasilaki, 2015). A semi-public place, however, is situated between private and public space characteristics (Ekim & Vasilaki, 2015; Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012).

Only places that lead to frequent and deeper interactions create connections between people, which can lead to the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017). If people have a connection, this does not necessarily mean they are friends. For example, people at a community centre may engage with others to widen their social networks, but not to form friendships, as they already have friends. New friendships require commitment, which would leave them with less time to relax. As a result, these contacts are considered “less-than-friends”. As stated before, weak ties, such as these, can still lead to the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017).

Physical characteristics and social characteristics of (semi-)public places

This subsection explains that there are preconditions needed for parents to be at (semi-)public places, for social interactions to take place (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). Besides preconditions, parents also have preferences for certain characteristics in (semi-)public places, that make these places attractive to visit (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). This subsection will also explain how different activities stimulate social interactions, for example stationary activities stimulate that people stay longer, which stimulate social interactions (Farahani, Lozanovska & Soltani, 2015).

Preconditions

There are certain preconditions that need to be present for parents to visit a (semi) public place: accessibility, perceived safety, and cleanliness (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). This is important to acknowledge, as people need to be in public places for social interactions to take place. Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman (2012) argue that the scope and number of public spaces do not directly lead to social interactions, but rather that the quality of public spaces does. Public spaces with high-quality appearances tend to draw more users (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012).

Parents are more likely to visit a public place frequently if it is close to their home. They argue that if a park is not nearby, it is visited less often. People need to be at a (semi) public place for social interactions to take place (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo and Knuiman (2012) also argue that the cleanliness of a public place influences whether people choose to visit. Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams (2013) argue that if a park is clean, more children and their

parents are interested in visiting it. People with gardens may have higher standards for the cleanliness of public places, as they can also choose to stay at home instead of going to a park (Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013). If people will not visit a public place, it is difficult for social interaction to occur (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012).

Perceived safety, as social characteristic, also plays a role in whether people choose to visit a place (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012; Qi, Mazumdar and Vasconcelos, 2024). Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson and Williams (2013) argue that parents do not want to visit public places where drugs or violence are present. Alparone & Pacilli (2012) support this, stating that parents' perceptions of social dangers include the presence of drugs, burglaries, visibly ill adults, people who dress differently, or other potentially frightening elements. Perceived safety influences whether people feel comfortable entering a public place. If people do not visit a place, it is difficult for social activities to occur (Holland, Clark, Katz & Peace, 2007). Regulations such as the presence of security personnel can contribute to perceived safety, as people believe there is less disorder (Holland, Clark, Katz & Peace, 2007).

It is important to acknowledge that different locations bring different concerns. For example, parents in inner-city areas were more concerned about drug use in public spaces, whereas those in suburban areas were more concerned about the weather (Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013).

Preferences

Besides preconditions, people also have certain preferences for (semi-)public places that make a place attractive for them to spend time in (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). Parents argue that if facilities such as toilets are not available in public places, it is less attractive to be there with children (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013). They also state that places with a clear and visible overview are more attractive than places that are not organised in this way. This allows them to relax while their children are playing, rather than having to watch them constantly. It gives parents a greater sense of control over the public space (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016). Urban green spaces are also seen as attractive for everyone. They are considered inclusive because different age groups are present, and they are accessible and free of charge (Holland, Clark, Katz & Peace, 2007). If people feel attracted to a public place, they are also more likely to remain there for a longer time; for example, comfortable benches are needed (Frers & Meier, 2016; Holland, Clark, Katz & Peace, 2007). This is a stationary activity, meaning that people remain in one place rather than moving around (Farahani, Lozanovska & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014). Interaction with others is stimulated when people stay longer in a place (Farahani, Lozanovska & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014). A place where people can also sit in the shade helps them to stay longer as well (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016).

Stationary, leisure, planned and intergenerational activities

According to Farahani, Lozanovsk and Soltani (2015) and Thompson & Kent (2014), interaction with others is thus stimulated when people stay longer in a place. Green spaces also encourage activities for children. This is why families are often present with small children at parks, because children can play there with balls and other items (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013). Leisure activities, such as picnics, are needed for (semi-)public places to become meeting places. This is because leisure activities stimulate a lively atmosphere, which supports social interactions (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). However, large parks stimulate less social interaction because people can choose to sit separately from each other (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). Simões Aelbrecht (2016) argues that places where multiple activities take place lead to social interactions. For example, a café, through activities such as eating, sitting, and walking, encourages social interaction. Leisure and stationary activities thus stimulate social interactions (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010; Farahani, Lozanovska & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014). Planned encounters are more likely to stimulate deeper and

more frequent interactions compared to unplanned encounters, which lead to social connections (Peterson, 2017). These social connections are needed for social support to be exchanged (Dias, Geard, Campbell, Warr, & McVernon, 2018; McLeish & Redshaw, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Policymakers and studies focus mostly on unplanned encounters in (semi-)public places, which can come at the cost of planned encounters (Peterson, 2017). Activities were different generations can take place, also stimulate social interaction between age groups and social connections, which is called intergenerational contact (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023).

Social processes

As argued before, encounters should not only be understood through their physical environment, but also through social processes (Levasseur, Généreux, Bruneau, Vanasse, Chabot, Beaulac & Bédard, 2015; Peterson, 2017). People make places more than the other way around (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). Social interactions are needed for social support to be exchanged (Perren, Arber & Davidson, 2004; Peterson, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). The social processes discussed here include how children can act as a social bridge and how public familiarity enables social interactions to take place.

Public Familiarity

Public familiarity means that you recognise others and they recognise you (Blokland & Nast, 2014). It can be defined as a social space built within a physical space where social interactions occur. People can take part in or observe this interaction (Blokland & Nast, 2014). Local social connections are not a prerequisite for public familiarity, but they can contribute to it (Cattell, Dines, Gesler & Curtis, 2008).

Fleeting encounters can stimulate a sense of familiarity by offering feelings of community and comfort in the environment. As mentioned before, fleeting encounters include eye contact, smiling, nodding, or short greetings (Peterson, 2017). Public familiarity is more likely to occur in places that are often visited by the same people. For example, if a park is small and only people who live nearby visit it, this increases public familiarity (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). Cattell, Dines, Gesler & Curtis (2008) argue that familiarity with a space arises when people want to be in a public place regularly, which can be stimulated by the environment.

Public familiarity makes a social space a comfort zone (Blokland & Nast, 2014). A comfort zone means that people know what happens at a place, which creates trust in others (Blokland & Nast, 2014). Trust is needed if people want to talk to strangers. Public familiarity can therefore support fleeting encounters between people (Blokland & Nast, 2014; Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). However, the frequency of visiting a place does not automatically increase the chance of someone talking to a stranger. What matters more is why people visit a place and how they make use of it (Blokland & Nast, 2014).

A place can still be a comfort zone even if people do not like the activities, such as drinking on the streets. It becomes a comfort zone because people know how others behave and know how to deal with it (Blokland & Nast, 2014). However, this does not mean that if a place is a comfort zone, people feel attracted to be there. Young children with their parents are generally not seen in places where people drink on the streets or in skateparks (Holland, Clark, Katz & Peace, 2007). This is important to acknowledge, because people need to be in public places for possible social interactions to take place (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012).

Children act as social bridges

Children can also create a comfort zone for social interaction. They can act as social bridges by stimulating social connections between parents. The process of children acting as a social bridge works as follows: children interact with other children and make friends with them. Their parents can then form social connections with the parents of those children. However, children need meeting places to encounter other children (Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Children's social interactions are primarily found in public places within their neighbourhoods (Rogers, 2012).

The literature highlights the following meeting places where children can act as social bridges: parks, playgroups, school playgrounds, sports clubs, playgrounds, and churches as key gathering spaces (Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). Blokland and Nast (2014) argue that shopping streets do not lead to children acting as a social bridge. They suggest this might be different for playgrounds and parks.

Williams and Pocock (2009) argue that these are places where parents can have conversations while their children engage in activities. However, parents can also build connections through shared activities such as volunteering in public places, participating in sports, or serving on a church board (Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006).

School yards are seen as places for encounters and as spaces where social connections can be made. However, parents need to invest time to build these connections. There are often already existing groups in school yards, which are not always welcoming to new parents. Still, children help parents build connections, as they make friends and their parents may become friends too. Some parents develop friendships with people they would not normally connect with, but because they see each other often, they find things to talk about (Wilson, 2013).

It is argued that institutional places like schools offer even more significant potential for sustaining relationships between parents. This is because schools generate frequent encounters over time and shared identities, such as being the parent of a child attending the same school. However, some argue that in order for parents to build and maintain relationships, it is important that they meet in spaces where they choose to be, often based on shared interests (Vincent, Neal & Iqbal, 2017). Norouzi, Chen, Jarrott and Satari (2023) argue that most urban planning is based on separating ages, to support one generation, which makes it less attractive for other age groups to be present at (semi-)public places. This constrains intergenerational contact, which fosters social interactions between different age groups (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023). This aligns with the fact that most policies and studies are based on specific age groups. For example, policies often focus on either child-friendly or age-friendly cities (e.g., Brown, de Lannoy, McCracken, Gill, Grant, Wright, & Williams, 2019; Cordero-Vinueza, Niekerk & van Dijk; Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023; Jansson, Herbert, Zalar, & Johansson, 2022).

Parents' characteristics

Social interactions occurs because of a public place's social and physical context. However, the social and physical context depends on personal and household characteristics (van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). For example, if someone has little time to be in public places or is not interested in social interactions, it is harder for social interaction to occur (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). This is explained further in this subsection. In this research, the characteristics of parents is chosen as an umbrella term for all household characteristics and personal characteristics that influence why social interactions occur or not.

Household characteristics

Parents with children who stay for a longer time in a residential area have more chances to have social interactions in public places (Abass, Andrews & Tucker, 2020; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). The influence that (semi-)public places have in stimulating social interactions is also constrained by time-activity patterns (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). Time-activity patterns capture how people typically divide their time across locations and activities throughout the day (Matz, Stieb & Brion, 2015). People need to be attracted to a (semi) public place to allocate their time to it (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). In addition, they need to have the time to be in a public place (Rapoport & Le Bourdais, 2008). According to Rapoport and Le Bourdais (2008), single mothers do not always have a choice about whether or not they spend time in the neighbourhood. They argue that single mothers have limited time for activities with children in the neighbourhood and are more occupied with work and household chores than two-parent households (Rapoport & Le Bourdais, 2008). This is important to acknowledge, because spending more time in the neighbourhood increases the chance of meeting residents (van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). Van den Berg, Arentze and Timmermans (2015) argue that parents with young children spend more time in their neighbourhood. However, if people who work they spend less time in their neighbourhood than people who do not work (Levasseur, Généreux, Bruneau, Vanasse, Chabot, Beaulac & Bédard, 2015; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). Forsberg (2009) argues that parents who work experience the most time pressure as they have to combine work, household tasks, and childcare (Forsberg, 2009). Parents who both work full-time may experience fewer social connections in the neighbourhood. Williams & Pocock (2009) found that some parents in their study transitioned from full-time to part-time jobs due to a lack of social connections in their neighbourhood. Peters, Elands & Buijs (2010) argue that people who do not have a garden are more often in (semi-)public places. This is because people use parks as their gardens. They argue that it might be that people who have a garden are less present in (semi-)public places.

Personal characteristics

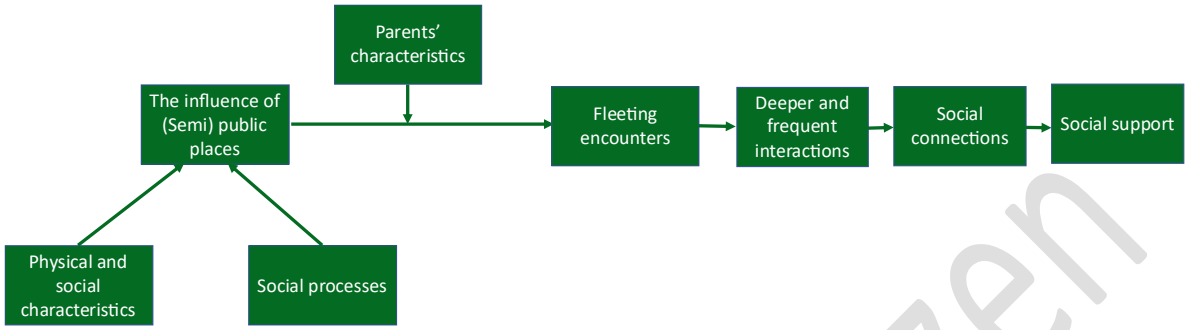
It appeared that people with a migration background more often have picnics in parks compared to people without a migration background. This is important to acknowledge, because people need to be in (semi-)public places for social interactions to occur (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012). According to van den Berg, Arentze and Timmermans (2015), people who are low educated might have more local social interactions, because they have less money to travel for activities. However, people with a higher level of education might have more local social interactions if they live with people who are like them (van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). Williams (2005) also argues that social interactions also depend on whether people share the same social characteristics, such as norms and values. In addition, it is argued that parents interested in spending time in their neighbourhood will be more likely to seek social connections (Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015). Specifically, extrovert people are the ones who are interested in social interactions, as they get energy from social interactions, as they need extra stimulation besides themselves. Introvert people are less focused on social interactions, they feel better if they can function without being dependent on social interactions (Hills & Argyle, 2001).

2.5 Conceptual model

In Figure 3 it is shown that specific physical characteristics and social characteristics of (semi-)public places can influence whether parents are actually present, prefer certain places, or stay longer, which can stimulate social interactions between parents (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012; Qi, Mazumdar & Vasconcelos, 2024). Once parents are present, social processes come into play, such as children acting as social bridges (Peterson, 2017; Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock,

2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013). If a (semi) public place stimulates fleeting encounters, it is important that these fleeting encounters develop into deeper and more frequent interactions for them to become social connections, as social connections are needed for the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017).

Figure 3 Conceptual model

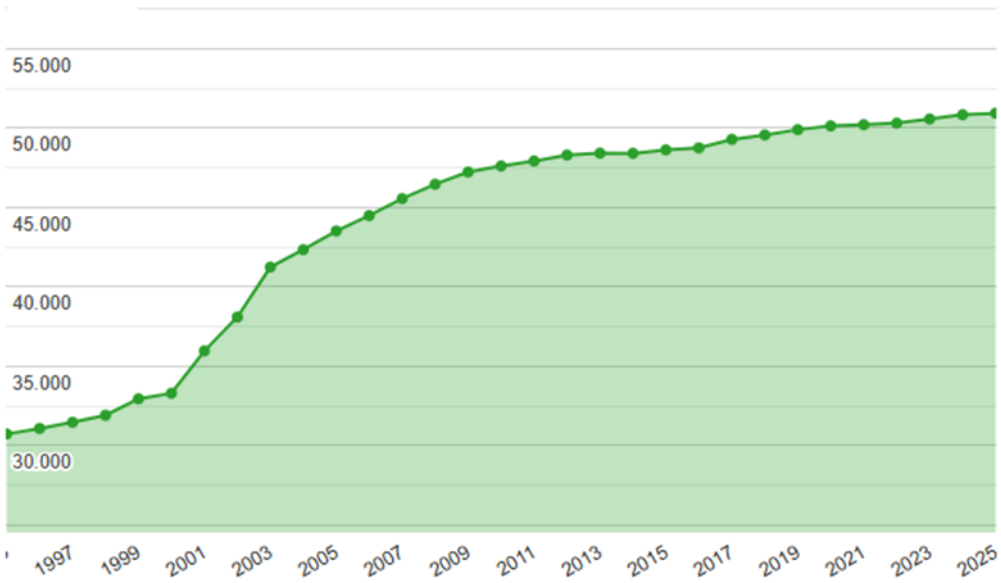


Source: Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012; Peterson, 2017; Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013; Qi, Mazumdar & Vasconcelos, 2024).

3 Contextual section

To provide some context about the study area, the municipality of Houten has existed since 1962 (Peters, 2021). Figure 4 shows that in 1997, the number of inhabitants was 30,000, and this number has been growing ever since, based on data from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], n.d.-a), visualised by AlleCijfers.nl, 2024). Nowadays, the number of inhabitants has increased to 50,945 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], n.d.-a). According to population forecasts, this number is expected to exceed 55,000 by 2028 (Pronexus, 2022).

Figure 4: Aantal inwoners per jaar. De gemeente Houten telt 50.943 inwoners in 2025 (Number of inhabitants for each year. The municipality Houten counts 50.943 inhabitants in 2025).

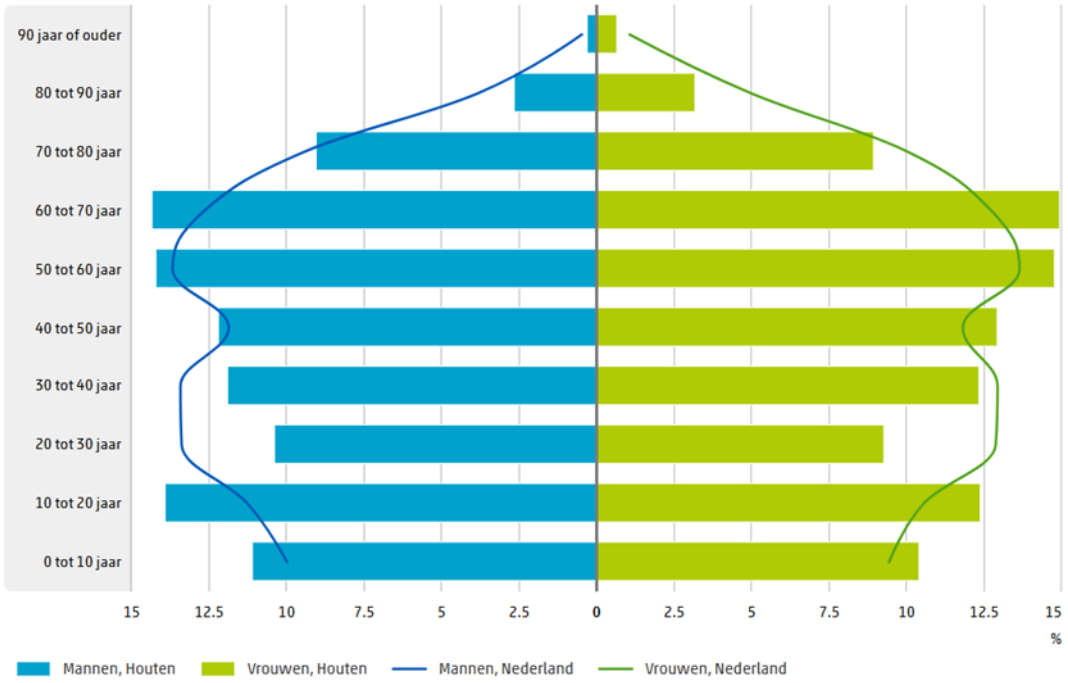


Source: Based on data from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], n.d., visualised by AlleCijfers.nl (2024).

Houten is a suburb of Utrecht (Munro, 2019). Compared to urban areas, people in suburbs and rural areas have more frequent social interactions. This suburban context is, therefore, relevant to this research (Nation, Fortney, & Wandersman, 2010). Van den Berg, Arentze, and Timmermans (2015) also argue that the higher the degree of urbanization, the fewer neighbours are part of one's social network. Houten was carefully planned (Ploeger & Oldenziel, 2024), for example Houten has a large number of cycle paths and footpaths, which are frequently used for daily travel. Driving is less attractive, as people cannot use shortcuts to reach their destinations more quickly. Instead, they must take longer routes. In Houten, the car is less present, and these places are therefore perceived as safer. Houten is also a place with many open spaces (Munro, 2019).

Figure 5 shows that in Houten, there are more older people (aged 50 to 70) compared to the rest of the Netherlands. Moreover, there are also more children and young people (aged 0 to 20) in Houten than in the rest of the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], n.d.-b).

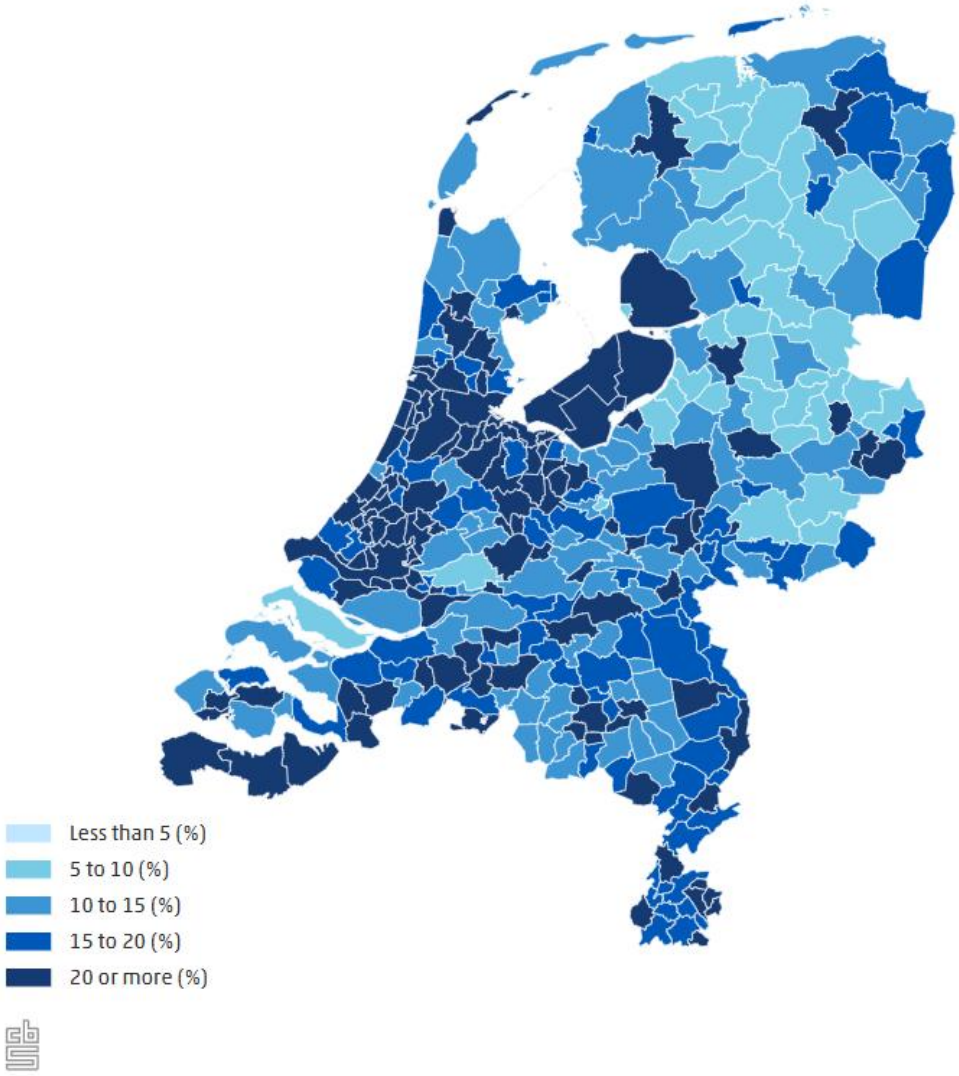
Figure 5: Leeftijdsopbouw, Houten, 2025 (Age structure, Houten, 2025)



Source: (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], n.d.-b).

Figure 6 shows the percentage of people with a migration background for each municipality in 2024. The population of Houten has a relatively high percentage, with 19.5 percent of residents having a migration background, compared to other municipalities (Statistics Netherlands, 2023).

Figure 6: Share of populations with a migration background, 1 januari 2024



Source: Statistics Netherlands, 2023, data as of 1 January 2024.

The standardised household income in Houten is 46,100 euros, while the national average is 35,600 euros. The standardised income represents the disposable income of a household, adjusted for the number and type of household members using equivalence factors. This enables comparison of welfare levels between households by expressing all incomes as if they belonged to a single-person household (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, n.d.-b).

Figures 7 through 13 show different (semi-)public places in Houten, to provide an impression of what Houten looks like.

Figure 7 Shopping centre Castellum

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 8 One type of play equipment, a football field in Houten

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 9 Petting zoo

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 10 Café in the petting Zoo

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 11 Hockey field

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 12 Small playgroun

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

Figure 13 Park Schoneveld, larg playground

Source: N.A.M. van Biezen

4 Methodology

This section will explain why this research area was chosen. In addition, the data collection and the implications of recruiting the participants will be explained. Furthermore, the characteristics of the parents are described to understand what kind of participants were interviewed. This section will also explain why semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research. Furthermore, it will be explained how the data analysis, namely the thematic analysis, was conducted. Lastly, the ethical considerations will be described and taken into account.

4.1 Houten as a case study

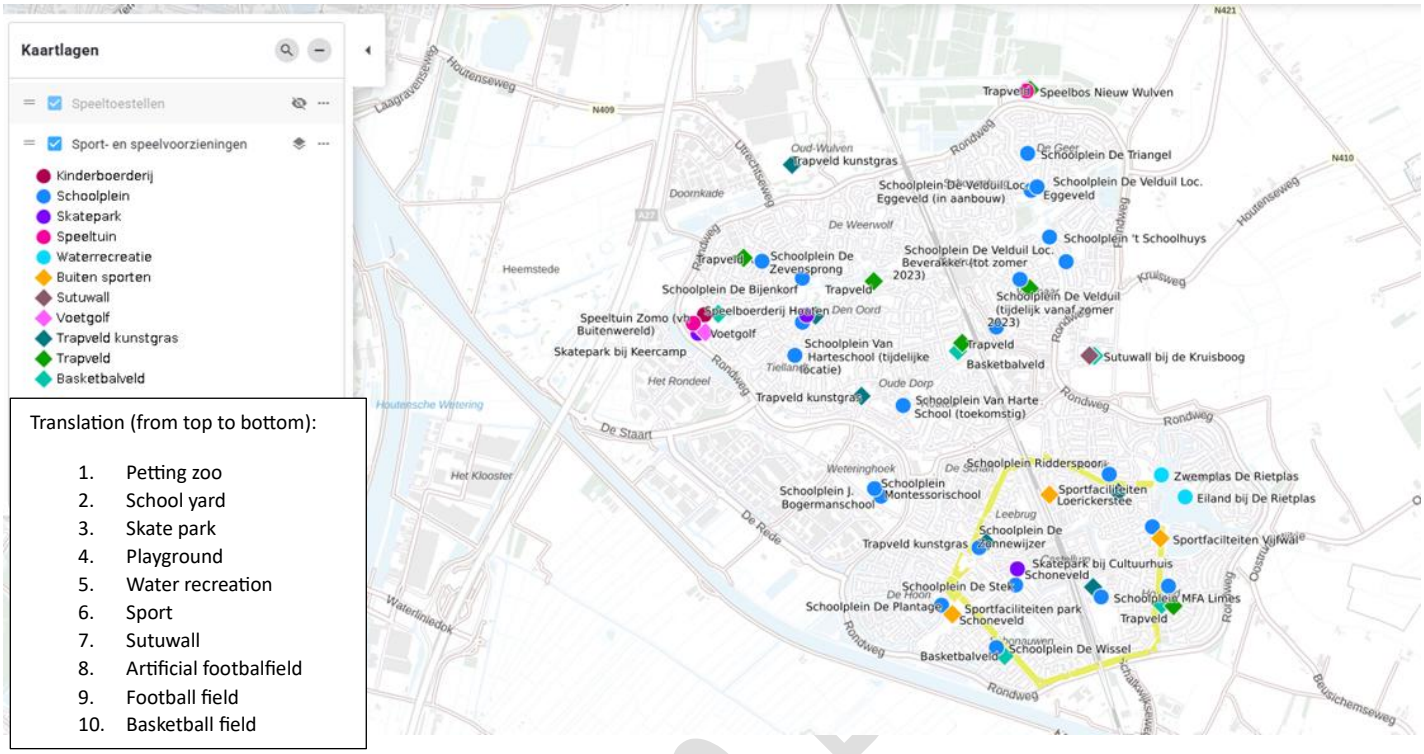
Houten, in particular, is chosen as a study area because parents, as the studied group, are relatively well represented in the area compared to the national level (CBS, n.d.). This is visible in Table 1, which shows that in Houten, 40 percent of households consist of families with children, compared to the national average of 32 percent. This suggests that Houten is relatively family-oriented and appears to be an attractive place for households with children compared to the national picture. Houten is designed with families in mind, as every neighbourhood has a small playground. Large playgrounds are also available in Houten (Gemeente Houten, 2024). Figure 14 shows the large sports and playgrounds, while the small playgrounds are not included in this figure (Gemeente Houten, 2024). Houten is thus chosen as a research area because it is designed with families in mind through its relatively high number of playgrounds (Gemeente Houten, 2024). This study is interested in how children can act as social bridges through different (semi-)public places to facilitate social interactions. It appears that in Houten, there are enough possible meeting places for the social process of children acting as social bridges.

Table 1 Huishoudens, samenstelling, grootte, regio, 1 januari

City/Country	Households with children in percentage	Households without children in percentage
Houten	40%	60%
Netherlands	32%	68%

Source: Own table based on data from CBS Statline. (n.d.).

Figure 14 Sport-en speelvoorzieningen (Sport and recreational facilities)



Source: (Gemeente Houten, 2024).

4.2 Data collection: purposive sampling, convenience sampling and voluntary sampling

Sixteen parents living in Houten participated in this research, aged between 33 and 47 years. I used purposive sampling, meaning that all participants had children between four and twelve years old and lived in Houten (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, & Walker, 2020). The age group of four to twelve was chosen because children in this range can act as social bridges through (semi-)public places, such as primary school, which starts at the age of four, but not earlier, and ends at the age of twelve. During these years, children often form friendships with others, which can lead to parents building connections with the parents of their children's friends (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick, & Bulsara, 2013).

Each interviews was planned to last at least thirty minutes and took no longer than one hour. Only one parent per household was interviewed, as parents within the same household might share the same social network due to their children's bridging role. I made sure to include both mothers and fathers, since existing research on parental social support tends to focus mostly on mothers (De Sousa Machado, Chur-Hansen, & Due, 2020; Leahy Warren, 2005; Small, Taft, & Brown, 2011).

In addition to purposive sampling, I mainly used convenience sampling, meaning that participants were people I encountered in the neighbourhood at specific times of the day (Hossan, Dato' Mansor, & Jaharuddin, 2023). I approached them at the following locations: BSO Kind & Co (14 April), scouting (12 April), Star Dance (14 April), primary school De Zevensprong (14 April), and the petting zoo (12 April). At these locations, I introduced the research to them, handed out a flyer with information, and exchanged contact details.

Furthermore, I also used voluntary sampling, meaning people could reach out to me on their own initiative by responding to my flyer at various locations or to my social media posts, which I shared on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook (Hossan, Dato' Mansor, & Jaharuddin, 2023). Two participants were recruited this way: one person responded to a Facebook post in the group Mama in Houten, and the other contacted me after seeing the flyer at the library in Houten. The interviews were conducted between April 27 and May 9.

4.3 Implications by selection participants

Parents have busy time schedules, which made it harder to find participants who were willing to give up a bit of their free time to do an interview with me. Since I already expected this to be a challenge, I prepared for it by keeping my agenda open and staying flexible, which resulted in me conducting quite a few interviews in the evening and on the weekend. Some interviews were done through Microsoft Teams, which had the advantage that participants did not need to travel, saving them time, while others took place at the library in Houten, although this location closes at 17:00, meaning that any interviews scheduled in the evening had to take place online.

[redacted]

4.4 Information table about participants

In Table 2, the visible characteristics of parents are shown below. The time-activity patterns of the parents are left out in this figure because it is difficult to interpret from a figure. The time-activity patterns will become apparent in the results section.

Table 2 information table about participants

Pseudonym	Age	Household composition	Children's age	Are both parents working?	Duration of residence in Houten	Friends/family in Houten, before moving to Houten?
Carla	37	Married, 2 children	6, 3	Yes	37	Yes,
Linda	45	Cohabiting 2 children	9, 11	Yes	45	Yes
Dalia	44	Married, 2 children	8, 3	Yes	11	No, but my in-laws live here
Bas	38	Cohabiting, 2 children	5,7	Yes	8	No
Nina	45	Divorced, 1 child	7	Yes	8	Yes
Kim	45, 45	Cohabiting, 2 children	10, 8	Yes	10	No, made new friends
Lisa	37, 38	Married, 4 children	8,5,3 0	Yes	11	Yes
Jan	43, 42	Cohabiting, 2 children	7,11	Yes	11	Yes
Lars	36, 36	Married, 2 children	6,5 en 4	Yes	8	Yes
Matteo	39, 39	Married, 2 children	6 en 4	Yes	4,5	No

Willem	47, 44	Married, 2 children	5, 5	Yes	4,5	Yes
Guus	36,41	Married, 4 children	10, 8, 6, 4	Yes	8,5	Yes
Abel	unknown	Cohabiting, 2 children	12, 10	Yes	14	No, they are there now, but initially not
Noa	41, 41	Cohabiting, 1 child	10	Yes	10	Yes, but in-laws live here and friends of her man
Julia	39, 38	Married, 3 children	0,3,6	Yes	6,5	No, they have now, but initially not
Bente	33, 42	Married, 2 children	4, 2	Yes	5	Yes,

Source: Based on data from the interviews

4.5 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they help ensure that the discussion remains centred on specific topics while allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions to gain deeper insights (Hay & Cope, 2021). These interviews are necessary because they provide an in-depth understanding of how (semi) public spaces can facilitate places for social interaction and social support, according to parents' experiences. According to Olsen (2004), quantitative variables prevent us from closely examining and understanding complex social phenomena. This qualitative research aims to explore social interactions and social support in their full complexity. This is important because people, as social beings, shape places more than the other way around (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). This research seeks to capture that by exploring in depth how physical surroundings and social processes in (semi-)public places influence social interactions and social support.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Dutch. In translating the citations into English, I have aimed to stay as close as possible to their original meaning. As Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg (2010) argue, translating also involves interpreting the data, which can lead to shifts in meaning.

4.6 Data analysis: Thematic Analysis

For this research, thematic analysis has been applied to identify, analyse, and interpret themes within the qualitative data. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is its flexibility and its ability to produce rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is essential to recognise that the researcher plays an active role in selecting and interpreting themes, which requires a reflexive approach to acknowledge how their positionality influences the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, Clarke & Braun, 2017). Positionality is based on individual characteristics, such as gender (Acevedo, Aho, Cela, Chao, Garcia-Gonzales, MacLeod & Olague, 2015).

My positionality is [redacted]

To develop themes from the data, it was first necessary to identify codes that captured key aspects related to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding was also influenced by the interpretation of the data, which is why I made use of the six phases for analysing the data according to (Byrne, 2022). These were as follows: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes,

generating themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Phase one, familiarisation with the data, meant that I actively listened back to the interviews without taking notes or transcribing the data directly. I was also aware of how my positionality influenced my thoughts on the interpretation of the data. In the second phase, I generated the initial codes through the use of NVIVO, which helped me to understand the data in a systematic way. It is also important to be aware of the codes that are changed (Byrne, 2022). I have paid attention to the code I have changed, for example, at first, I coded *public familiarity* under the theme *influence of semi-public places*. Later, I realized that participants also mentioned a potential threat to public familiarity due to the rapid population growth in Houten. This led me to create a separate code called *rapidly growing village*. I also noticed that public familiarity not only enables social interactions, but also facilitates the exchange of social support. For that reason, I decided to assign it a separate code under the theme *influence of social interaction on their social support*. Throughout the coding process, I remained conscious of the idea that it is more effective to code based on whether something fosters deep or fleeting encounters, rather than relying on a distinction between public and semi-public spaces. It is possible that public places also facilitate frequent interactions, even if this happens more often in semi-public places. I also introduced a separate code, *functional reason*, under *time activity patterns*. Some parents have busy schedules yet still choose to visit certain places without a specific functional reason. At the same time, some parents expressed a strong preference for always having a clear purpose when they go somewhere, especially because they have limited time and want to do something meaningful for both themselves and their children.

Finally, during the interviews, I noticed that both parents in each household were employed. If both parents work, they are less present in the neighbourhood compared to people who do not work (Levasseur, Généreux, Bruneau, Vanasse, Chabot, Beaulac & Bédard, 2015; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). However, I found it important to note that one parent who worked fewer hours expressed a stronger need for social contact, as she did not want to only engage in conversations with her children. This highlights that there are also differences in the number of working hours in relation to the desire for social interaction, this led to the code *relatively short working week*.

In phase three, I formed themes from my codes, and these themes gave me insight into what the data was telling me. Furthermore, in phase four, by asking the critical questions posed by Clarke and Braun, I reflected on whether the themes were truly themes or merely codes. Clarke and Braun (2022) argued that themes were not hidden, and that the researcher had to actively look for the linkages between codes in order to explain the themes. Phase five made me aware that I needed to be critical of why a participant said something that was relevant, rather than merely describing the phenomenon. Phase six, writing the report, might have seemed like the final phase. However, codes and themes were reviewed throughout the process, which meant that writing the report was not actually the last phase (Byrne, 2022).

4.7 Ethical Considerations

This subsection, will illustrate the potential harms, informed consent, participant privacy and effective data management.

Potential Harms

A potential harm that my research could have posed to participants was that recalling memories might have evoked emotions of sadness. People with fewer social connections in their neighbourhood might have felt uneasy discussing their experiences. To mitigate this, I ensured informed consent by clearly stating beforehand that participants did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable

with. Additionally, I explained that they could stop the interview at any time. I also paid attention to nonverbal signs of discomfort.

Informed Consent

Before the interview began, I asked for the participant's permission to participate in the research. This also meant that they were informed about the topics discussed and what it meant to be a participant. Furthermore, they were informed of the researcher's expectations, such as the estimated interview duration. Moreover, I asked their permission to record the interview if they felt comfortable (Hay & Cope, 2021).

Participant Privacy

Ensuring participant privacy was essential. This was maintained through pseudonyms to protect anonymity, a name different from their real names (Subedi, 2025). I also explained what would happen with their information. Only my thesis supervisor and the second reader had access to the interview transcripts (Pina, Ramos, Jorge, Váz, Silva, Wanzeller, & Martins, 2024).

Effective Data Management

Effective data management ensured transparency, data integrity, and participants' rights. This involved responsible data collection, processing, storage, and use to mitigate risks such as unauthorised access. A crucial regulation in this context was the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which granted individuals the right to request data removal. Additionally, GDPR mandated that data should not be stored beyond its intended purpose. All data were securely stored in Utrecht University's two-factor authenticated OneDrive. No one besides the researcher had access to this OneDrive, ensuring that the data remained unaltered, reliable, and accurate. Participants also had the right to access the data collected about them (Pina, Ramos, Jorge, Váz, Silva, Wanzeller, & Martins, 2024).

5 Results

This chapter is structured based on the sub-questions. The first subsection provides insight into how the influence of semi-public places on social interactions depends on the characteristics of parents. The second subsection provides insight into how (semi-)public places facilitate the emergence of social interactions. The third subsection explains how certain social interactions lead to the exchange of social support, whereas others do not. The fourth subsection identifies what parents in Houten need for social interaction to take place.

5.1 How parental characteristics influence social interactions

Most parents argue that they have tight, busy schedules, which results in them having less time left over for other activities, which means that they are more critical about where they prioritize their time. Some parents argue that they do not experience their week as busy. Still, they say there is less room for spontaneous or new activities. Their week is already planned with work, household chores, their children's hobbies, and bringing and picking up their children from school. The activities they do are thus part of their weekly routine:

> "[…] our schedule is just full. […] We both work four days a week. And then at the weekend, there are the kids' sports activities, but also your own. So, there's not much left, and even now, it's already sometimes a puzzle to get everything planned." (Jan, 43, cohabiting, 2 children)

Some parents argue that they do not even have much time left for themselves to have a hobby at a (semi) public place without their children present. Matteo argues that he would like to meet more parents, which could be possible if he were part of a sports club or another hobby. However, because of the busy schedules, he does not have the time to make use of that opportunity. This means that social interactions have more chances to take places when their children are present, as some parents are usually with their children. Most parents argue that when they visit a (semi) public place, they do so with a specific purpose rather than simply being there without a reason. They do not have the time to be in (semi-)public places without a reason.

It appeared that all parents work from the parents that were interviewed. However some parents work four days, other less, one parent worked two days. Noa argues that because she works four days a week, she does not have time to socialize with parents after school and have a drink, although she is invited to. She argues that these are parents who do not work four days a week and who have the time for longer social interactions after picking up the children from school. Kim also argues that she is less often at the schoolyard because of her paid job, compared to when she did voluntary work. Studies about Western societies, showed that household were both parents work, experience most time pressure as they have to combine work, household tasks, and childcare (Forsberg, 2009). People who work spend less time in their neighbourhood than people who do not work (Levasseur, Généreux, Bruneau, Vanasse, Chabot, Beaulac & Bédard, 2015; van den Berg, Arentze & Timmermans, 2015). This is important to acknowledge, because people need to be in public places for possible social interactions (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo, & Knuiman, 2012

Nina, as a single parent, argues that she is frequently at (semi-)public places for her only child to meet other children. Other parents know she is a single mother, which leads them to offer her social support more often. This results that she can prioritize her time in being frequent in a (semi) public place. Rapoport and Le Bourdais (2008) argue that single parents might have less time to be at (semi-)public places, because they have more tasks to do alone (Rapoport and Le Bourdais, 2008). However, Nina

has an environment that offers her social support, which means that she has more time to be at (semi-)public places.

Moreover, parents with large gardens mention they have the option to sit in their large gardens, which leads to them feeling less need to be at (semi-)public places. They have the opportunity to stay at home. Lisa argues that because she moved from a house with a smaller garden to one with a large garden, she is less present at playgrounds than she used to be. This is in line with the literature, which states that if people feel a semi-public place is less attractive to be, then people who have the opportunity to use their private gardens use this opportunity instead of public parks (Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013). If people do not visit a public place, then it is hard for social interaction to occur (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo & Knuiman, 2012).

The age of the children can also play a role in how often and when parents are present at (semi-)public places. Kim argues that parents with younger children are more present at the schoolyards, while parents with children in group eight are not, or are less present. Jan argues that neighbours who have older children have different rhythms. This means they have fewer opportunities to talk to each other. He argued that especially when they had babies, they had the desire to sleep early. However, the parents with older children wanted to stay up later at night and have a drink together as neighbours at neighbourhood parties. When he was ready to join the neighbourhood parties, the neighbours had already stopped organizing them.

For frequent and deeper social interactions to occur, it is not only important whether people have time to be at a (semi) public place, but also whether they have the desire. Most parents do have the desire for social interaction with other parents, but the reason for this differs for each parent. Some parents have this desire because they enjoy it themselves. Bente, who works two days a week, argues that she finds it nice to talk to adults instead of only toddlers or kindergartners.

“Yes, I do actively look for that. Especially on days when I only talk to a toddler or preschooler, I really enjoy having a conversation with adults as well.” (Bente, 33, married, 2 children)

Kim also argues that she has a strong desire for social interaction with other parents. The reason for this is that most of her friends do not live in Houten, and humans are social beings. Kim argues that she became friends with parents in Houten because of this desire, which she acted on by attending the organized buurtkoffie (neighbourhood coffee). This is an organized activity where neighbors talk to each other regularly while drinking coffee. Matteo argues that he recently moved to Houten and has the desire to meet new parents in his residential area. This is in line with the literature that people who live for a shorter time in a residential area have fewer social connections compared to parents who live for a longer time in the neighborhood (van den Berg, Arentze, & Timmermans, 2015). Some have the desire for social interactions not for themselves in the first place, but for social interactions for their children. They argue that they are at a (semi) public place so that their children can have social interactions, while they also interact with the parents of those children. For example, Noa argues that sometimes she stays longer at a (semi) public place so that her child can play with other children. Nina also argues that she chooses to visit (semi-)public places where familiar children and parents from the schoolyard are present because her child is an only child.

Most parents argue that they are easier talkers, which helps social interactions to take place. Willem argues that he is an easier talker because he is from the south of the Netherlands. He argues that he does not have to think when talking to strangers. He greets everybody on the street because he is used to it. Sometimes people look at him strangely when he does this, but for him this does not matter. However, Guus, Julia, and Dalia feel less comfortable talking to a stranger. They argue that it is easier to talk with someone who you are familiar with than with someone who is a stranger. Julia argues that

if she does not know anyone, it is harder for her to have social interactions with strangers. Dalia also explains that it is usually other people who start the conversation. She says that she is introverted, which for her means that she is less likely to initiate a conversation herself. However, she says that she enjoys having conversations, but she is less likely to walk up to people to talk. Guus also argues that he does not feel comfortable just walking towards someone else and starting a conversation when there is no trigger for it.

Guus and Linda argue that they have less desire for (longer) social interactions in their neighbourhood. Guus argues that he has less desire to talk with parents from school because he can also talk to people from work. He argues that this was different when COVID-19 was present, but now that it is gone, he has less desire for that. Linda also argues that she greets others but does not stop for a conversation, as she does not have the desire or time for that.

Most parents do not have the desire to become friends with other parents. They meet parents only at the (semi-)public places, not at home. It appears that time and already having friends and family in the neighbourhood is intertwined with less desire for making new friends

5.2 The influence of (semi-)public places on their social interactions

This subsection will be dived into the physical and social characteristics of a (semi) public place that influence if social interaction take place and the social processes in a (semi) public place that influence if social interactions take place.

Physical characteristics and social characteristics

Parents argue that there are preconditions for being in a (semi) public place that determine whether social interaction occurs or not. One of these preconditions is that parents argue they have busy time schedules, which makes it convenient that the (semi-)public places in Houten are accessible. According to Nina, she reaches (semi-)public places in Houten in less than 10 minutes by bicycle. Parents argue that (semi-)public places that require them to go by bicycle and cannot be reached on foot are visited more often on weekends or less frequently, for example, the petting zoo and the Rietplas. This matters because research shows that proximity to (semi-)public places influences how often parents visit (semi) public spaces (Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson, & Williams, 2013). This is important because people need to be in public places for possible social interactions (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo, & Knuiman, 2012). Lisa argues that it takes more effort to take all four of her children to the Rietplas, as it is further away. Most parents argue that it is a precondition that (semi-)public places are clean. This is mostly the case in Houten, however, not at sandy playgrounds where cat poop is present. Parents argue that they avoid these places because this is not hygienic for their children, and their children pick up this cat poop because they do not understand it.

Parents also argue that it is important that a place is perceived as safe because they are protective of their children and visit a place only if they perceive it as safe. Houten is perceived as safe to the extent that parents act on this by not being afraid to let their children play alone at a young age, when they are five years old. They perceive Houten as safe because there are nice people present, a low amount of traffic, a sense of social control, limited presence of loitering youth, and no drugs on the streets. However, one participant mentioned that a flasher had been spotted in the Tuinen of Houten. This is the reason she still accompanies her son to the playground instead of allowing him to go alone. She explained that although she originally intended to let him play independently once he reached a certain age, she no longer dares to do so for now.

Besides preconditions for being at a (semi) public place, parents also have preferences for intergenerational contact at (semi-)public places. Intergenerational contact means that different generations can participate in activities at a (semi) public place, which leads to social interaction between age groups and stimulates social connections (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023). Many parents mention they are more likely to visit places that offer something for both them and their children. For example, they are drawn to places like the petting zoo or shopping centre Castellum, where there is both a café and a playground. Lisa, who has four children, also argues that she prefers playgrounds or parks that offer more variety and are designed for children of different ages. If intergenerational contact is not possible, parents stay for a shorter time at a (semi) public place or let their children play alone at a (semi) public place if their children are old enough. They argue that they are bored if they are just waiting while their children are playing and they have nothing to do. Moreover, they argue household tasks also need to be done, and if a place is not attractive for them, they prefer to divide their time between those tasks that need to be done. Parents argue that they have more social interactions at public places where they stay longer. This is in line with the literature that interaction with others is more stimulated if people stay longer in a place (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014).

Parents also argue that for intergenerational contact to take place, (semi-)public places need to be comfortable for them to stay longer. Benches make it more attractive to stay longer at a (semi) public place. Nina argues that there are fewer options to sit next to the play equipment at Castellum, which makes it less attractive to stay. Matteo also argues that benches are not often present at the small playgrounds, which has the effect that parents stay for a shorter time at these playgrounds because it is less comfortable. He argues that there are no social interactions at the playgrounds, as he most of the times does not see parents there. For social interactions to occur, parents need to meet others at these (semi-)public places (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo, & Knuiman, 2012). However, parents do not prefer to be at the playgrounds if others are not present to socialize with. This creates a cycle: fewer parents means fewer opportunities for interaction, which in turn discourages others from going as well.

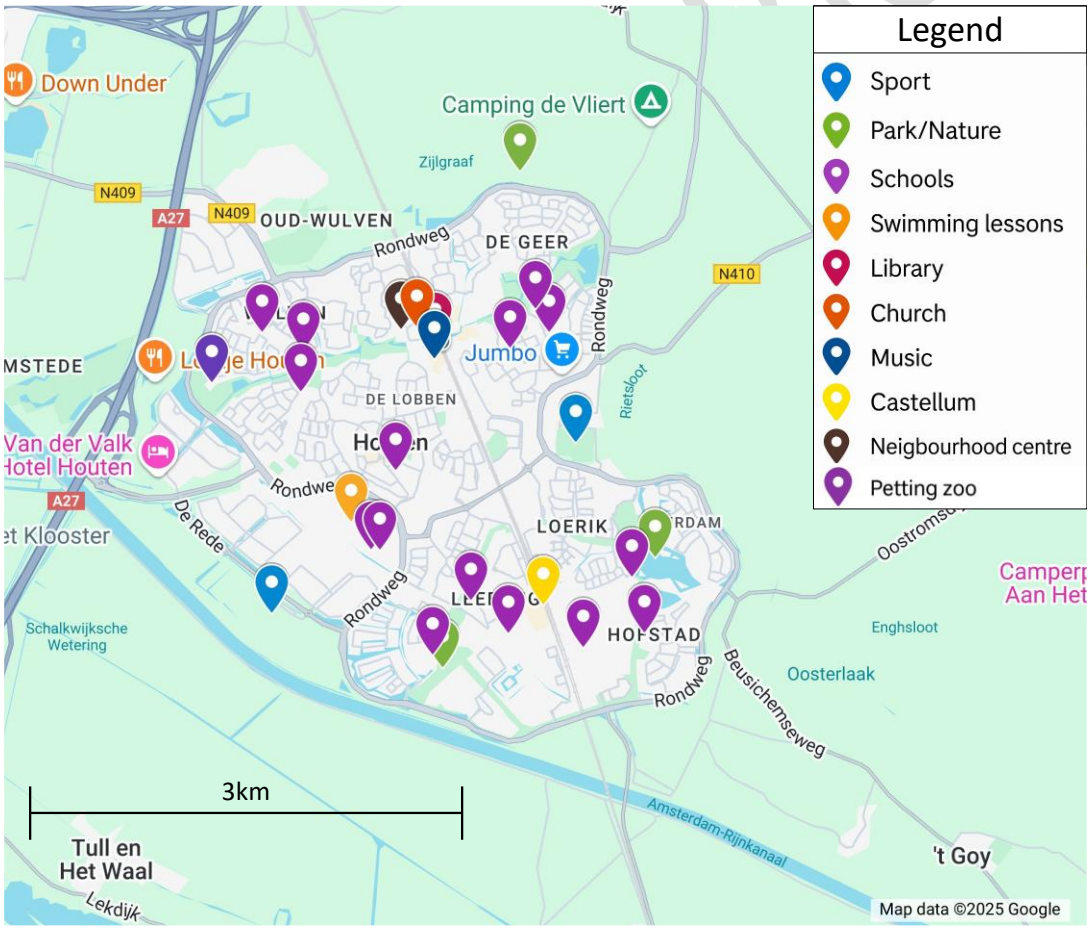
Parents also argue that benches in the shade are needed for them to stay comfortable at a (semi) public place. This is in line with the literature that a place where you can sit or be in the sunshade helps people stay longer (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016). While parents indicated that they are not attracted to benches in the sun, they did not say whether they act on this in practice, for example, by avoiding benches in the sun or spending less time there. Some parents did say they avoid certain playgrounds when the play equipment is fully exposed to the sun. On hot days, these playgrounds become too warm for children to play, making them less appealing.

In addition, green places are also preferred because they experience these as more comfortable to sit at for a longer amount of time compared to stone benches and terraces. However, Jan argues that in Houten there are mostly stone benches and cafés. He argues that at cafés, people have conversations only with their own friends and family, while in Utrecht this is different. He argues that in Utrecht, there are more large parks and music is played, which creates an atmosphere. Large green places can thus lead to social interactions because people stay there longer and there may be an atmosphere that also stimulates social interaction between strangers.

There are different places where parents want to be and where they engage in social interactions: the petting zoo, schools, sports clubs, music lessons, the community centre, church, swimming pools for lessons, activities in the library, parent committee of the childcare centre, childminder, speelcafé, parks/nature places (Rietplas, Park Schoneveld, Speelbos Nieuw Wulven), neighbourhood squares, the initiative De Buurtkoffie (Coffee in the Neighbourhood), markets, shopping centre Castellum.

Rietplas is a lake with beaches in Houten where people can relax (VVV Kromme Rijnstreek, n.d.). Parents argue that they meet familiar parents there, mostly parents from school. Childminder can be someone who takes care of your children at his home or your home. Carla argues that you get to know parents more quickly because it is smaller than a daycare centre. Park Schoneveld is a large park with swings, a football field, and it is possible for the children to bring their own stuff to play with, according to Bas. Also, Speelbos Nieuw Wulven is a forest with play equipment for children. Speelcafé, which only Carla has made use of, is a place where children can play while their parents have a cup of tea. Carla argues that the speelcafé changed to Thursday, which is not the day she is off from work. This means she could not use this place anymore. Initiative De Buurtkoffie is, according to Kim, a frequently organised activity for neighbours by neighbours, where neighbours drink coffee and have conversations with each other. Figure 15 shows the (semi-)public places in Houten where parents experience social interactions. By categorising them, it becomes clearer which types of places facilitate social interactions. The meeting places in figure 16 are categorized as: sport, schools, park/nature, swimming lessons, the library, church, music, Castellum (shopping centre), neighbourhood centre and petting zoo. In the subsection about whether social interactions lead to the exchange of social support, it becomes clear which places also facilitate the exchange of social support.

Figure 15 Meeting places in Houten according to parents



Source: Own map, created with my Google my Maps, based on interview data (2025)

According to the parents in Houten, there are more planned activities at semi-public compared to public places. This is important to recognize as parents argue that they feel more comfortable engaging with planned activities semi-public places, such as during Voorleesweek at the library. This is because they know other parents will stay for a longer period of time, as organised activities have a clear ending.

This gives them the sense that they are not holding someone up who might be in a rush, which could be the case at a playground. Moreover, other parents are more mentally prepared for the possibility of social interaction in these settings. This means that social interactions do not come entirely unexpectedly, as they sometimes do at playgrounds, and parents may be more in the mood to socialise. This makes parents feel more free to initiate contact with other parents.

> "Yes, with such an activity I think you are more open to having contact with the people who are there. Because then you consciously make a choice to indeed go to a library or to such a play morning. And if you just randomly walk to a playground or something and you happen to see someone there. Yes, then you also don't know how long it is going to take." (Noa, 41, cohabiting, 1 child)

However, some parents are more spontaneous in their social interactions and simply enjoy having a chat without planning or overthinking it. For them, organised activities are not a prerequisite for natural social encounters.

"Yes, I always like to have a little chat. See where people come from, where they live. Well, you can always talk about children and what they are playing. So yes." (Matteo, 39, married, 2 children)

Parents experience the petting zoo, as a semi-public space, as a place that fosters social interaction. They feel it encourages conversation because people tend to stay there longer. According to Jan, this creates more opportunities for interaction between parents. This aligns with the literature, which suggests that interactions with others are more likely to occur when people spend more time in a place (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014).

Schoolyards lead to frequent and deeper social interactions. There are more parents present, which increases the chances of having social interactions according to them. Parents also argue that seeing the same familiar faces makes it easier to start conversations. According to them, the school, as a semi-public place, supports regular and deeper interactions, for example when waiting to pick up their children or during playdates arranged at the school playground. This aligns with the literature, which suggests that the school encourages frequent encounters over a longer period. It also corresponds with the idea that social interactions are stimulated because they share the same identities, being parents with children from the same school (Vincent, Neal, & Iqbal, 2017).

Sports clubs for children also support deeper and frequent social interaction between parents. While watching their children's games, parents are surrounded by others in similar situations. They have shared interests to talk about, their children who both play football or hockey. Frequent social interactions are facilitated at sportclubs, through watching the sports games of their children or having to drive to sports games. If the physical space of a sport do not allow watching the game together or arranging things together, then this make it harder to have social interactions between parents, according to Abel. He says that parents are not allowed to be in the dance room, which means that parents cannot watch their children together with other parents. There are screens, however, it is hard to see what happens on those screens, this lead that parents do not watch the dance lessons together. Also, for dancing do parents not have to arrange things with other parents, which leads to fewer chances for social interactions. Abel says that for skating, you have to arrange things with other parents, while for dance, you just have to wait. Moreover, for dancing, there is less frequency of social contact. His daughter dances once a week, while skating takes place twice a week. There are also more games for skating compared to dance competitions. Finally, it is also important whether it is comfortable to wait somewhere, which is less the case for dancing because the waiting area is small.

In contrast, it appears that there are fewer frequent social interactions in public places like playgrounds. Parents in Houten explain that most of the time, there are fewer parents present at playgrounds, which makes social interactions less likely to happen. Matteo mentions that the playgrounds are often empty of parents. He hopes to frequently see the same parents at playgrounds in his neighbourhood. Nina, for example, says she finds it a pity that there are only two large playgrounds, the only places, in her view, where it feels worth staying longer. Matteo says that there are fewer parents at the playgrounds to have social interaction with:

> "We are used to there being a lot of playgrounds in Utrecht. Well, there are about five or six playgrounds with quite a lot of different things, and we are really used to going there regularly, and we often see the same children and parents there, with whom we have a lot of contact. When we move here, we like the idea of making new contacts and we also expect that at the playgrounds we meet other children and other parents. But back then, and still regularly now, we notice that a lot of those small playgrounds are just deserted. And well, making contacts is also disappointing." (Matteo)

This is important to acknowledge, because for social interaction to occur, parents need to be present in public places such as playgrounds (Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo, & Knuiman, 2012). According to Matteo and Nina, one reason these playgrounds are often empty is the lack of varied play equipment. As a result, even when parents and children do visit, they tend not to stay long, but for 10 minutes. This again links back to the literature: interaction is more likely when people linger in a space (Farahani et al., 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014). As mentioned earlier, household characteristics also play a role. Due to busy family schedules and the generally safe environment in Houten, many parents choose not to accompany their children to the playgrounds. Finally, the weather also plays a role in whether parents are present at (semi-)public places outdoors. Carla explains that she sees fewer familiar people in the winter compared to the summer, as fewer people are outside.

However, during a different period, the COVID-19 pandemic, frequent and deeper interactions at playgrounds are more likely. Lisa describes how she meets the same parents repeatedly while moving from playground to playground, eventually forming a friendship. Carla also explains that she sometimes meets neighbours at the playgrounds. If social interaction takes place at playgrounds outside your own neighbourhood, these are mostly fleeting encounters. She explains that when the same parents are there again, you have to recognise each other first. She adds that it is harder to have deeper interactions with strangers compared to neighbours. Overall, parents explain that playgrounds are less attractive for spending extended periods of time, and therefore less conducive to social interaction.

Social processes

According to parents, social interactions often arise when (semi-)public places are appealing to spend time in and when other people are present, or when such places encourage people to stay longer. (semi-)public places are more likely to stimulate frequent and deeper interactions. However, according to parents, it is not only the (semi-)public places themselves that stimulate interactions, it can also be the people who stimulate social interactions.

Parents argue that children can lead to social interactions between other parents. This happens because parents come into contact with other parents through their children's playdates. After their children play with each other, some parents stay to talk. This talk can be about how it went, but also to get to know each other as parents. This is in line with the literature, which states that children interact with other children and make friends. This then leads to parents developing social connections with the parents of those children (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick, & Bulsara, 2013).

Kim explains that she has a social connection with another parent through her children:

"But that contact only comes about because the children are actually friends with each other. And then he has a click I think. And because of that, it then happens." (Kim, 45, cohabiting, 2 children)

Guus argues that the parents of your children's friends are the ones you often talk more with. It is easier because you already talk with them when picking up your children from their playdates. Matteo supports this by saying that it would be easier for him to get to know more parents if his child has more friends. He experiences this as a reduced opportunity for social interaction. Parents argue that it not only matters whether children have social interactions with each other, but also that they are simply present. This is because parents have something in common: children. That alone can also lead to social interaction between parents. As Kim and Bente explain, children are an easy topic to talk about with parents you do not know. Bente argues that this might be similar to people who own a dog, they have something in common. This corresponds with the literature that children can act as social bridges for parents to meet other parents (Williams & Pocock, 2009).

Besides the fact that children can lead to social interactions, it also helps if there is a trigger that leads to a conversation:

"Or if someone is doing something or so. Or playing a nice game or so like we also do that at home, we have that at home too. Do you want to join? Something like that. You know?" (Lars, 36, married, 2 children)

For frequent and deeper social interaction, it is necessary that parents have a click with each other. This can be based on similar interests. However, that is not always enough. Most parents argue that their click is also based on having the same parenting style. Otherwise, it is less likely for social interaction to take place again, and even less for friendship to occur, according to the participants:

> "That sometimes someone else is so convinced like yes but it just has to be like that. And if you do it differently, then you are stupid I think. Yes, then it does get difficult to be friends with someone." (Kim)

There is still public familiarity present in Houten. Public familiarity means that you recognise others and they recognise you. It can be defined as a social space built within a physical space where social interactions occur (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008). This is supported by parents who say that they see a lot of familiar faces in Houten every day, with whom they have fleeting encounters or frequent and deeper interactions. Being familiar with each other can thus lead to social interactions. Linda, like others, says that she sees many familiar faces every day:

"Yes, but when you see people every day, you start to recognize them, you know? And then they'll always greet you. That's just how it is here in the village, all day long it's like: hey, hi, hey, hi!" (Linda)

Julia also argues that Houten is a smaller municipality compared to Utrecht, which she says increases the chance that parents see familiar faces. However, fleeting encounters between strangers require more conditions to take place. As stated before, some people need an organised occasion for social interaction to occur more easily between strangers, which mostly takes place in semi-public places. Lars also argues that back in the days, it is easier to have social interactions with strangers in Houten. With "back in the days," he means the time when Houten is a smaller area; it is different then. He suggests that there is more social cohesion, everybody knows everybody. However, because Houten is a rapidly growing town, people know less what they can expect from others. This means that conversations with strangers are less often initiated. There is more needed than only public familiarity for people to engage in conversations with strangers. Public familiarity can help people engage more

comfortably with strangers in conversations (Blokland & Nast, 2014; Francis, Giles-Corti, Woo, & Knuiman, 2012). However, there are sometimes social interactions between strangers. These are mostly negative social interactions, aimed at solving conflicts between children rather than having a conversation for fun, according to Kim.

5.3 How social interactions contribute to social support

The following (semi-)public places lead to social interactions but are not mentioned as places that also lead to social support: an activity at the library, music lessons, swimming lessons, cafés, the community centre, Park Schoneveld, and sports clubs for themselves. Swimming lessons take place frequently. However, most of these (semi-)public places do not lead to frequent and deeper interactions over a longer period of time. Noa mentions that she does not continue to visit the community centre but only goes a few times. In addition, Carla explains that playgrounds outside of your neighbourhood are mostly places of fleeting encounters. This is because you have to recognise these parents again to have a conversation. This aligns with the literature, which suggests that encounters lacking continuity or mutual recognition do not foster social support (Peterson, 2017). Bas also notes that at Park Schoneveld he sometimes has a one-time encounter with strangers because his children play together with other children. He does not exchange social support at this place. This is in line with the literature, which states that only frequent and deeper interactions lead to social connections that can result in the exchange of social support (Peterson, 2017).

Specific (semi-)public places that do lead to the exchange of social support include school yards, sports clubs, neighbours, playgrounds, friends, family, and work. At these (semi-)public places, parents meet each other frequently over a longer period of time. Other (semi-)public places such as nature areas, parks, and Castellum are meeting places where they frequently meet the same parents from the school yard, who provide social support.

School yards are thus semi-public places where parents meet each other frequently and exchange social support over a longer period. Parents indicate that this is a semi-public place where they are with the same group of parents for eight years. According to Willem, this leads to the exchange of social support because you get to know other parents well at the school yards. This means that after two years, you know you can trust them to leave your child with. Parents point out that they are frequently at school yards because they want to be involved in school and to exchange contact information with other parents for playdates. The parents do not see the contact with other parents at the school yard as close friendships but more as relationships between acquaintances and friends. They mention that it is something in between, because most parents do not speak outside of the places where they always meet. They do not experience these contacts as friendships because there is not a long history with these parents, unlike with close friends. However, they do exchange social support with each other, even though they are not friends. These findings are in line with the literature suggesting that ties, whether weak or strong, can lead to social support (Peterson, 2017). Repeated interactions with people described as ‘less-than-friends’ can still provide social support. Strong ties mean that people interact frequently, at least twice a week, compared to weak ties. The closer someone is to another person, the stronger the tie (Granovetter, 1973).

Only two participants receive social support through frequent and deeper interactions at playgrounds. Lisa mentions that this happens to her during COVID, when she frequently visits the playground with her children. Carla adds that she meets her neighbours frequently at the playground. However, most parents do not have frequent and deeper social interactions at playgrounds. This is important to acknowledge, as deeper and frequent social interactions are needed for social support to be exchanged

(Perren, Arber & Davidson, 2004; Peterson, 2017; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013).

Some parents do receive social support from neighbours, if neighbours are familiar with each other. Bente explains that because neighbours live close to each other, social interactions often arise spontaneously and can lead to the exchange of social support. She describes that her child is playing with a friend, but she has to go somewhere. She asks the parents of her child's friend, but they already have plans. A neighbour of hers overhears this and offers practical social support. Parents mention that neighbours who have children at the same school mainly exchange social support with each other. Bente notes that her neighbour has children at the same preschool, which makes it easy to ask her to bring her child as well. Lars also states that because his neighbour has children at the same school, he is more likely to ask her for support. It matters for parents if it requires little effort from others to provide social support.

Parents also receive social support at sports clubs if the physical space is designed to allow parents to watch the sports game together or if they need to arrange things with each other. Parents are frequently present at sports clubs because they feel the need to be there, to cheer on their children or to drive them to their games. This also stimulates frequent social interaction, because the parents do the same activities. Jan describes that it becomes a clique. According to Nina, it can even grow into a friendship if parents also enjoy the hobby themselves. She explains that her ex-husband becomes friends with other football parents because he is interested in football, just like some of them. He also coaches the team and meets with other parents outside of football.

Bas mentions that he also receives social support from colleagues at work because they are in the same life phase. This makes it easier to exchange support. Dalia, who works at a daycare, also describes that because of the nature of her job, she receives social support from her colleagues. Most parents also receive social support from their existing social networks, such as colleagues, family, or friends who live in Houten. They also receive support from new friends made in Houten. However, most parents do not receive support only from family or friends. They also receive social support from other parents, such as those at school yards, sports clubs, neighbours, and some at playgrounds. In other words, parents receive social support through different social connections.

Parents mention that public familiarity is present in Houten. Public familiarity means that you recognise others, and they recognise you. It can be defined as a social space built in a physical space where social interactions occur (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008). Public familiarity makes it easier to exchange social support, according to Linda. She explains that Houten feels like a village. Parents describe it this way because of the characteristic of knowing the people in your community, which is still present because Houten used to be smaller. This leads to parents being more familiar with each other and knowing how to find their way to one another, compared to cities. She notes that in cities, people are more anonymous. Lars experiences this differently. He states that people are less familiar with each other than they used to be in Houten, which leads to fewer social interactions. Linda acknowledges that Houten has become larger over time, yet people still know each other well enough to ask for support.

Parents report that all types of social support are exchanged at (semi-)public places. They describe that these types include perceived support, enacted support, emotional support, and practical support (informational support + instrumental support) (Ayers, Baum, McManus, Newman, Wallston, Weinman & West, 2007; Taylor, 2011). Jan mentions that he experiences perceived social support because he knows support is there if he needs it. He knows this because a parent once tells him that if he ever needs something, they are there to help him. Perceived support means the idea that support is

available when needed (Ayers, Baum, McManus, Newman, Wallston, Weinman & West, 2007). Linda also explains that she always knows she can call people if she needs something.

“You know, there are certain people you can always call if you need something or want to know something. We always know how to find our way to each other.” (Linda, 45, cohabiting, 2 children)

Enacted support is the support that is actually received, which can be informational support, instrumental support, or emotional support (Ayers, Baum, McManus, Newman, Wallston, Weinman & West, 2007; Taylor, 2011). Examples of informational support that Kim receives include when her child has lice and she asks other parents what lotion works best. Linda also asks other parents why their children never have lice, while her child does. Noa mentions that she is asked to provide social support to other parents by sending them an article about the use of mobile phones. The article explains why mobile phones are not good for children. Noa also says that she asks other parents for advice about whether they let their children watch Harry Potter already, as it can be a thrilling movie.

Instrumental support is also offered, which means one person helps another understand a stressful situation and provides the resources or strategies needed to cope with it. Based on this, the person experiencing the stress can decide how to manage it (Taylor, 2011). Kim mentions that her children can play at the homes of other parents because she is recovering from illness. Noa also says that if someone in her family dies, she can ask parents at the school playground if her children can stay at their houses. Some parents, such as Matteo, do not receive instrumental support. He explains that this might be because his child is afraid to play alone without his parents. That is why he does not receive instrumental support, because his child is not ready for this yet.

Emotional support is also important for parents, as they receive empathy from others. For example, Bente explains that when her children got sick during a vacation, other parents expressed care by saying, 'Sorry to hear that’. Emotional support refers to interest, concern and empathy, especially during moments of stress or being upset (Taylor, 2011). Appraisal support is also important. Matteo describes that sometimes practical advice is not needed, but just the recognition that someone else goes through the same thing. He finds this helpful because it reassures him that his child’s behaviour is normal. Appraisal support refers to the way parents can reflect on their own situations by comparing them with the experiences of other parents facing similar challenges, problems with potting training (Corneil, 1998)

However, within a specific type of support, especially informational support, there are differences in what kind of support people do or do not ask for. For example, Noa explains that she does not talk with other parents about how her child throws up after drinking milk, but she does talk about it with her friends. She says that with friends, you feel freer to say everything.

Other parents are less hesitant to talk about parenting difficulties with each other:

“No, but I’m not ashamed of that. If something doesn’t work out for us but does for others, then... I wouldn’t quickly ask for help, but by talking we kind of exchange ideas. Yes, that definitely, yes.” (Lars, 36, married, 2 children)

Kim says that she makes friends through the initiative de buurkoffie (neighbourhood coffee). However, she does not specify whether she shares more personal parenting difficulties only with those friends. She mentions that if she knows a parent and the person is nice to her, she does exchange social support.

5.4 What parents need to have social interactions in the neighbourhood

Almost every parent argues that they are looking for intergenerational activities, where not only the children have an activity to do, but also the parents. (semi-)public places are designed for intergenerational contact, meaning places stimulate social interactions between children and parents rather than focusing on a single age group (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023). Parents argue that they do not have much time left to have their own hobby without their children, which could be a place to meet other parents. Instead, they are more often with their children, which highlights that (semi-)public places are needed where both parents and children have an activity to do.

Julia argues that it is important for her to combine something practical with something nice. As an example, she argues that she searches for places where she can drink a cup of coffee while her child is playing at play equipment. Nina argues that a café is being built in the forest of Houten (Speelbos Nieuw Wulven). She argues it is an attractive initiative because it is possible to use the toilet and have a drink, which means that parents stay there longer. This is in line with the literature, which states that facilities such as toilets make it attractive to be there with children (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Jarrett, Bahar, McPherson & Williams, 2013). Dalia is hesitant about this initiative. She argues that a restaurant makes it attractive. However, she would not like it if the nature area, Speelbos Nieuw Wulven, becomes too crowded because she argues that the picnic tables would be full and then you have to bring a picnic blanket.

Matteo argues that it is attractive for him to be at a (semi) public place where children can play for a longer time and parents feel comfortable, because they have the opportunity to sit. Matteo argues that benches are not often present at the small playgrounds, which has the effect that parents stay for a shorter time at these playgrounds. He argues that there are no social interactions at the playgrounds. This is in line with the literature stating that interaction with others is more stimulated if people stay longer in a place (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014).

According to parents, there are not always benches in the shade, which is experienced as negative. It is not argued whether people stay for a shorter time because of this. This supports existing literature, which states that a place where you can also sit or be in the shade helps people stay longer for social interactions to take place (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014; Simões Aelbrecht, 2016).

In addition, many parents argue that picnic tables are needed to stimulate social interactions, which are mostly not present according to them. Lars argues that picnic tables are needed because they stimulate sitting next to other parents. This means that they are not physically separated from other parents, which is mostly the case in cafés. He argues that picnic tables can lead to social interactions if you overhear a conversation or if you see a familiar parent. However, Bente argues that parents may be less likely to sit next to a stranger, but arranging seating close to each other may help to stimulate social interaction. Carla argues that it also matters for social interaction to take place more easily if parents sit next to each other instead rather than opposite each other.

Lars argues that picnic tables may only work for social interactions to occur if a (semi) public place is lively and not quiet. However, he argues that Houten is mostly quiet. Also, Jan argues that Castellum is mostly empty. He argues that if there were more to do, then parents would be more likely to have social interactions with each other. Specifically, Lars and others argue that there are not many meeting places for parents and children, which is a missed opportunity:

> “I don't think Houten has that many really great places to meet people. No, De Beren is one of the few. And the petting zoo. But if you really look at something that’s for both children and parents, then I think it already becomes quite limited.” (Lars, 36, married, 2 children)

Carla also argues that there are not really any meeting places for parents. She mentions the Wereldhuis (neighbourhood centre), where people can have a coffee or something to eat, but adds that it mostly attracts vulnerable and older people. However, Lisa argues that in Houten Castellum, there is a bakery that has a place where you can sit and have a cup of coffee while your children play at the playground. She argues that a lot of parents come to this (semi) public place. She argues that more of these types of places would be a good idea because she thinks a lot of parents would be interested in that.

Also, the petting zoo is mentioned as a place for social interactions. It is a semi-public place where parents can have a cup of coffee while their children play. However, Matteo argues that this place does not have a clear view, which means that he is more occupied with following his child than having time for social interactions. Also, Bente argues that a place that is fenced makes it more attractive.

Parents in Houten also argue that they miss large parks, which they believe can stimulate social interactions for intergenerational contact. They argue that in Utrecht, there is Wilhelminapark or Griftpark, while in Houten, there are many small playgrounds. Moreover, they argue that in Houten there are mostly stone benches and terraces. Large parks are seen as places where you can comfortably sit, have a drink and eat something, and stay longer. Moreover, music is played and there is more of an atmosphere. This stimulates easier social interactions between people. Peters, Elands & Buijs (2010) argue that leisure activities can stimulate a lively atmosphere, which can lead to social interactions (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010). It is argued that in Houten, people just visit a café, which leads to people staying for a shorter time. In addition, as stated before, Lars argued that in cafés, people only talk with their own friends or family.

Furthermore, parents argue that planned activities for parents and children are also important for intergenerational contact. These are crucial because Kim argues that at playgrounds, it is harder to understand if someone is interested in social interactions compared to planned activities. Jan argues that he misses organised activities in Houten, especially neighbourhood parties. According to him, sometimes there are activities in Houten, but they are not really clearly announced. He argues that most of the time, he goes with his family to Utrecht to visit activities. Also, Julia argues that she is invited to a neighbourhood party, which is not literally in the neighbourhood she lives in. She argues that it would be nice to have neighbourhood parties in her own neighbourhood, but she does not have the time to organise a neighbourhood party herself. Moreover, Carla argues that a planned activity, where there is something to do and everyone does the same, leads to conversation topics. She argues that having a cup of coffee and listening to a guest speaker who talks about parenting leads more to social interaction than waiting somewhere while your children are playing.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand how parents with children between 4 and 12 years old in Houten experience the influence of neighbourhood (semi-)public places on their social support through emerging social interactions.

Parent exchanged social support at (semi-)public places, all types of social support were exchanged: emotional support, appraisal support, practical support (instrumental + informational support). Parents exchanged mostly social support with parents from school and sport. It appears that these semi-public places are more likely to stimulate frequent social interactions than public places. This is

because parents feel a sense of obligation to be at school yards or sports activities to support their children. Through these new social connections, often formed at school or during sports, parents acquire social support. Frequent social interaction is essential for social support to develop (Peterson, 2017). It became clear that children can act as a social bridge, for example through playdates at school (Roos, Trigg & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013).

In contrast, public places such as playgrounds rarely stimulate frequent social interaction between the same parents. Only two participants reported having frequent social interactions with neighbours at playgrounds. These frequent interactions often occurred, because other parents were presents, parents have a click with each other and they have a strong desire for social contact. Some parents wanted to interact with others, but found no other parents present at the playgrounds. Time constraints, large gardens at home, or lack of interest meant that many parents did not frequently visit playgrounds. Some parents visited nature areas as public places, but only when the weather allowed. As a result, public places seem to offer limited opportunities for the exchange of social support due to the absence of frequent and deeper interactions. This study also shows that public familiarity still exists in Houten, which according to the parents facilitates social interactions and the exchange of social support (Blokland & Nast, 2014). Parents also interact with strangers during organised activities at (semi-)public places, such as library events. These settings are preferred over unplanned activities as parents feel more confident that they are not interrupting others. However, most of these activities are one-time encounters, which limit the development of deeper and frequent interactions.

Parents prefer to visit (semi-)public places where they can do something for themselves. Cafés with play equipment are seen as attractive because they serve both the parents and the children's needs. Parents argue thus for more places that are designed for intergenerational contact. These are also the places where they most often see familiar faces. In the end, (semi-)public places that encourage intergenerational contact lead to happy parents and happy children. When these places create frequent interactions, social support has the chance to blossom there (Peterson, 2017).

7 Discussion

Parents describe various preconditions that influence whether they visit (semi-)public places with their children: perceived safety, accessibility, and cleanliness. These preconditions are mostly present in Houten. It is important that children have social interactions with each other for them to act as social bridges. This process works as follows: children interact and form friendships with other children, which creates opportunities for their parents to connect with one another. However, children need appropriate meeting places in order to initiate such interactions (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick, & Bulsara, 2013).

In addition, it is essential that (semi-)public places are attractive not only for children but also for their parents. Parents have a preference for (semi-)public places that are designed for intergenerational contact, meaning places that enable social interactions between children and parents rather than focusing on a single age group (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023). This is attractive because parents often spend more time with their children than they have time for themselves, as the remaining time is divided between work and household tasks. (semi-)public places designed for intergenerational contact make parents feel more comfortable, as there are also activities for them. Instead of merely waiting while their children are playing, which some experience as boring, they can also enjoy themselves. For example, parents argue that places where they can have a cup of coffee while their children are playing are seen as attractive. Moreover, comfort also means that they can sit instead of just standing. Parents state that if intergenerational contact is stimulated in (semi-)public places, these

spaces become more attractive and parents are likely to stay there longer. This is important, as the literature argues that people need to spend a longer time in public spaces for social interactions to occur (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014).

According to parents, there are not many places in Houten that are designed for both parents and children. This aligns with the fact that most policies and studies are based on specific age groups. For example, policies often focus on either child-friendly or age-friendly cities (e.g., Brown, de Lannoy, McCracken, Gill, Grant, Wright, & Williams, 2019; Cordero-Vinueza, Niekerk & van Dijk; Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023; Jansson, Herbert, Zalar, & Johansson, 2022). Child-friendly cities are perceived as places that are safe, green, and have open spaces, as well as bicycle-friendly roads (Corsi, 2002; Jansson et al., 2022). Norouzi, Chen, Jarrott, & Satari (2023) state that less research has been done about intergenerational contact. In addition, fewer policies are based on designing (semi-)public places to be attractive for all age groups, instead of focusing solely on one. This study is in agreement with this statement, arguing that this is a missed opportunity in Houten.

Parents stated during the interviews that they felt more comfortable socialising with others during planned activities, which were mostly organised in semi-public places. In such settings, parents knew when an activity would end, which made them feel less like they were interrupting others compared to unplanned encounters in public places, such as playgrounds. It is important to acknowledge that this study argues that planned activities stimulate more social interactions, which can be deeper interactions, compared to unplanned activities. Unplanned activities may stimulate more fleeting encounters, as parents feel less comfortable having a long conversation. Peterson (2017) argues that planned activities lead to deeper and more frequent interactions than unplanned activities. The difference between unplanned and planned encounters in (semi-)public places is important to understand, as most policymakers and studies focus on unplanned encounters in these spaces. Focusing on one type, unplanned encounters, comes at the cost of planned encounters, which should not be the case. Both types of encounters are important, as planned encounters are more likely to stimulate frequent and deeper interactions. Peterson (2017) also argues that, because there is less money available for local projects in the Netherlands, fewer investments are made in projects based on planned activities. This is why it is important to gain insight into the importance of these different types of encounters and into where fleeting encounters, as well as frequent and deeper interactions, are formed.

According to parents, frequent social interactions lead to the exchange of social support, as they foster trust and familiarity. These frequent and deeper interactions mostly take place in semi-public places rather than in public ones. This aligns with Peterson's (2017) findings that semi-public places are more likely to foster frequent social interaction. Frequent interactions at (semi-)public places that led to the exchange of social support were interactions with other parents from school, sports, and the neighbourhood. In addition, already existing social connections offer social support, such as family, friends, and work.

This study also adds that a distinction exists in how the physical space of a sport is organised. This means that parents can be frequently present at sports locations, but for interactions to occur, certain conditions are required. For example, dancing was organised in such a way that parents watched the game on a screen instead of in person, which distracted them from having social interactions with other parents, as they were more likely to pay attention to their phones. However, skating was organised in such a way that parents could watch the game in person, which led all parents to be more likely to support their children together. In addition, it also helped that for skating, parents had a reason to arrange things with each other, while for dancing, parents were not obligated to talk to each other, as they did not have to arrange anything.

The desire for social interaction also plays a role in whether interactions are likely to take place. Most parents are open to socialising, while others are too busy or already have a busy social life with friends. Most parents state that their new social connections are not considered close friends, yet these ties still lead to social support, which is in line with Peterson (2017) study about weak and strong ties (Peterson, 2017). Parents in this study indicate that they exchange all types of social support with these new acquaintances. They have perceived social support, as Jan argues that parents offer support to them in case they might ever need it. Enacted social support is also present, as parents exchange emotional, informational, and instrumental support with each other. They exchange emotional support by showing empathy for the situation someone has experienced, for example, for Bente het situation that her children were sick during a vacation. In addition, appraisal support is exchanged through the recognition that someone else experiences the same things as you do. Matteo argues that he experienced this as comforting because he knows that it is normal how his child acts. Parents also exchange informational support, as they ask each other which lotion for lice is best or how long children should use their mobile phones. Furthermore, parents exchange instrumental support by letting their children play at other homes when needed, in case of an emergency, when someone is sick, or when it requires less effort for someone. Matteo does not receive instrumental support, because his children are not comfortable being at someone else's home without their parents. To add depth to this literature, it is worth noting that for more personal matters, close friends remain the ones with whom everything is shared, as they provide a sense of safety to express oneself freely. For social support to be experienced as positive, it is important that parents are familiar with the person, that the support is reciprocal, and that it is only offered from their own parents if they requested this.

The context also matters in determining how easily social support is exchanged. Public familiarity still exists because Houten used to be a village, it was smaller. Parents describe it as a close-knit community. This is line with Granovetter (1973) who argues that if parents know each other well, it is called a close-knit network (Granovetter, 1973). Parents still see a lot of familiar people, which makes it easier to exchange social support. For example, Linda notes that even if parents talk less deeply and less frequently with each other, they know how to reach one another. It may be that Houten is not too large for public familiarity to remain intact, allowing social support to circulate among residents. It is important to recognize that Lars argues that Houten has become less close-knit over time. Houten has become less "everybody knows everybody" because it has grown, which has led to fewer people speaking to each other spontaneously. It is important to recognize that there is thus a threat that there may be less public familiarity because Houten is a rapidly growing town, which might influence the exchange of social support. To sum up the important findings, frequent social interactions are needed for social support to be exchanged. (semi-)public places that are designed for intergenerational contact attract parents to stay longer at these places. It is important that parents have a common aim and stay at a place longer, which is stimulated through (semi-)public places designed for intergenerational contact.

7.1 Further research

Based on the findings of this thesis, future research should examine the social cohesion in a neighbourhood that has more influx of new residents. Some parents mentioned that, although they now live in Houten, they still feel attached to Utrecht due to their study background or preferred leisure activities. While Houten was chosen as a safe and affordable place for their children, their attachment to Utrecht remains. Additionally, further research could explore how parents in urban areas like Utrecht experience the influence of (semi-)public places on their social support. Some participants argued that in cities with fewer private gardens and large parks such as Wilhelminapark, spontaneous interactions occur more easily than in Houten. Applying this research also to smaller villages could be valuable, as

participants suggested that such environments offer more public familiarity and stronger social networks. Comparing urban, suburban, and rural areas could deepen understanding of how the type of residential areas influence the role of (semi-)public places in facilitating parental social support.

7.2 Policy recommendations

A policy recommendation is to design more (semi-)public places that foster intergenerational contact. There are relatively few such spaces in Houten. According to parents, these places should be green, fenced, and include shaded picnic tables where parents can enjoy a coffee while their children engage in play or sports. They argue that they feel less bored and more comfortable to be at a (semi) public place if a (semi) public place is designed for intergenerational contact. In this way parents are more likely to be and stay longer at a semi-public, which is needed for social interactions to occur (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Francis, Giles-Corti Woo & Knuiman, 2012; Thompson & Kent, 2014). Parents are more likely to exchange social support in spaces where they encounter familiar others, they could meet familiar parents at these potential intergenerational designed places. Houten still offers a degree of public familiarity, which helps for social interactions to take place and the exchange of social support. A policy recommendation is to foster and maintain social cohesion in a neighbourhood experiencing an influx of new residents, to foster the exchange of social support in a neighbourhood.

Another recommendation is to organise neighbourhood-based activities. Parents feel more at ease initiating conversations during such organised event. Moreover most parents argue that they are already familiar with neighbours who have children at the same school. Two parents argue that they frequently meet other parents at playgrounds, but other parents argue that there are no parents at these playgrounds. Frequent activities, such as the buurtkoffie (a neighbourhood coffee gathering), can encourage presence of parents, which stimulate frequent and deeper interactions. This was an already existing initiative in a neighbourhood in Houten, which worked well. A neighbourhood social worker could propose and initiate such activities, as parents may lack the time to organise them. Once started, residents could take over. Additionally, children playing football at neighbourhood fields can act as social bridges, creating common ground for parental interaction (Peters, Elands & Buijs, 2010; Moroka et al., 2020; Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood et al., 2013). According to parents, social interactions are rather easy fostered among neighbours due to physical proximity, which is particularly important for parents with busy daily routines. Frequent neighbourhood activities could thus support the development of the exchange of social support.

8 Reflection

A limitation of this study is that the possibility of socially desirable responses cannot be fully excluded. Social desirability bias means that people answer in ways that are seen as socially satisfactory (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). This can make it harder to understand what the actual situation is. However, I have sufficient trust that parents gave not many social desires answers, as they gave open, fair and nuanced answers. As an example they did dare to say if they did not have desire for social interactions or sometimes do not want to be social. It also helped that I have spoken to relatively a lot of parent, sixteen. For this study was chosen an age range for children from four until twelve years old, this excluded parents with children from 0 until 3 years old. This was chosen, because most social contacts are formed through the primary school, through arranging of playdates. Social contacts are needed for social support to be exchanged. Parents who are just become parents are more insecure about their parenting tasks, which lead that they might need more social support. Further research could study this age group.

This research through a thematic analysis has resulted in different experiences and nuances. To understand the differences between the neighbourhoods in Houten, then a social network analysis could be done in addition, to quantify it more. This study picked up the first hint that there are gender differences in their view about social support. Some man said they can handle everything on their own. A feminists approach can study this further. This study has created a map based on the answers from parent about where they argue their meeting places are. This was explored during the sixteen in-depth interviews and by applying the LSD method [listen, summarize, ask through] to ensure that parents did not forget meeting places (Harkhoe, 2024). This study could have used mental mapping, as mental mapping helps people to recall situations more clearly. Through mental mapping, people could point out where they experience meeting places (Archambault & Purchase, 2013). However, not every interview was on location, some were on Microsoft Teams because of the tight schedules of parents. This would have made it harder for people to point out where their meeting places are. Moreover, the aim of this research was more to understand why places function as places for social interactions and the exchange of social support than where and which ones.

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10 Appendix

This section includes Appendix 1 (the operationalisation), Appendix 2 (the topic list), and Appendix 3 (the code tree).

10.1 Appendix 1: Operationalisation

This operationalisation table explains the concepts through the definitions and the interview questions. The main concepts are time-activity patterns, public places, semi-public places, physical surroundings, perceived safety, stationary activities, social processes, public familiarity, comfort zones, children acting as social bridges, intergenerational contact, characteristics of parents, encounters (fleeting encounters, frequent and deeper encounters), social connections, and social support.

This research aim is to understand how (semi-)public places play a role in stimulating social interactions. This research acknowledges that a public place's physical and social characteristics and social processes influences this process. These influence physical, social characteristics and social processes have are depend on the parent's characteristics. First are questions asked about parent's characteristics, as this may feel like a simple question to start with. This can help the participants to feel at ease. Parents have different time activity patterns, which are an example of the characteristics of parents that influence if people are present in public places. The following questions are asked to understand the participant's time-activity pattern.

- What does your weekly schedule look like? Do you have busy agendas?
- How often are you present outside in your neighbourhood?

This research acknowledges that parents can meet other adults in public places if their children are not with them. This is why the question is asked:

- What are important meeting places for you in the neighbourhood?

This research also acknowledges that parents may receive social support from others who may not be parents. This is why the question is asked:

- How do you know the person you receive social support from?

Through follow-up questions and the context added by the participant, the researcher tries to understand whether this person also has children. Appraisal support may not be applicable if they receive social support from people without children, as this refers to the way parents can reflect on their own situations by comparing them with the experiences of other parents facing similar challenges, such as problems with potty training (Corneil, 1998).

After that, I will ask questions based on their experience, which they may have to think more about than the questions based on their characteristics. This question is based on the social processes in (semi-)public places. The question is about if parents feel comfortable having social interactions with others. Children can act as a social bridge (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013; by asking this question, one aims to find out who or what facilitates the establishment of social interaction in public places:

- How exactly do you get in contact with other parents at those places?

The physical characteristics of a public place are questions asked to understand why people are attracted to visit a (semi) public place or not. People need to be in a public place for social interactions

to occur (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012). First, can parents argue by themselves about what makes a (semi) public place attractive to visit. The following research question is asked:

- Why do you choose to go or not go to a certain place?

After participants have discussed why they are in a public place or not, the research explores whether the preconditions from the literature also play a role in their presence in a public place. Questions are based on whether these places are perceived as accessible, safe, and clean, and whether they provide acceptable seating options. The following research question is asked:

- To what extent do you find that the meeting places looks clean? Could you give examples?

Physical characteristics can influence whether stationary activities take place, which can stimulate social interactions (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014). Participants can name characteristics of a public place that either stimulate or do not stimulate social interactions.

- Which characteristics of the meeting place help you to easily make contact with other parents? Why do these characteristics help you to easily make contact with other parents?
- Which characteristics of the meeting place make it harder for you to make contact with other parents? Why do these characteristics make it harder for you to make contact with other parents

Next, it tried to understand if these activities, which lead to social interaction, also result in frequent encounters with deeper interactions. This produces social connections, which are needed for social support to occur. Frequent encounters with deeper interactions are more likely to occur in semi-public places (Peterson, 2017).

- Have these moments of contact ever led to further contact? Could you share your experience?

Lastly are question asked through understand where they exchange their social support?

- Do you ever receive help with things related to parenting? Could you give some examples

Operationalisation table

Concepts	Definition	Interview questions
Time-activity patterns	Time-activity patterns capture how people typically divide their time across locations and activities throughout the day (Matz, Stieb & Brion, 2015)	What does your weekly schedule look like? Do you have busy agendas? How often are you present outside in your neighbourhood? What does your household look like?
Public place	A public place is a space that is accessible to everybody and is controlled by the state (Mehta, 2014; Ekim & Vasilaki, 2015).	At which places do you meet other parents?
Semi-public place	A semi-public place is situated between private and public	At which places do you meet other parents?

	space characteristics. In terms of how public space is used, rather than who owns it, the following applies: the more accessible a place is, the more public it becomes, and the less public it is, the more private it feels (Ekim & Vasilaki, 2015; Francis, Giles-Corti Woo & Knuiman, 2012).	
Physical and social characteristics	Physical characteristics are the tangible objects in a (semi) public place. Social characteristics are how someone experiences a (semi) pubic place (Qi, Mazumdar & Vasconcelos, 2024).	Which characteristics of the meeting place help you to easily make contact with other parents?
Perceived safety	How safe their neighbourhood feels from crime (Lapham, Cohen, Han, Williamson, Evenson, McKenzie, & Ward, 2016)	To what extent do you feel safe when you are present at the meeting place? Could you give examples?
Stationary activities	Stationary activities are thus a type of activity that means that people spend a more extended amount of time in a (semi) public place (Farahani, Lozanovska, & Soltani, 2015; Thompson & Kent, 2014).	Why do these characteristics make it harder for you to make contact with other parents?
Social processes	People determine if social interaction will take place despite if the physical surroundings stimulate social interaction (Peterson, 2017)	To what extent do you feel comfortable chatting with other parents in your neighbourhood? How exactly do you get in contact with other parents at those places?
Public familiarity	Public familiarity means that you recognise others, and they recognise you. It can be defined as a social space built in a physical space where social interactions occur. People can participate in or observe this social interaction (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008).	To what extent do you sometimes have a chat with other parents in your neighbourhood?
Comfort zone	A comfort zone means that people know what happens at a	To what extent do you feel comfortable chatting with

	place even if they do not like the activities(Blokland & Nast, 2014)	other parents in your neighbourhood?
Children act as a social bridge.	Children interact with other children and make friends with other children. Parents can have social connections with the parents of those children (Roos, Trigg, & Hartman, 2006; Williams & Pocock, 2009; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick & Bulsara, 2013).	How exactly do you get in contact with other parents at those places?
Intergenerational contact	Activities were different generations can take place, also stimulate social interaction between age groups and social connections, which is called intergenerational contact (Nelischer & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023).	How exactly do you get in contact with other parents at those places?
Characteristics of parents	The characteristics of parents are all factors in each household that influence why social interactions occur or not (Arai & Pedlar, 2003); van den Berg, Arentze, & Timmermans, 2015	For example: How long have you been living in Houten?
Encounters	Encounters are mainly referred to as interactions between people (Hunt, Papallas & Wessendorf, 2024)	Have you ever had contact with other parents in (semi-)public spaces (such as a playground, park, or schoolyard)?
Fleeting encounters (social interactions)	Fleeting encounters are eye contact, smiling and nodding, or short greetings) (Peterson, 2017).	Have you ever had contact with other parents in (semi-)public spaces (such as a playground, park, or schoolyard)?
Frequent encounters with deeper interaction (social interactions)	Frequent encounters with deeper interaction (Peterson, 2017).	Have these moments of contact ever led to further contact? Could you share your experience? What kind of contact is this? How do you experience it?
Social connections (social interactions)	Social connections are defined mainly as someone's perception that he/she has close and positive friendships	What kind of contact is this? In what situation would you exchange contact details with

	with others (Suragarn, Hain, & Pfaff, 2021).	other parents to have planned contact?
Social support	Social support is determined by what individuals feel (need for emotional support) and do (need for practical support) (Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2015).	Do you ever receive help with things related to parenting? Could you give some examples? How do you know this person? Where did you meet them? What kind of help do you exchange? How do you experience this help, does it go both ways? Why do you experience the help as positive or negative?

10.2 Appendix 2: Topic list

This is the topic list which is used during the interviews.

Characteristics parents

- How long have you been living in Houten?
- Do you have any friends and/or family living in Houten?
- What does your household look like?
- Do you both work?
- What does your weekly schedule look like? Do you have busy agendas?
- How often are you present outside in your neighbourhood?
- What is your age?
- What are important meeting places for you in your neighbourhood?

Physical and social characteristics

Dus voornamelijk interacties tussen ouders, of interacties die als social support kunnen dienen voor ouders.

- To what extent do you sometimes have a chat with other parents in your neighbourhood?
  - To what extent do you feel comfortable chatting with other parents in your neighbourhood?
  - What does that depend on? (e.g. the people themselves, your own personality, being extroverted)
- To what extent have your conversations with other parents in the neighbourhood provided you with support? Could you give an example or examples?
- At which places do you meet other parents?
- Why do you choose to go or not go to a certain place?
- To what extent do you find that the meeting places look attractive? Could you give examples?
- To what extent do you find that the meeting places look clean? Could you give examples?
- To what extent do you find the meeting place accessible? Could you give examples?
- To what extent do you think the meeting place has comfortable seating? Could you give examples?
- To what extent do you feel safe when you are present at the meeting place? Could you give examples?

- How exactly do you get in contact with other parents at those places?
- Which characteristics of the meeting place help you to easily make contact with other parents?
    - Why do these characteristics help you to easily make contact with other parents?
- Which characteristics of the meeting place make it harder for you to make contact with other parents?
    - Why do these characteristics make it harder for you to make contact with other parents?
- Based on your experience, can you tell me whether these encounters also lead to frequent contact with other parents (that you speak to them more often)?
- What is the reason that you have frequent contact with other parents?

Social support

- Do you ever receive help with things related to parenting? Could you give some examples?
    - How do you know this person?
    - Where did you meet them?
    - What kind of help do you exchange?
    - How do you experience this help, does it go both ways?
    - Why do you experience the help as positive or negative?
- Have you ever had contact with other parents in (semi-)public spaces (such as a playground, park, or schoolyard)?
    - What kind of contact is this?
    - How do you experience it?
    - What do you find positive or negative about these encounters?
    - Have these moments of contact ever led to further contact? Could you share your experience?
    - If so, where did these other contact moments take place?
    - Did you run into each other again spontaneously at that location, or had you exchanged contact details to meet there?
    - In what situation would you exchange contact details with other parents to have planned contact?

10.3 Appendix 3: Code tree

This code tree visualizes the codes and themes, which are used to interpret the data.