



Acts of Purpose

How hobbies can be the
heartbeat of a great life
in Charlotte

A report by
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Commissioned by
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Executive Summary

This report highlights the role hobbies play in living a great life and how hobbies can be an instrumental part of Charlotte becoming a city of purpose and belonging. Enabling every Charlottean, especially children and youth, to find their purpose and passion is a simple, concrete and inspiring goal that public, private and nonprofit actors can rally around.

Hobbies, defined here as voluntary activities done regularly for enjoyment, relaxation, and pleasure, bring agency, belonging, and mastery into individuals’ lives. Research underscores the benefits of hobbies in improving well-being, fostering social connections, and developing life skills at every stage of child development.

Countries like Finland and Iceland recognize the value of hobbies with policies and funding. No similar policy framework exists in the United States. While providing opportunities for recreation, play and learning outside work are seen as crucial components of well-being in the Nordic countries, in the US extracurriculars are categorized as “just a hobby” or done for the purpose of academic benefit. The recreational opportunities available to children and families rely heavily on membership fees and philanthropic contributions.

As a result, hobby opportunities in the US split along socioeconomic lines. Funding for low-income areas is usually directed toward keeping kids out of trouble or supporting survival, while residents in wealthier areas are able to enroll and pay for high-quality arts and sports and other enrichments.

That’s the case in Charlotte, as well. Interviews with dozens of civic leaders point to racial and economic divides in recreational opportunities, especially for children. Barriers like transportation prevent many Charlotteans from accessing opportunities.

Fragmentation and lack of coordination among nonprofit providers make it difficult to find the offering or know where the gaps and needs are. However, Charlotte has strengths to build from, such as a collaborative civic culture and existing data-sharing infrastructure.



We recommend seven initiatives to make hobbies a key component of Charlotte’s future:

- 1 Collect data on children’s experiences, needs, and hopes.
- 2 Distribute microgrants for exposure to fun and creative things.
- 3 Create universal experiences of wonder and belonging.
- 4 Spark collaboration between hobby providers.
- 5 Tell the story of the power of hobbies
- 6 Spur place-based youth investment.
- 7 Link hobbies to the vibrancy and prosperity of Charlotte.

By adopting these strategies, Charlotte can improve the well-being of its children and youth, create both systemic change and concrete action now, foster creativity and purpose in every individual, tackle loneliness and build a more socially and economically vibrant city.

Introduction

Tommi Laitio

It had taken a while to get my Finnish 18-year-old godson up. He was visiting us in California and I wanted him to have a great time. Over the last few days, we had gone to a museum, a movie, Disneyland, and shopping. It was 11 a.m. and the temperature was rising. I decided, against better judgment, to suggest a hike in the Los Angeles hills.

As we trekked up the hill in the scorching sun, his responses to my questions got shorter and shorter, changing into grunts as we neared the top. I was running out of things to ask. I realized I was peppering him with weighty questions about school and future plans. It was like people asking me to talk about my work while on vacation.

I decided to try another approach.
“Tell me more about the video game you play,” I asked. “How does it work?”

I knew that he was passionate about this game. This week was the first one in a year that he had not been on his computer, collaborating with friends to beat the other teams. “Are you actually interested?” he asked, reflecting skeptical conversations he had with adults around gaming. “Yeah,” I said.

The walk down lasted 40 minutes. We were running out of water. But he talked the entire way. He talked about the ways his team members give feedback to each other. He described in great detail his role within the group and how a winning team requires highly different talents. He spoke with passion and deep knowledge about the economic models around sponsorships and tournaments. He mentioned how he tries to tone down the sexist language he hears in the heat of the game. I understood the game and his passion for it in so much greater depth than my first impression of it as just another shooter game.

As we got down to the car, drenched and dusty, he said:
“That was a great walk.”

Whether a person’s hobby is an online game, collecting fountain pens, soccer, cheerleading, reading or woodwork, there is one thing in common: their eyes light up when they talk about their hobby. Hobbies give you purpose. They encourage you to go deeper. They build communities. They make you feel seen. A sign of a real hobby is that you could talk about it for hours.

Hobbies are a lifelong passion for me. I learned most of my leadership skills in hobbies, like scouting. I built confidence and a sense of achievement as a teenager in art school. And I spent a decade as a city executive in Helsinki, Finland with a responsibility to meet the city’s goal to ensure that every child has a hobby. I have experienced personally and witnessed professionally how hobbies transform lives.

In this report, we explore the idea of Charlotte, NC becoming a city where every person has something that lights up their eyes. We identify both opportunities and obstacles for meeting this challenge and suggest concrete actions. We don’t offer hobbies as a miracle drug to cure every societal ill but suggest hobbies as something that keeps people going and injects joy and a sense of belonging into their lives even when faced with hardships.

Hobbies are about hope. As Harvey Milk once said: “You cannot live on hope alone but without it, life is not worth living.”

Tommi Laitio is an urban strategist focused on public spaces, city leadership and youth engagement. He was the inaugural Bloomberg Public Innovation Fellow (2022-2024) and the first Executive Director for Culture and Leisure for the City of Helsinki, Finland (2017-2021).

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Background

The Gambrell Foundation, a private philanthropy based in Charlotte, has initiated a groundbreaking community engagement project to learn from cities and thought leaders across the globe on what builds a great life. The foundation’s aim is to redefine its philanthropic focus area based on the learnings from this project.

The foundation hopes to help Charlotte create an environment where everyone can forge powerful bonds with the community. The foundation’s strategic priorities are fostering belonging, relationships, and awe and wonder.



This study on hobbies is one in a set of exploratory initiatives funded by The Gambrell Foundation to find ideas for building a great life in Charlotte.

This work was inspired by a study trip The Gambrell Foundation organized for a group of Charlotte leaders to Helsinki, Finland, and Copenhagen, Denmark, in October 2023. These countries were selected because they consistently rank as the happiest and second-happiest in the world. Both of these countries have globally high levels of reported satisfaction in life and high levels of social cohesion. The week-long study trip looked into daily life, access to nature, urban planning, education, and the arts.

One key takeaway and source of inspiration for many Charlotte leaders was Helsinki’s strategic goal and collective action on ensuring that every child has a hobby. Many participants were intrigued by the simplicity of that goal as a way to promote the well-being of children, youth, and families. As we discuss in the appendix, the City of Helsinki sees hobbies as an effective way to promote a sense of purpose, happiness, and belonging in children across socio-economic lines. In 2022, 92 percent of 10-year-olds and 96 percent of 14-year-olds said they had at least one weekly hobby. In Helsinki, two-thirds of young people have a sports hobby and one third have an artistic hobby.

Helsinki is a highly different city from Charlotte. Before committing to the idea of hobbies, The Gambrell Foundation wanted to understand the social and cultural context of Finland and how stakeholders in Charlotte beyond those having visited Helsinki would see the opportunity.

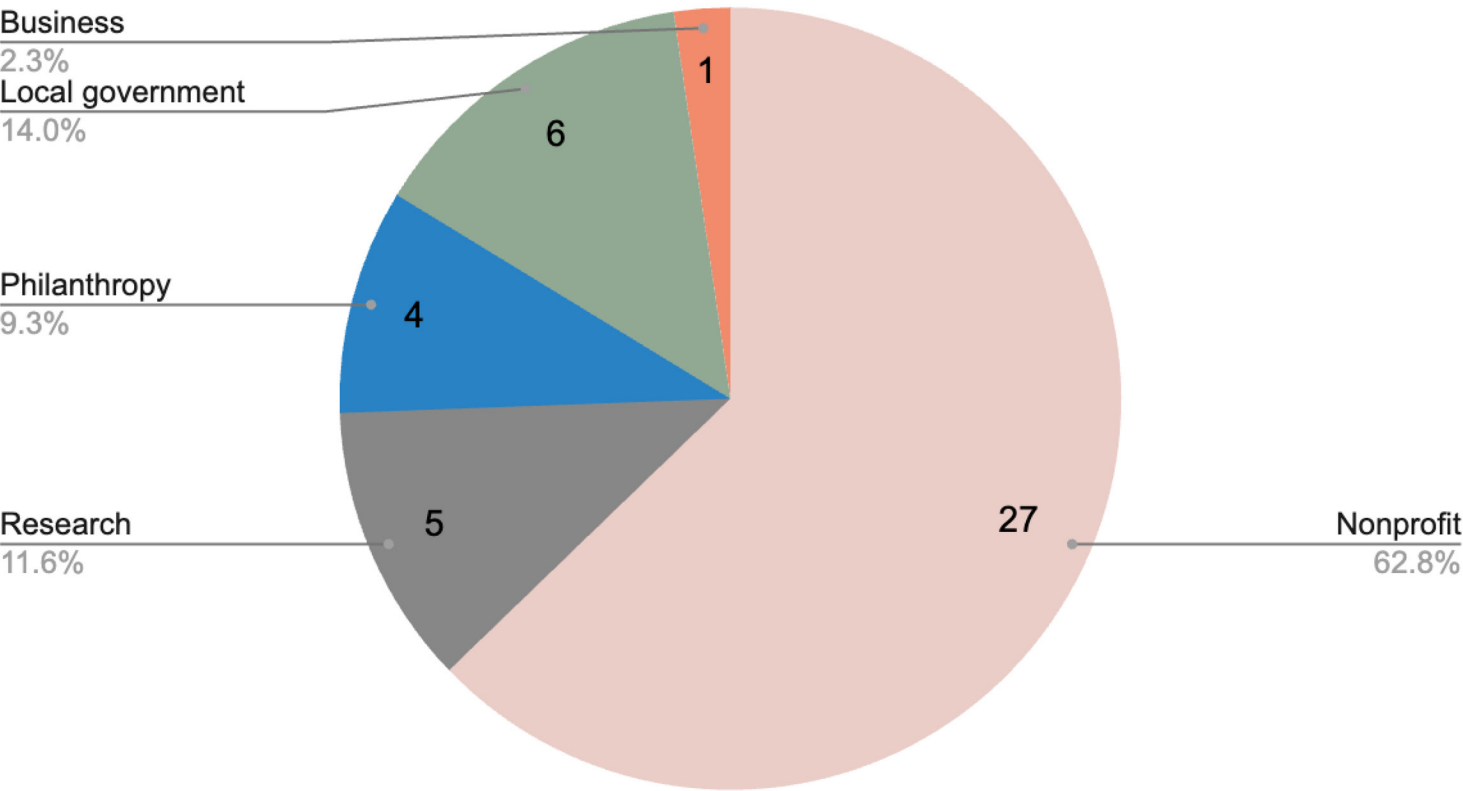
The Gambrell Foundation commissioned Convivencia Urbana, an urban consultancy founded by Helsinki’s former Executive Director for Culture and Leisure, Tommi Laitio, to conduct this exploratory study on what setting a similar ambition could mean in Charlotte. The goal of this project was to create recommendations for future actions for Charlotte leaders to consider.

Methods

This study started in April 2024 and continued during the spring, summer, and fall of 2024. We engaged a total of 43 stakeholders and experts in one-on-one interviews, workshops and informal conversations. We agreed to present quotes anonymously to allow stakeholders to speak freely. The insights from the engagements are enriched with publicly available information and research, as well as study visits to the Charlotte area.

The graph below shows the professional backgrounds of people we spoke with. It is worth noting that at this stage of the project we focused on stakeholder engagements rather than public consultation. We have enriched this report with a few interviews with children and youth but see a need for a broader consultation.

Interviewees



The principal author of this report is Tommi Laitio of Convivencia Urbana Inc. Emmanuella Assem and Sophia Gerz-Escandón, both undergraduate students at UNC Charlotte, supported the work. Emma focused on child development theory and Sophia on urban geography and land use in Charlotte.

Christopher Swope provided editorial support. The photos were taken by Terence Kennedy, a young Charlotte-based photographer. The appendix on Finland and Helsinki was written in collaboration with Senior Expert Oona Frilander of think tank Demos Helsinki.

This work would not have been possible without the support and insights provided by The Gambrell Foundation.

Why Do Hobbies Matter?

When he wasn’t writing or lecturing about physics, Albert Einstein liked to play the violin. The Nobel Prize-winning chemist Marie Curie enjoyed cycling. In the White House, President Barack Obama played pickup basketball. One of the world’s leading living philosophers, Martha Nussbaum, does classical singing. And when they’re not singing, Shakira likes claywork, Beyoncé keeps bees, and Taylor Swift makes snowglobes.

It’s tempting to look at hobbies of these people as endearing distractions — something light to take their minds off the serious work of science, politics, or entertainment. That’s the way many Americans view hobbies: as one of life’s side dishes, not part of the main course. *Just a hobby.*

However, hobbies are critical contributors to our whole selves. Research shows that hobbies bring agency, belonging, and mastery into our lives, enriching our idea of who we truly are as people. Whether your passion is pickleball, skateboarding or needle point stitching, hobbies let us experience joy, relieve stress from school or work, and provide moments of wonder. Having at least one hobby is shown to be associated with fewer depressive symptoms and higher reported health. Hobbies allow us to develop character. They bring new people into our lives.

While we all need hobbies, they are particularly important for children. They help young people build and hold onto an identity, develop and sustain supportive relationships, and bring more trusted adults into their lives. Having a weekly hobby correlates with children feeling less lonely, experiencing less stress, being less bullied, feeling better, and sleeping more. Hobbies also enhance the joy of learning, boost persistence, and teach self-regulation, all of which benefit academic performance.

Research on hobbies in the United States tends to focus on organized afterschool and out-of-school programs rather than the wider landscape of hobby activities. Multiple studies of these programs point to clear benefits for children’s academic achievement, physical health, and psychological well-being, as well as violence and substance-abuse prevention. However, the research is less clear on what makes certain programs more successful than others, and how much the intensity and the quality of participation and instruction impact the results. We also do not have enough understanding of the benefits of independent hobbies one does on their own without a membership or instruction.



“I got these adult coloring books and detailed coloring books. I mostly do it alone, but sometimes I will do it with my sister. We have a TV in our room and we look up drawings to give us ideas of what to draw. It’s just being creative and making my own things. It’s a way to express myself. I’ll draw what I’m feeling.”

Alyssa, 12



“I like playing basketball and playing with my friends and talking with my friends through the phone and playing games with them. I like that there’s different things you can do like dunk, shoot three pointers, layups and stuff. I had seen people playing it and it looks cool.”

Cairo, 10



“I like to listen to music so I’m taking DJ and music production. I was practicing a beat that I made. At first, I’m nervous because there’s a lot of people watching you and judging you. After you mix your first song, you get into the groove and you share your energy with everybody and make them feel happy.”

Shamaira, 14

Defining A Hobby

What counts as a hobby is open to interpretation. Is watching a favorite TV show a hobby? Going for walks? Collecting vintage shirts?

The idea of hobbies emerged as a category of leisure in the nineteenth century. As industrialization moved more and more jobs into cities and factories, new boundaries were introduced between work and home life. This resulted in a new category of time: leisure.

From the nineteenth century, hobbies have been promoted as a way to counter the hardships of work. Simultaneously, as historian Steven M. Gelber points out, hobbies rearticulated and enforced the values of a capitalist society by emphasizing development and learning. While for many people hobbies were something to take their mind out of school or work or family, for many the interests and skills gained through education and employment have always spilled over into hobbies. In this way hobbies have always been closely connected to work and education.

Hobbies were promoted as a valuable way to use one’s leisure time and to tackle the perceived source of evil and trouble: idleness. As mass production and urbanization broadened access to tools, products and materials, hobbies became quickly synonymous with two activities: collecting and crafting. While crafting was more common among blue-collar workers, collecting was perceived as more appropriate for office workers.

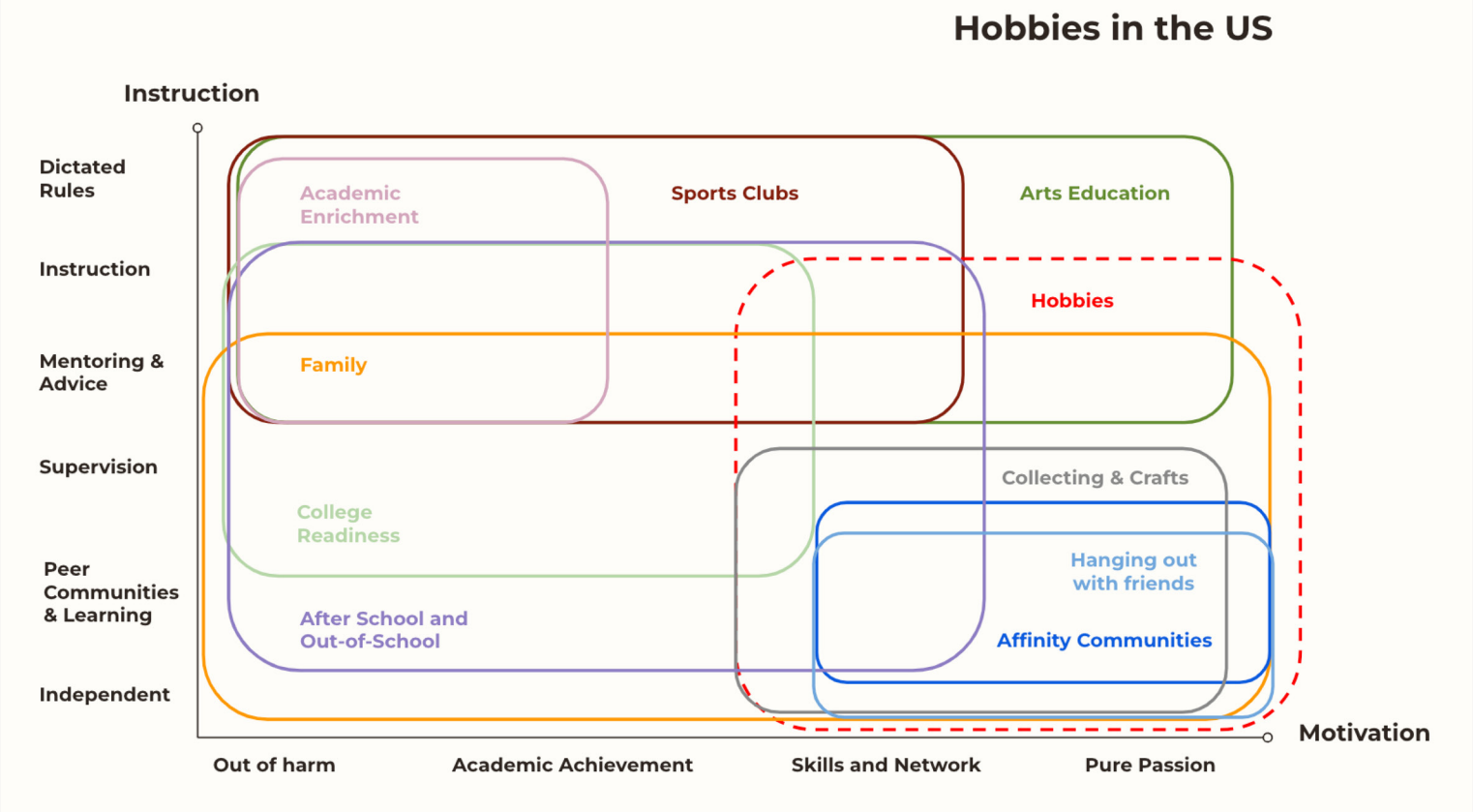
During the first three decades of the twentieth century, there was a significant push for hobbies as a way to build character, keep children and working classes out of harm’s way and to keep the American public active in times of mass unemployment. Organizations, like the Leisure League of America and the National Recreation Association of America, promoted a range of hobbies and their benefits as something beneficial to the individual and to the society. World War II disrupted and in many ways ended these aspirations. The war and recovery forced society to prioritize survival and employment over higher quality of life.

The rise of consumer society and suburban life in the 1950s had a strong impact on hobbies. When pre-war hobby advocates had made a clear separation between hobbies and work or consumption and warned about the dangers of seeking benefit from hobbies. In the new era the ideals of leisure and freedom were replaced by capitalist and consumerist aspirations for enjoyment and profit. Hobbies were seen and promoted as a way to have fun or to make an extra buck.

Today, the American understanding of hobbies is still closely tied to collecting and crafts. Online marketplaces have opened completely new opportunities for turning a hobby, like woodwork, drawing, DIY design, or needlepoint, into a business. The global arts and crafts market size is estimated to be worth over \$4 billion and growing.

When it comes to children and youth, the idea of benefit dominates the conversation. The historical narratives of keeping children healthy and out of harm and crime are still prominent today. A wide range of terms are used to describe children’s organized activities that relate to hobbies, but none of them quite encompass what we see as the real potential of hobbies. Those terms include “afterschool programs,” “out-of-school time,” “clubs,” “teams,” “do-it-yourself communities,” “academic enrichment,” and many more.

In the graph below, we have placed these concepts in a grid along two axes that we deem as relevant for understanding and defining hobbies. First is the level of instruction involved, ranging from none to highly organized and rule-bound. And second is the motivation of the activity, ranging from specific purposes like keeping kids out of harm’s way to activities that are all about pursuing one’s passions.



For the purposes of this report, we consider a hobby to be something one does voluntarily for enjoyment, relaxation, or pleasure on a regular basis. This means that programs carried out primarily with the aim of keeping children safe or to boost academic achievement are not considered as hobbies. In our understanding, the most critical part of defining what is and is not a hobby is the motivation of the activity.

Hobbies are something done to gain skills, connect with others, relax and restore or just have fun break. This means that while hobbies can have and often do create success or fame, the primary motivation is intrinsic, as in something you would engage in even without the benefit.

The way we understand hobbies, they can be anything from a teacher-led violin class to something done alone using books or YouTube videos for inspiration and guidance. This brings us to another key feature of hobbies: effort and learning. They are something one wants to put hours into and wants to get better at – or at least understand on a deeper level. When we are passionate about our hobbies, we are willing to try and fail numerous times. We persistently try to get to the next level of the computer game. We stay hours on the court until we score. We watch that video clip hundreds of times to get the dance move just right. We spend hours and hours online searching for recipes, reading fan fiction or learning from our peers or idols. We lose track of time reading a really good book or drawing.

A hobby is something done voluntarily and regularly by oneself or with others for enjoyment, relaxation and pleasure.



“I like to make jewelry and I like to do a bunch of things that are creative. I like helping people so I use those skills to help. It has helped a lot with my public speaking skills. And I use art to help me be creative.”

Ava,14



“I was a part of this group called Exposure Project. I got to make a sweatshirt. It was a contest. I didn’t win that first one, but the second time I made the Best Sweatshirt. It made over 100 sales and I won first place. And that’s why I started making shirts.”

Isaiah,15



“I do gymnastics because I’ve made so many friends here, everyone on my team is my friend. It would be harder to do it by myself. It feels really good to learn new skills and to see yourself get better when you think back on the progress you’ve made.”

Liliana, 11

The Role Of Hobbies In Child and Youth Development

Research shows that hobbies nurture the psychosocial needs of youth at every stage of development, from birth to early adulthood. This is the main reason why most of our recommendations in this report focus on children and youth.

While hobbies benefit everyone, having a hobby early in life is an essential building block for the future.

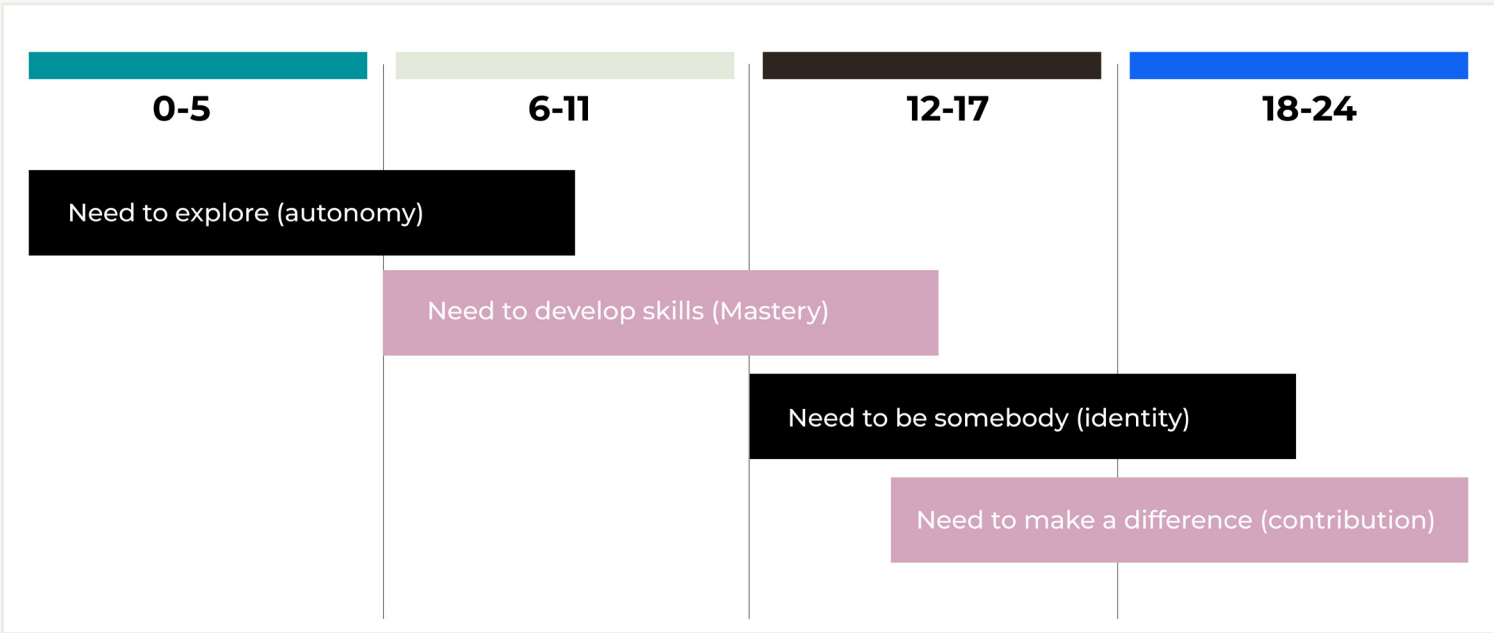
Between the ages of 0 and 5, children have a need to explore new things and test boundaries with the guidance of parents and caregivers. During this time, hobbies like play dates, singalongs, and art require a welcoming and engaging atmosphere. At this age, parents or other adults choose, facilitate and instruct these activities. Storytime at the library, exhibits at the museum or a playdate at the park can help families in supporting their children to take initiative and build self-confidence.

From age 6 to 11, children build skills and gain agency. Hobbies such as ballet, scouts, or playing piano give children opportunities to learn routines and develop mastery, earning approval from adults and peers. During this time, feedback is critical – constructive feedback and encouragement can boost a child’s self-confidence and sense of competency, while public shaming, excessive competitiveness or harsh critique can cause children to feel inadequate. Demonstrating progress and rewards for achievement and prosocial behavior is critical at this stage. Badges earned on scouting trips or new belts earned in karate help children grow confident in their ability to set and accomplish goals.

During adolescence, children ages 12 to 17 are focused on forming their identity and cultivating personal beliefs and values. Hobbies such as clubs or sports enable tweens and teens to connect with people who share their newly discovered passions. During this time, teenagers yearn for a sense of belonging and for spaces that reaffirm their developing identity. They’re also constantly pulled by two opposing forces – to stand out and to belong – a tension that makes adolescence challenging. Development at this age can happen either through structured activities like dance, band, or mentoring programs, or in unstructured leisure activities like walking around the local shopping mall, reading a book, or hanging out with friends at a youth center or a park.

At ages 18 to 24, young adults develop a sense of responsibility and duty. Life transitions such as going to college, starting a career, or moving away from home bring new levels of independence – and an awareness of the need to contribute to society. Volunteering or joining college clubs or faith-based groups provide stability in moments of transition. They expand one’s social network of friends, family, peers, and other trusted adults, while offering opportunities to continue learning and demonstrate leadership.

Hobbies in Child and Youth Development



(Tommi Laitio & Emmanuella Assem 2024, based on e.g. Erikson, Bowlby, Piaget, Haidt)

While we focus mostly on children in this report, it is important to note that the benefits of hobbies do not end in youth. Engaging in regular recreational activities can help cope with stress created by family situations or work, stimulate learning and creativity and reduce loneliness. Hobbies have been proven to build resilience, hold onto a sense of self and help cope with life-changing situations, like unemployment and chronic illness.

As we retire, hobbies allow us to sustain and build relationships, maintain physical and mental capability and feel seen as valuable members of our communities. The routines and behavioral patterns developed over decades in our brain help to slow down dementia, hold on to a sense of mastery, deal with the impact of aging and collaborate with others.

While we still need a lot more research on the impact of hobbies, one finding seems consistent across studies and countries. Whether we are talking about toddlers or seniors, what matters is having something you love and doing it regularly, not what that thing is.



The Need For Hobbies

We write this report at a critical time for the well-being of American children. As Jonathan Haidt writes in the “The Anxious Generation,” we have overregulated the physical environments of children, such as building risk averse and therefore boring playgrounds, not enabling children to cycle or walk to school, monitoring their location and actions constantly with phones and smart watches and imposing tough curfews on teenagers. Simultaneously, we have underregulated their digital environments by having limited protections or limitations to how much and at what age they use social media and what content they can access. This results in boredom, social isolation, competition to be popular on social media, immensely cruel online bullying, overstimulation and addiction to devices.

According to the media scholar danah boyd, the limits adults have imposed on physical engagement drive young people online to find spaces without constant adult control. boyd writes in It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens: “The importance of friends in social and moral development is well documented. But the fears that surround teens’ use of social media overlook this fundamental desire for social connection.”

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the crisis of childhood depression, anxiety, loneliness, substance abuse, and suicide. According to [the 2021 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), only 56 percent of students report feeling good about themselves, a decline from 76 percent in 2013. The same study found that about one in five teens have seen someone physically attacked, beaten, stabbed, or shot in their neighborhood. Almost a third of teens reported that their mental health was most of the time or always “not good.”

All of these developments combined result in what U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy [called](#) the youth mental health crisis “the defining public health issue of our time.”

We are seeing a similar crisis of belonging and purpose among adults. The amount of time Americans spend in-person with their friends has reduced to one-third from two decades ago. Approximately half of Americans report significant levels of loneliness. Many people are stuck in a job they hate, experience significant barriers in meeting new people and joining new activities, and feel left behind, forgotten or unseen. Traditional forms of convening like churches and other houses of worship attract only a fraction of the public. The vitriolic nature of public debates makes a lot of people tune out of public life. When we have less and less meaningful engagements the media characterization of the world as a dangerous place seeps in.

Hobbies are not miracle cures to all these ills. But they are a major contributor to happier, healthier and more connected individuals and communities. Expanding hobbies is a relatively low-cost, fast and achievable way to create concrete, positive, and shared changes. Hobbies can build resilience and connections even as the long-term work of system-wide transformations in education, transportation, and housing goes on.

The power of hobbies is in their simplicity. Some may say elevating something so basic on the policy agenda seems frivolous. But as one of our interviewees with a long history of youth work in Charlotte said: “What teens need is not difficult. They need fun and creative things to do.” Hobbies do just that. They allow people across generations and world views to engage in joint action towards a great and full life.

Hobby Policy

In Finland and Iceland, policies at the national and local levels set a vision around hobbies, and direct substantial funding to them. Building recreational and cultural facilities and funding nonprofits for hobbies are seen as key responsibilities of local governments. In the United States, hobbies do not enjoy the same standing.

Finland, ranked the world’s “happiest country” seven times in a row, sees having a hobby as critical to a person’s overall well-being. In Iceland, investments in hobbies have been proven to strengthen social connections, improve physical health, and reduce substance abuse among youth.

In both countries, policies at the national and local levels set a vision around expanding access to hobbies, and direct substantial funding to implement it. Building facilities and funding nonprofits for children’s hobbies are seen as key responsibilities of local governments. In Finland, the main public funders for hobbies are local governments. In Helsinki, a city of 650,000 residents, its funding for culture and leisure services, including grants to nonprofits was approximately \$323 million in 2024. Next to a vibrant civil society providing most of the hobby opportunities, the city’s Culture and Leisure Division employs 1,800 people, including sports instructors, arts educators, youth workers, musicians, and librarians.

*(See the appendix for more on the Finnish hobby ecosystem.)

While the main focus of public policy is on children, hobbies of adults enjoy substantial public support. Next to institutions, like libraries and recreational centers, Finland has an extensive system of adult education centers. In a country of five million people, you have over 500,000 annual adult learners in adult education classes. What’s essential to understand that in Finland the idea of adult education goes far beyond computer skills and immigrant integration, for example 72 percent of the classes focus on arts and crafts. At Helsinki’s Adult Education Center, the offering of 2,300 different classes include subjects like genealogy, investing, spoken word, learning to speak Bulgarian, Italian wines and seasonal baking.

Photo: Aki Rask / City of Helsinki



In the United States, hobbies do not enjoy the same standing. While American parents across the political spectrum support investments in after school programs, there’s no policy framework, vision, or goal at any level of government aimed at nurturing hobby ecosystems for the fulfillment of all. At the local level, recreation departments and libraries – key local providers of sports, arts, and cultural programming for children – enjoy wide support from the public but are often the first to see their budgets cut in times of austerity.

As a result of the lack of funding and a policy void, a familiar split in American cities appears between haves and have-nots. Children’s programs in low-income areas are usually funded with the premise of supporting basic needs and keeping kids out of trouble. Options in the city center or across town are out of reach for many due to a scarcity of public transportation. Meanwhile, children and adults in more affluent areas are able to enroll and pay for music lessons and yoga classes, learn languages, and pursue other enrichments in higher numbers.

Overall, the perceived benefits of these activities, often referred to as extracurriculars, are tied to an American sense of achievement and competition. Sports are seen as a pathway to get into college and earn scholarships. Volunteering looks good on a college application or resume. Nourishing joy and well-being is rarely an explicit goal. Rather than providing opportunities for relaxation or to feel a sense of belonging or wonder here and now, they feed into the fear of falling behind.



Opportunities And Challenges In Charlotte

Background

Charlotte is in many ways the prototypical modern American city. The Queen City anchors one of the fastest-growing metro areas of the U.S., yet still feels to many longtime residents like a small town. The metro area is growing both upward with new office and residential towers and outward with sprawling suburban-style development.

Charlotte is one of the leading hubs for the financial sector in the U.S. The political culture generally values low taxes but residents also want high-caliber public services. The dominant narratives of success in Charlotte are about economic benefit and entrepreneurship.

Facts about Charlotte

Population: 911,311 (2023)

Average household income: \$78,438 (2023). **Persons in Poverty:** 11%

Language other than English spoken at home: 22.3%

Racial and ethnic demographics:

- 41.5 % White alone
- 34.1% Black alone
- 0.4 American Indian and Alaska Native alone
- 6.4% Asian alone
- 0% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone
- 8.9% Two or More Races.
- 17% Hispanic or Latino

Total land area: 308.29 square miles (2020)

Population per square mile: 2,836.9 (2020)

Mean Travel Time to Work: 25 minutes

Source: US Census

Charlotte's land use is typical to most North American cities that have grown rapidly during the last 100 years. Data collected by researchers at Queens University found that Charlotte has a walkability score of 26 out of 100 (Sam Carnes | Queens University News Service, 2023), indicating a high dependency on automobile-centric infrastructure. While the city's commercial center, referred to as Uptown, and the neighborhoods adjacent to it are increasingly walkable, most of the neighborhoods further from the urban core are not.

When we discussed the characteristics, opportunities and challenges of Charlotte during our interviews, many spoke of a “wedge” and “crescent” to describe what can feel like two separate cities. The wedge refers to the wealthy and mostly white southern part of the city, while the crescent refers to the mostly Black and poorer neighborhoods west, north, and east from Uptown Charlotte, the city's commercial center.

The economist Raj Chetty highlighted these disparities in the 2014 Land of Opportunity Study, which — to the shock of many in Charlotte — ranked the city 50th out of 50 in economic mobility. The research questioned the myth that anyone can “make it” in America, pointing out neighborhoods where children struggle most to escape poverty.

The community's response to the study illustrates one of the greatest potentials for advancing hobbies in Charlotte: collaboration. The Land of Opportunity Study prompted a large public-private coalition to launch the Leading on Opportunity initiative to tackle some of the root causes behind the low economic mobility. A key part of this agenda was the Corridors of Opportunity initiative. The program has channeled more than \$38.5 million of public and private investments toward driving employment growth and expanding services in some of the city's most economically disadvantaged areas.

When Chetty released an updated version of his study in 2024, Charlotte's economic mobility ranking rose to 38th. Yet there are new challenges for Charlotte, particularly housing affordability. Median home prices have increased by [more than half since 2019](#) and incomes are not keeping pace. Four of five households in Charlotte can't afford to buy a home.

Charlotte's Hobby Ecosystem

The characteristics of the hobby ecosystem in Charlotte look very similar to what you would find in most other U.S. metro areas.

Look across Charlotte, as we did, and you'll see a multitude of programs enabling especially children to have hobbies.

Nonprofits and faith-based organizations run hundreds of activities, from afterschool enrichment programs to sports to art to dance to youth ministry. So do private businesses and individuals. The public sector offers lots of programming. For example, Mecklenburg County's Park and Recreation Department offers [athletics, outdoor exploration and cultural activities](#), the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library* offers [storytimes for younger children](#) and [digital escape rooms for teens](#), and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools offer [academic enrichment before and after school](#).

These actors and the thousands of self-organized activities, like informal gatherings, running clubs, book clubs, group chats, online groups and others form Charlotte's hobby ecosystem. Funding for the organized programs comes primarily from four main sources: philanthropy, private donors, public dollars, and fees paid by parents. Many of the nonprofits we interviewed receive no public funding, meaning that they rely purely on donations and participation fees.

Lots of high-quality options for those who can afford them. Tens of thousands of kids enrolled. Numerous neighborhood-level organizations making miracles with limited funding. Churches and other faith communities provide opportunities from after-school daycare to youth leadership. Busy parents rushing kids to soccer practice or band rehearsal and home in time for dinner. Thousands of informal hobby communities with limited institutionalization, recognition or registration.

In our conversations with civic leaders, we heard a desire to make Charlotte a “great city” in ways that go beyond jobs and infrastructure to include the health, happiness and well-being of residents. At a stakeholder workshop we organized in August 2024, many of the participants welcomed the opportunity to start from a place of abundance, to focus on a sense of belonging rather than always being in a problem-solving mode. However, we heard skeptical voices, too: Some nonprofit leaders and government officials felt that focusing on hobbies might be seen as tone deaf in neighborhoods with real challenges and concerns about safety, school attendance, and affordable housing.

*The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library is a separate legal entity but heavily connected to Mecklenburg County through funding and shared services.

Interview Insights

Five main themes emerged from our conversations with stakeholders in Charlotte’s hobby ecosystem.

1 Inequity is real.

Several of our interviewees spoke passionately about the stark inequalities in access to high-quality facilities for sports or the arts, for example. As one of the interviewees running a large afterschool program in a less resourced neighborhood described it: “I go across the city and these kids [in wealthy areas] have full-on ceramics classes and professional instruction. And here we are trying to spark creativity with recycled styrofoam. What message does that send to kids on what they are worth?”

Transportation was mentioned by many as one of the greatest obstacles to real equity. Several interviewees and workshop participants advocated for neighborhood-level investments as a way to counter the limited public transportation and walkability in Charlotte. A seasoned public school professional said there is a clear need to create high-quality opportunities closer to children’s homes, rather than all great things requiring a trip Uptown. “I don’t really like the idea of a ‘field trip’ so much. There’s no continued impact there. Kids today need some kind of emotional connection and you need time to build some relationships” He advocated for bringing creative residencies to environments familiar and accessible to children in their own communities, like neighborhood schools, houses of worship and community centers.

2 Hobby funding is focused on solving problems rather than promoting well-being.

We heard a fairly consistent message that children’s activities and hobbies tend to be seen as a way to keep kids out of harm’s way. Particularly in historically underserved communities, providers said it is easier to find funding for programs framed as keeping children safe and tackling social problems like violence than offering children a sense of joy, wonder, or well-being. “We fund these programs because kids who are in activities are less likely to get in trouble,” a Charlotte-area philanthropist told us. “A sense of happiness, mental health, learning new things — these are things we as a society don’t prioritize and are really important for children’s development.”

Several providers mentioned that they have to use a different language for getting money and using it. While you need to focus on problems, like school attendance and violence and substance abuse, to get funding, you need to communicate wellbeing and creativity to attract children and youth.

As a nonprofit executive described it, the idea of what is needed for success is very limited in Charlotte, especially in the case of low-income black and brown children. “It often feels like workforce development is pushed towards our black and brown students. We define personal success as: okay, they’re employed. And not whether they are living a life that they are proud of. So for marginalized populations, we just equate it to having a job.”

3 There’s very little coordination – and some competition – between hobby providers.

Charlotte has a number of initiatives aimed at coordinating nonprofits and other actors around shared goals for instance around summer programming, literacy, creativity and improving the wellbeing of boys and men of color. While most of these initiatives have connections to hobbies, there is no unified coalition with shared advocacy for hobbies and recreation.

As a CEO of one of the largest afterschool providers said: “I’m not sure that we partner with other providers per se. Not that I’m aware of.” There is also no clear understanding of which organizations operate in which neighborhoods and where the possible overlaps and gaps are. Currently, every nonprofit makes their own pitch to the City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and local philanthropies rather than creating joint advocacy and partnerships to meet the needs of Charlotte’s residents.

Many people we spoke with admitted that this dynamic results in a competitive mindset. The constant need for fundraising drives nonprofit leaders in the children’s hobby space to see one organization’s gain as another’s loss. Even as many of the nonprofits face chronic capacity struggles, such as staffing shortages and budget gaps, they rarely team up to pool funds, develop employer practices, or combine efforts around marketing and recruitment. As one nonprofit leader told us, “We in Charlotte have a tendency that everyone needs to do their own program and set their own organization without actually checking if someone is doing that already.” Another nonprofit executive echoed the sentiment: “Instead of looking at how we work collaboratively together to address those challenges, we sometimes appear to be competitors.”

In most of our interviews, we tested the idea of creating a local intermediary for hobby providers. We raised this issue as such coordinating organizations in many U.S. metro areas have been able influence public policy, advocate for more funding and create best practices around impact assessment and employment.* Several interviewees expressed wariness toward forming a new coordinating body. Part of the skepticism results from failed attempts in the past, as well as doubts about whether an organization like this would create direct benefits, like new funding.

In our August 2024 workshop, participants welcomed more flexible ways of convening and collaboration. The participants saw value in joint fundraising and data sharing, but were cautious about standardizing their services. The current competitive scarcity mindset was illustrated by a comment by a seasoned community developer: “If you set up an intermediary, the question will be will they fundraise in addition to dispersing dollars? If they fundraise, that’s an added benefit, and you’ll have more buy in. But if they come along and tell you whether or not you have a good program, you’ll never get the buy-in.”

4 Data on what works and how to improve programs is limited.

Several funders we spoke with said they would welcome more rigorous impact assessments to understand better which hobby programs are producing the biggest impacts for children. Currently, when evaluations are done, they are usually carried out one organization or program at a time and rely on participant satisfaction or anecdotal evidence.

While many providers pointed to individual stories, good participant feedback, or full rosters as signs of quality, these practices do not create a systematic understanding of what is needed and actually end up building justification to continue things as they are. Currently, there is no way of knowing how the supply of programs meets the needs of different neighborhoods, families and youth.

* See for instance the members of the national Every Hour Counts organization: <https://www.everyhourcounts.org/our-network>



From an equity standpoint, there’s also no systematic way of learning what new programming would benefit those kids and families that don’t have access or are not able to utilize the current offering. We identified a need to strengthen and systematize the voice of children and youth in the conversation about Charlotte’s future. As a philanthropic leader said in our interviews: “There’s a double standard where in corporate settings, there’s a big push of doing focus groups and getting the voice of the customer. And we want to build solutions for students. But we don’t want to get their input.”

Whether it is a comfort or not, Charlotte is not unusual in lacking rigorous impact assessment and systematic practices to hear the voice of children. We see this as an opportunity for Charlotte to show national leadership. Charlotte has the resources and infrastructure to be a flagbearer in data-driven youth policy and meaningful youth engagement. What creates hope is that our interviews confirm that the appetite is there. “We need to do a better job of collecting the data on the impact that we’re making,” one nonprofit executive who runs children’s programming told us.

5 The Charlotte community knows how to collaborate.

Charlotte stands out among American cities in its ability to come together across sectors to tackle complex challenges. The collective action in response to Raj Chetty’s research is just one example. Joint initiatives have increased funding for the arts, for public libraries, racial justice, literacy, and a network of trails and bike paths, to name a few. In many of these cases, The Foundation For The Carolinas and other local foundations have played the role of a trusted broker.

In a similar fashion, Charlotte has good bones for stronger practices around data and research. Infrastructure and protocols already exist for collecting, storing, and sharing anonymized data. UNC Charlotte’s Urban Institute and UrbanCORE are experienced in public and participatory research and have existing data-sharing agreements in place with the City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and many of the big nonprofits that run children’s activities. This infrastructure can be utilized for more systematic data collection on hobbies.

There are other existing data assets that could be built on. The North Carolina Center for Afterschool Alliance provides state-level insights on parents’ priorities based on the national America After 3PM study. The survey could be oversampled for Charlotte to get city-level insights. Further, the Leading for Opportunity initiative on economic mobility is developing new indicators to measure social capital, which could be aligned with the hobby agenda. And the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey, administered by the Centers for Disease Control, is carried out in schools every two years and was answered last time by more than 1,400 young people. The survey could be enriched with questions on happiness, passion, purpose, or recreation.

If Charlotte wishes to take a leap on ensuring that every child has a hobby, civic leaders would not be starting from scratch. There are building blocks for providers and funders to shape policy, programming, and funding. There are funders keen on exploring new and experimental approaches. There are providers open to stronger collaboration. And there are research organizations keen to do more community-based and asset-based development.

There is hunger for collective action, which could motivate turning a patchwork of recreational activities into a hobby ecosystem nurturing belonging and well-being. Doing so would not only be good for the region’s kids and their families. It would establish Charlotte as a national leader, showing all American cities a more purposeful way of thinking about what makes a great life.



“I like Corpse Bride, The Nightmare Before Christmas, Halloween Town, Scream. I like to watch scary things.”

Amiyah, 12



“Football is a place where I can get my anger out. I play on a travel football team. My mom asked me if I want to do it and I said I’ll try it. Now I’m getting better grades and stuff.”

Zaire, 13



“My mom put me in gymnastics when I was little, and on my first day, when I came home, she asked me if it was fun, and I said, Yeah. And so when I grew older, I became a good gymnast.”

Ramsey, 7



“I prefer reading over watching a movie. I love the anticipation of reading a book you like. You always want to turn the page. I read this book called Origin, by Jessica Khoury. It’s kind of sad but it has a happy ending. I like books like that where, for a minute, they make you feel not sad but you’re like disappointed in the book, but then it has a good ending.”

Maaseyah, 13

Recommendations

Based on our interviews and research, we recommend that public, private, nonprofit and philanthropic leaders consider the following seven initiatives to improve the opportunities for every Charlottean to have a hobby. Due to the critical role hobbies play in child and youth development, we put most of our focus on them.

The recommendations are a combination of long-term policy development and short-term tactical action. We believe this combination creates momentum while pushing for larger cultural and policy changes. Concrete actions, engaging communication and a collective vision are also a way to create more ambassadors for the work.

The seven recommendations are presented in a prioritized order.

Seven Recommendations

- 1 Collect data on children’s experiences, needs, and hopes.
- 2 Distribute microgrants for exposure to fun and creative things.
- 3 Create universal experiences of wonder and belonging.
- 4 Spark collaboration between hobby providers.
- 5 Tell the story of the power of hobbies
- 6 Spur place-based youth investment.
- 7 Link hobbies to the vibrancy and prosperity of Charlotte.

1 Collect data on children’s experiences, needs, and hopes.

Children’s activities tend to be designed by adults, with little or inconsistent consideration of what children and youth say they want or need. We suggest addressing this by developing a regular, city- or county-wide survey to understand what children’s current activities and interests are and what they would want to do. As we see just based on the testimonials of children and youth across this report, a stronger children’s voice would ensure that joy, wonder, play, and belonging are present in the policy conversation on great life. (See Promising Practice 1 in the appendix for more on how Finland surveys children.)

The most efficient platform to gather survey data is at school. As we would be surveying children, the data should be collected in a way that meets high standards of privacy and integrity, protecting the anonymity and privacy of children and families. The questions should be developed with children and childhood professionals to make sure that they start from children’s reality and are written in a language they understand. New technologies, gamification and creative partners could help make sure that the way to gather the data is a meaningful and joyful experience for children, youth and their educators. Children and youth should be invited to enrich the analysis, along with education and hobby professionals. And the results should be analyzed and shared in a way that makes them actionable and available for schools, funders, researchers, families and nonprofits.

We see a partnership with a research organization, like a university, as critical for developing the questions, collecting responses, sharing the results and building trust and legitimacy in the exercise.

First step: Develop and pilot test the survey in two socio-economically different neighborhoods.

2 Distribute microgrants for exposure to fun and creative things.

While we are advocating for large-scale impact and systemic change, all of the steps to get there do not need to be expensive, or take a long time. We advocate for a microgrant program funded by local philanthropy and operated by a local nonprofit. The microgrants would be available for individuals and groups interested in sharing their passion and skills with their local community.

Microgrants are small grants from a few hundred to a few thousands dollars, with a simple application process. Examples from around the world demonstrate that microgrants are a fast and flexible way to generate new and positive activity, whether fighting poverty, improving neighborhood streets or initiating youth-led global climate action.* Multiple examples show that providing technical assistance to potential applicants in building budgets and managing projects is an important equity investment.

The microgrants could support activities from masterclasses in schools to intergenerational community events. Bringing free-of-charge opportunities to learn about new hobbies to schools and communities is central to advancing equal opportunities and broadening children's imagination of what is possible and available.

Microgrants are a powerful and cost-efficient way to discover and reward unrecognized talent and develop a more dynamic and entrepreneurial hobby ecosystem - and workforce. For many Charlotteans, the grants would function as a way to get their foot in the door. It would also make sure that the hobby initiative creates fast and tangible results that community members recognize as valuable. As a nonprofit leader put it: "We got to stop taking money to serve kids and not find ways to give it back to them. Like, okay, you got a half a million dollars to do this program. Find a way to pay the kids. Find a way to provide them with real dollars."

*See for instance: [Trickle Up Project](#), [Youth Climate Action Fund](#) and [Love Your Block](#), supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.



Charlotte's low walkability score creates obstacles for participation for many families. That is why the activities supported with microgrants should be prioritized to neighborhoods with the greatest need and where a lack of convenient public transportation poses an obstacle for participation. Taking the activities to familiar spaces, like schools, churches, parks, community centers, and libraries would lower the threshold for people to try out something new.

First step: Fund two nonprofits to experiment on a microgrant program of \$25,000 each, with each nonprofit working in two communities. Build partnerships with community centers, places of worship, schools and libraries to act as platforms for experimentation. A six-month experiment would inform which organization has the networks and capability to discover and motivate a diverse group of teenagers, young adults, and senior citizens to share their talents, work with community partners, and create engaging experiences for children.

3 Create universal experiences of wonder and belonging.

Shared experiences are critical to a sense of belonging. We advocate for new creative and fun “tentpole” events for every young person in Charlotte regardless of what neighborhood they grow up in or how much money their parents make.

As we describe in greater detail in the appendix, Finland and its capital city, Helsinki, have invested in many universal experiences for children. The example that generated the most enthusiasm among the Charlotte delegations during their Helsinki explorations was Culture Kids, a program that invites every newborn in Helsinki to a seven-year relationship with an arts institution. Other universal experiences include donating a book bag to every Finnish family with a newborn, giving a book to every 7-year-old in Helsinki, inviting all 12-year-olds in Helsinki to the Mayor’s Independence Day Reception, inviting all 14-year-olds in Finland to a professional arts performance, and providing a summer job voucher to every 15-year old in Helsinki. Next to creating once in a lifetime memories, these opportunities also broaden children’s understanding of who lives in their city. Most of the Helsinki experiences have been created as a public-private partnership.

While Helsinki can function as one source of inspiration, we advocate for Charlotte to develop a few inspiring universal experiences of its own. The experiences should focus on key moments in child development such as birth, starting kindergarten, turning 12 or graduation. The experiences should feel authentically like Charlotte and communicate to children and their families that their city cares for them and thinks that they deserve the very best. The universal experiences should mix children from different backgrounds and open their eyes to what they share in Charlotte.

First step: Host a design workshop in Charlotte on creating universal experiences of belonging and wonder for children in Charlotte. Invite nonprofits, foundations, arts organizations and public authorities. Bring in speakers from Helsinki and other cities to inspire the local community. The highlight of the year could be the inter-generational Day of Hobbies celebration in a public park hosted by the Mayor of Charlotte.



4 Spark collaboration between hobby providers.

We have identified a clear need for collaboration and convenings between the nonprofit, public, private and uninstitutionalized providers that make up Charlotte’s hobby ecosystem. We recognized based on our interviews and other engagements that there is a need and an interest in collective action but few structures and incentives to do it. Some obvious areas for collaboration are sharing best practices in areas, like marketing, impact measurement, youth engagement and employment, advocacy and partnerships with schools.

Several interviewees expressed concern about starting an intermediary organization to facilitate collaboration. Many were wary of standardized outcome measures. Therefore the focus in the beginning should be on bringing hobby providers together for well-facilitated, inspiring convenings hosted by a trusted party. These convenings should start from a place of abundance and provide nonprofit leaders with access to actionable research, data, and new insights. The events should facilitate exchange between the more and less institutionalized actors in the Charlotte hobby ecosystem. The goal of the convenings would be to help the hobby leaders increase their impact, grow their networks, feel recognized and valued, strengthen their leadership capabilities and build new local partnerships.

We believe convening stakeholders regularly in insightful and well facilitated learning and sharing sessions would help develop a shared language for the field and help develop advocacy messages toward funders and policy makers.

First step: Publish a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a grant to host a year of engaging and open convenings for hobby actors in Charlotte. Build an inspiring program with experts, peer learning, co-design and site visits.

5 Tell the story of the power of hobbies.

Many of our interviews have started awkwardly when we have mentioned the word “hobby”. As a nonprofit executive admitted: “I don’t think I have ever used that word.” We also received pushback from some leaders who felt that the word was too light or frivolous.

While many of the leaders we talked to could name the hobbies they have or have had and talked about them with great excitement, many of them admitted that they had never considered hobbies as a question of public policy.

We have intentionally chosen the word “hobby” as it is strongly connected to purpose and belonging. But we also recognize that making the case of hobbies requires intentional and engaging communication through real Charlotteans, concrete actions in Charlotte and clear calls to action. This is one of the reasons why we advocate for quick measures like microgrants and why we have brought the voice of children to this report.

We advocate for communications and marketing that utilizes academic research and focus groups to identify inspiring stories, impactful data points and the current obstacles. We suggest tailoring the messaging to key audiences, like local elected officials, philanthropic leaders, those who would benefit the most from a new hobby or parents.

First step: Identify a communication partner to build an advocacy, communications and marketing strategy for hobbies in Charlotte. Conduct a deeper stakeholder analysis on key audiences and their interests and concerns.



“I’m also a writer. I like writing stories and then I also like learning stories. I’ve noticed patterns and structures of how my writing changes. As I’m growing as a writer, the characters are growing as people and the story is developing in a better way. I feel like it’s telling the story of artists that can’t use words. I want them to know that somebody can hear them, and translate. I feel like a translator. And I like that.”

Aspen,16



“This summer I went to a camp at my school, and one of the things we did was we knitted, it was finger knitting, and so I wanted to learn how to knit with needles at home, so I watched a bunch of videos, and I learned how to knit. If I’m mad or sad or frustrated I usually want to do it alone, but if I’m happy I’ll probably want to do it with other people. My hobbies are always very fun, they help me calm down.”

Adeline, 11



“I love to go to the mall to shop. I love to go to Big Air and trampoline parks and Carowinds. I always bring my best friends with me. Even though I have siblings, it’s just better with my friends because my siblings don’t understand me like my friends do.”

Zamiah,12

6 Spur place-based youth investment.

Concerns about the mental health of teenagers are alarming. Many young people are physically healthier and more responsible than the previous generations but more anxious, lonely and lost.

We suggest a public-private partnership to focus specifically on this question. We suggest a multi-year place-based investment on creating a model for great neighborhood for youth. The initiative would combine improvements in physical spaces, programming, workforce development, and community-driven outreach.

Choosing the right neighborhood for development is a critical decision. Research shows that the representativeness and transparency of the selection process matters especially to those groups and communities with lower levels of trust toward funders and policy makers.

We suggest a gradual and transparent selection process with an independent expert jury and predetermined selection criteria. The process could start with neighborhood coalitions expressing interest in participating. Interested neighborhoods would gain access to design support to develop their proposal, ensuring that all interested neighborhoods have a fair chance to submit a high-quality plan regardless of their initial resource level.

Based on applications, two neighborhoods would be selected for more intensive development, including opportunities for national and international benchmarking and research to support their final application. An independent jury would choose the winning proposal for a multi-year investment into physical spaces, programming, and research. A gradual process with technical assistance along the way would make sure that the neighborhoods not selected for the investment could repurpose their new networks and insights for fundraising from other sources.

First step: Explore collaboration opportunities for place-based investments with philanthropic, corporate, research and public sector partners. Hire a design and facilitation partner to build the selection process. Recruit 3-5 independent experts for an advisory board.



7 Link hobbies to the vibrancy and prosperity of Charlotte.

Most hobbies require gear and guidance. Every parent knows that when children get excited about a subject - whether it is manga, a pop artist or basketball - that results in requests for better sneakers, concert tickets, high quality markers or new comic books. As an amateur photographer learns more about cameras, they want a flash, a zoom and a stand.

And it is not only children. Whether the hobby is building a miniature railway, playing golf, brewing beer or gardening, hobbies create economic activity, events and new communities. Most hobbies require investments in both time and money.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), Americans spent annually on average \$3,458 dollars on entertainment, including hobbies. A simple equation would show that the potential hobby market of adults in Charlotte is worth over \$2.3 billion.

Charlotte has all it needs to be a city where every person can have a passion and find the places, communities and tools to pursue it. Charlotte could quickly become known as a city where hobbyists can start their business, find their community, build supply chains and grow their operations. There is an economic argument to be made for hobbies that only strengthen the social and societal arguments. Next to supporting local small and mid-sized entrepreneurs, Charlotte could become a welcoming host to hobby gatherings from large conferences to fringe conventions and where “what’s your hobby” would be a common icebreaker.

First step: Conduct an initial stakeholder map of the commercial and nonprofit ecosystem in Charlotte from afterschool providers and online communities to speciality stores and event organizers. Strengthen the business case for hobbies by commissioning a study on the local commercial and wellbeing potential of hobbies.

In Conclusion

In his 2020 book “Transcend,” psychologist Barry Kaufman revisits one of the most influential psychological theories, Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs.” A common representation of Maslow’s theory is a pyramid: Food and shelter form the base, with less urgent needs above and self-actualization on the very top.

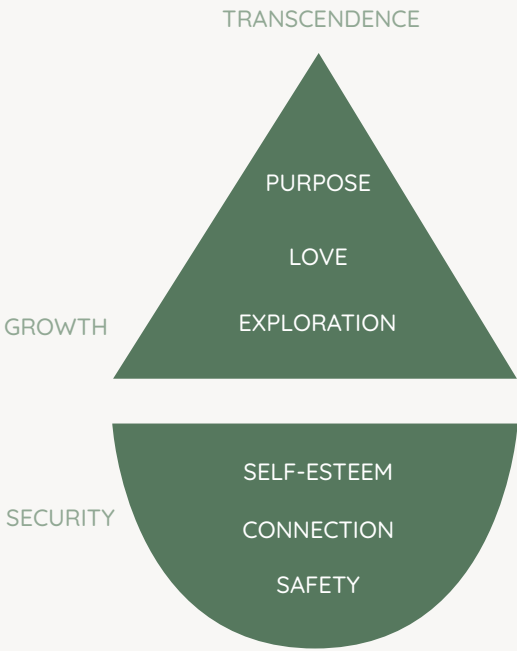
This pyramid is often used to argue for a “First Things First” position about human needs. Viewed this way, we might only think of questions like hobbies after we have sorted out public policy questions like education, safety, housing, and transportation.

But as Kaufman points out, this understanding of the Hierarchy of Needs is just one, and actually mistaken interpretation of what we need for a great life. As he points out, the famous pyramid is not Maslow’s theory but a simplification made by a management consultant in the 1960s.

According to Kaufman, there is a better metaphor for the hierarchy of needs: a sailboat. And on a sailboat of needs, hobbies play a number of important roles.

The sailboat has two critical needs: to float and to sail. Floating happens in the hull, which in this metaphor, is filled with safety, connection, and self-esteem – all things hobbies contribute toward. Movement happens with the sail. The sail is filled with love, purpose and exploration. That’s where growth happens – which, again, is something hobbies provide us.

The idea of a sailboat captures the role of hobbies very well. We cannot enjoy our lives if we constantly feel like we are drowning. But simultaneously, life without exploration, love and purpose does not feel like worth living. We are witnessing across the United States and across generations how investing only in hulls without sails leads to anxiety and depression rather than happiness and well-being.



The diagram is inspired by Scott Barry Kaufman's sailboat metaphor for the hierarchy of needs, based on Abraham Maslow's original theory.

In a complex and unpredictable world, a hobby can be the heartbeat of a great life, the thing that keeps us afloat and is the wind in our sail. Hobbies can unite us across divides and build moments of awe, wonder and belonging.

Our interviews demonstrate that Charlotte has the resources, actors, and culture of collaboration to ensure that every resident has something that makes their eyes light up. This report outlines actionable steps—both tactical and strategic—to make the Queen City a place where every individual finds their purpose.

Let’s go, Charlotte.



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Photo: Maija Astikainen / City of Helsinki

Appendix

Study on the Finnish Hobby Ecosystem

Executive Summary

In Finnish society, people across the political spectrum believe that having a hobby is part of a good childhood. Accordingly, public policies and legal frameworks at the national and local levels aim to ensure that every child can pursue at least one hobby of their choice. Unlike in the United States, where public action in this area tends to be fragmented and aimed at addressing specific problems like youth violence or academic performance, Finland approaches hobbies holistically, with a goal of promoting children's well-being.

Municipalities play a critical role in driving local hobby ecosystems by supporting nonprofits who organize the bulk of children's activities and by running some activities themselves. Participation is high but disparities exist, particularly among children whose families migrated from other countries. Promising practices from Finland and its capital city of Helsinki include using surveys and other data to inform decision making, leveraging schools to reach more children, and connecting families of newborns directly with arts and cultural organizations.



Photo: Jussi Hellsten / City of Helsinki

This appendix was produced by Senior Expert Oona Frilander of Demos Helsinki, a globally operating, Helsinki-based, independent think tank, in collaboration with Tommi Laitio, the founder of Convivencia Urbana and Helsinki's former Director of Culture and Leisure. Christopher Swope provided editorial support.

The methodology used to produce this report includes interviews and desktop research. The desktop research covered key reports, surveys, strategies, legislation, and websites related to hobbies and their organization in Finland. Ten interviews were conducted with Finnish hobby experts, public-sector representatives, and nonprofit hobby providers. We want to thank our interviewees for their valuable contribution to this report - especially Mikko Vatka (Director of Youth Affairs at City of Helsinki), Ulla Laurio (head of the Culture Kids program at the City of Helsinki Cultural Services) and Mikko Salasuo (a leading youth researcher and specialist at Icehearts). The full list of interviewees and sources are listed at the end of this report.



Photo: Jussi Hellsten / City of Helsinki

85 percent of all school-aged Finnish children have a hobby.

In Finnish society, there is a broadly shared sentiment that having a hobby is part of a good childhood. While many Americans no doubt share that view, in Finland it is woven into the country's laws, administration, and funding structures in ways that American policymakers may find informative and perhaps surprising. It is important to note that while robust public funding is available for children's hobbies in Finland, the country does not necessarily take a "big government" approach. Children's activities are largely paid for by parents and carried out by independent nonprofit organizations.

Policy Objectives

In Finland, children's hobbies have strong support in law and policy, at both the national and local levels. There is consensus across ideological lines that hobbies are a central means to improve the well-being of children and youth, combat loneliness, and teach life skills such as agency, trusting in oneself, and acquiring new experiences.

The key national laws related to hobbies include the Youth Act, the Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity, the Act on Cultural Activities in Local Government, and the Act on Basic Education in Arts. These laws set a comprehensive national framework for hobbies, leaving it largely to municipalities to drive their local hobby ecosystem and decide how much service should be provided. The Acts also emphasize promoting equal opportunities for participation in hobbies. In Helsinki today, that's put a big focus on ensuring opportunities for the 20 percent of children whose families have migrated from other countries.

In Helsinki – with 650,000 people, Finland's largest city by far – all 11 political parties take part in negotiating an overall City Strategy guiding priorities for four years. The current strategy, which is supported by 10 of the 11 parties, echoes the idea that every child should have a chance to pursue a hobby. The city backs that up by offering nonprofits funds and physical space to conduct culture, art, sports, exercise, and youth-service activities. Helsinki's strategy also pledges to combat segregation and fill gaps by directing more resources to areas with higher socio-economic needs.

Organization

Finnish law requires municipalities to take an active role in nurturing their local hobby ecosystem. They carry out this responsibility in two ways. The largest role that municipalities play is supporting the nonprofit sector or other hobby providers with financial grants and subsidized or free-of-charge use of municipal recreational spaces. Second is by offering and organizing activities they run themselves.

The large majority of hobbies in Finland are organized by nonprofits, although the for-profit commercial sector around hobbies is steadily growing. Volunteering plays a significant role: Many parents, seniors, and young adults dedicate their time to running programs. Not all hobbies are organized activities. Many young people pursue their passions on their own, utilizing public facilities like libraries, trails, skate parks, recreation centers, and outdoor gyms.

The municipalities receive central-government transfers and collect property, income, and corporate tax, which they use to finance their operations. Funding for hobbies is discretionary. There are no specific revenue mechanisms to raise public funds for hobbies. Nor are there service-level standards municipalities are required to meet.

However, municipalities take the responsibility very seriously. In Helsinki, hobbies are led by the Culture and Leisure Division, which runs libraries, sports facilities, arts education, youth centers, and more. The division has a budget of \$323 million and employs 1,800 people, including sports instructors, arts educators, youth workers, musicians, and librarians.

Local nonprofits fund their hobby activities largely through fees paid by participating families. The municipality practically supports every nonprofit sports, arts and youth organization in the city with operating and project grants. The municipal grants never cover all of the costs.

Hobby Ecosystem in the City of Helsinki

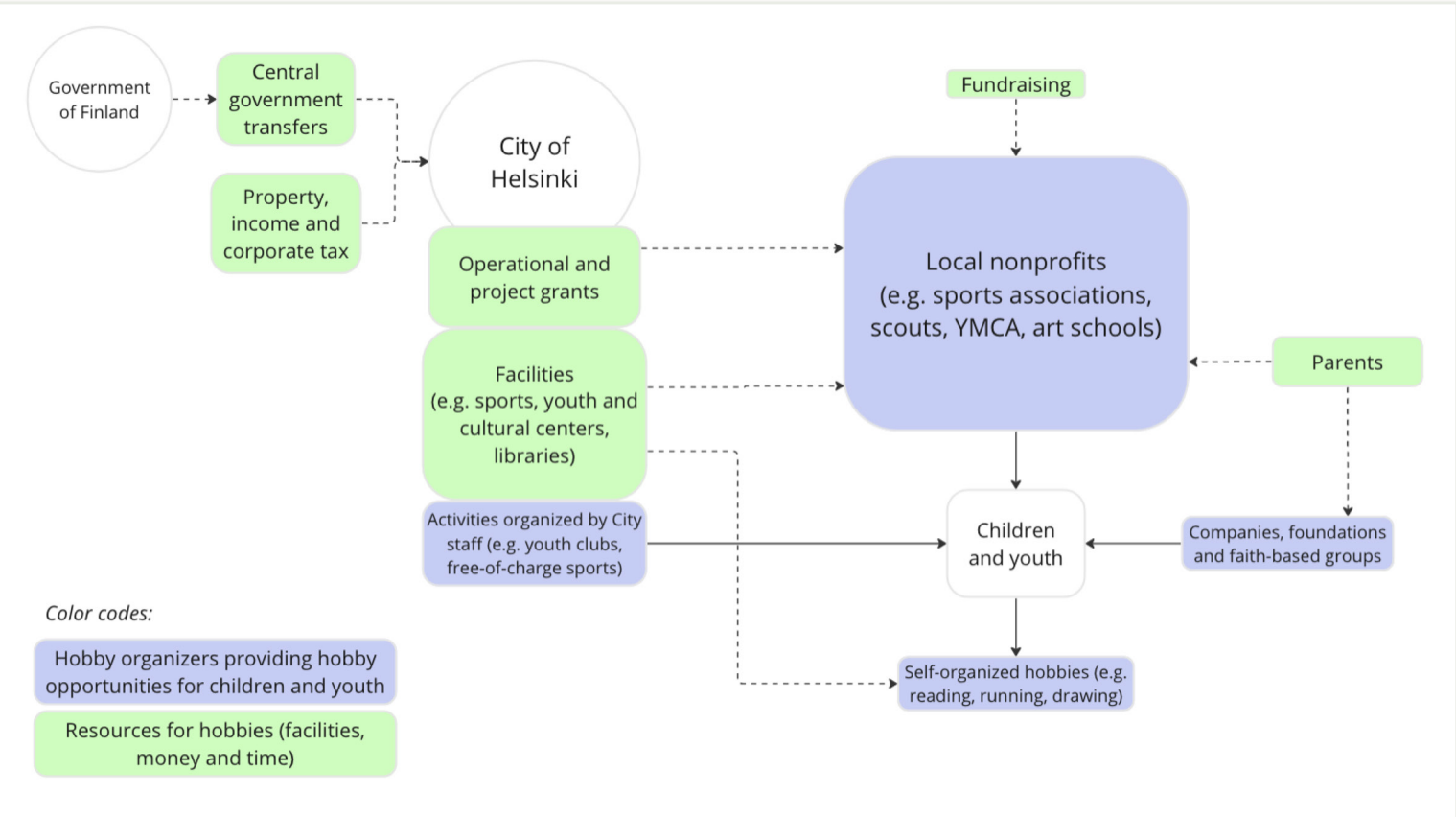


Image: Frilander & Laitio, 2024

Participation and Equity

Hobby participation in Finland is very high. About 85 percent of all children and youth say they have a hobby. According to the School Health Promotion Survey, 94 percent of 4th and 5th graders and 96 percent of 8th and 9th graders in Helsinki report that they have a hobby that they engage in at least once a week.

Yet there are clear disparities in participation by residential area (see table), family income, and national origin. The City of Helsinki Culture sees its role as trying to balance out such differences with its own activities. For example, the city offers hobbies free of charge for youth and organizes activities in areas where nonprofits are less active. The city also dedicates more youth workers, youth clubs and other activities to areas with greater socio-economic needs.

Teenagers are of particular concern, as data show many youth drop hobbies during their teen years. The city has identified through youth engagement and national surveys that teenagers want low-key activities in relaxed spaces where they can meet friends and socialize. In response, city leaders have invested in music events and cafe-like environments at youth centers, which have the additional benefit of providing workforce skills for young people. (See Promising Practice 6 below.)

In addition, Helsinki was the first city in the country to introduce participatory budgeting for youth work. The city’s 60 youth centers collaborate with schools to carry out an extensive participatory design process in which young people offer ideas and vote on budget allocations for priorities in their neighborhoods.

How significant were the following reasons for you to stop a programmed hobby? (15-29-year-olds, n609)

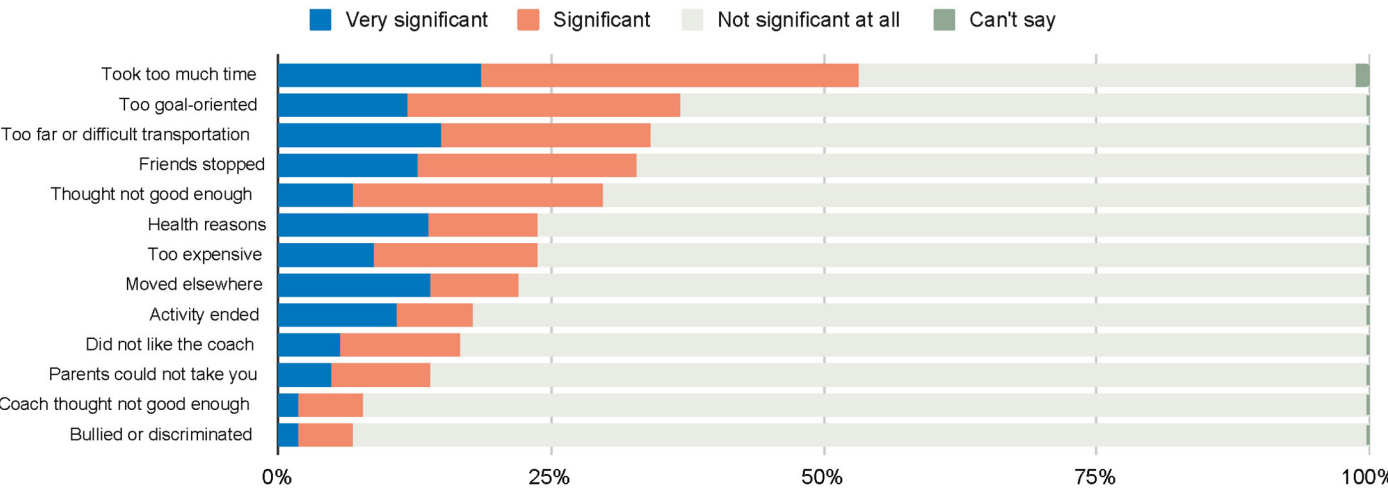
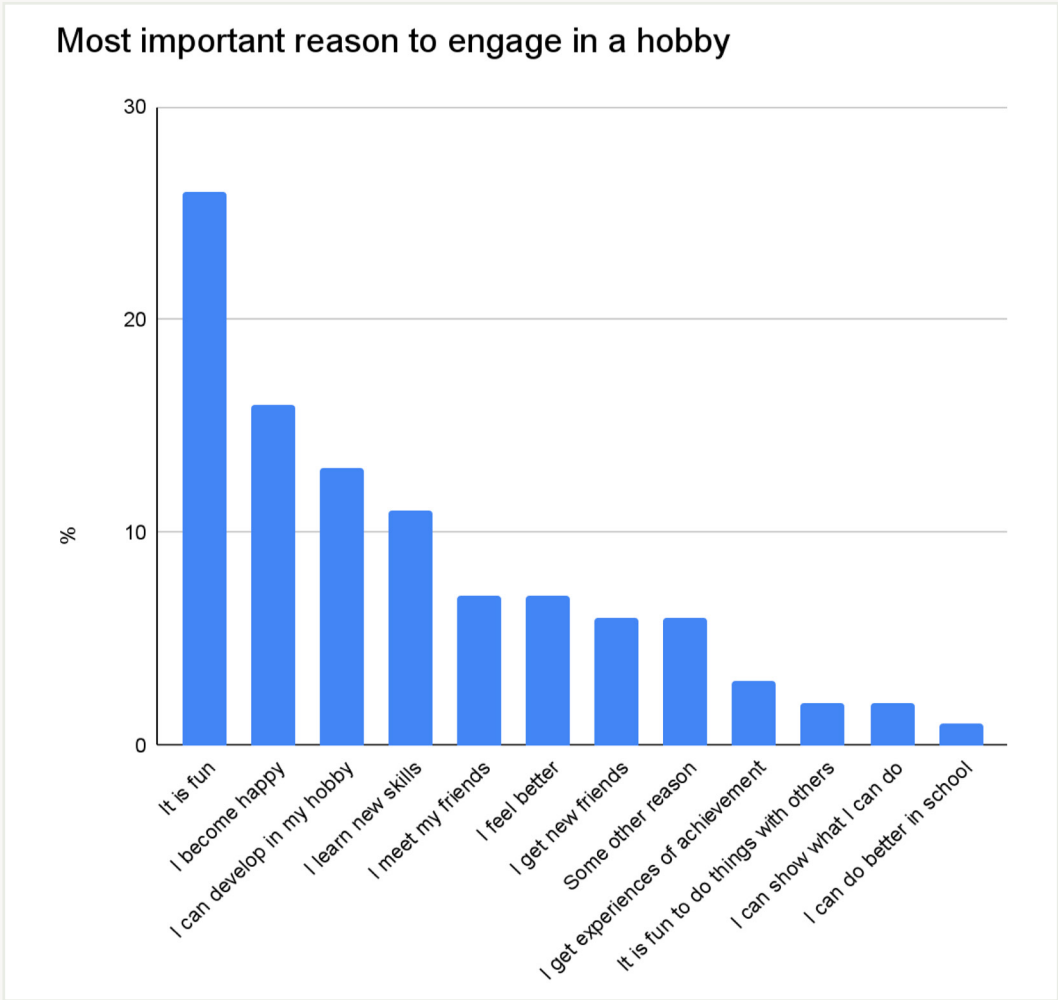


Chart: Reasons for stopping a programmed hobby among youth.
Source: [Children and Youth Leisure Time 2022](#).

Promising Practice 1: National Survey on Hobbies and Well-being

Collection and use of data is a hallmark of Finland’s approach to hobbies. The Ministry of Education and Culture conducts a national survey of school-aged children that local governments use to program hobbies. In 2022, more than 164,000 children from 74 percent of Finnish primary and secondary schools answered the survey. The survey is given at school. Some insights from the survey include:

- Over half (51 percent) would like to try a new hobby, and 58 percent of those without a hobby would like to start one.
- Elementary school-aged girls rank horseback riding, animal clubs, visual arts, cooking, and film as top hobbies, while boys prefer soccer, parkour, gaming, and film. Teenage girls favor working out in the gym, snowboarding, cooking, arts and crafts, and film, while boys rank highest working out in the gym, snooker, snowboarding, parkour, gaming, and film.
- Children connect hobbies strongly to a great life. They say the most important reasons to have a hobby are that it is fun (26 percent) or it makes one happy (16 percent) (see chart below). Top reasons remain the same across different age groups and gender.



Source: [National School Survey 2022](#)



Promising Practice 2: Melvio - An Impact Tool

We Foundation, a private philanthropy based in Helsinki, has developed a data tool for tracking hobby enrollment and children’s well-being. The goal is to help nonprofits and municipalities who run hobby programs measure their effectiveness and steer funding to maximize impact.

The tool, called Melvio, measures three dimensions of impact:

- 1) Reach:** When a child enrolls in a hobby, a parent or guardian is asked to fill out a registration form that includes questions about family employment, education, language spoken at home, and other factors. This helps the provider to understand what kind of backgrounds the children come from.
- 2) Engagement:** The tool tracks hobby participation, enabling providers to both monitor overall engagement levels and also target extra attention to individuals whose attendance suggests they may be at risk of dropping the hobby.
- 3) Well-being:** Every six months, the family receives a well-being questionnaire. The child or their guardian is asked to assess how the activity is impacting the child’s well-being. Questions include: “Do you feel like you belong to a community?” “Do you have at least one friend?” and “Do you feel like you want to learn new things and develop?”

The tool is currently used by dozens of Finnish hobby providers, and is going to be tested in 20 municipalities. In the future, We Foundation hopes to enable a more granular analysis of what factors of a hobby impact well-being and more detailed information about participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Read more: [We Foundation](#)

Promising Practice 3: Hobbies at school

A concern in Finland is the growing cost of some hobbies, particularly sports such as ice hockey or soccer that may require expensive equipment or travel and arts that may require professional one-on-one instruction. There’s also concern about the high rates at which teenagers drop hobbies. In response, the national government in 2021 launched an initiative known as “The Finnish model for leisure activities.”

The goal of the initiative is to enable every child in Finland to have a pleasant hobby during the school day free of charge. Key features include:

- The activities are organized in school facilities and take place either before or after school. Municipalities must either organize the hobbies themselves or procure them from nonprofits or companies.
- The hobbies offered must be based on the children’s own wishes, as indicated in an annual school survey. (See Promising Practice 1.)
- Participation is voluntary for the child and free-of-charge.

The initiative was included in the national Youth Act in 2022, making it a legal obligation for municipalities to provide activities. Each municipality decides how to implement the program, within certain guidelines. Municipalities fund the program with a total of \$15 million in grants from regional government bodies; the grants cover 70 percent of the costs. More than 11,000 groups of hobby activities were organized in over 2,000 schools across Finland.

According to a 2024 evaluation by the We Foundation, 16% of the children taking part in the program’s activities had no other hobbies. The activities were reaching especially well children from immigrant families.

The Finnish initiative was inspired by a national effort in Iceland. The Icelandic model successfully decreased adolescent substance abuse by improving collaboration among schools and families. This included moving organized, high-quality youth programs to the afternoons and introducing curfews for minors to promote family time.

Read more: [The Finnish model for leisure activities](#)

Promising Practice 4: The Guides and Scouts of Finland

Scouting is a hobby that draws a higher share of children in Finland than in the U.S. Instead of two organizations catering mostly to girls or boys, Finland has one. The Guides and Scouts of Finland is the country’s largest youth organization, with 65,000 members. Due to intentional strategic development and recruitment efforts to find volunteer leaders, the scouts have seen an increase in participation in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The Helsinki Metropolitan Area Guides and Scouts, has 12,000 members.

Scouting takes place in local groups through weekly activities, hikes, camping trips, and events guided by youth and adult volunteers. Children can participate from the age of seven, and many groups are not segregated by gender. As in the U.S., scouting in Finland is aimed at enabling youth to become active and responsible members of both local and global society. Among older scouts, there is a big focus on developing leadership skills. The scouts recently introduced Johtajatule, an annual national event for their volunteer leaders where CEOs of Finnish companies, government officials, experienced scouting leaders, and management researchers who might have once been scouts themselves lead leadership trainings – not in a classroom but in the forest.

Scouting is a hobby with low barriers to entry. Helsinki has 60 local groups that are found in almost all neighborhoods across the city; children can often walk to the weekly activities on their own. Scouting is also an affordable hobby, with an annual membership fee of between \$65 and \$110 and no special equipment needed to participate in the weekly activities. While additional fees are collected for hikes and camping trips, families with low incomes can apply for scholarships and borrow camping equipment from the scouting association. The financial support is administered in a way that participants do not know who paid what, to avoid stigma.

The Scouts want to be a hobby open to all. It attracts youth who have not found their place in other hobbies, including many children with special needs. In Helsinki, the scout association is stepping up outreach with families that have migrated from other countries – especially non-Christian families – by sharing information about the hobby in playgrounds, daycare centers, and schools and offering small nature trips free of charge.

Local scout groups are financed through annual membership fees from families as well as grants from cities and nonprofits. In Helsinki, the local scout groups receive operational grants from the city. Lutheran parishes, part of the main religion in Finland, often boost local scout groups with meeting space or financial support. Local groups, hikes, camping trips, and events are fully organized by volunteers.

Read more: [The Helsinki Metropolitan Area Guides and Scouts](#)

Promising Practice 5: Youth Services

The City of Helsinki runs one of the largest youth departments in Europe. Helsinki takes a comprehensive view of and responsibility for youth policy and empowerment, including the coordination of Helsinki’s policy goal on hobbies. The Youth Department’s mission is to strengthen young people’s agency, work with communities and youth groups, encourage children to make a difference, and advocate for youth and their living conditions.

The Department operates approximately 60 youth centers across the city. These dedicated youth spaces cater to 13-to-17-year olds with opportunities for sports, hanging out, gaming, cooking, and the arts. Many of them are co-located with libraries, cultural centers or built inside shopping malls, and are open outside of school hours. In addition, the Department has outreach teams who meet young people on the streets, in shopping malls, and other public spaces to collaborate with the police on public safety concerns such as fighting or sexual harassment.

The Department employs approximately 300 youth workers. Most of the youth workers have a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree specifically in what Finns call “youth work.” Youth work differs from the American concept of social work by primarily focusing on the interpersonal relationships between young people and on empowering young people with opportunities to make an impact in their local community.

Image: Helsinki has youth centers across the city.



Promising Practice: Culture Kids Program

Culture Kids is a public--private collaboration that invites every newborn in Helsinki to a seven-year relationship with a professional arts organization. The arts organizations invite the children twice a year to free-of-charge experiences tailored to the child’s age. The families are invited to the program through maternity and child health clinics, which are used by 99.5% of families. Approximately 70 % of families have registered to the program.

Culture Kids provides an opportunity for every child born in or after 2020 in Helsinki to be sponsored by a museum, dance group, theater, or other arts organization. These sponsors welcome the children, together with a family member, to at least two free-of-charge performances or events a year until age seven.

A key innovation is a partnership with the city’s maternity and child health clinics,, which are municipally run as a government service and used by 99.5 percent of families in Helsinki. Acting as a trusted messenger, nurses invite families into the program. This helps to drive the program’s high participation rate: More than 18,800 children have registered for the program, and around 60 percent of those registered attend the program events.

The goal of the program is to improve the well-being of families and children in Helsinki – both by accessing the proven health benefits of the arts, and by having opportunities to be together and make friends. Another underlying idea was to give people who move to Helsinki from other countries an easy way to connect with city services and find community. For the culture and art organizations, a key motivation is to nurture a new generation of patrons in an increasingly multicultural city. The program also aims to build both the supply of and demand for new arts and culture hobby offerings for children of all ages.

The concept for Culture Kids came from a successful project run by the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, which invited two cohorts of children to participate in similar programming over seven years. In surveys afterward, participating families gave the initiative high marks, indicating that activities improved their well-being and sparked interest in cultural hobbies. Borrowing from this model, Culture Kids operates on a seven-year cycle, with different institutions assigned to cohorts of children by birth year. (see chart on the following page)

Art Organizations in the Culture Kids Program

Children born in 2020 and 2027
Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra

Children born in 2021
Helsinki City Theatre
Finnish National Theatre
Svenska Teatern
Theatre ILMI Ö.
Q-teatteri
Puppet Theatre Sampo

Children born in 2022
Cirko – Center for New Circus
Hotel and Restaurant Museum
Finnish Museum of Photography
Dance House Helsinki
Dance Theatre Hurjaruuth
Theatre Museum

Children born in 2023
Museum of Finnish Architecture
Design Museum
Helsinki City Museum
National Museum of Finland
Association of Cultural Heritage Education in Finland
Helsinki University Museum Flame

Children born in 2024
Helsinki City Library
Helsinki City Sports Services

Children born in 2025
HAM Helsinki Art Museum
Amos Rex
Ateneum Art Museum
Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
Sinebrychoff Art Museum
UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra

Children born in 2026
Finnish National Opera and Ballet

Organization

The City of Helsinki coordinates and develops the Culture Kids ecosystem. The program has a coordinator based in the city’s Culture and Leisure Division. The city’s early childhood education services offer expertise, venues, and other support for events. And the city’s maternity and child health clinics are key partners on outreach to families.

Program activities are provided by the 28 culture and art organizations. In 2023, the organizations held a total of 781 events, such as concerts, performances, storytimes, and workshops. The events have received good feedback in surveys; on average the families give them a score of 4.7/5.

The City of Helsinki and the culture and art organizations have jointly formulated a set of core values that steer the work. The core values are child-orientedness, cooperation, professionalism, equality, accessibility, experimentation, and cultural awareness. The program is continuously developed in close cooperation between the different parties based on feedback from the families. The coordinator from the City of Helsinki meets monthly with the arts organizations to jointly develop forthcoming activities and events. One key success factor of the program is a non-competitive environment that exists among arts organizations of many types and sizes. This allows for mutual learning and joint development of events.

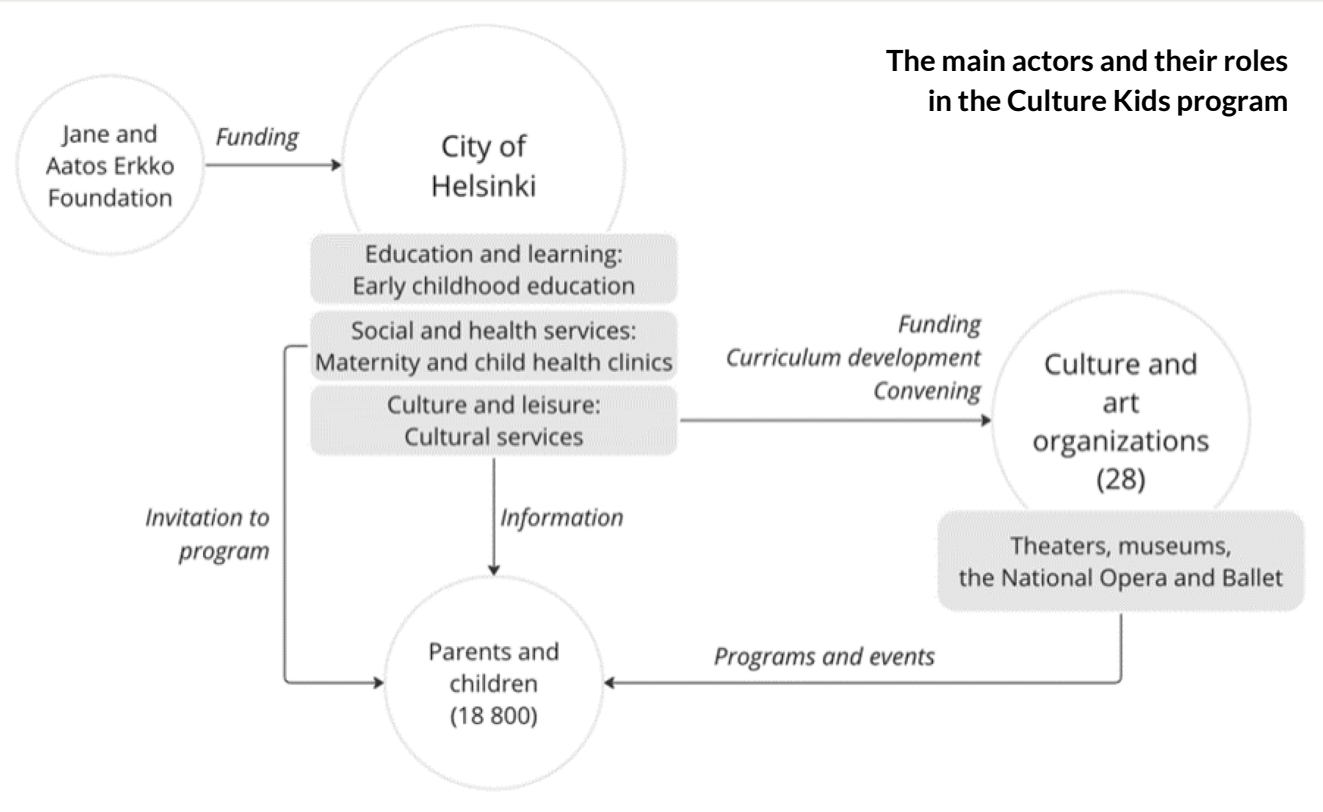




Photo: Maarit Hohteri / City of Helsinki

Funding

The program is funded by the City of Helsinki, the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation, and the culture and art organizations. The Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation, a private philanthropy, has supported the program from its beginning, for a total of three years. The annual costs for 2023 are presented in the table below.

Annual costs of the Culture Kids program in 2023	
The City of Helsinki (includes coordinator’s salary, communication activities, IT development and maintenance)	\$128,000
Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation (covers the costs for each child’s participation in two events annually at \$17.90 per event)	\$366,000
Culture and art organizations (covers administration, purchases, and staff time, as well as participation of a family member in two events annually)	\$391,000
Total cost (2023)	\$885,000

Participation

The program is open and accessible for all children born in or after 2020 in Helsinki until they start school at age seven. At the maternity and child health clinics, families are invited into the program during their child’s two-month checkup. As part of a conversation about parenting, nurses give the family an informational welcome card. Clinics also offer information about the program to families who move to Helsinki with older children.

When families register with the program, they share their postal code, child’s birth year, and, if they want, the language spoken at home. This allows program leaders to monitor emerging needs in different neighborhoods. Welcome cards are available in three languages (Finnish, Swedish, and English) and the program website is offered in 16 languages. All cultural and art events are organized in a way that the child and the family member can participate in whatever language they are most comfortable with.

Approximately 70 percent of families take part in the program – a high participation rate for any arts program. However, data show spatial differences in participation. Children from neighborhoods with high average incomes are more likely to be registered than children from neighborhoods with lower incomes (see table on the right). Among immigrants, the program has been most successful at reaching families who speak English and other European languages, while participation lags among families who speak Arabic or other languages commonly spoken in Africa.

Table: Percentage of children registered in Culture Kids program in different neighborhoods.

Neighborhood in Helsinki	Annual average income in neighborhood	Percentage of children aged 0-4 years registered in Culture Kids
Lauttasaari and Vattuniemi	\$102,000 (Lauttasaari) \$124,000 (Vattuniemi)	95 percent
Etelä-Haaga	\$63,000	98 percent
Vallila	\$61,000	93 percent
Meri-Rastila	\$53,000	48 percent
Jakomäki	\$43,000	40 percent

The program is taking several steps to increase participation of children from different cultural backgrounds. For example, an effort is underway to develop more culturally aware events and programming in cooperation with leading experts and researchers in the field. The program also has stepped up outreach at community events, such as the Somali culture days and Ramadan festivities.

Key Takeaways From Finland

Children’s hobbies are well established in Finnish society, lifestyle, and governance. Here are six takeaways from the Finnish hobby ecosystem.

- 1 Wide support across the political spectrum.**
Hobbies have political support across all parties and ideological lines.
- 2 Focus on well-being.**
The shared objective of hobbies is to promote the overall well-being of children and youth, rather than addressing specific social problems.
- 3 Strong policy and legislative support.**
The hobby ecosystem in Finland is backed by robust policy and legal frameworks at the national and local level.
- 4 Systematic data collection.**
National data on what hobbies children want is collected annually, and municipalities are obliged to use that data to decide on programming.
- 5 Proactive local government.**
Municipalities have an active role in nurturing their local hobby ecosystems by supporting hobby providers with financial grants and permission to use municipal facilities, as well as by offering and organizing activities they run themselves.
- 6 Meeting children and families where they are.**
Providing hobbies at school lowers barriers to participation and ensures that all children receive equal opportunities to have a hobby. Likewise, utilizing maternity clinics for outreach ensures that almost all parents get information about hobby opportunities.



Photo: Maarit Hohteri / City of Helsinki



Photo: Jussi Hellsten / City of Helsinki



Photo: Aki Rask / City of Helsinki



Photo: Maija Astikainen / City of Helsinki

Interviewees

Mikko Vatka
Director of Youth Affairs at City of Helsinki

Liisa Remes
Specialist at City of Helsinki Youth Services

Ulla Laurio
Leads the Culture Kids program at the City of Helsinki Cultural Services

Irma Sippola
Specialist at City of Helsinki Youth Services leading the Finnish model for leisure activities in the City of Helsinki

Iina Berden, Henni Axelin and Tiina Kivisaari
Leads the Finnish model for leisure activities in the Ministry of Education and Culture

Mikko Salasuo,
Youth researcher and specialist at Icehearts

Tiina-Maija Toivola
Managing Director of We Foundation

Hanna-Mari Peltomäki
Secretary General, Jane and Aatos Erkkö Foundation

Mimmu Mannermaa
Executive Director of Helsinki Metropolitan Area Guides and Scouts

Veli-Matti Rinnetmäki
Executive Director of HJK

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Photo: Maarit Hohteri / City of Helsinki



Photo: Maarit Hohteri / City of Helsinki



Photo: Maija Astikainen / City of Helsinki

Acts of Purpose

How hobbies can be the heartbeat
of a great life in Charlotte

Convivencia Urbana - Tommi Laitio

www.convivenciaurbana.com

Reference:

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www.gambrellfoundation.org