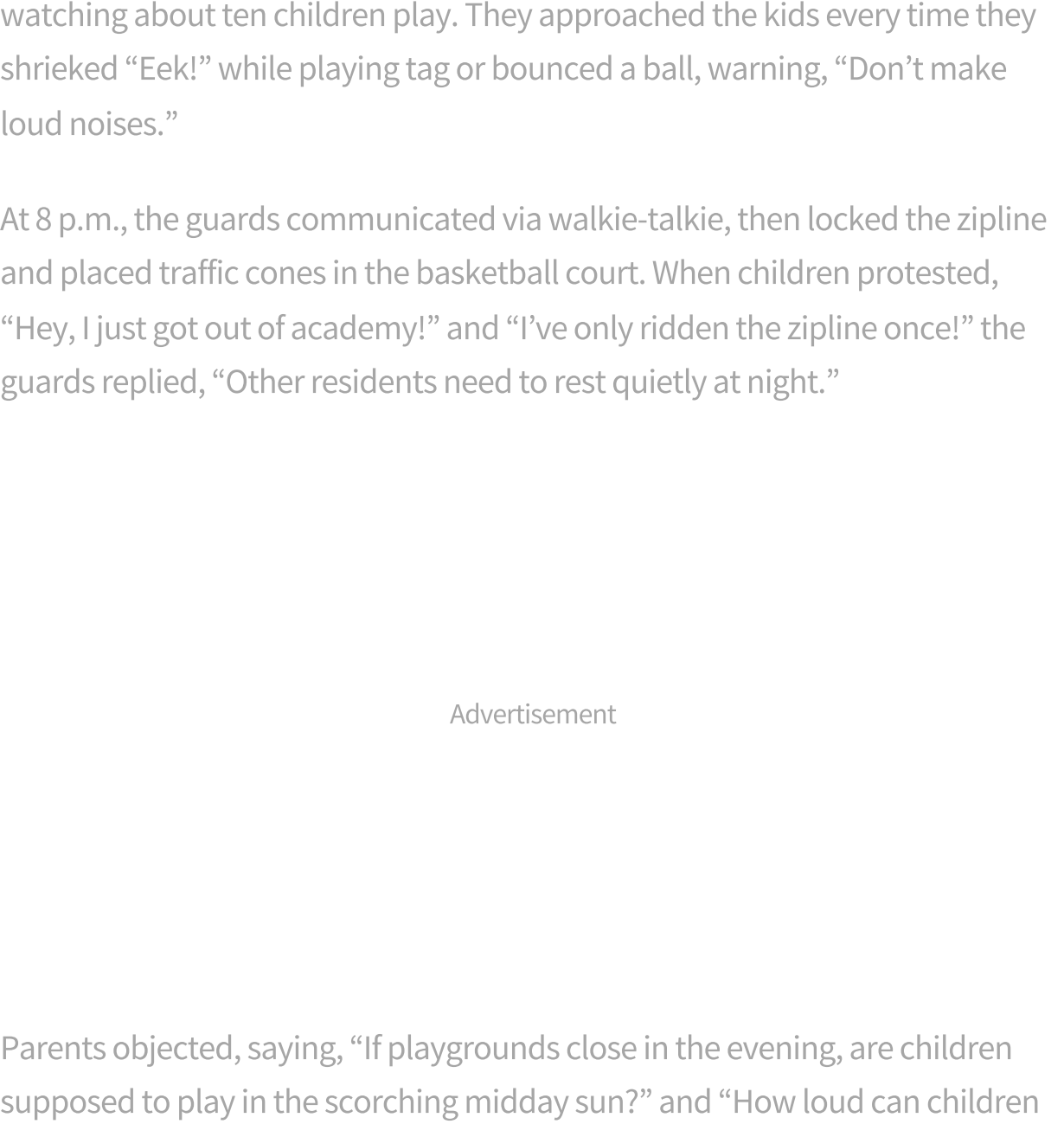


Playgrounds Close, Sports Days Halt in South Korea

Noise complaints shrink child spaces in world's worst low-birthrate nation

By Jeong Si-haeng

Updated 2026.08.22. 19:14



On the 18th, at the water play area of Yongsan Children's Garden in Seoul. The government, stating 'there are not many users,' proposes a plan to demolish the garden and build public rental housing. Amid ultra-low birth rates, playgrounds, sports fields, children's parks nationwide shrink as they face treatment as idle or hated facilities. /Courtesy of Lee Geon-song Video Media Reporter

On the evening of August 18, at a playground in a newly built apartment complex in Seoul's Seocho District, two security guards lingered while watching about ten children play. They approached the kids every time they shrieked "Eek!" while playing tag or bounced a ball, warning, "Don't make loud noises."

At 8 p.m., the guards communicated via walkie-talkie, then locked the zipline and placed traffic cones in the basketball court. When children protested, "Hey, I just got out of academy!" and "I've only ridden the zipline once!" the guards replied, "Other residents need to rest quietly at night."

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Parents objected, saying, "If playgrounds close in the evening, are children supposed to play in the scorching midday sun?" and "How loud can children playing be?" The guards responded, "We have no choice due to overwhelming noise complaints."

Spaces for children to play are shrinking. Apartment playgrounds, children's parks, and daycare centers across the country are being treated as nuisances and pushed away. Schools hesitate to hold annual sports days for fear of complaints. In a society where children are minorities and nuisances, this is the landscape of the world's worst low-birthrate nation.

Playgrounds, Locked and Removed

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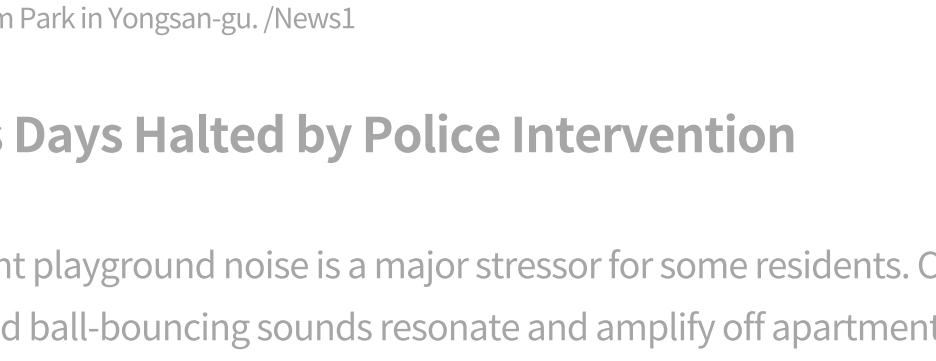
In 2021, a petition condemning a resident representative who reported children visiting an apartment playground as trespassers. /Screenshot from Cheong Wa Dae petition board

Closing playgrounds at 8 p.m. is lenient. In a reconstructed large apartment complex in Jamsil, playgrounds close at 6 p.m. Parents have pleaded with the residents' representative meeting to extend hours, calling 6 p.m. "unrealistic for working parents and kindergarteners," but the meeting remains unmoved.

Another Seocho District complex once closed its playground entirely, citing, "Daycare children entering the playground caused noise." Residents with children protested to the district office, which issued an administrative guidance stating, "Public housing essential facilities cannot be arbitrarily closed or exclude specific groups." Though the playground reopened, the conflict left lasting scars.

With 80,000 playgrounds nationwide—half in apartment complexes—these spaces are disappearing at a rate of 800 per year due to the sharp decline in children from low birthrates.

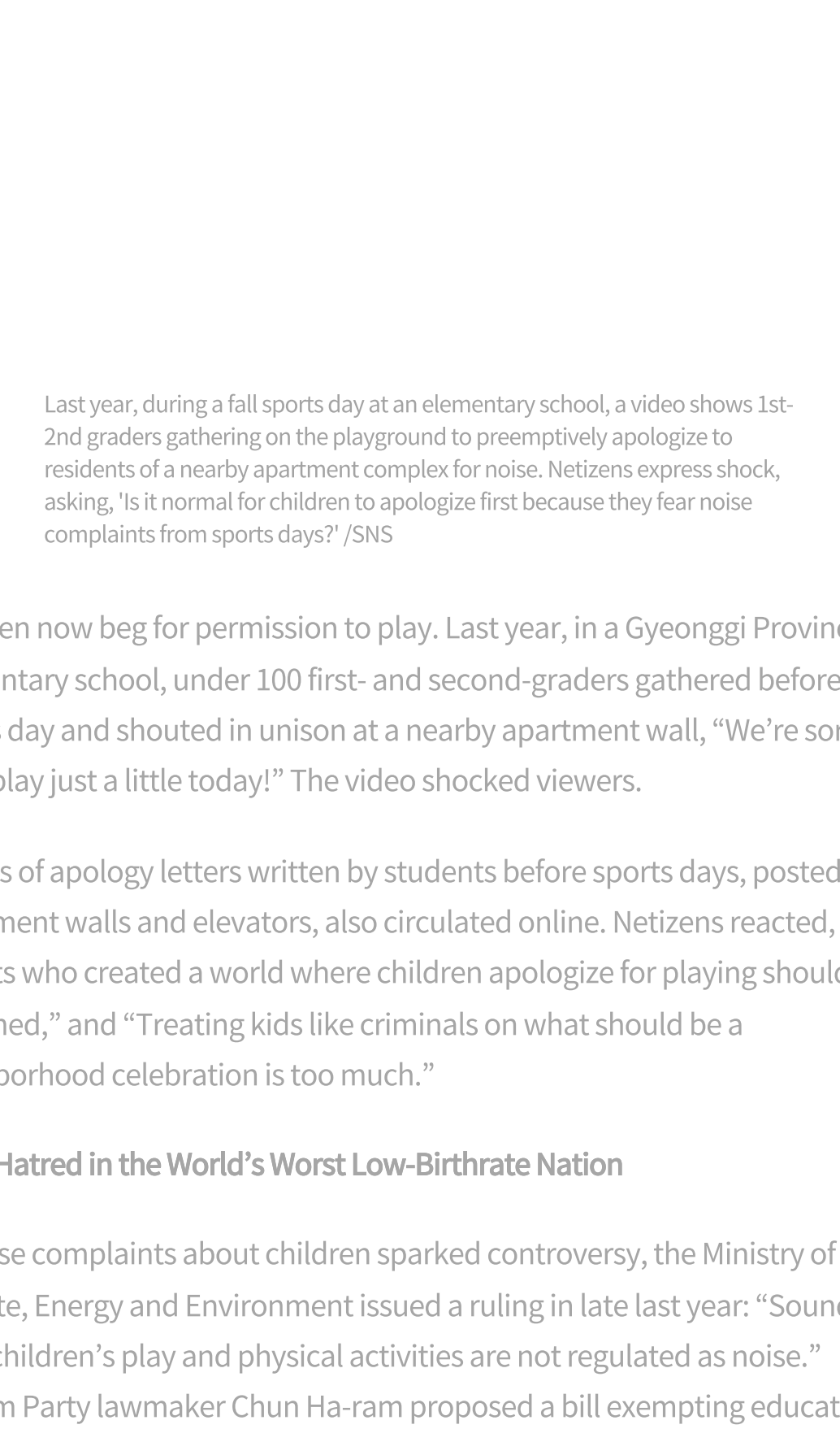
Older apartments are converting playgrounds into parking lots or electric vehicle charging stations. As maintenance costs rise and users dwindle, residents easily agree to repurpose the spaces. A manager at one apartment complex said, "A decade ago, removing a playground would have caused chaos, but attitudes have changed."



Even new apartment complexes with many children face similar issues. Lee, a homemaker in Seoul's Eunpyeong District raising an elementary schooler, said, "In our second year of residency, the water park stopped running water, and the floor fountain became a decorative feature. A 'no cheering' sign was posted at the futsal field, forcing kids to play 'muted soccer' with hands over their mouths." She added, "Though the facilities are flashy, they're nearly useless."

Public children's parks face similar neglect. Kim, a parent in Daegu's Suseong District, said, "Apartments and nearby public parks have 'no ball games or skateboards' banners. To let kids play freely, I occasionally take them to indoor kids' cafes, but it's a financial burden. I feel angry that it's come to this."

The government is pushing to demolish Seoul's Yongsan Children's Garden, established three years ago to build youth rental housing. Critics condemned the plan to turn the playground into a public rental housing complex.



On the 19th, residents of Yongsan, Seoul, hold a rally titled 'Yongsan Children's Garden Defense Rally' at Hanmaum Park in Yongsan-gu. /News1

Sports Days Halted by Police Intervention

Apartment playground noise is a major stressor for some residents. Children's voices and ball-bouncing sounds resonate and amplify off apartment walls. Higher building coverage and floor-area ratios in modern apartments exacerbate the noise. In real estate, "low-floor units near playgrounds" are the most avoided.

Analysts suggest the rise of apartment living and the low-birthrate crisis are linked to noise issues. Children are often the culprits of inter-floor noise complaints, which can escalate to murder, and this intolerance now extends to outdoor play spaces. Raising children in cities has become a high-stakes task requiring constant control to avoid testing neighbors' patience.

School playgrounds are another battleground. Apartments with adjacent elementary schools—called "cho-pum-a"—are expensive but often become "complaint hells" intolerant of children's noise. Many schools cannot ring bells during lunch or breaks and restrict playground access outside physical education classes. Noise complaints flood district offices and education authorities, prompting police interventions.

Annual sports days are shrinking or disappearing due to noise complaints. Daycare centers to middle schools send "noise apology letters" to nearby apartments, shorten event times, and bar parents from attending. Some schools split sports days by class or event in narrow indoor halls.

Choi, a parent in Incheon's Cheongna raising a daughter, fumed, "Police arrived as soon as the kindergarten sports event began on Children's Day. A three-hour schedule ended in 20 minutes." Last year, police responded to 345 noise complaints related to sports days nationwide.



Children now beg for permission to play. Last year, in a Gyeonggi Province elementary school, under 100 first- and second-graders gathered before a sports day and shouted in unison at a nearby apartment wall, "We're sorry! We'll play just a little today!" The video shocked viewers.

Photos of apology letters written by students before sports days, posted on apartment walls and elevators, also circulated online. Netizens reacted, "Adults who created a world where children apologize for playing should feel ashamed," and "Treating kids like criminals on what should be a neighborhood celebration is too much."

Child Hatred in the World's Worst Low-Birthrate Nation

As noise complaints about children sparked controversy, the Ministry of Climate, Energy and Environment issued a ruling in late last year: "Sounds from children's play and physical activities are not regulated as noise." Reform Party lawmaker Chun Ha-ram proposed a bill exempting educational and play noises from noise regulations and penalties. Police announced, "We will no longer respond to simple noise reports about sports days."

Yet the trend of treating playgrounds, sports fields, and daycare centers as nuisances persists. Last year, in a Seoul Jongno District mixed-use apartment, a proposal to establish a public daycare center sparked conflict. Opposing residents argued, "Outside children using the playground will lower property values," and "Luxury apartments don't have daycare centers." Insults like "mothers should quit jobs and raise kids themselves" were reported.

A pediatric dentist at a Seoul Gangnam hospital said, "A door between adult and pediatric waiting rooms was removed because 'children disturbing adult spaces' was a common complaint." He added, "Though society urges childbirth, it feels unwelcoming to children."

A handwritten apology letter posted by elementary students ahead of a sports day in a densely populated apartment complex in Gyeonggi Province. /SNS

Park, a homemaker who returned to South Korea after living abroad and raises two children, said, "No developed country is as harsh to children as Korea. Here, the most frequent phrases to kids are 'be quiet' and 'stay still.' Otherwise, parents are labeled 'troublemakers.'" She continued, "Policies like newborn housing support and child allowances are flashy, but the philosophy of a 'child-friendly society' is missing."

Professor Jeong Ik-jung of Ewha Womans University's Department of Social Welfare said, "Eliminating playgrounds and sports days due to adult inconvenience shows child hatred has peaked." He added, "It's absurd to discuss low birthrates while the entire nation becomes a no-kids zone."

· This article has been translated by Upstage Solar AI.

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