

## Parents' View of Child-Friendly Cities Initiative: The Case of Mersin

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*This study is about the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, which was carried out in 2014 and 2015 in Türkiye. A child-friendly city is a concept that responds to the needs of children, who represent the future of cities, to develop healthily, to feel happy and free, and to develop physically, mentally, and socially in the city they live in. Child-Friendly Cities Initiative started in 10 municipalities in 2014, to intervene in the difficulties faced by disadvantaged children and adolescents in urban areas in Türkiye. In this study, the situation in Mersin, which was within the scope of the project in 2014-2015, is discussed from the parent's perspective. Six parents living in Mersin are included in the scope of the research. Parents' awareness and satisfaction levels, together with their expectations, regarding the child-friendly city project carried out in the city are measured through in-depth interviews. Five main objectives of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative are determined as a framework for preparing the interview questions. These goals are (1) the right of children to enjoy basic facilities such as health, education, and nutrition, (2) the right to be heard, (3) the right to be valued, respected, and treated fairly, (4) the right to be safe, and (5) the right to spend quality time with family, have free time and play games. The data is analyzed using descriptive analysis. The findings showed that most of the parents were not aware of the child-friendly city project carried out in partnership with the municipality and UNICEF in Mersin, but they could still define Mersin as a "child-friendly city". Parents' expectations from similar projects in the future focus on health, education, nutrition, and security components.*

**Keywords:** *child-friendly cities initiative, children's rights, Mersin, Türkiye*

### Introduction

A child-friendly city is a concept that refers to a city that responds to the needs of children, who represent the future of cities, to develop healthily in the city where they live, to feel happy and free, and to develop physically, mentally, and socially. A child-friendly city is also a city, town, community, or local government system that is committed to improving the lives of children in its jurisdiction by realizing their rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In these cities, children's voices, needs, priorities, and rights are an integral part of public policies, programs, and decisions. While the primary responsibility for ensuring the realization of children's rights lies with governments, other stakeholders such as civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, and the media, as well as children themselves, also have an important role to play in becoming a child-friendly city.

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UNICEF defines child-friendly cities as places where children's basic rights are respected. These rights include the right to influence decisions made about the city, to express their opinions about the places they want, to participate in family life, neighborhood life, and social life, to benefit from basic needs such as health and education, to drink clean water and live in places with good infrastructure, to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, and harassment, and to walk safely on the streets on their own, meet and play with new friends, have access to green spaces with plants and animals, live in an unpolluted environment, participate in cultural and social activities, and enjoy the rights of citizens in the cities where they live and have access to all kinds of services, regardless of their ethnic, religious, economic, gender and physical composition (UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child 2022). Similarly, UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative defines a child-friendly city as "a place where children are protected from exploitation, violence, and abuse, have a good start in life, grow up healthy and well-groomed, have access to quality social services, receive inclusive and participatory education, and express their views, a city where children can participate in decisions that affect them, live a family life, socialize, have safe access to green spaces, make friends, have fun, and be treated fairly regardless of ethnicity, religion, income, gender, and ability" (Child-Friendly Cities Initiative 2022).

The concept of a Child-Friendly City first emerged as a guarantee of the fulfillment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its grounding was based on the ideas that emerged during the Habitat II Conference held in Istanbul in 1996. As a result of this conference, it was decided to establish UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). In 1997, important steps were taken for Child-Friendly Cities. Efforts have continued to create "child-friendly" environments in Northern European countries, Canada, Australia, and the United States (Çınar 2020). As of 2022, UNICEF is carrying out projects in a total of 36 countries all over the world with the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative. Projects in eight countries have been completed, and projects will be carried out in five countries shortly (Child-Friendly Cities Initiative 2022).

The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) acts around five main goals. These five goals are: children's right to basic amenities such as health, education, nutrition, the right to be heard, the right to be valued, respected, and treated fairly, the right to be safe, and the right to spend quality time with their families, have leisure time and play. Under these goals, cities and communities can choose the goals to focus on according to the needs of children and young people in their regions (CFCI Brochure 2018). Cities and communities that want to take steps towards becoming child-friendly city first sign a memorandum of understanding with UNICEF, thoroughly analyze the situation of children in their cities, and prioritize their goals and objectives in line with these five main goals. An action plan and budget are then prepared and approved. Following this, the city is awarded the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative Candidate Logo. Following the implementation of the action plan, which lasts between two and five years, progress is evaluated and if the result of the evaluation is positive, the city is given the CFCI logo, and the city can become a Child-Friendly City (CFCI Brochure

2018). The city in question also receives a certificate that includes its commitment to promoting children's rights and recognizes active participation (Çınar 2020). However, this is not a process that ends with the acquisition of the logo and certificate, but rather an ongoing process. Cities can restart the process cycle, prepare a new Action Plan, strengthen their work in selected areas, and eventually request a reassessment. UNICEF can recognize a city as a child-friendly city for a maximum of five years. Regardless of the length of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative cycle, the initiative should review the cycle annually to ensure that the city is fulfilling its commitments under the Action Plan (Child-Friendly City Project Implementation Guidelines 2018).

Child-friendly cities is also important for the development of tourist destinations. The most important driver of resort tourism, which is the dominant type of tourism in most tourist destinations in Türkiye, is family tourism. In 2018, the Russian Federation ranked first with 1,083,669 people traveling with children aged 0-14, followed by Germans with 559,176 people. Considering that both markets are important tourist markets targeted by Türkiye, the importance of Türkiye's development of family tourism and child-friendly cities becomes evident once again (TUIK 2020). Thanks to this image, child-friendly cities and destinations can attract many tourists, especially those traveling within the scope of family tourism. On the contrary, tourists who see that children's rights are not respected and child labor practices are present in the destinations they travel to do not want to travel to these destinations again. There are research findings (World Vision Australia 2012) showing that tourists do not tolerate the child labor they witness in the destinations they travel to and that they shorten their visits to these destinations. From this perspective, being a child-friendly city is also important in terms of strengthening the image of a city in the eyes of tourists.

The main starting point of this study is the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, which was conducted in Türkiye in 2014 and 2015. The study aims to find out to what extent the local community, and especially parents, are aware of the Child-Friendly City Initiative in Mersin, and to understand how satisfied they are with these efforts. It is also aimed to determine which aspects of the change in their city within the scope of the Child-Friendly City Initiative are shared by the parents living in Mersin as stakeholders. The questions sought to be answered in the study were as follows:

- What is the level of awareness of parents about the effects and outcomes of the child-friendly city project in Mersin?
- What is the level of satisfaction of parents with the child-friendly city project and Mersin as a child-friendly city?
- What are the demands and expectations of parents from future projects like this one?

## **Child-Friendly Cities Project in Türkiye and the Case of Mersin**

Child-friendly cities are becoming more important for countries with large child populations. When the issue is evaluated from the perspective of Türkiye, children constitute an important social and economic potential. Türkiye is a country with a young population. As of 2022, 26.5% of the country's population consists of children. In Türkiye, where children constitute a significant portion of the population, children bring along a dynamic and productive social structure, and many issues concerning the lives, wishes, and needs of children need to be taken into consideration in economic, social, and legal terms.

The first steps of the child-friendly city movement in Türkiye were taken by scaling the quality of life of 81 provinces according to certain criteria and nominating 12 provinces as candidates to become child-friendly cities according to these criteria. Between 2006 and 2010, UNICEF initiated efforts to create a "Child-Friendly City" model in 12 pilot cities, including Sivas, Uşak, Gaziantep, Kırşehir, Karaman, Antalya, Kayseri, Erzincan, Konya, Tekirdağ, Bursa, Trabzon, and Bursa. In this context, the organization of the Children's Festival in Tekirdağ, the establishment of the Science and Technology Center in Bursa, the launch of the Child-Friendly School Project in Karaman, the Baby-Friendly City studies in Konya, and the Baby-Friendly Hospital practices in Trabzon can be given as examples of the studies carried out in pilot cities (Berkün 2019).

In the following years, the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative was launched in 10 municipalities (Lüleburgaz, Mamak, İspir, Giresun, Bitlis, Eyyübiye, Yüreğir, Mersin, Manisa, and Bornova Municipalities) in 2014 to intervene in the challenges faced by disadvantaged children and adolescents in urban areas in Türkiye. The implementation was carried out under the coordination of the UNICEF Türkiye Office with the financial support of IKEA and the UNICEF Türkiye National Committee. In 2014-2015, these municipalities implemented practices such as the establishment of playgrounds adapted for children with disabilities, training for parents, raising awareness on children's rights through billboards and other communication tools, establishing Children's Assemblies, establishing a renewable Energy and Mechatronics Laboratory with child-friendly equipment, and establishing a children's street. UNICEF contributed to building the capacity of local administrations to support policies for disadvantaged children and adolescents through the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative. Guidelines and training materials were prepared and used to build the capacity of municipalities in child participation, child rights programs, preventing child marriage, combating child labor, developing child-focused strategies, budgeting, and resource allocation. Increasing the number of girls going to school, making streets safe for children, increasing the number of baby-friendly hospitals and sports and playgrounds for children are among the targets planned to be achieved in child-friendly cities. In Türkiye, a total of 40 provinces and nearly 100 municipalities have been reached in line with these targets. In total, nearly two million children were indirectly involved in this program (UNICEF 2020).

Mersin is located between Antalya and Adana in the south of Türkiye, neighboring Konya, Karaman, and Niğde. Mersin, which was called Klikya in the

classical period, has been an important settlement since prehistoric times. Under the rule of the Hittites, Phrygians, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, and Byzantines, the region came under the rule of the Seljuks in the 11th century and the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. It is Türkiye's ninth-largest province in terms of area and 11th-largest in terms of population. It has 13 districts. It is a true city of culture and tourism with its natural beauties, faith tourism, and historical richness (Mersin Governorship website 2024). 2022 tourism statistics also confirm this. In 2022, the number of domestic and foreign tourists visiting Mersin's accommodation facilities was 642,999. These tourists spent a total of 1,364,617 overnight stays in the same year (Accommodation Statistics of Facilities with Business Certificates 2024).

Child-friendly city implementation in Mersin started in 2014 in four districts of the central city after Mersin Metropolitan Municipality signed a protocol with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Türkiye. The first step in the preparations began with the delivery of training seminars at the initiative of UNICEF Social Policy Officers and the Local Coordinator of the Child-Friendly Cities Project. The training content was designed to include policies and programs that address the needs of children, identify the needs of children in urban areas, and create child-friendly spaces to ensure children's access to play and development rights. Young volunteers from Mersin Metropolitan Municipality, Mersin University, Toros University, Çağ University, Educational Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye (TEGV), and General Directorate of Social Services Policies participated in these trainings (Mersin Portal 2014). In 2015, a Children's Action Plan Workshop was held in Mersin with the participation of all stakeholders who supported this project (Anamurlu'nun Sesi 2015). In line with this plan, children's rights have been promoted throughout the province. Mersin Metropolitan Municipality also participated in UNICEF training in Istanbul with its representatives. Mersin Municipality, together with other municipalities, was invited to a three-day training on Children's Rights and Participation in Istanbul to promote children's rights and establish a children's assembly. During the training, representative children learned about their rights and the formation of the children's assembly through educational games and visuals, discussed how to disseminate their knowledge across the province, and turned their work into an action plan by making their city plans upon their return. Adult representatives were also told how to establish a children's assembly and children's rights (Hürriyet 2015). Following this, the Metropolitan Municipality established the Children's Assembly working office. After the completion of one year of Mersin Metropolitan Municipality's work, these efforts were evaluated, and Mersin was ranked among child-friendly cities (Milliyet 2016).

Becoming a child-friendly city is subject to a certain period. After the end of this period, it should be monitored how the initiative has left traces in the city, awareness and satisfaction studies should be carried out regarding these effects, and if awareness and satisfaction levels are low, the process should be continued by taking necessary measures and making improvements to restart the process. This study is based on this rationale and examines the situation in Mersin, one of the 10 municipalities that took part in the project in 2014-2015, from the

perspective of parents. In the literature, there is an academic study (Öktem and Akpınar 2019) that focuses on the results of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative in Lüleburgaz and it aims to evaluate the results of this initiative. There are no studies that investigate the awareness in the city and the level of satisfaction with the results of this initiative in the case of Mersin. This constitutes the unique aspect of this study.

## **Method**

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and collected data through face-to-face interviews with parents over the age of 18 residing in Mersin. Mersin was chosen as the city for data collection because it is one of the two metropolitan municipalities among the 10 pilot cities in the project. This creates an important expectation that child-friendly city practices have been implemented with care and dedication. In addition, there were no studies or reports on the results of the project in Mersin.

### *Data Collection Form*

The five main objectives of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) were used as a framework for the preparation of the questions in the interview form. These five goals are; (1) the right of children to benefit from basic facilities such as health, education, nutrition and nutrition, (2) the right to be heard, (3) the right to be valued, respected, and treated fairly, (4) the right to be safe and (5) the right to spend quality time with their families, to have free time and to play. The above-mentioned questions, the answers to which were sought in the study, were adapted to these five basic goals and directed to participants. Thus, it was aimed to obtain information about the extent to which the goals of the project could be achieved. The following questions were included in the semi-structured interview form in addition to the age, gender, and education level questions of the participants:

1. Do you have any information about the Child-Friendly City practices carried out in your city and their scope? Do you have information about the impacts and outcomes of Child-Friendly Cities Initiative project on the city? Please answer by evaluating it from the following perspectives (Benefiting from basic facilities such as health, education, nutrition, and nutrition, being heard, being valued, respected, and treated fairly, being safe, spending quality time with family, having free time, playing games)
2. Have you been satisfied with the results of the Child-Friendly City practices carried out in your city for children? At what point do you see Mersin as a child-friendly city? Please answer by evaluating it from the following perspectives (benefiting from basic facilities such as health, education, nutrition, etc., being heard, being valued, respected, and treated fairly, being safe, spending quality time with family, having free time, playing games)

3. What would be your expectations from the new project if the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative project is repeated in your city in the future?

#### *Selection of Participants*

In determining the participants of the study, parents over the age of 18 residing in different neighborhoods of the city were consulted. In the identification of the first participant, information was obtained from individuals known to the researcher and residing in this city, while the opinions of the first and subsequent participants guided the identification of the other participants. In this way, it was aimed to reach a diversity of samples belonging to different educational levels and age ranges and residing in different neighborhoods of the city.

#### *Data Collection*

Parents' awareness and satisfaction levels regarding the effects and outcomes of the child-friendly city project in their city of residence were measured through face-to-face interviews. In addition, parents' demands and opinions on the continuation of the project were also collected. Interviews were conducted online to reduce time and cost loss. For this purpose, the participants whose contact information was obtained were contacted in advance to obtain their consent and appointments, and a total of six people were interviewed online between December 20, 2023, and February 15, 2024. Interviews continued until the data reached a point of saturation. Participation in the research was voluntary. In addition, the Ethics Committee Permission Certificate dated May 2, 2023, and numbered 516504 Protocol was obtained from Anadolu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board.

#### *Data Analysis*

The descriptive analysis technique was preferred in data analysis. For this purpose, firstly, audio and video recordings were taken for the answers. These recordings were then transcribed and deciphered, and narrative texts specific to each participant were obtained. These texts were used to determine parents' views on the child-friendly city implementation in Mersin. The data obtained from the narratives of the participants were transformed into findings to form the answers to the questions and were evaluated under these subtitles. Direct quotations were also included in the findings to reflect the views of the participants.

#### *Validity and Reliability*

To increase the construct validity of the study (Yin 2003, Yıldırım and Şimşek 2011), detailed information about each stage of the research was given. In addition, no interpretation was included in the presentation of the collected data as findings, the findings were presented directly to the reader with a descriptive approach, and the interpretation was left for later. Thus, the reader is allowed to

evaluate the results reached by the researcher according to these data. This is expected to increase the internal reliability of the study (LeCompte and Goetz 1982).

## **Results**

Four of the interviewees were women and two were men. The ages of the participants ranged between 32 and 55. Three of the participants had undergraduate and three had graduate-level education. The findings of the study are presented under the following subtitles: Awareness about the Child-Friendly City Project in Mersin, Satisfaction with the Child-Friendly City Project in Mersin, and Expectations from Future Child-Friendly City Projects in Mersin.

### *Awareness about the Child-Friendly City Project in Mersin*

The findings obtained from the descriptive analysis of the participants' views showed that the participants were not informed about the practices and scope of the Child-Friendly City project carried out in Mersin. In parallel to this, the participants were not informed about the effects of the project on the city and the results it produced. One of the participants, P1, stated this situation as follows: "I became aware of the child-friendly city practice as a result of your study. There has not been a situation where we have felt a child-friendly city in Mersin", while P2 expressed this lack of knowledge on this issue by saying, "I like such projects. Let children know, learn, gain self-confidence, and socialize. However, we were not informed".

P4, who was not aware of the child-friendly city activities carried out in Mersin but considered the city to be a child-friendly city and realized during this research that this feature of the city emerged due to the impact of this project, expressed his thoughts as follows "I honestly did not know that this was a child-friendly city. We just didn't realize that many of the good practices are based there. Mersin is one of the most beautiful cities to raise a child" (P4). Similarly, P6 also characterized the city as a child-friendly city, although she was not aware of the activities carried out: "I think Mersin is a child-friendly city. It is currently progressing very fast in terms of technology, child development, children's rights, libraries, etc. and this is reflected in the villages, too".

### *Satisfaction with the Child-Friendly City Project in Mersin*

Participants were asked whether they were satisfied with the outcomes of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative's practices in Mersin for children. While answering this question, some participants responded by thinking independently of whether the current practices in their cities were an extension/result of the Child Friendly City project or not and took Mersin's current situation into consideration. At this point, a significant portion of the findings served to assess satisfaction with Mersin as a child-friendly city rather than understanding satisfaction with the results of the



project. The biggest factor in the emergence of this situation is that most of the parents in the study were not aware of the project.

The first positive outcome of the Child-Friendly City project was the establishment of the Children's Assembly. The Children's Assembly, which came to life following the efforts of Mersin Metropolitan Municipality and UNICEF, offers children the opportunity to freely voice their opinions in a democratic environment. P6, expressed her thoughts on this issue: "When the Children's Assembly was established, they made very good announcements on social media. It had become remarkable. The Children's Assembly held a meeting and elected a chairperson among themselves. The fact that there were very qualified children who could express themselves attracted my attention". P5, on the other hand, approached the issue a little more cautiously and said, "Their energy at the foundation does not continue afterward. How much of the work of the elected assembly is effective? How much of it is used? Which children are included in which decision-making mechanisms?" and stated that he would like more information about the functioning of the Children's Assembly in the future.

Participants stated that following the child rights training provided in Mersin, children became more aware of claiming their rights and making their voices heard: "The municipality is active in terms of informing children and taking them to science schools. My 7-year-old son also participated in these trainings. He learned about children's rights. He says, 'My right is to play, children have rights'" (P2). In addition, in Mersin, meetings on issues related to the management of the city are organized with the participation of children: "We organized a meeting with the participation of children, university professors, the chamber of environmental engineers, and environmental associations. This time we asked children between the ages of 9-13: 'What would you like to do about the environment when you become an adult, when you become mayor? They told us, our teachers took notes'" (P6). P6 also stated that training was provided for children and young people on screen addiction, peer bullying, career planning, and biodiversity. These training courses are not limited to the city center but are also delivered to children in villages: "We have an education commission in Mersin City Council. We mentor children in schools in villages and the city center and provide support training. For example, we organized a ceramic workshop with a ceramic artist for primary school students (P6).

The responses to the question about children's educational opportunities in the city showed that the quality of education received by children may vary across schools and that there may therefore be educational inequality. P2 stated that there are no vacancies at the nursery level in public schools for young children as follows: "We cannot find a daycare center for our children even for half a day, we cannot register. Unfortunately, they are all full". Another problem is the alleged difference in the quality of education between public and private schools. P5 stated that he did not think that education was at a good level except for one or two public schools, and mentioned the educational inequality caused by this. P4 stated that the quality of education in public schools has decreased due to the high level of migration to the city: "Our little one was going to a public school, we could only bear for two months. It is a very old, well-established school, but there is no

service I have encountered. Of course, migration also plays a role in this, there is chaos in education" (P4).

Another important component of being a child-friendly city is the availability of places where children can spend time with their families and play games. Participants stated that Mersin is a very advantageous city in this sense. The biggest advantage at this point is Mersin's long coastal band. Almost all participants stated that there are enough parks and social areas in this part of the city. For example, P4 stated "We have a wide coast that meets all our expectations. There are many parks. They are all very big. There is a lot of green space. There is also a Children's Rights Park. It is very nice that it is named like this". However, there are also participants who find the number of activities organized in these areas insufficient: "Although we have a very large and beautiful beach, there are not enough beach activities for children" (P1). Similarly, some parents cannot benefit from these opportunities because they cannot afford the cost of activities on the beach: "There are playgrounds and parks on our coastal band. There is a recently built traffic park. But unfortunately, if you have money, you can enter these places. If you don't have money, your children are deprived" (P2).

Mersin is also a city where science, art, and sports activities and opportunities for children are abundant: "Schools can visit the Meteorology House free of charge with an appointment. Courses are given to children. Science experiments are conducted" (P4); "The Metropolitan Municipality has a Children's Library, and a Science Center was established for children" (P5). One participant used the following expressions when talking about music activities for children: "Music activities are very much supported here. Children can receive education at very low prices. The education is like that in high-priced places. The staff are very devoted, the teachers do their best" (P4). Similarly, P4 emphasized that free training is provided in many sports branches in the city: "In terms of sports, I think the city is unique. For example, my child goes to taekwondo for free. There is also basketball, curling, and volleyball and all of these are free of charge. The sports facilities are good, very clean. It is very good for the individual development of children".

Another important component of child-friendly cities is child health. Participants' evaluations of the city in this regard are not as positive as in other components. Two participants mentioned that there may be problems in utilizing public health services in child health due to overcrowding: "You cannot get an appointment with a pediatrician. The examination fees in the private sector are high" (P2); "It is difficult to get an appointment at the State Hospital, so when the child gets sick, we have to take him/her to a private hospital" (P4). P5 stated that the Metropolitan Municipality has a Child Psychology Counseling Center, but he did not know how this center works. With a preventive medicine approach to child health, Mersin City Council also provides awareness-raising training on certain diseases: "We organized two programs for children with type 1 diabetes. We did a program with a team of professors, representatives of public institutions, and dieticians, with the participation of families and children. It was very well received. We learned what type 1 diabetes patients should pay attention to, issues related to the measuring device were discussed, and experiences were shared"

(P6). One participant's opinion and request regarding child-friendly hospitals that are expected to be in a child-friendly city is noteworthy: "When a mother goes to the hospital for her child, there should be a playground where her child can linger while waiting in line. Similarly, there should be an area where children can be taken to the playgrounds and cared for, and where children can spend time while the mother or father is being examined. Unfortunately, these do not exist in our city" (P3).

Participants were also asked a question about child-friendly food and beverage establishments, one of the components of a child-friendly city. The responses indicate that developments in this area are not yet at a sufficient level. P3 expressed her concerns about access to healthy food, citing unhealthy products sold in school canteens as an example: "In school canteens, there are still jellybeans, sugary products, packaged foods, and chips, which are not recommended to be consumed by children. Therefore, we are not a child-friendly city in terms of nutrition". P5 stated that there are a limited number of child-friendly food and beverage establishments in Mersin and that few breakfast places have a children's social area and that he has not yet come across a children's menu in the city.

Security was also one of the areas of concern for the participants. Participants acknowledged that the fact that the city has largely accepted the Syrian and Afghan population as immigrants has also played a role in this: "I don't think the city is that safe. Of course, migration also has an effect on this" (P4); "The city is not safe because of migration. Most of the population is Syrian and Afghan. It is an assimilated city" (P2). Security gaps in children's playgrounds were also among the narratives of the participants: "In parks close to the road, the side of the road or around the park should be protected, there should be a fence so that children do not get on the road. In most parks, I see that these fences are not there. In most parks, I can see loose screws, nails with the ends sticking out. This should not happen in a child-friendly city" (P3).

#### *Expectations from Future Child-Friendly City Projects in Mersin*

Another question asked to the participants in line with the objectives of the study was what they expected from future Child-Friendly Cities projects in Mersin. The responses to this question indicated that the training gap that parents felt was lacking should be addressed. Here, parents referred to the need for child development training for parents (P1), training to teach children proper nutrition (P3), and child rights training for parents (P5). For example, P3 emphasized the importance of conducting projects to ensure that healthier foods and snacks are sold in food and beverage establishments, school canteens, and hospital cafeterias, and providing healthy nutrition education to children, while P5 stated that a mental transformation is needed to respect children's rights: "This is not something that only municipalities or the state can do. There is a need for social and mental transformation. And we are far away from this. In Finland, they have children design children's parks". Similarly, P3 stated that training should be organized to raise awareness among adults that children are also individuals: "Children are not seen as individuals. It is thought that I am older than them, I have the right to this,

and children's rights are not respected. I think that this is due to ignorance and that training should be organized to teach that we should respect them" (P3).

One of the expectations from future projects is the practice that can be considered within the scope of the child's right to spend quality time with his/her family and play games. Participants demand the opening of a sufficient number of daycare centers located within workplaces to meet the increasing need for daycare centers for working parents. In this way, it is envisaged that both children and parents will benefit. P3 expressed her opinion on this issue with the following words: "There should be kindergartens that accept children between the ages of 0-5 in every workplace. Because the most productive time for a parent to work is when they know that their child is safe and healthy. If there is an active daycare center in your organization, you can spend your breaks taking care of your child. I think this would also increase work efficiency" (P3).

Increasing the number of child-friendly businesses is also among the expectations from future projects. Participants demanded child-friendly museums, child-friendly food and beverage establishments, and child-friendly libraries in Mersin. P5 stated that practices that would make it easier for children to spend time in these places should be increased: "Child-friendly museums have to have playgrounds, food, and beverage areas. Abroad, for example, libraries are important activity centers for children".

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The results of the study showed that a significant number of the parents interviewed were not aware of the child-friendly city project carried out in Mersin in partnership with the municipality and UNICEF. A similar situation was also found in Öktem and Akpınar's (2019) study. Locals are largely aware of past and present efforts to make Mersin a child-friendly city, but there is no awareness that the seeds of these efforts were sown by the Child-Friendly City project in 2014-2015. This may be because the project was not sufficiently publicized to all stakeholders who could benefit from it. This is evidenced by the fact that participants stated that they had heard about the project for the first time during the interviews. However, despite this, Mersin was defined as a "child-friendly city" by almost all the participants. Based on this, it can be stated that in future similar projects, initiatives should be taken to ensure that local people have more information about the project. Local people's knowledge of this issue will enable them to cooperate to make the city more child-friendly. The announcement of similar projects in the future can be made more effectively through billboards placed in different parts of the city, advertisements to be placed on local television and social media, posters hung in playgrounds, and information given in schools.

The responses to the questions about satisfaction with the project focused on the evaluation of Mersin as a child-friendly city today, which was also related to the lack of awareness of the project. At this point, there were positive and negative aspects. For example, parents positively evaluated initiatives to promote the best interests of children, such as the establishment of a Children's Assembly, providing

children with children's rights training, giving children the right to have a voice, having parks and playgrounds where children can spend their free time with their families, and supporting science, arts and sports activities. However, there are also issues that parents see as obstacles to becoming a child-friendly city. For instance, it was emphasized that educational inequality has increased due to migration to the city and the growing population. This refers to the decline in the quality of education due to the increase in the number of students in public schools and the inequality that occurs because not all children can benefit from private education institutions. It is understood that migration-related problems also manifest themselves in health. In other words, parents stated that it has become difficult to get appointments at hospitals for pediatric illnesses and that the fees of doctors' private offices are unaffordable high. It was emphasized that food and beverage establishments are open to improvement in terms of both the content of the products sold and the quality of the service provided. Similarly, the possibility of security problems due to migration and the need to improve the security conditions of playgrounds are among the important results. As can be seen from the results obtained, while the project is sufficient in some areas, some areas are still open to improvement. In future projects, the child-friendly city should be evaluated with all its components such as health, education, nutrition, and safety, and its stakeholders should be increased, and its scope should be expanded.

The expectations of the interviewed parents from future projects are mostly in the direction of eliminating the lack of education. What is meant by education here is child development and child rights training for adults and healthy nutrition training for children. Parents also consider it necessary to establish kindergartens and to increase the number of qualified child-friendly businesses that can offer child-friendly products and services. The lack of training should be addressed in future projects by providing training to parents on child development, children's rights, preventing child marriage, combating child labor, and extending this training not only to the city center but also to rural areas. This training should even include how to communicate with children with disabilities. Similarly, the number and frequency of child rights and healthy nutrition training for children in schools should be increased. The work of the Children's Assembly, which is the best indicator of children's representation as individuals, should be encouraged, and the results of these activities should be shared with the public to raise awareness.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies**

This study has some limitations. First, time and money constraints made it necessary to conduct the interviews with the participants online; facial expressions and body language of the participants could not be observed and in-depth information that could be obtained through face-to-face interviews could not be obtained. Moreover, the fact that the researcher resided in a different province and had limited knowledge about Mersin prevented on-site observation of child-friendly elements in the city. In future research, it may be recommended to

conduct face-to-face interviews with participants to determine the child-friendly elements of the city and to support the research with field trips and observations.

This study aimed to understand parents' awareness levels and satisfaction with the Child-Friendly City Initiative in Mersin. However, it is also intriguing how Mersin is perceived as a child-friendly city by touristic visitors. In other words, how child-friendly do domestic and foreign visitors perceive the services of commercial enterprises offering services in different areas of tourism such as accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, and recreation? Future research could explore how Mersin is perceived as a child-friendly city holistically by consulting the views of different stakeholders such as domestic and foreign tourists, representatives of civil society organizations, representatives of tourism enterprises, and locals.

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